

**From:** Heron, Rache (OASG)  
**Subject:** FW: National Climate Task Force  
**To:** Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** February 19, 2021 7:30 PM (UTC-05:00)  
**Attached:** TEMPLATE (b) (5)

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**From:** Colangelo, Matthew (OASG) (b) (6)  
**Sent:** Wednesday, February 10, 2021 4:31 PM  
**To:** Williams, Jean (ENRD) <JWilliams@ENRD.USDOJ.GOV>; Gelber, Bruce (ENRD) <BGelber@ENRD.USDOJ.GOV>; Heron, Rachel (OASG) (b) (6); Sooknanan, Sparkle (OASG) (b) (6)  
**Subject:** RE: National Climate Task Force

To follow up below is the agenda I just received, along with the attached template document. You will see from the below that each agency representative will be asked to “say a few words about priority projects that they are looking forward to launching --or already may have launched -- to take on the climate crisis.” If you could give me any thoughts just one paragraph, there will be a lot of people speaking on the update you would like me to give re: “priority projects” you are “looking forward to launching,” that would be very helpful. Many thanks Matthew

Gina McCarthy is looking forward to your participation in the first meeting of the National Climate Task Force on Thursday, February 11th from noon to 2:00 pm.

The meeting on Thursday will provide an initial opportunity to discuss the Task Force’s key role in mobilizing the administration’s whole-of-government attention on the climate crisis, and the fast start that already is underway on climate. In Thursday’s meeting, each agency and EOP Task Force member will be invited to say a few words about priority projects that they are looking forward to launching --or already may have launched -- to take on the climate crisis. (b) (5)

We will be sending an agenda and short read-ahead for the meeting on Wednesday. Please call or email Roque Sanchez (b) (6), (b) (6) with any questions.

**EOP Manifest:**

- Climate Policy Office: Gina McCarthy, Ali Zaidi
- Council on Environmental Quality: Matt Lee-Ashley, Cecilia Martinez
- Domestic Policy Council: Susan Rice
- NEC: Brian Deese
- NSC: Jake Sullivan, Liz Sherwood-Randall
- Office of Management and Budget: Nicole Budzinski, Candace Vahlsing
- Office of Science and Technology Policy: Kei Koizumi

**Agency Manifest:**

- Treasury
- Department of Defense
- Department of Justice
- Department of the Interior
- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Commerce

- Department of Education
- Department of Labor
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department Housing and Urban Development
- Department of Transportation
- Department of Energy
- Department of Homeland Security
- GSA
- Environmental Protection Agency

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**From:** Colangelo, Matthew (OASG)

**Sent:** Wednesday, February 10, 2021 4:15 PM

**To:** Williams, Jean (ENRD) <[JWilliams@ENRD.USDOJ.GOV](mailto:JWilliams@ENRD.USDOJ.GOV)>; Gelber, Bruce (ENRD) <[BGelber@ENRD.USDOJ.GOV](mailto:BGelber@ENRD.USDOJ.GOV)>; Heron, Rachel (OASG) (b) (6) Sooknanan, Sparkle (OASG) (b) (6)

**Subject:** National Climate Task Force

**Importance:** High

Jean EO 14008 establishes a National Climate Task Force (Sec. 203); it sounds like the first Principals meeting of the Task Force will be tomorrow, and the Acting AG may be unable to attend (in which case I would attend as his designee). With apologies for the short notice, can ENRD send me in the morning your most up-to-date summary of steps you have taken so far or currently plan to take to implement EO 14008, along with any other info you think I should be aware of? And although the Task Force is established by EO 14008, it would probably help to have your latest EO 13990 update as well (including a summary of the stuff we've already talked about, like the guidance documents withdrawn last week, just so I have it in one place). I have not seen an agenda yet for the Task Force meeting but will pass it along if I get something. The meeting is at 12pm tomorrow.

Thank you,  
Matthew

**From:** Home and Security Committee  
**Subject:** Home and Security, Transportation & Infrastructure Leaders Write White House National Security Advisor Sullivan on Colonial Pipeline Ransomware Attack  
**To:**  
**Sent:** May 11, 2021 8:21 PM (UTC-04:00)



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

***Homeland Security, Transportation & Infrastructure Leaders Write  
White House National Security Advisor Sullivan on Colonial Pipeline  
Ransomware Attack***

**May 11, 2021** (WASHINGTON) – Today, leaders of the Homeland Security Committee and the Transportation & Infrastructure Committee sent a letter to White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on the national security and economic security implications of the Colonial Pipeline Company ransomware attack, which could lead to rising fuel costs and fuel shortages. In the letter, the Members ask for a formal briefing as soon as possible from the interagency task force the White House established in response to the attack.

**“We are deeply concerned about the security of our nation’s critical infrastructure and the industrial control systems (ICS) that underpin many national critical functions,”** the Members wrote. **“As we have repeatedly stressed, cybersecurity is no longer just an ‘IT issue’ but instead an economic and national security challenge that can have real-world impacts to our security. It is imperative that the federal response is rapid, clear, and consistent.”**

The letter is signed by Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) and Ranking Member John Katko (R-NY), Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Peter DeFazio (D-OR) and Ranking Member Sam Graves (R-MO), Homeland Security Cybersecurity, Infrastructure Protection, & Innovation Subcommittee Chairwoman Yvette D. Clarke (D-NY) and Ranking Member Andrew Garbarino (R-NY), Railroads, Pipelines, & Hazardous Materials Subcommittee Chairman Donald Payne (D-NJ) and Ranking Member Rick Crawford (R-AR), Transportation & Maritime Security Subcommittee Chairwoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ) and Ranking Member Carlos Gimenez (R-FL), Intelligence & Counterterrorism Subcommittee Chairwoman Elissa Slotkin (D-MI) and Ranking Member August Pfluger (R-TX).

**“In addition to a more detailed understanding of the cyber forensics of the incident response and more formal adversary attribution, we want to make sure there is interagency clarity in roles and responsibilities between the National Security Council, CISA, Sector Risk Management Agencies, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation,”** the Members added. **“Now is a time to focus on critical infrastructure resilience, not relitigate federal turf battles.”**

[Link to Letter](#)

# # #

Media contact:

Adam Comis (Homeland Majority): 202-225-9978

Lesley Byers (Homeland Minority): 202-834-5230

Kerry Arndt (T&I Majority): 202-225-4472

Justin Harclerode (T&I Minority): 202-225-9446

**From:** Home and Security Committee  
**Subject:** Home and Security Committee Announces Hearing with Colonial Pipeline CEO After Ransomware Cyber Attack  
**To:**  
**Sent:** May 20, 2021 4:06 PM (UTC-04:00)



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## ***Homeland Security Committee Announces Hearing with Colonial Pipeline CEO After Ransomware Cyber Attack***

**May 20, 2021** (WASHINGTON) – Today, Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS), Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, announced that the Committee will hold a [full Committee hearing](#) on June 9 with the CEO of the Colonial Pipeline as part of its ongoing oversight of the cybersecurity of our critical infrastructure after the ransomware attack on the company's networks last week.

***Full Committee Virtual Hearing: Cyber Threats in the Pipeline: Using Lessons from the Colonial Ransomware Attack to Defend Critical Infrastructure***

**Date:** June 9, 2021 at 12pm EDT

**Witness:** Colonial Pipeline CEO Joseph Blount

Latest info, witness list, and livestream available [here](#).

Additional Homeland Security Committee oversight actions on this attack:

- On [Tuesday, May 11](#), Committee leaders, along with Transportation and Infrastructure Committee leaders, sent a bipartisan letter to White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan requesting an interagency briefing on the Federal response to the attack.
- On [Monday, May 17](#), the Committee, along with the Oversight and Reform Committee, held a staff level briefing with Colonial Pipeline.
- On Tuesday, May 18, the Committee held a classified threats briefing for Full and Subcommittee Chairs and Ranking Members with DHS, FBI, and ODNI that focused on the Colonial Pipeline attack.
- On Wednesday, May 19, the Committee, along with the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, held a joint interagency Member briefing with CISA, TSA, and FBI that was requested on May 11.
- On Thursday, May 20, the Committee met with officials from the Colonial Pipeline Company to discuss the ransomware attack in advance of the June 9, 2021 hearing.

**“The Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack and the related fuel shortages laid bare three urgent challenges facing the nation: cybersecurity vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure, the need to build resilience into our networks, and the profitability of ransomware. To address these urgent challenges, Congress must have a complete understanding of what happened on Colonial Pipeline’s networks, how it made decisions related to network operations and ransom payments, and how it leveraged support from the Federal government and private sector.**

**“As we do our work to investigate what happened at Colonial Pipeline, we must not make the mistake of taking a siloed approach to addressing cybersecurity vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure. The reality is cyber attacks against critical infrastructure will have cross-sector impacts. Federal policy should be rooted in that reality, as it has been since September 11, 2001. Moving forward, we will work to build a stronger understanding of cybersecurity vulnerabilities to critical infrastructure and the interdependencies among sectors to inform policies that will encourage mitigation and build resilience.”**

# # #

Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978



**From:** Coey, Anthony D. (PAO)  
**Subject:** FW: [EXTERNAL] Fox: "Jake Sullivan's wife, AG Garland counsel, is not connected to Durham investigation, senior DOJ official says"  
**To:** Kapper, Matthew B. (OAG); Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** November 12, 2021 6:15 PM (UTC-05:00)

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**From:** DoJ Real Time News Clips (b) (6)  
**Sent:** Friday, November 12, 2021 4:03 PM  
**To:** Coey, Anthony D. (PAO) (b) (6)  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Fox: "Jake Sullivan's wife, AG Garland counsel, is not connected to Durham investigation, senior DOJ official says"

Fox: "Jake Sullivan's wife, AG Garland counsel, is not connected to Durham investigation, senior DOJ official says," Jake Gibson and Kelly Laco, November 12, 2021  
<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/jake-sullivan-wife-maggie-goodlander-merrick-garland-durham-investigation-not-connected-doj>

A senior Justice Department official told Fox News on Friday that National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's wife, who currently serves as counsel to Attorney General Merrick Garland, is not connected to the Durham investigation into the origins of the Russia investigation.

Fox News reported Tuesday that Sullivan is the "foreign policy advisor" referenced in the indictment of former Hillary Clinton presidential campaign lawyer Michael Sussmann, according to two well-placed sources. This is the closest Durham's probe into the origins of the Russia investigation has come to anyone directly associated with the Biden White House.

However, there is no indication that Sullivan is a target of Durham's investigation, only that he received information from a campaign lawyer. Durham's indictments have since revealed that the information Sullivan received about an alleged link between the Trump presidential campaign and a Russian bank, which was fed to the FBI, was false.

The senior DOJ official told Fox News that while Sullivan's wife, Maggie Goodlander, is currently a counsel to Garland, she has no connection to the Durham investigation, adding that among her portfolio are issues such as antitrust and international matters.

In light of Sullivan's newly confirmed connection to a Clinton campaign lawyer, watchdog groups are saying Biden's national security adviser's family ties to the Biden administration are troubling.

Goodlander previously clerked for Garland when he was a D.C. Circuit judge. In addition, Sullivan's brother, Tom, serves as deputy chief of staff for policy at the State Department. Tom's wife, Rose Sullivan, holds a top position as the acting assistant secretary for legislation in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

"The fact that he has relatives in the agency responsible for overseeing the investigation is very troubling from an oversight and a watchdog perspective and is something that we would recommend and potentially will recommend Congress keep a close eye on and investigate," nonprofit watchdog America Accountability Foundation founder Matthew Buckham told Fox News. "This is something we always flag, and we don't want any undue influence from family members in an ongoing investigation."

In addition, the 44-year-old security adviser is facing bipartisan criticism for the Biden administration's handling of the Afghanistan withdrawal, which left hundreds of Americans and Afghan allies stranded in a country that was taken over by the Taliban.

"Jake Sullivan led the interagency process that resulted in the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. Now more than

ever, our nation needs leaders who are competent and trustworthy," Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs member Josh Hawley, R-Mo., told Fox News on Friday. "Sullivan has shown himself to be neither and that's why I've been calling for his resignation for months now."

Brett Bruen, a former director of global engagement under the Obama White House, also called for his dismissal in a USA Today op-ed in August.

"President Biden needs to fire his national security adviser and several other senior leaders who oversaw the botched execution of our withdrawal from Afghanistan," Bruen wrote.

END



**From:** Coey, Anthony D. (PAO)  
**Subject:** FW: [EXTERNAL] Press inquiry on Margaret Goodlander's involvement in Durham probe  
**To:** Kapper, Matthew B. (OAG); Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Cc:** Iverson, Dena (PAO)  
**Sent:** December 9, 2021 3:42 PM (UTC-05:00)

Shall we deploy? (b) (5)

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**From:** Chuck Ross (b) (6)  
**Sent:** Thursday, December 9, 2021 3:33 PM  
**To:** Coey, Anthony D. (PAO) (b) (6) >  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Press inquiry on Margaret Goodlander's involvement in Durham probe

Mr. Coey,

How are you? I'm reaching out for a story we're writing about Margaret Goodlander.

A House Republican and a watchdog group we have talked to are questioning whether Ms. Goodlander has had any involvement or input regarding the Durham probe. They're raising these questions because her husband, Jake Sullivan, has been referenced in one indictment so far (that of Michael Sussmann). There is also a strong likelihood he would be discussed in any report issued by Durham given his role on the Clinton campaign. They're saying this is an issue because AG Garland has ultimate say over Durham's investment, the approval of his budget and the release of his eventual report.

I was hoping to find out whether the Department may have already addressed this issue internally. Is Ms. Goodlander recused from having any involvement in the Durham matter? Has she advised AG Garland or the Department on the investigation? If she has not officially recused, what would the rationale be for her not being made to do so?

Thank you for any help,  
Chuck Ross  
Senior Investigative Reporter  
The Washington Free Beacon  
(b) (6)

**From:** U.S. Department of State  
**Subject:** Department Press Briefing – March 9, 2021  
**To:** Good ander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** March 9, 2021 7:08 PM (UTC-05:00)

You are subscribed to Press Releases for U.S. Department of State. This information has recently been updated, and is now available.

## [Department Press Briefing – March 9, 2021](#)

*03/09/2021 06:56 PM EST*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

2:17 p.m. EST

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. A few things at the top.

First, today marks 14 years since beloved husband, father, grandfather, and former FBI agent Robert “Bob” Levinson was abducted in Iran. Since that time, Bob has missed graduations, marriages, and the birth of all but one of his grandchildren.

Yesterday, Secretary Blinken spoke with the Levinson family and promised to press the Iranian Government to provide credible answers to what happened to Bob Levinson.

We call on Iran to immediately and safely release all U.S. citizens who are unjustly held captive in Iran. The abhorrent act of unjust detentions for political gain must cease immediately – whether it’s in Iran or anywhere else around the world.

Next, yesterday, the Department of the Treasury, in consultation with the Department of State, revoked a license issued to Specially Designated National Dan Gertler, which was issued on January 15 of 2021.

The license previously granted to Mr. Gertler is inconsistent with America’s strong foreign policy interest in combatting corruption around the world, and it undermined the integrity and effectiveness of the Global Magnitsky sanctions program.

Mr. Gertler engaged in extensive public corruption in connection with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Yesterday’s action further demonstrates our strong support for efforts to counter corruption and to promote stability in the DRC. Under our Privileged Partnership for Peace and Prosperity, the United States stands firmly with the people of the DRC in their efforts to advance democracy, bolster public institutions, and promote accountability for corrupt actors who seek to undermine them.

The United States will continue to confront corruption around the world, to uphold international norms, and impose in – tangible costs on those who seek to upend them.

And finally, looking ahead —

**QUESTION:** Wait. Impose —

**MR PRICE:** Tangible. Tangible costs.

**QUESTION:** Tangible. Not intangible costs.

**MR PRICE:** Tangible costs.

Later today, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas will announce Venezuela's designation for Temporary Protected Status, also known as TPS. This designation demonstrates the continuing support of the United States for the people of Venezuela.

To date, nearly 5.5 million Venezuelans have fled their homeland, while another seven million remain in chronic need of humanitarian aid. Nicolas Maduro's repression, his corruption, and economic mismanagement have victimized these Venezuelans and produced this political and humanitarian crisis. Maduro's willful neglect of his people, in a bid to remain in power, has created one of the hemisphere's worst refugee and migration crises.

With this designation, we proudly join Colombia in their recent announcement to provide a similar status for vulnerable Venezuelans. The United States continues our leadership in the international effort to alleviate the suffering of the Venezuelan people. We provided nearly \$529 million in regional humanitarian assistance in Fiscal Year 2020 in crisis response, and we welcome Spain's recent financial commitment for the same. We encourage others to contribute.

We are proud to stand with these partners in both our commitment to democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela, as well as concrete action to help Venezuelans in need.

With that, Matt.

**QUESTION:** Great. Okay. All right. No travel to announce or anything?

**MR PRICE:** No travel to announce.

**QUESTION:** Okay. All right. Well, then barring that, and that was what I was going to start with, but since we don't have that, just on the Levinson thing, on the anniversary – he was taken during the Bush administration. And every Secretary of State since Condoleezza Rice has been demanding that the Iranians release him or provide information about what – what exactly is new or different about your approach with the Iranians? Because the Obama administration, right – we had the nuclear deal. We had people released; he was not one of them. The Trump administration tried a harder approach, lots of sanctions. Why exactly do you think that your approach – well, first of all, what is your approach? And then secondly, why do you think that that approach is going to work any better than the previous three administrations have on this case?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me start by reiterating what I said a moment ago, and yesterday the Secretary did have an opportunity to speak to the Levinson family. Last year, of course, the family shared with the world their belief that Bob is deceased. In December of 2020, late last year, the United States designated two Iranian ministry of internal security officials for their role in Bob's abduction, disappearance, and probable death. We also, Matt, I would remind you, have a Rewards for Justice out for \$20 million for information leading to the location, recovery, and return of Robert Levinson.

As we said in the topper, the Secretary committed to the Levinson family that finding answers – long overdue answers, as you alluded to – will be an absolute priority for us. We will press the Iranian Government for those answers, as we have said, in the context of Americans who are being unjustly detained in Iran today. We have made no bones about the fact that we have no higher priority than the safe return of Americans who are being unjustly detained in Iran. We have made that clear to the Iranians. National Security Adviser Sullivan made note of that a couple weeks ago now.

When it comes to Mr. Levinson's case and the fact that he has now been missing for 14 years, separated from his family for all of that time, we will absolutely continue to press the Iranian Government for these answers that I said before are long, long overdue.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but they haven't given you any answers, and they haven't given any answers for 14 years. And I just wrote down a list of the – just off the top of my head, starting a long time – anyway, I'm just curious as to what – what is this administration going to do differently, if anything, than the previous three administrations have done to try and find out what happened to him or get him back?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think it goes without saying that our approach to Iran differs in pretty profound ways, and we've talked about that broadly when it comes to Iran's nuclear program. We've always made the point that unless you have a strategy that is accompanied by diplomacy, that is accompanied by an ability to exchange ideas, to exchange proposals, to exchange initiatives, any – just about any effort to contain Iran in the nuclear arena will be fruitless and feckless.

Now, the fact that we intend or at least seek to have lines of communication with Tehran allows us, of course, to press the Iranians for information about cases of missing or detained Americans. We absolutely plan to leverage those channels. I would – I don't need to remind you, Matt; you were there – but I believe it was January 20th of 2016 when several Americans were released and were reunited with their families, and that was the result of concerted engagement with the Iranian Government. So we are going to absolutely make it a priority. We are going to make it a priority to secure the release of Americans. We are going to make it a priority to find answers, long overdue answers about Bob Levinson.

**QUESTION:** You're right, there were Americans released back then, but it – but not Levinson. And the Iranians have consistently said that they don't have any information about it. Now, whether they're telling the truth or not, I don't know.

**MR PRICE:** Well, that's exactly the point. That's exactly the point. We are going to press the Iranians for answers. We are going to press them for what they have to say. We will continue to use every tool in our disposal, every tool in our toolkit to find out all we can about what happened to Mr. Levinson and to try and provide those answers to the family.

**QUESTION:** Okay. But the critics of all this – and I have to do – the Obama administration had opened up a big line of communication with Iran and got nothing in terms of Levinson. Nothing. The Trump administration took a hard line; they got nothing in terms of Levinson. The Bush administration prior to the Obama administration got nothing in terms of Levinson. And when you talk about the release in 2016, critics will say that they were released because you paid the Iranians.

**MR PRICE:** That's what critics might say, Matt.

**QUESTION:** That's what they say, but —

**MR PRICE:** I assume you're not saying that because you know that is absolutely not true. I don't need to go into that. You presumably know just how false that is.

**QUESTION:** I know – well, but I'm just saying that that's what they're going to say. So what – I just don't understand what it is that you think that you can do differently that the previous three administrations haven't in this case. That's all.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, you are not wrong that the last two administrations have not been able to provide satisfactory answers either to the family, to the broader American public, about what happened to Bob

Levinson. I can speak to the Obama administration; it wasn't for a lack of trying. This case was absolutely a priority back then. Obviously, wouldn't want to characterize the Trump administration's approach beyond what we've all seen and what you, in fact, alluded to.

And so, again, our approach to Iran is one that recognizes the necessity of diplomacy. And diplomacy in this case requires that we have channels for communication. We will use every single one of those channels as appropriate to press the case for those Americans who are unjustly detained in Iran today and for answers when it comes to Bob Levinson.

Now, those channels of communication are one important tool. We also have other tools and means at our disposal to try and find those answers. We will use every single one of them.

**QUESTION:** Thanks.

**QUESTION:** Staying on Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Sure, staying on Iran.

**QUESTION:** One hundred forty members of Congress have sent a letter to the Secretary saying that as it tries to re-engage with Tehran on the nuclear deal, that they should go bigger, deal with other security issues, deal with foreign policy issues, deal with Tehran's regional influence. What has been the Secretary's reaction to this bipartisan letter, and does this building read the letter as a kind of a leeway to go big and to be willing to negotiate everything, and perhaps offer things that otherwise might not get political support on the Hill?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry, do we read it as a – what was the word?

**QUESTION:** As a way – a sort of leeway.

**MR PRICE:** Oh, leeway, leeway.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, yeah.

**MR PRICE:** Look, so this letter and the ideas put forward in the letter are in important ways very consistent with the approach that we have laid out. And let me just remind you of that approach. At its core, the first step is what we have short-termed – or what we have shorthanded “compliance for compliance,” the idea that if Iran resumes its full compliance with the JCPOA, resumes its commitments with the JCPOA, the United States would do the same. We would seek to lengthen and strengthen the deal.

And the important point we have made that is consistent with the point that is made in that letter is that the JCPOA and compliance for compliance – it is necessary, but it's not sufficient. And we say it's not sufficient because we have also spoken to the need to: number one, lengthen and strengthen the terms of that deal; but two, importantly, to use the JCPOA as a platform to negotiate follow-on agreements, agreements that would cover other areas of concern – concern for the United States, concern for our allies, concern for our partners in the region. Two of those concerns certainly are ballistic missiles and Iran's support for terrorism, two issues that I believe were mentioned in that very letter.

So it sure sounds like we are on the same page in broad terms. That is precisely the work that we have set out for ourselves. It's precisely the work that we are engaging in. And these are still early days. We have started the process of engaging with allies, with partners, with members of Congress as well. And we will continue to engage with members of Congress. Of course, Secretary Blinken will

be up on the Hill tomorrow before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

And so we will continue that in an effort in the first instance to arrive at that arrangement for compliance for compliance, but then also recognize and operationalize the fact that it is necessary but not sufficient, and not sufficient for the reasons I set out.

**QUESTION:** Should the JCPOA be converted from an agreement to an actual treaty? That was a criticism that some in Congress lobbed at the measure back in 2015.

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, the deal was enshrined in the 2015 INARA legislation. Of course, we intend to follow the law. INARA remains the law of the land.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** First of all, this is a different topic.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Honduras. Federal prosecutors today implicated President Hernandez in alleged drug trafficking. Does the United States have any read of this, any implications in terms of policy? Can the United States still deal with the president in the same way?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as in other countries, Shaun, we strongly support the rule of law and the fight against impunity. That is true in Honduras. It is true at all levels in Honduras. We are working with Honduran Government officials, civil society, and private sector to build a better future for the Honduran people. That's our goal; that's what we seek to do. It's also what we spoke to yesterday when a similar question was raised.

**QUESTION:** Sure, but can we – can you actually deal with the president the same way as, considering there might be some sort of a – some criminal liability allegedly in this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to criminal liability, I would say that we are working across all branches of the Honduran Government, we're working with civil society, we are working with the private sector – again, to build a better future for the people of Honduras.

In many ways, we have a shared future, and what happens in Honduras is not consequence-free for the United States. It's one of the many reasons why we have spoken about the need to partner with the Honduran people, with civil society, with elements of the Honduran Government. We are committed to that partnership, we are committed to fighting corruption in Honduras, and we will support and work with leaders who are committed to fighting corruption. Any leader, I think it is fair to say, not prepared to combat the corruption won't be in a position to enjoy a close partnership with the United States.

**QUESTION:** So you're saying what happens in Honduras doesn't stay in Honduras? Was that what you were trying to —

**MR PRICE:** What I am saying is that, of course, corruption, poverty, impunity, lack of rule of law – all of those have profound implications for the people of Honduras, of course, but they are also important drivers of irregular migration and migratory patterns in the Western Hemisphere that ultimately do redound on the United States. And so if we are to address the challenge of irregular migration within our own hemisphere, we have to take these on, these challenges on. We have to partner with and invest in the region. It's one of the many reasons why President Biden's plan includes significant funding for partnership with the Northern Triangle. And it is one of the many reasons why President

Biden has made clear that we will partner with the region to address these underlying causes. Until and unless we address these underlying causes, the challenge of irregular migration for us will remain acute.

**QUESTION:** Maybe I missed – maybe I missed some of the administration-wide nomenclature change. When did it become irregular migration? Was that something that happened on the 20th of January?

**MR PRICE:** I don't know when that came into being. It's a term that I've long been familiar with. I couldn't say.

**QUESTION:** All right, okay. Fine.

**QUESTION:** Could I ask you something else in Latin America? I wondered if you want to weigh in on Brazil, the overturning of the sentence against Lula. Do you have anything to say about this? Do you agree with his contention that this is politically motivated to begin with?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we're, of course, aware of recent news regarding the Brazilian court decision annulling former President Lula's conviction. For details, for reaction, we'd refer you to the Government of Brazil as well as for information about the court's decision. What is fair to say – and this is consistent with what I was saying about a – in a very different context in our own hemisphere – we note our support for Brazil's, in this case, its democratic institutions. And we continue to underline and underscore that support.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On China. *The South China Morning Post* has a report saying there's a discussion about a meeting possibly in Anchorage involving Secretary Blinken. Is that something you're able to confirm? And the reporting says this is a bid to reset the relationship with China, so I wonder if you – are you seeking a reset in your talks with China?

**MR PRICE:** Well, to your first question, we don't have any future travel or meetings to announce at this time. When we think about our relationship with China, I would go back to what Secretary Blinken said just under a week ago now. As you recall, he outlined eight priorities in his address to the American people outlining a foreign policy for the American people, and China, of course, was one of those priorities. And he said at the time that our relationship with China, it will have aspects are – that are competitive. It will be competitive when it should be, it will be collaborative when it can be, and it will be adversarial when it must be.

The common denominator in all of this and what we have consistently talked about when we note our approach vis-a-vis China is that we will engage China from a position of strength. And we have spoken to any number of those strengths. And to do so, it requires us to work with allies and partners. Again, our system of alliances and partnerships around the world are a core source of strength. That's precisely why they are the envy of competitors and adversaries the world over.

It requires that we engage in diplomacy and in international organizations, leveraging them and recognizing them as a core source of strength, knowing that when the United States has pulled back over the course of history, including recent history, China has filled in that vacuum. And it requires standing up for our values. And we have talked about our values as a core source of strength, whether that is when it comes to human rights abuses in Xinjiang or the way in which Beijing is trampling democracy in Hong Kong, because if we don't do this – and if we don't do it in concert and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world – China will act with even greater impunity.

And then we've also talked about our domestic strength and the strengths that we bring to the table as a country and the prudent investments we need to make in American workers, companies, technologies, insisting on that level playing field. Because when we are competing on a level playing field, the United States can out-compete anyone, including the Chinese. So that is a long-winded way of saying we don't have any meetings to announce at this time, but we know what we have to do to engage China. We know what we will do to engage China. And we've started some of that important work.

**QUESTION:** Is this kind of meeting something that the administration would like to set up?

**MR PRICE:** Look, we would like and we will engage China from a position of strength. We have already laid some of that important groundwork, and you can go through those priorities I listed and you can look at concrete actions on many, if not all of those. But I'm not going to characterize any forthcoming efforts, meetings, travel. We know what we will do, and that is precisely what we have set about preparing for since day one.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can we stay in the region?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Yes. So how much adversary relationship between U.S. and China are going to be discussed in Friday's virtual – President Biden's virtual meeting with the Quad?

And separately, if I may, would you like to comment on reports like South Korea may be considering rejoining the Quad in an effort to weigh in North Korea policy? Is there such discussion? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, as the White House I believe – I hope – announced today, on Friday President Biden will meet virtually with his fellow heads of state in the Quad. Of course, that's Prime Minister Suga of Japan, Prime Minister Modi of India, and Prime Minister Morrison of Australia. The Quad grouping was essentially established – I believe it was in 2007 in the first iteration – to showcase what democracies can deliver together for both our own populations and also the broader international public. Quad members are uniquely positioned to help lead the world out of the deep crises that we've spoken about recently – and, of course, that includes COVID-19 – and towards the more positive vision that we all seek. And it's a vision that we in large part share with our fellow Quad counterparts.

And so the summit meeting – the leader-level summit meeting – will be the first of its kind, the first leader-level summit of the Quad. It will showcase the Quad's ability to pool our capabilities and build habits of cooperation to address some of those urgent challenges we face.

Now, at the same time, I would just note that the Quad is not about any single challenge. It's not about any single competitor. This is an entity forged and formed because we share common interests. They're – maritime security is, of course, an important one, but our shared interests go well beyond that. And I think you will see reflected in the agenda the breadth of those shared interests in the aftermath of the Quad meeting.

**QUESTION:** Could you please give us update on the North Korea policy review? Do you envision a summit between President Biden and North Korea leader Kim, or should we expect a return to the Six-Party Talk, or a whole new format? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to North Korea broadly, what I would say is that – and we have spoken about this before – is that we will adopt a new approach, an approach that fundamentally



seeks to keep the American people and our allies safe. And that begins, as you mentioned, with a thorough review of the state of play with North Korea – the state of play of affairs in North Korea, I should say – in close coordination with our treaty allies – the ROK and Japan and other allies and partners – on ongoing pressure options and the future for potential diplomacy. We will focus in the first instance on reducing the threat to the United States and our allies, as well, of course, on improving the lives of citizens both in North Korea and in South Korea on the peninsula. All the while, we'll remain committed to the objective of denuclearization.

When it comes to the issue of a summit – and President Biden and his team made this clear, I believe, even before President Biden was inaugurated into this current high office – that our approach will probably look very different. Our approach will be principled. Our approach will be clear-eyed. Our approach will be conducted in close coordination with our treaty allies, including the Japanese and the South Koreans. And I would expect that it will be led by individuals who are deeply steeped in the subject, people who are experienced with the challenges – the unique challenges – we face when it comes to North Korea.

So I'm not going to announce or, on the other hand, rule out any sort of meetings or any specific diplomatic efforts, but I think those will be the principles that guide our approach to North Korea going forward.

**QUESTION:** Can I – Ned, I'm sorry, just – this goes back to my questions about Levinson and Iran. What do you mean, a fundamentally new approach to North Korea? Just for me personally, right – so I started covering North Korea diplomacy in the Clinton administration. That would be Bill Clinton administration, right? Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden – every single one of them has said exactly the same thing as you just did: We're going – we want to help the North Korean people; we want to – we want them to – to have a better life; we want to preserve our U.S. security and the security of our allies, North Korea, Japan. What exactly does – what exactly is different?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I would say I think what I just outlined, it is at least self-evident to me and I imagine it's self-evident to you that there are key differences from what we witnessed in the last administration. Now —

**QUESTION:** Ned, this goes back well before just the last administration, okay?

**MR PRICE:** The other point —

**QUESTION:** Are you saying that, like – are you taking about, oh, we're going to have new people in there?

**MR PRICE:** The other point is that 2021 is not 2016. It's not 2009. It's not 1994. There are changed circumstances and conditions and changed leadership, of course, not only in this country but in North Korea, with our treaty allies. This is a challenge that has evolved over time. The circumstances that we face today are very different from what the last Democratic administration faced.

**QUESTION:** Are you suggesting that somehow previous administrations, the people that they had as point people on this, were not —

**MR PRICE:** Of course not.

**QUESTION:** — were not competent?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, no such words came out of my mouth.

**QUESTION:** I mean, one of them is still – one of them is your acting assistant secretary for East Asia and the Pacific right now.

**MR PRICE:** Of – Matt, I – that’s why I didn’t say that, so okay.

Yes, please.

**QUESTION:** Yes. I have a follow-up question on South Korea’s participation in Quad. And so South Korea – so, according to some South Korean officials, South Korea has never been officially invited to join the Quad, and it is sort of weird because South Korea is a treaty ally of the U.S. in the region and it also has deep ties with the United States, not only diplomatically but also militarily. And so do you think the United States will eventually invite South Korea to Quad, whether it will be a Quad plus or quintet? And more broadly, do you think South Korea should invest more for peace and security and for the entire Indo-Pacific region, rather than focusing only on the Korean Peninsula?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me leave aside the question of the Quad for a moment. I don’t have any projections or any announcements, certainly. But of course, the South Koreans – the ROK – they are an important treaty ally, an indispensable treaty ally. We share any number of interests, including the challenge of North Korea that we have talked about, including a free and open Indo-Pacific. And we have underlined and underscored our commitment to the region.

We spoke yesterday, I believe it was, to an agreement in principle on the Special Measures Agreement when it comes to the ROK, something that had been negotiated and negotiated carefully and – at least in principle – successfully at this point. So I think you will see, just as you did in the first trilateral meeting between the acting assistant secretary and our South Korean and Japanese allies, that we will engage with the South Koreans bilaterally, we will engage with them multilaterally, we will engage with them as the treaty ally that they are and the important friend to the United States that they are.

**QUESTION:** Actually, I have one more question about the Special Measures Agreement, because, of course, the two countries announced the agreement in principle, and I think it is unprecedented because for the last two previous negotiations completed in 2019 and 2014 – so basically at that time two countries announced the conclusion of a negotiation and provided details about the proposed text. And so this is the first time I’ve ever seen that two countries just announced agreement in principle without giving any details. And I – but probably it is related to the like flexibility concept of the DOD, because current – recently, I’ve seen the commander of INDOPACOM Phil Davidson, he – last week he said something about the shift of historic focus from the Northeast Asia and Guam to the broader region. And also Dr. Colin Kahl, the nominee for under secretary for defense —

**MR PRICE:** Under secretary of defense for policy.

**QUESTION:** He just said that the United – the alliance between the United States and South Korea is not committed to the matching number of forces. So it just indicates the possible change or reduction of troops in South Korea and logical issue just related to the Special Measures Agreement, which will cover until 2025. So is that the reason why you just cannot provide the details?

**MR PRICE:** No. And in fact, I would urge you just to be patient. You don’t have to be patient for too much longer. As you mentioned, this is an agreement in principle. I certainly expect we’ll be in a position to speak to additional details of the Special Measures Agreement before too long.

When it comes to global force posture review, the administration did announce that Secretary Austin at the Pentagon would be undertaking a global force posture review. I’d refer you there for questions about specific deployments around the world. But when it comes to our alliance with South Korea, it’s

rock solid. You'll be hearing additional details on the special measure agreement consistent with what you have heard when it comes to previous negotiations in the past.

Joel.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks. I have questions on China and Iran, so maybe I'll stay in the region and decide if you – how you want to follow up.

**MR PRICE:** Sure. Sure.

**QUESTION:** Just on China and the Uyghurs, this was discussed a little bit yesterday, but Secretary Pompeo, before leaving office, in his genocide declaration said that, quote, "this genocide is ongoing." And Secretary Blinken, then Secretary-designate at the Foreign Relations Committee replied – affirmed – "that would be my judgment as well" was his language in the hearing.

You've seen since used this language that genocide was committed. So I want to just – sort of a process question. What's at stake in terms of U.S. policy in the difference between the statement "this genocide is ongoing" and "genocide was committed"? Are there —

**MR PRICE:** No, there's —

**QUESTION:** Are there different authorities or obligations related to that?

**MR PRICE:** No, and I'm glad you – no, thank you for asking, because I think it's an important point. There's no difference. The question that was asked yesterday was about Secretary Blinken's statement in his confirmation hearings. I was referring to that.

What I can say is that we have seen – we are unaware of – we are unaware that these atrocities have ceased. So of course, Secretary Blinken noted his judgment on January 19th of this year, I believe it was. He has since repeated that. And from the vantage point of the State Department, we're unaware that the atrocities that we have spoken to have ceased. And we have spoken to crimes against humanity, the department has, has reached that judgment. And as you noted, both Secretary Pompeo and his successor Secretary Blinken have arrived at the judgment that genocide has taken place in Xinjiang. We absolutely stand by that. In fact, there have been additional reports even today detailing allegations that – of what has transpired in Xinjiang.

**QUESTION:** If – my – admittedly, not an expert on this. But if – my understanding is that the genocide piece of this question in particular depends on – legally on the reports about suppressed birth rates and forced sterilization. If you were to learn that maybe that specific component of the abuse underway in Xinjiang were no longer ongoing, would that change the U.S. – would that alter the set of tools available to the U.S. response?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it wouldn't change Secretary Blinken's determination that genocide has occurred in Xinjiang. That is what is important in this case. It is – it underscores what's at stake. It underscores what's at stake as we seek to galvanize the international community, our likeminded partners and allies around the world, to make clear to Beijing that there will be consequences for these atrocities, for this genocide, for these intolerable actions. And that is precisely the activity we've been engaged in as we consult closely with these partners and allies, and making clear to Beijing that its actions, including in Xinjiang, will have consequences.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I'm sorry. Can you – it seems to me there's a very simple way to answer this question. If you think —

**MR PRICE:** Do you want to come up here?

**QUESTION:** Well, no. I want to ask – it seem – I mean, you seem to be kind of convoluting the whole thing. When you say that we are unaware that atrocities have ceased and then you keep – but then you keep saying that genocide has taken place in Xinjiang – so the question that I asked you yesterday about the tense I think is still relevant, because I don't think you really answered your own question. Is – does the administration believe that a genocide is ongoing, is continuing in Xinjiang right now? You're just – yes or no.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, Secretary Blinken has made clear that in his judgment, genocide occurred in Xinjiang. The department —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, “occurred.” I'm looking for something in the present tense, okay? Or not if you don't think that it's still ongoing. I mean, I don't really have an —

**MR PRICE:** Matt, it – but I don't think I'm the one complicating this. As I said just a moment ago, we are not aware that these atrocities have ceased.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, okay. So is genocide ongoing right now in Xinjiang?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, we have seen nothing that would change our assessment. I am not – look, it is – it is —

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask if – then on a different – on a different subject?

**MR PRICE:** But let's – but let's – before we come back to you, let's make sure we have equity.

**QUESTION:** I just want to get a —

**MR PRICE:** Let's make sure we have equity in the room. So —

**QUESTION:** All right. I just want to make sure we get a Myanmar question in before —

**MR PRICE:** Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** It doesn't have to be me, could be anyone.

**QUESTION:** Me?

**MR PRICE:** Please.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I have a follow-up question on Quad. As was mentioned earlier, it has been in the making for about a decade now. And what was the hurry for having this Quad first summit in the first – 50th day of the administration?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think the fact that we are – that the White House will be taking part in this summit, the fact that Secretary Blinken met at the ministerial level with his Quad counterparts, it was important for us to underline in the early days of this administration our commitment to the Indo-Pacific. As we have said from this podium, it's a region that holds tremendous promise for the United States, also tremendous challenge. We see ourselves as a Pacific nation. We see ourselves as engaged in this region. We want to deepen that engagement, and this is an important forum with important partners with whom we share a good deal of interest, so it was important for us to demonstrate that early on.

**QUESTION:** And secondly, what is Secretary's vision of a Quad? Is it heading towards military kind of

a dimension or economic or political? What kind of vision?

**MR PRICE:** No. As I mentioned before, the Quad is a grouping with important friends and allies of the United States, and it's a grouping that is predicated on shared interests. There are any number of shared interests. Some of them involve maritime security, global health, climate. So I would hesitate to point to one animating challenge that the Quad is set to address today. We are engaging with the Quad to take on those collective shared interests that will be relevant in that setting.

**QUESTION:** Staying in the region, China had recently announced increase in its defense budget. How do you say, given the context that China has been bullying its neighborhood, approaching their territories?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to China's defense budget, I understand Admiral Davidson was on the Hill today, in fact, testifying. So I'd refer you to his testimony and to DOD for details of that.

**QUESTION:** One quick one on China. What is this administration's position on the issue of Dalai Lama's reincarnation? The previous administration had taken a stand on it.

**MR PRICE:** Well, we believe that the Chinese Government should have no role in the succession process of the Dalai Lama. Beijing's interference in the succession of the Panchen Lama more than 25 years ago, including by, quote/un-quote, "disappearing" the Panchen Lama as a child and attempting to replace him with a PRC Government-chosen successor, it remains an outrageous abuse of religious freedom.

**QUESTION:** I have one more on Afghanistan, if I can. Do you have any update on Ambassador Khalilzad's travel or meetings in the region? Where is he now? Is he coming back?

**MR PRICE:** So today, he is in Doha meeting with negotiating parties to encourage progress in the Afghan peace negotiations. As we spoke about at some length yesterday, we're working closely with Afghan parties to encourage progress on a political settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire. We're also working diplomatically to mobilize regional and international support for peace.

And the broader point I would make, and to underscore what I said yesterday, is that Ambassador Khalilzad's trip, it's really a continuation of American diplomacy in the region. There is a broad and longstanding consensus that there is no military solution to this conflict, and that the political solution and the political solution that Ambassador Khalilzad is there to support, it must, of course, be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. We know this will be a difficult road, but that's precisely why we're there, to support this Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process.

**QUESTION:** As Ambassador Khalilzad continues with his peace talks, is Secretary Blinken okay with Mullah – Taliban leaders like Mullah Baradar or other senior leaders being in the government as part of the peace deal?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would point you precisely to what I just said. Any agreement, any outcome that is to be durable has to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. It's not for us to dictate the deals. It's not for us to preordain outcomes. It has to be an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process.

Abbie.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** I just wanted to follow up on that and some questions asked yesterday. You keep saying "negotiating parties," but has Ambassador Khalilzad met with any representatives of the Taliban in the

course of his trip to the region?

**MR PRICE:** That's why he's in Doha, in part to meet with Taliban negotiators. I would expect we'll have additional details of those engagements in the coming days.

**QUESTION:** Can I please follow up? Did Secretary Blinken recently have a phone call with – 54 minutes talk with Pakistan army chief, General Bajwa? And did the U.S. play any role in the recent Kashmir ceasefire that was jointly announced by Pakistan and India? The reason I ask is because it was aired in the major TV network in that region that such phone call took place, very specifically 54 minutes.

**MR PRICE:** Well, as we have said, we continue to support direct dialogue between India and Kashmir – between India and Pakistan, excuse me, on Kashmir and other issues of concern. We've read out the Secretary's key calls with his counterparts in the region, so I don't have any details to share beyond that.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Quick question. I wanted to ask about the two IRGC officials blacklisted today for human rights violations. I believe this is a first for the administration, so what message are you trying to send with these designations, and should we expect further actions like this targeting Iran over violations unrelated to its nuclear program?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think the message we're trying to send is clear. The United States is committed to promoting accountability for those responsible for human rights violations and abuses. That includes in Iran, as well as any other country around the world. It's precisely why today Secretary Blinken announced the public designation of these two Iranians under Section 7031(c) of the Department of State Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriation Act. And it's an act that allows us to take these actions in response to gross violations of human rights.

The broader point we have made is showcased by today's example. We can pursue what is in our interests, and an Iran that is permanently and verifiably barred from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon is in our interests, just as we uphold and act in accordance with our values. And it is consistent with our values to make clear that there will be consequences for the sort of gross violations of human rights that these individuals engaged in. We can absolutely do both, and that's what we did today.

**QUESTION:** Back on Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Did you have a – sorry, quick —

**QUESTION:** Sorry, just a quick follow-up.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Can you clarify Jake Sullivan's comments last month that the U.S. has begun to communicate with the Iranians on the hostage issue which you mentioned today? Is that communication being conducted via the Swiss embassy or a third party, and are you seeing any progress on that front?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to extrapolate. I think the underlying point is important, though. Number one, the cases of Americans who are unjustly detained, unjustly held in Iran are an absolute priority to us. As I mentioned previously in this briefing, we have – there is no higher priority than the safe return of Americans unjustly detained overseas, including in Iran.

Number two, we have made this known to the Iranians. There should be no doubt in their minds about the priority we attach to these cases. But of course, we're not going to detail any specific channels.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Just a look back at the – some of the news out of the IAEA last week. The – Director General Grossi told the Board of Governors on March 1st, I think it was, in his appearance there, he said that they had come across clear indications of nuclear material at a particular undeclared site. And he also mentioned that there were three other undeclared sites that they – that Iran was not providing information about. So bearing in mind that the implementation of the JCPOA, the implementation phase included this final assessment from the IAEA, do the Iranians need to provide full – declare those sites and answer all of the IAEA's questions in order for the Iranians to be considered back in compliance as part of your compliance-for-compliance rubric to – or for us rehabilitating this deal?

**MR PRICE:** Well, fortunately, we have full faith and full confidence in the IAEA, in this director general, Director Grossi, in his efforts to ensure full implementation of IAEA verification in Iran. We can't comment on a report, the details of which haven't been released. But as we have said before, we know that Iran continues to take steps in excess of the JCPOA. Iran also recently has taken steps towards reducing cooperation with the IAEA, including under the Additional Protocol. This all undergirds our concern that Iran is moving in the wrong direction.

It's important to us that we, once again, have those permanent and verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear program, and verifiable in the sense that the IAEA is able to ensure that verification and monitoring regime is working and fully operational. So it's precisely why we put this offer on the table, to meet with the Iranians in the context of the P5+1, to try and get back to that point of joint full compliance with the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** I should be more clear. The statement from the director general that I'm referring to, that's on his website. That's not a report that hasn't been released. And so that – that's the predicate then for a process question. In order to be – not about the – what their competencies – and I'm sure there were – but in order to be considered in compliance on their side of the table, do they have to provide transparency about these four undeclared sites and answer those questions?

**MR PRICE:** We are fortunate to have a global nuclear watchdog in the form of the IAEA. Compliance is up to the IAEA to decide. Of course, we'll be working closely with the IAEA, closely with our partners and allies, but the – what the JCPOA afforded us was this robust – the most robust verification and monitoring regime ever peacefully implemented. And so the IAEA will be the judge as to whether Iran is or is not in full compliance. And – yep.

**QUESTION:** Very briefly, just on Burma. Do you have anything – is there anything new to say about your position as – in terms of what the situation there is today as opposed to yesterday? And if there isn't, I mean, if it's just the same, then that's fine.

And then secondly, you mentioned that the Secretary is going to be on the Hill tomorrow. He's going to be asked by Republicans in particular about Nord Stream 2. Is he – and sanctions and why the administration has not imposed additional sanctions. Is he going to be prepared to answer those questions, and if so, what's he going to say?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me just say a word on Burma, Matt, because I think it's obviously important. And we are repulsed by the military regime's continued use of lethal force against the people of Burma. We strongly condemn the use of violence by Burmese security forces against the Burmese people, including peaceful protesters, journalists, and other elements of civil society. We urge – and we continue to urge – the Burmese military to exercise maximum restraint. The latest escalations that we've seen in recent days of violence, it's just another indication of the military's complete disregard

for the people of Burma. It's unacceptable. The United States will continue to hold to account those responsible. Many of our partners and allies around the world have enacted measures of their own.

We continue to work with partners and allies to speak with one voice and to act consistently with one another. Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets to show the strength of their will and the power of their collective voice. And again, we call on security forces to respond peacefully with respect for human rights, including the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

**QUESTION:** And on Nord Stream 2 tomorrow? I mean, he's going to get hammered on this, as you are probably aware, so is he going to be able to give a further explanation beyond the report that was sent last month?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Matt, as you know, the report that we submitted last month is a regular status report to the Hill. The next status report is due to the Hill in May.

**QUESTION:** They want it – they want something – you've seen the letters, right, and public statements.

**MR PRICE:** So I would say —

**QUESTION:** They want it before May.

**MR PRICE:** I would say as a general matter, we don't comment on communications with the Hill. What we can say is that the administration's focus and our efforts remain the same, and that is preventing the completion of Nord Stream 2 pipeline. President Biden has, of course, called it a bad deal, a bad deal that divides Europe. The Secretary has had and I'm sure will have an opportunity to continue discussions with members on the Hill tomorrow. He appreciates the insight and communication from them on this and every other issue we confront.

Thank you very much, everyone.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:12 p.m.)

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## **Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan's Meeting with PRC Counterparts**

03/10/2021 12:38 PM EST

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will meet on March 18 in Anchorage, Alaska with People's Republic of China (PRC) Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi. The meeting will take place following Secretary Blinken's meetings with two of our closest regional allies in Tokyo and Seoul. Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan will discuss a range of issues with the PRC.

Secretary Blinken will return to Washington, D.C. on March 19.

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 11, 2021](#)

*03/11/2021 06:07 PM EST*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

1:48 p.m. EST

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon.

**QUESTION:** Do you need all that today?

**MR PRICE:** Absolutely.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** A few things at the top.

Secretary of State Blinken will travel to Tokyo, Japan, and Seoul, Republic of Korea, March 15th to the 18th to reaffirm the United States' commitment to strengthening our alliances and to highlight cooperation that promotes peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world.

On March 16th through the 18th in Tokyo, Secretary Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin will attend the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee, or 2+2 meeting, hosted by Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi and Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi. Secretary Blinken will meet with Minister Motegi and other senior officials to discuss a range of bilateral and global issues.

Secretary Blinken will also meet virtually with business leaders to highlight the importance of U.S.-Japan economic ties and shared priorities, addressing climate change, securing supply chains, promoting and protecting emerging technologies, fostering digital trade, and recovering from COVID-19. He will have a discussion with women entrepreneurs on the challenges women face in building successful businesses. Secretary Blinken will also host a virtual roundtable with emerging Japanese journalists to discuss the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the role of a free press in promoting good governance and defending democracy, and the widespread benefits from advancing gender equity and opportunities for women worldwide.

On March 17th through the 18th in Seoul, Secretary Blinken will attend – Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin will attend a U.S.-ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial, or 2+2 again, hosted by the ROK's Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Foreign – and Minister of Defense Suh Wook. Secretary Blinken will meet with Foreign Minister Chung and other senior officials to discuss issues of bilateral and global importance. Secretary Blinken will also meet virtually with Korean youth leaders and host a virtual roundtable of emerging Korean journalists to discuss the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance in

promoting peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and around the globe.

Next, as we announced yesterday, the State Department has taken decisive action against violent extremism by designating ISIS-Democratic Republic of the Congo and ISIS-Mozambique as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists, or SDGDTs for short.

Seka Musa Baluku, leader of ISIS-DRC, and Abu Yasir Hassan, leader of ISIS-Mozambique, have also been designated as SDGTs under Executive Order 13224.

ISIS-DRC is responsible for many of the terrorist attacks across North Kivu and Ituri provinces in eastern DRC, and it's notorious in the region for its brutal violence against Congolese citizens, as well as against DRC military forces and U.S. peacekeeping personnel. Attacks attributed to ISIS-DRC have killed more than 840 civilians in 2020 alone.

ISIS-Mozambique's violent extremist insurgency has wreaked havoc in the country's Cabo Delgado province and has killed more than 1,300 civilians. ISIS-Mozambique's continued attacks have caused the displacement of nearly 670,000 persons within Mozambique.

This designation is an important step in the global fight to defeat ISIS. The United States will continue to expose and isolate terrorists, disrupt their support networks, deny them access to the U.S. financial system, and do everything in our power to preserve the security of the United States.

We remain decisively engaged with our partners to address security challenges and to advance peace and security in Africa.

And finally, as you saw yesterday with Ambassador Jacobson's remarks at the White House press briefing and our media note, we are taking concrete steps to implement our comprehensive regional migration management strategy.

The latest step involves reopening the Central American Minors, or CAM, program, which reunites qualified children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with their parents or parent who are lawfully present in the United States.

As directed by President Biden, we have initiated the first phase of reinstating this program, reopening applications that were suspended when the program was terminated in 2017.

In doing so, we will provide a safe, legal, and orderly alternative to dangerous irregular migration. During the life of the program, the United States has reunited nearly 5,000 children safely and securely with their families.

The U.S. southern border, of course, remains closed to irregular migration and we reiterate that we strongly discourage people from attempting this dangerous journey to the United States.

The steps we are taking reflect our values as a nation and represent our continued commitment to ensure that we treat people with dignity and respect, and that we protect the most vulnerable people, especially children.

So with that, Matt.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. I got two brief ones just on the – to follow up on stuff that came up at the hearing the Secretary had yesterday.

Just on the first one – and I think this is going to be dispatched with kind of quickly – he was asked a couple times about Hong Kong, the situation there, and the last time he – the second time he was

asked about it, he was asked specifically about this new election law that was going in and it hadn't happened yet, so he didn't give a very – he didn't give a big answer about it.

**MR PRICE:** Right. Right.

**QUESTION:** So I'm just wondering, can you – do you have concerns about this latest move by the NPC to take away the ability of Hong Kong citizens to vote for —

**MR PRICE:** We absolutely do, and Matt, to your question, I expect you will be hearing from the Secretary – at least in the Secretary's voice – on this later today. In the meantime, let me just say that we condemn the PRC's continuing assault on democratic institutions in Hong Kong. The changes approved by the National People's Congress today, on March 11th, are a direct attack on Hong Kong's autonomy, its freedoms and democratic processes, limiting political participation, reducing democratic representation, and stifling political debate in order to defy the clear will in Hong Kong and deny their voice in their own governance.

**QUESTION:** I got one other, but it's on a different subject if someone wants to – but it's still from yesterday. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Okay. On China – so this is going to be – next week is going to be the first time Biden administration in person will meet with Chinese officials. It's safe to say that your bilateral relationship is at its worst in decades. What would success look like?

**MR PRICE:** Well, before we talk about next week in Anchorage, I think it's worth underscoring for a moment the predicate of what you will see in Anchorage on March 18th. The predicate speaks —

**QUESTION:** Snow.

**MR PRICE:** — I think – excuse me?

**QUESTION:** Snow.

**MR PRICE:** Snow. You will see snow. It may be colder, certainly colder than it is here today. But I think the predicate speaks to the ways in which we plan to engage Beijing from a position of strength. Across every one of our sources of strength – and we've talked about these in recent days – you've seen us take concrete steps to revitalize them, in many ways to build them back better, to coin a phrase. And it's no accident that we've taken these steps before we engage Beijing at a more senior level, as will happen in the coming days.

Let's start with our alliances and partnerships, a core source of strength. Calls to our treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific were some of the first that the Secretary made upon his confirmation. He spoke to Foreign Minister Motegi, he spoke to then-Foreign Minister Kang, spoke to Foreign Minister Payne, Foreign Minister Mahuta, followed those by others in the Indo-Pacific. Those were some of the very first calls he made as Secretary. Of course, he attended the Quad ministerial on February 18th. We've seen a trilateral engagement with the Japanese and the ROK. We've had now, I believe, two sessions with the E3 that the Secretary has taken part in. The Secretary was invited to address the EU's Foreign Affairs Council, or the FAC. And, of course, as I mentioned just a moment ago, we'll be traveling to the region as our first physical trip next week when we visit Japan and South Korea, our two treaty allies.

In the same breath, I would mention our re-engagement in multilateral institutions: the WHO – we have re-engaged with the WHO in a constructive and we think productive fashion; we have re-engaged the Paris climate agreement and other institutions.

Third, our values, which we also consider a key source of strength. We have consistently and oftentimes in harmony with our allies and partners spoken up in defense of our allies and to condemn the PRC's affronts to many of these shared and even universal values, whether that's in Xinjiang, whether that's in Hong Kong – as a moment ago – whether that's in Taiwan. Anywhere around the world, we have spoken up, and we have taken in many cases concrete action.

And fourth, our domestic strength. The administration has taken steps to strengthen our own house, recognizing that our strength on the world stage is directly tied to our strength at home, our supply chains. The White House, of course, on February 24th rolled out an executive order to create more resilient and secure supply chains for critical and essential goods. And of course, we now have the American Rescue Act, which will be a key driver of American strength and vitality going forward.

So with all that said, we will engage – as we announced yesterday; Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan – their Chinese counterparts, doing that from this position of strength that the predicate to all of this has allowed us to amass. It will be a – there will be some difficult conversations, I would expect. We will certainly not pull any punches in discussing our areas of disagreement.

But as Secretary Blinken has said, our relationship with Beijing is a multifaceted one: It is fundamentally competitive; it is adversarial in some ways; and there also are potential areas for collaboration. And so I suspect all of those elements will come up during these discussions on March 18th.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** The Secretary said yesterday that any follow-up engagement with the Chinese officials after Anchorage have to be based on the proposition that we're seeing tangible progress and tangible outcomes on the issues of concern. Can you describe a little bit what you're expecting after this first meeting and what would make you say, okay, we can have further meetings and engagement?

And also to follow up on Hong Kong, you've been condemning and taking actions and sanctions for months, and yet China feels strong enough to change the Hong Kong electoral law, so isn't this the proof that you have very little leverage to make pressure on them with pressure?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to next week, when it comes to this bilateral engagement, what we expect is for Beijing to demonstrate seriousness, to demonstrate seriousness regarding its own oft stated desire to change the tone of our bilateral relationship. As I've said before, this will be a difficult conversation. We'll be frank in explaining how Beijing's actions and behavior challenge the security, the prosperity, the values of not only the United States but also our partners and allies.

Now, on the flip side of that coin, we also will explore avenues that – for cooperation that are in our interest. When Secretary Blinken first spoke with Director Yang, when President Biden first spoke with President Xi, they made very clear that there will be areas for collaboration, or at least there will be the potential for areas of collaboration. But there has to be one common denominator – when it is in our national interest.

Of course, climate change I think is one of those that we can tangibly point to as undeniably in our own national interest for the world's largest and the world's second-largest emitters to be able to work productively and constructively together when it comes to climate change.

But the point remains that we're not looking to engage in talks for the sake of talks. We are looking for Beijing, again, to demonstrate that seriousness of purpose, to demonstrate that it seeks to live up to its own oft stated desire to change the tone of the bilateral relationship. And Humeyra made a point

about the tone of that relationship not only in recent weeks and months but for years.

**QUESTION:** Change of topic?

**MR PRICE:** Other China?

**QUESTION:** Yes. How would you characterize the current status of the U.S.-China relationship?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would characterize it precisely how Secretary Blinken did. It is multifaceted. It is primarily and fundamentally a relationship that is predicated on competition. Our goal when it comes to our relationship with Beijing, our approach to Beijing, is to compete and ultimately to out-compete with Beijing in the areas that are competitive. And we've talked about them. The economic realms, the security realms are primarily competitive. There are, of course, areas in this relationship that are adversarial. And there are, as I was mentioning a moment ago, areas for potential collaboration. So I wouldn't want to attach one label to it, because it truly is multifaceted.

We are going to discuss those more difficult areas with the Chinese. I have every expectation that when it comes to those more difficult issues – Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, pressure on Taiwan, broader human rights abuses, the South China Sea, the Mekong, economic pressure, arbitrary detentions, the origins of COVID-19, other issues – I have every expectation they will come up. But that doesn't mean that these talks have to be purely adversarial or have to be purely predicated on issues of profound disagreement. I expect there will also be opportunities to raise potential areas for cooperation, again, when that criterion is met: when it is in our national interest.

**QUESTION:** That was a pretty long list. What are you going to – what do you have to agree on? Rainbows? I mean, that list that you just gave to Kylie is pretty long.

**MR PRICE:** It is a long list. And it is a long list because there are – it is a long litany of disagreements we have with the People's Republic of China. The point is that it is not just a litany that we have. The predicate that I was referring to earlier —

**QUESTION:** They're going to have a litany with you, too.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'm sure they might. But my point was, Matt, that it is not just our litany. It is not just our list. We have spent much of the past six or seven weeks, certainly the time that Secretary Blinken has been on the job, conferring with those partners and allies, comparing notes, setting those priorities, ensuring that our approach with our closest partners and allies around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific but also in Europe for that matter, that we have a calibrated, coordinated approach to the Chinese, allowing us to approach these talks from fundamentally that position of strength.

Other questions on this? Yes.

**QUESTION:** This isn't on China. It's on Egypt.

**MR PRICE:** Okay, let's finish up China. And I know we're – we have a tight timeframe today. So yes.

**QUESTION:** One more on China?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** It's not been too long since the Quad came back together in earnest in 2017, and it seems like a big deal to have this leadership level meeting so early on in the administration that you've having tomorrow. How central will the Quad be to your strategy on China, and what is the message that China should be taking from tomorrow's Quad summit?

**MR PRICE:** I missed the last part.

**QUESTION:** Oh. And what's the message that China should be taking from tomorrow's summit?

**MR PRICE:** Ah, got it. Well, the Quad, as it's known – the United States, Australia, and India and Japan – it was established not to counter one single threat or to focus on one single issue, but it was really established, and certainly how we seek to use it, is to showcase, to showcase what democracies can deliver together both for our own populations and for the broader world. We recognize that Quad members are uniquely positioned to help lead the region out of crises and to help move the region towards the more positive vision we all seek, both to address these crises and to seize these opportunities that are presented to all of us collectively.

So I would hasten to – I would dissuade you from the idea that the Quad is focused, again, on any single issue, to include China. It's not. Of course, maritime security is a key focus of the Quad, but it is a grouping that is predicated on shared interests, and we certainly have shared interests with these three other partners and allies. We have shared interests in standing up for universal values and rights. We have shared economic interests. We have shared security interests. We have deep people-to-people ties with all of these countries. And that's what the Quad is about. It's about more than any one particular challenge.

**QUESTION:** Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** Afghanistan. Anything else on China? Let's – we'll take one more China question before we move on. Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Can you elaborate a little bit more about why he – I mean, the Secretary chose Japan and South Korea as his first overseas trip destination? And what is the meaning of having a high-level meeting with China right after his trip? And one more. And how would Biden administration's approach to Japan and other allies in Asia be different from the previous administration, especially in terms of dealing with China? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Sorry. The last question was how will our approach be different in dealing with partners and allies?

**QUESTION:** Yeah, especially in terms of dealing with China.

**MR PRICE:** Dealing with China. Sure. Well, the Secretary is traveling to the Indo-Pacific to meet in person with our treaty allies, the Japanese and the South Koreans, primarily because we know that our global system of alliances and partnerships is, again, a core source of strength. The military might call our partnerships and alliances force multipliers. We call them necessary. We call them imperative to achieve not only our interest to stand up not only for our values but to achieve common interests and to stand up for universal values and universal rights.

Now, it is undeniable that over the course of recent years these partnerships and alliances in some cases have atrophied. In some cases, they have frayed. So Secretary Blinken, President Biden, Secretary Austin, they have all made a commitment to show both – and to demonstrate, both in word and in deed, that our partnerships and our alliances are – that we attach the value to them we say we actually do. And I think that is what this first physical trip demonstrates. Again, we have many common interests. We share many common values with these two partners.

You mentioned China. And of course, a coordinated approach to China is one of the elements that will be on the agenda in both countries. China, at the same time, is not going to dominate the agenda. We have a lot of business, we have a lot challenges, we have a lot of opportunities to address with these



close treaty allies. And it's precisely why Secretary Blinken is traveling there so early in the administration to begin those discussions.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, on the Gulf. Any comment on the Russian foreign minister tour in the Gulf and his talks in Saudi Arabia about acquiring S-400 missiles?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any specific comment on that. We have – when it comes to other contexts, we've made our position on the S-400 very clear, especially in the context of NATO. But I wouldn't want to comment on Foreign Minister Lavrov's —

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** One more on —

**MR PRICE:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Can we go to (inaudible)?

**QUESTION:** One more on Iraq?

**MR PRICE:** On Iran?

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Iraq.

**MR PRICE:** Iraq.

**QUESTION:** Militia group called International Resistance claimed responsibility for an IED attack on U.S.-led coalition logistic convoy in Anbar province. Are you aware of that, and do you have any reaction to that?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any particular reaction to that right now. The Department of Defense may have something for you.

**QUESTION:** Egypt.

**MR PRICE:** On Egypt? Okay.

**QUESTION:** Okay. You've previously said that selling weapons to Egypt doesn't interfere with your commitment to human rights. Do you not see the contradiction in saying that selling weapons to a dictatorship that openly oppresses its own people and that tortures its own people has got nothing to do with your commitment to human rights?

And on that, we've actually just returned back from Egypt. And whilst we were there, we documented a number of human rights abuses. We spoke to people who gave us accounts of how their family members and loved ones have been disappeared, detained, or arrested by the government because they posed some sort of threat to the Egyptian administration.

We also have the list – a list of at least 22 names of individuals who are either American citizens or

people who have green cards or those who are related to American citizens that have been arrested by the Egyptian state or have been released and are currently facing politically motivated charges. On top of that, you already know that human rights organizations describe Egypt as one of the most oppressive regimes – Sisi's Egypt as one of the most oppressive regimes in the country's history.

Given all that information, and the fact that President Joe Biden back in July 2020 tweeted that there would be “no more blank checks” for, quote, “Trump's favorite dictator,” Sisi, can you confirm that you will be freezing the \$1.3 billion of funding that is given to Egypt in military aid every year?

**MR PRICE:** It is absolutely true that there will be no blank checks for any country – a close security partner, a competitor, an adversary. That is absolutely true. The United States will not check our values, will not check our principles, at the door in any relationship. Candidate Biden made that very clear; President Biden has made that very clear; Secretary Blinken has made that very clear.

When it comes to Egypt, it is true that Egypt plays an important role in promoting some of our key interests in the region: regional security and stability through the guardianship of the Suez Canal; counterterrorism cooperation; and its leadership in promoting Middle East peace. Secretary Blinken has had an opportunity to discuss some of these issues with his counterpart, Foreign Minister Shoukry, just as we raise human rights, just as we raise our values. These two things, they're not separate. They're inextricably linked. If we don't stick up for our values, if we don't stick up for human rights, we're not sticking up for our interests. We recognize that, and we can do both.

We have deep concerns, as we have said, about the human rights situation in Egypt, including undue restrictions on civil society, undue restrictions on freedom of expression, some of the detentions you have mentioned. There is repression of civil society and human rights abuses. They undercut Egypt's own dynamism and stability as a partner of ours. We will consistently raise these issues. We will not shy away from them. We'll do that both publicly, as we have, and we'll do it privately, too. We'll also work and seek to find a partner in Congress to champion these same issues.

Look, when it comes to weapons sales and transfers, that's precisely why this administration has put those back in regular order. There is now a process that involves the interagency to review especially sensitive proposed weapon sales and transfers to make sure not only that they're consistent with our interests but also that they're consistent with our values. Those two things will always go hand-in-hand for us. We can pursue our interests and we can stick up for our values. It's precisely what we're going to do in Egypt. It's precisely what we're going to do in every other context.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Will you freeze that going forward? Will you freeze that – sorry, just to follow up. Will you freeze the military aid that —

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any announcement when it comes to —

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** — when it comes to aid. As I said before, Egypt has been an important leader in promoting Middle East peace, but I don't have any announcements.

**QUESTION:** Middle East?

**QUESTION:** Same thing.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Please.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. So with the median age of below 20 in Africa, and knowing that about 60 percent of Africans are not yet 25, actually in the next decade you will have about 320 million of population in Africa. When do you expect to have an assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of African Affairs to demonstrate that Biden is serious in nurturing relationships Africans beyond what past administrations have done from Reagan on? Such as joblessness in South Africa is at an all-time high. I'll tell you that in Zimbabwe in the last three and a half years, more than 2,714 arrests of human rights activists, journalists, political opposition, women, and even students. You say that you will speak out in defense of countries anywhere. Will Biden do more in defense of small, fragile states like Zimbabwe beyond the Executive Order 13288? And anything more on maybe foreign direct investment for South Africans?

**MR PRICE:** This administration is committed to not only sustaining but also deepening the partnerships we have across the continent of Africa, all parts of the continent. We are committed to ensuring that we have an expert who will take the helm of the bureau of – the appropriate bureau of – the Africa Bureau. As you may know, the – all of these nominations for assistant secretary positions across all of our regional and functional bureaus, they are nominees put forward by the President of the United States. So there is a process that these all go through. We do not, as you know, yet have a nominee for the bureau, but neither do we have a nominee just yet for any other regional bureau.

Given the process involved here, we're working very quickly – I know the White House is too – to see to it that some of these nominees are put forward in short order. But I expect when you see names attached not only to this bureau, but to our regional and functional bureaus across the board, you will see an elevation of expertise of professionals, of people with deep experience. And when it comes to Africa, you will see that commitment reflected in the assistant secretary that's put forward and in the policies that this administration will put forward as well.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask a China follow-up question?

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Yes, thank you. Middle East.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask a China follow-up question?

**QUESTION:** Me – Middle East.

**MR PRICE:** Please, go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Middle East.

**MR PRICE:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** But thank you to our colleague. We don't hear much about Africa here, so thank you for that question. On the Middle East, yesterday Secretary Blinken was asked about the Abraham Accords and his willingness to profound those or make those deeper. And he said yes, it was a full-throated yes, that we're really going to work on it. But then today, we saw Netanyahu was going to go to UAE, that was cancelled. So there seem to be a lot of issues still.

My question is: What concretely are you guys doing to expand the Abraham Accords? Are you talking to Saudi Arabia, for example, about them recognizing Israel? Could you tell us a little bit about what concretely you're doing? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Absolutely. Well, when it comes to Prime Minister Netanyahu's travel, we'd refer you to the Government of Israel regarding his travel. As we have said, as the Secretary said yesterday, we welcome, we support the normalization agreements between Israel and countries in the Arab – in – and the broader Muslim world. It is something that we will seek to build on. It is something that we have welcomed from the previous administration and something, again, we will seek to build on going forward. We have discussed it in the bilateral context with some of our partners in the Arab and Muslim world. It is something that we have discussed with the Israelis. I wouldn't want to get ahead of where – of private conversations at this point, but I expect before too long, you will – we'll be in a position to say more and you'll be in a position to see more about how we are going to build on that.

**QUESTION:** From the Saudis?

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't want to get ahead of that.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Can you – thank you. Can you give us an update about special envoy trip to – Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad trip to Doha? Any readouts about his latest meetings there? How long does he plan to stay there? And on a related note, on the announcement by Russia that it will host a conference next week, would the U.S. Government consider participating in that conference? And also, I have another question about Yemen. Yesterday, the Secretary said that he stands strongly with the fact to deal with the Houthis, and in this regard, is there any update about Special Envoy Lenderking's trip to the region? And can you confirm whether he is still in the Arabian Gulf or whether he returned to Washington? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Okay, lots of questions there. Let me start with the – with the last one. Secretary – excuse me, Special Envoy Lenderking has returned from his trip. I expect we'll be in a position to share additional details of that trip later today. As we said, earlier in the week, Secretary – excuse me, Special Envoy Lenderking did have an opportunity to engage with all of the GCC countries during his time in the region. He visited all of them with the exception of Bahrain on the way over there. On the way over to the region, he did have a phone conversation with his Bahraini counterpart. He also visited Jordan, and I believe it was Jordan from which he traveled back to the United States and is now back in Washington, D.C., and I expect we'll have additional details to share of that travel after the briefing.

When it comes to Afghanistan, you mentioned the Russian proposal. It is fair to say that we recognize Russia as well as other countries in the region – we recognize that they have an important stake in a secure and stable Afghanistan. We have met in the past with Russia in support of the Afghanistan peace process, but we don't have anything to announce at this time when it comes to any meetings.

But this also gets to the point that we have been talking about, and that is the point that Afghanistan's neighbors, other countries in the region have a role to play. They certainly have an interest in a peaceful, in a stable Afghanistan, and that is precisely what we are and Special Representative Khalilzad is in the region now, in Doha, seeking to bring about. He's focused on bringing and achieving progress on a political settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire towards that end. He's looking at ways to move the diplomacy forward, and as we have said, he has shared ideas with Afghans on both sides, with both negotiating parties.

Any proposal that the United States would endorse, that we would get behind, has one requirement: that it be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned at its core. We believe that is an essential component to a just and durable peace. We recognize that for any peace to be durable, it must be just, and for any peace to be just, in many ways, it must be durable. So that's why we've never sought to be prescriptive. That is why you see the SRAR in the region offering ideas, seeking to support the dialogue, the intra-Afghan negotiations that is taking place. That's precisely what he's been doing in Doha. I don't have an estimate as to how much longer he'll be there, but as long as it's productive for him to be there, to be engaged in that, he will.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Just a quick question on Egypt. Have you made a determination yet about whether the former prime minister, Hazem el-Beblawi, has diplomatic immunity in the lawsuit that has been filed by Mohamed Soltan, Mohamed Soltan being the American Egyptian citizen who says that Mr. Beblawi oversaw his torture when he was imprisoned in Egypt?

The former administration, the Trump administration, determined that Hazem el-Beblawi was – did have diplomatic immunity, I think as you know, but that was put on hold by the Biden administration, and you set a February 26th deadline for determining whether he was immune from prosecution. Have you made a determination?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any update for you there, but if we have anything to share, we will. When it comes to Mohamed Soltan, of course, we spoke out against the outrageous detention of his relatives. I understand his cousins have been released from Egyptian custody. Obviously, that's something that we welcome, but I don't have any update for you when it comes to the former foreign minister at this moment.

Rich.

**QUESTION:** Hey, Ned. On Cuba, the White House says a policy shift with Cuba is not a top priority for President Biden. Does that mean that the administration finds value in the current policy, or is it quite literally just not a top priority and something that you imagine you'll get to later?

**MR PRICE:** It is a policy that we are reviewing. Secretary Blinken spoke to this yesterday. He spoke to the core principles that animate that review.

First, support for democracy and human rights will be at the core of our efforts, because we believe it is the means to empower the Cuban people to determine their own future; and second, as we've said before, we also know that Americans, especially Cuban Americans, are in most cases the best ambassadors for freedom and prosperity in Cuba. We are committed to both of these principles. Our review is being animated by both of those principles. We have also committed – and you heard this from Secretary Blinken up on the Hill yesterday – to consult closely with members of Congress as we undertake this review. So it is not that – it is not that this is in any way on the back burner. It is something we're looking at very closely, and as that review progresses, we'll consult with members of Congress. And when we have something to share, we'll let you know.

**QUESTION:** On Syria —

**QUESTION:** Do you guys have a timeline at all?

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't want to put a timeline on it.

Yes, in the back.

**QUESTION:** On Syria. Thank you so much. As we come up on 10 years of war in Syria, can you provide any insight into what this administration's approach will be to the ongoing hostilities? Do you believe diplomats have a role on the ground there? And do you still believe Assad must go?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we continue to promote a political settlement to end the conflict in Syria. We're doing that in close consultation with our allies, with our partners, with the UN special envoy. A political settlement, we believe, must address the factors that drive the violence, that drive the instability in Syria. We'll use a variety of tools at our disposal to push for a sustainable end to the Syrian people's suffering. We'll continue to support the UN roles – the UN's role in negotiating a political settlement in line with the relevant UN resolutions, including UNSCR 2254.

We also seek to restore American leadership when it comes to humanitarian aid. As we know, Syria is a humanitarian catastrophe. The Syrian people have suffered for far too long. They have suffered under the brutal rule of Bashar al-Assad. We must do more, we know, to aid vulnerable Syrians, including many displaced within Syria as well as the refugees who have had to flee their homes.

When it comes to Bashar al-Assad, he of course remains in power despite 10 years of civil war. If there is to be a sustainable end to this conflict, we recognize that the Syrian Government must change its behavior. We are in the process now of reviewing what we might do to advance the prospects for that political settlement, and we'll consult, as I said before, closely with the UN, closely with our allies and partners in doing so.

**QUESTION:** That doesn't sound like you're —

**QUESTION:** But changed behavior, not leader.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, that doesn't sound like you're calling for his —

**MR PRICE:** I think it is fair to say that certainly, Bashar al-Assad has not done anything that would restore his legitimacy. He has been at the center of the suffering of the Syrian people, the humanitarian disaster I referred to before. We believe, we continue to believe, that we need to find a durable political settlement. That's precisely what we are invested in.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but you're no longer saying, as we heard, that Assad's days are numbered. I remember —

(Cell phone rings.)

**QUESTION:** That wasn't me. That may have been a celebration of Georgetown beating Villanova just now, which is why I made that little outburst earlier.

But Assad's days are no longer numbered?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, as I said before, Bashar al-Assad has done absolutely nothing to —

**QUESTION:** You've been saying that (inaudible).

**MR PRICE:** He has done absolutely nothing to regain the legitimacy that he has lost through the brutal treatment of his own people. There is no question of the U.S. normalizing relations with his government anytime soon. There is no question that we will stand, that we will seek to support the humanitarian plight of the Syrian people as we seek a political settlement that would end their suffering.

**QUESTION:** Mozambique?

**MR PRICE:** Mozambique.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Beyond the designation yesterday of Abu Yasir Hassan, do you plan to do something about what Amnesty International has called patterns of abuse by Mozambique's security forces who have been – had torture, ill treatment, and extrajudicial killings, and some of these serious abuses by private military companies that have ties to Zimbabwe and Russia? And in these meetings with the Quad, will Africa play a role since many countries in Africa are taking the "Look East" approach and increasing their relationships with China and Russia, where some might point a finger to the United States and say that you are lagging behind? Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** Well, we will continue to engage Mozambican authorities on the importance of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. We will urge the Mozambican Government to investigate allegations of human rights violations and abuses, and we will urge them to hold the perpetrators of any such abuses accountable. Any such allegations threaten the government's ability to combat violent extremism. In this sense, it is not only consistent with our values but also consistent with our interests that Mozambique do everything it can to investigate and to ensure accountability for human rights violations.

I've said this in the context of this briefing already, but respect for human rights remains at the forefront of our cooperation with countries around the world. That includes the government in Mozambique. We will – of course, there is the Leahy Law. It's the law of the land here. And we provide assistance to foreign security force units, only those that are fully vetted and where there is no credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.

**QUESTION:** Ethiopia?

**QUESTION:** Ned —

**MR PRICE:** Ethiopia? Sure.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. When the Secretary mentioned yesterday the acts of ethnic cleansing committed in western Tigray, was that a formal determination by the State Department? And if yes, how was it reached and by whom do you believe the – they were committed, and what does that require as – in term of action and sanctions or response?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the Secretary did speak to this yesterday. He spoke to our grave concern about the reported atrocities and the overall deteriorating situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. We strongly condemn the killings, the forced removals, the sexual assaults, the other human rights abuses by several parties that multiple organizations have reported in Tigray.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but he mentioned ethnic cleansing. Was that a determination? Was that just —

**MR PRICE:** What the Secretary said is that acts of ethnic cleansing took place in western Tigray. He made clear it's unacceptable.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on Lebanon, the French foreign minister has said today that time was running out to prevent Lebanon collapsing and that he could see no sign that the country's politicians were doing what they could to save it, and he added, "I would be tempted to qualify Lebanese politicians as guilty of not helping a country in danger."

Do you share his concerns?

**MR PRICE:** We are concerned by developments in Lebanon and the apparent inaction of Lebanese leaders in the face of multiple, multiple ongoing crises. The Lebanese people, we believe they deserve a government that will urgently implement the necessary reforms to rescue the country's deteriorating economy. We know that the Lebanese economy is in a state of crisis because of decades of corruption and mismanagement. Lebanon's political leaders need to put aside their partisan brinksmanship. They need to change course. They need to work for the common good, the common interests of the Lebanese people.

As the International Support Group reiterated in its statement today, quote, Lebanon's leaders must no longer delay "the formation of a fully empowered government capable of meeting the country's urgent needs and implementing critical reforms." The international community has been very clear that concrete actions remain absolutely critical to unlocking longer-term structural support to Lebanon.

**QUESTION:** Are you planning to put any pressure on them to do so?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have demonstrated a long-term commitment to the people of Lebanon over decades, and we will continue to stand with them. We would not want to do anything that would in the first instance add to the plight of the Lebanese people.

**QUESTION:** Just one more on Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** And also related to oil, is the United States aware that Iran has been quietly moving around record amounts of crude oil to top client China? And also, India's refiners are adding Iranian oil to their annual import plans, all in the anticipation that you will – that the U.S. sanctions will soon ease. The previous administration was enforcing these sanctions super strictly, going after shipping industry, calling captains of tankers, and all that.

So first, are you aware of this rise in the oil shipments? Are you worried about this? And is this, like, your way of giving Tehran the breather that it wants ahead of these talks without actually removing the sanctions?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have a full accounting in front of me of the movement of oil in the region. I think the broader point, however, is one that is worth stressing, and the Secretary actually noted this yesterday. We will not offer any unilateral gestures or incentives to induce the Iranians to come to the table. If the Iranians are under the impression that absent any movement on their part to resume full compliance with the JCPOA that we will offer favors or unilateral gestures, well, that's a misimpression. If and only if Tehran comes to the negotiating table would we be in a position, would we be prepared to discuss proposals that could help push both sides back on that path of mutual compliance to the deal. Ultimately, that is where we seek to go: compliance for compliance.

If Iran returns to its full compliance with the JCPOA, the United States would do the same. As I have said before, that would be a necessary but insufficient development, insufficient because we would then seek to lengthen and strengthen the terms of that deal, using it as a platform to negotiate follow-on arrangements to address these other areas of profound concern with Iran's behavior in the region.

Thank you very much.

**QUESTION:** Wait, wait, wait. Wait, wait, wait. They had a couple here. (Laughter.) Yeah, I'm sorry, did someone ask about Burma?

**QUESTION:** No, we didn't.



**QUESTION:** Because I missed it if we didn't.

**MR PRICE:** We did not.

**QUESTION:** But there's still a problem in Burma, right?

**MR PRICE:** There is.

**QUESTION:** Something that you would like – might like to address from the podium?

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** I don't know —

**MR PRICE:** I am happy to address it. It's important to address.

**QUESTION:** I'm just wondering if you have any comment on the latest developments —

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** — if there's anything we can expect coming down the pike since you guys are going to be going on an Asia tour, where presumably it will be among the things discussed, and the President is meeting with or having his virtual meeting tomorrow with Asian leaders.

**MR PRICE:** It absolutely will be on the agenda next week. And I would reiterate that we are appalled by the horrific violence perpetrated against the people of Burma in response to their peaceful calls to — for the military to respect their rights and to restore the civilian government that they themselves elected last November.

We condemn the security forces' brutal killing of unarmed people, their attacks on journalists and activists, these ongoing unjust detentions that we have talked about in recent days. We condemn the attempted media blackout and efforts to silence the voices of the people by revoking the licenses of several local media organizations. We're deeply concerned about the increasing attacks on the freedom of expression, including for members of the press.

We call for the release of journalists and for all others who have been unjustly detained. The people of Burma have clearly demonstrated that they want the release of those unjustly detained, and at their core, a return to democracy, a return to the civilian government they themselves elected, that the military junta overthrew in an anti-democratic coup on February 1st. The military cannot protect itself from the consequences of these actions if it continues down this path.

And when we talk about the various actions, you will note that the United States – we have announced, just yesterday in fact, additional measures of accountability for the military, sanctions against both individuals and entities affiliated with the military junta. Together with our partners and allies, we will continue to do that, and we will continue to find ways to hold the junta accountable for its actions.

**QUESTION:** Secondly, on Honduras, are you aware of any attempt by the administration to clarify comments that you and others have made suggesting that President Hernandez is not exactly an ally in the fight against corruption?

**MR PRICE:** I am not aware —

**QUESTION:** There are some reports that there was an apology made to the Government of Honduras

because of some comments that were made.

**MR PRICE:** What I spoke to remains the policy of the United States Government. We know that corruption, that lack of respect for the rule of law, that endemic lawlessness in some cases – that it is ultimately not only not in the interests of the people of the region but it has reverberations for the United States. Again, as I spoke to the other day, these factors are key to the desire of some to flee their homelands, including Honduras, and to seek a better life elsewhere.

It's precisely why we seek a partnership with the people of the Northern Triangle, including in Honduras; why we seek a partnership with civil society elements in the Northern Triangle, including in Honduras; why we seek a partnership with governments in the Northern Triangle, including in Honduras, as we seek to address these underlying challenges and ultimately to address the patterns of irregular migration that have posed a challenge not only for the region, not only for our neighbor in Mexico, but also for the United States.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then lastly, yesterday in the hearing on the Hill – and then I presume – I don't know because it was closed – but there was a Senate hearing that the Secretary was in. But yesterday, at yesterday's public hearing, the issue of Nord Stream 2 came up several times. And the Secretary said several times that you guys were still looking into what other sanctions could be applied under the PEESA and PEESCA laws. And I am just curious if there has been any further determinations made on that since your report that came out, considering the fact that the Danish Maritime Authority has actually identified at least three other ships that are working on the pipeline, which would be sanctioned – they should be sanctioned – under U.S. law. I mean, they publicly identified them, and so I guess I'm – my question is: Why haven't these other ships been sanctioned? And because they haven't, I mean, is this something that's in the works?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I'll read you what Secretary Blinken —

**QUESTION:** You don't need to read – repeat what he said at the hearing yesterday.

**MR PRICE:** I – but I think it's important. He made the point – and he said – “I've been on the job, I think, five weeks. The pipeline is 95 percent complete. It started construction in 2018, so I wish we didn't find ourselves in this situation with a pipeline that's virtually complete.”

All that notwithstanding, the President of the United States, Secretary Blinken, others in this government have made this administration's view unavowedly – unambiguously clear that Nord Stream 2 is a bad idea. It goes against the own – Europe's own stated energy interests. It goes against our interests in the region as well. That's precisely why in the report that we submitted to Congress under the legislation that was passed and consistent with the legislation that was passed, we noted our sanctions on KVT-RUS and the *Fortuna*. As you know, Matt, these reports are due to Congress every 90 days. During that 90-day period, we will continue to evaluate the pipelaying activity that is ongoing in the region. If this activity meets the threshold for sanctions, I have no doubt – you should have no doubt – that this administration will follow the law. And if the law states that entities should be sanctioned for their pipelaying activity, I suspect you'll be hearing more about that from us.

**QUESTION:** I will have no doubt. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:43 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 15, 2021](#)

*03/15/2021 06:31 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

2:15 p.m. EDT

**MS PORTER:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining today's press call. A few things at the top, and then we'll get into your questions.

Today, Mathias Cormann of Australia was selected as the next secretary general of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the OECD. As a former finance minister and elected official, Cormann brings a wealth of leadership and problem-solving experience to the role. And, as the first secretary general from the Asia-Pacific region to lead the OECD in its 60-year history, we're confident he also brings a fresh perspective.

Cormann will lead the OECD as it navigates pressing international economic issues including addressing climate change, modernizing international taxation, tackling corruption, and strengthening labor rights.

The United States admires the OECD for its role in enhancing cooperation in the global economy and values it as a unique forum where the United States can work with likeminded, market-driven democracies in developing a shared approach to challenging issues and building a green and inclusive future together.

We also look forward to working with Cormann on the OECD's 60th anniversary Ministerial Council Meeting, which the United States will be chairing this year.

We want to thank UK Ambassador to the OECD and Dean of Ambassadors Chris Sharrock for leading a well-organized, fair, and transparent selection process, one that resulted in consensus among 37 OECD member-states on the next secretary general: Mathias Cormann.

Congratulations, Mathias. We look forward to working with you.

Ten years ago, the Syrian people peacefully took to the streets calling for basic human rights and an end to government corruption. On this anniversary, we honor the many brave Syrians who spoke out a decade ago against oppression and who continue to act today – documenting atrocities, providing humanitarian aid and medical services, and demanding freedom and dignity for all Syrians.

The United States stands with the Syrian people. Under the Assad regime, they have suffered innumerable atrocities, and we will continue to work with the international community to promote accountability and call for the release of those arbitrarily detained, information on whereabouts of the missing, and unhindered humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people.

We will also continue to promote a political settlement to end the conflict in Syria in close consultation with our allies, partners, and the United Nations. A political settlement is the only way to sustainably end the conflict, prevent greater suffering, and provide the peace and stability the Syrian people deserve.

This weekend also marked another new low, as Burmese security forces brutally attacked their own people, killing dozens throughout the country. The military junta's violence against the people of Burma is immoral and indefensible.

The junta has responded to calls for the restoration of democracy in Burma with bullets.

These tactics are a reminder that Burma's military conducted this coup for their own selfish gains and not to represent the will of the people.

The United States continues to call on all countries to take concrete actions to oppose the coup and its escalating violence.

The United States is following with concern developments surrounding the Bolivian Government's recent arrests of former officials. We urge our friends and neighbors in Bolivia to uphold all civil rights and due process guarantees of the American Convention on Human Rights and the principles of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Our concern joins those expressed by civic, political, and religious leaders in Bolivia as well as by those in the international community, including the UN secretary general, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bolivia, and the European Union. Many countries in our hemisphere, including the United States, have realized that at one time or another that democratic rule of, by, and for the people is a gift that must be respectfully handled.

And with that, we will go to our questions. Let's go to the line of Nike Ching of VOA.

**QUESTION:** Hi, good afternoon. Jalina, thanks so much for the briefing. On North Korea, I take note that White House spokesperson has confirmed the Biden administration has reached out to North Korea but has not received a response. As Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan are meeting with senior Chinese officials later this week, what does the U.S. ask from China regarding North Korea denuclearization? Is this something the U.S. envisioned it could cooperate with China? And separately, is there discussion to appoint a human rights envoy for North Korea? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thanks for your question, Nike. I'll get to your question on North Korea.

So the Biden administration is conducting a thorough interagency review of U.S. policy toward North Korea, and that includes evaluating all options to address the increased threats that are posed by North Korea to its neighbors as well as the broader international community. We're continuing to lead a structured and detailed policy process that has integrated a diverse set of voices from throughout the government and incorporates input from think tanks as well as outside experts.

We've also consulted with many former government officials, including in North Korea policy, and several from the previous administration. And throughout this review process, we will have and we will continue to engage with our Japanese and South Korean allies to solicit input as well as explore fresh approaches. We've listened carefully to their ideas, including through trilateral consultation.

Next, we will go to the line of Simon Lewis, Reuters.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Hi, can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Hi. Yes, we can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Hi, yes. So I wanted to ask the – on Thursday this week, there is a Afghan peace conference in Moscow, and we wanted to know whether Special Envoy Khalilzad is planning to attend that. And if the U.S. going to attend this conference under Russian auspices, then what does that mean for the peace process in Afghanistan?

**MS PORTER:** Well, to answer your question on the peace process in Afghanistan as well as Special Representative Khalilzad, as of last week the Secretary said we are engaging in the region and international partners to try to accelerate progress towards a political settlement, and as a part of our ongoing efforts to encourage this important peace process, Ambassador Khalilzad does plan to attend the meeting in Moscow. This meeting will complement all other international efforts to support the Afghanistan peace process and also reflects the international community's concerns about the progress to date.

Next we will go to the line of Erin Ji, Radio Free Asia.

**QUESTION:** Hello, can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Hi, yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Great. Thank you. Thank you for doing this. My question is on North Korea as well. Would you – would you be able to elaborate on why the U.S. Government reached out to North Korea behind the scenes at this particular time? And how does diplomatic outreach fit into the ongoing policy review on North Korea? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question. Again, I'll just repeat what we said before that the Biden administration is conducting a thorough interagency review of U.S. – the U.S. policy towards North Korea. And we've continued to consult with many former government officials involved in North Korea policy as well as several from the previous administration. And again, through this review process we have and will continue to engage with our allies in the area.

Thank you. We'll go to the line of Jiha Ham of VOA. Hello?

**QUESTION:** Hi, can you hear me? Hi. Yeah, I have a similar question actually. I have a question on North Korea. So we learned that the U.S. has not received any response from Pyongyang. So a non-responsive North Korea, how would this affect to the ongoing policy review on North Korea? I mean, does it matter in how you shape the policy that they have shown no response? And would it change any directions of the policy towards North Korea?

And if I may, I have one more question. It seems like the U.S. has several channels that can reach out to North Korea. So would sending a direct letter to Kim Jong-un be one of the channels? We know the previous administration regularly exchanged letters with Kim Jong-un. So has President Biden written or will he try to maybe write a similar letter to Kim Jong-un? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Well, thank you. To answer both of your questions, to reduce the risk of escalation, we've reached out to the North Korean Government through several channels starting in mid-February, including in New York. And to date, we have not received any response from Pyongyang. This follows over a year without active dialogue with North Korea despite several attempts by the U.S. to engage.

We can now go to the line of Nadia Bilbassy.

**QUESTION:** Jalina, this is Nadia Bilbassy with Al Arabiya Television. As you have seen today, the Houthi militias has launched another rocket towards Khamis Mushait in Saudi Arabia, targeting civilians. I'm wondering if you can update us on Mr. Lenderking (inaudible) an effort of trying to get the Houthis back to the negotiation table.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question. Well, I'll start off by saying that we strongly condemn all egregious Houthi drone and missile attacks in Saudi Arabia. And these attacks are unacceptable. They're dangerous. They put the lives of civilians at risk. And we remain deeply concerned by the frequency of these attacks, including on Saudi Arabia. We strongly call on all parties to seriously commit to a ceasefire and engage in negotiations under UN auspices in conjunction with UN Special – U.S. Special Envoy Tim Lenderking. And this is a time for, again, the Houthis to come to the table and to commit to peace and diplomacy in the region. Again, the Houthis' attacks on Saudi Arabia – again, we'll just repeat – are unacceptable and this – these are not actions of a group who say that they want peace.

We will go to the line of Laura Kelly from The Hill.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you for taking my question. I hope you can hear me.

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** That's wonderful. House Democrats sent a letter today to Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling for the State Department to pressure Israel to provide more vaccines and a vaccination campaign for the Palestinians. Have you received the letter? Do you have any comment on it? And if I may just ask a second question. Does the State Department have comment on the UK – the police in London breaking up the peaceful vigils for Sarah Everard over the weekend? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Hi, thank you for your questions. To the first question, I haven't seen the report so I'm unable to comment on that. And when it comes to your second question about the vigil in London, we also don't have any specific comment on that, but if we do, we'll be sure to let you know.

Now let's go to the line of Hiba Nasr.

**QUESTION:** Thanks for doing this. I would ask about Sudan. Earlier today, Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok called for a U.S. mediation to solve the issue of the Nahda dam. Do you have any comment on that? Are you willing to engage?

**MS PORTER:** So we've seen the breaking report, and we continue to support collaborative and constructive efforts to resolve the disagreement on the GERD. We understand the GERD is a major issue for the parties, and we certainly encourage the resumption of a productive dialogue.

We go to the line of Simon Lewis – oh no, we already went and got him. Right. Simon, are you back on the line or is that – he's back? Okay. The line of Simon Lewis.

**QUESTION:** Question if you don't mind. Just you mentioned the violence in Myanmar over the weekend, in Myanmar, Burma over the weekend. Specifically, a lot of the killings happened in the Hlaing Thar Yar neighborhood of Yangon on Sunday. And that seems to be connected to these Chinese diamond factories that were set on fire.

And the Chinese Government has responded by – well, calling for the security forces in Myanmar to handle the situation and protect the Chinese businesses there, and state media in China is sort of warning of more drastic action to protect its interests in the country.

Given the talks that are about to happen with the Secretary and Chinese counterparts, I wonder if the U.S. had some warning or comment to make about China's seeming involvement in backing the security forces in this case, and any concern that outside foreign actors are getting involved in this situation in Myanmar.

**MS PORTER:** So I'll just start off by saying that, again, we are deeply concerned and saddened by the reports and strongly condemn the use of violence in Burma security forces against their people. When it comes to your question about China and the Chinese-owned factories in Burma, we certainly have to refer you to the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs for more information on that, but we again certainly don't condone any use of violence in Burma. And again, we'll continue to call on all countries, including neighbors of Burma, to take concrete actions to oppose the coup and urge a return to civilian governance and stability.

Can we go to the line of Jennifer Hansler on CNN?

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks for doing this, Jalina. I have two questions. One, it appears that Ambassador Khalilzad is back in Afghanistan meeting with Afghan Government officials. I'm wondering if you have any more information on that stop.

And then separately, there are reports in Hong Kong that two employees of the consulate there tested positive for COVID but refused to be quarantined, citing diplomatic immunity. I was wondering if you could confirm that or if you have any comment. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you, Jennifer. Going back to Ambassador Khalilzad, he departed Doha today after several days of meetings with negotiating parties and other stakeholders to encourage progress on political settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire as well as immediate reduction of violence. And I'll repeat what we said earlier about his participation in Moscow, which he plans to attend.

Is she still on the line? What was your second question, Jennifer? Are you still there?

**QUESTION:** Hi, can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Okay. On the second one, there were reports that two Hong Kong consulate workers tested positive for COVID but wouldn't quarantine and they cited diplomatic immunity. I was wondering if you could confirm that or if you have any comment.

**MS PORTER:** Yes, so we've been informed that two consulate general employees have tested positive for COVID-19, but due to privacy concerns, we're not able to share additional information. When it comes to disinformation about these two not complying to quarantine, that is absolutely false.

Can we go to the line of Michel Ghandour?

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) for doing the call. I have two questions, one on Libya and one on Lebanon.

On Lebanon, do you have any comment on the visit that the Hizballah delegation has made to Russia and the reception that the foreign minister made for them, Sergey Lavrov?

And second, on Libya, do you have any comment on the new government that swore in today? And how do you view the future of Khalifa Haftar?

**MS PORTER:** So on Lebanon, generally speaking, we're concerned about the developments in Lebanon and the apparent inaction of the country's leadership in the face of multiple ongoing crises.



Lebanon's political leaders need to put aside their partisan brinkmanship and form a government that will quickly – quickly implement critical and long-needed reforms, restore investor confidence, and rescue the country's economy.

As far as Libya, we don't have a comment right now. If we do, we'll be certainly forward those to you as soon as possible.

All right. So we will take one final question from Hadil.

**QUESTION:** My question is about Yemen. Do you think you have any plans to convince the Houthis to stop their escalation against Saudi Arabia and to assess a political resolution?

Also I have a question about Syria. Are you considering lifting the sanctions applied on Assad regime, especially Caesar Act? And do you think the sanctions have been viable to pressure Assad's regime to accept the political resolution? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Hi, thank you. To address your first question on Syria, President Biden has made it one of his first foreign policy priorities to end the war in Yemen, and by doing so, appointing a high-level envoy dedicated to that purpose, U.S. Special Envoy Lenderking, who has also been engaged with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths on this effort. We now have a sound, fair plan for a nationwide ceasefire with elements that would immediately address Yemen's dire humanitarian situation. And that plan has been before Houthi leadership for days. Again, the United States is building on a UN framework and amplifying it through our own diplomatic engagement and expanded regional support. And again, we will routinely call on the Houthis to seize this moment and come to the table to diplomacy.

To your second question on Syria, I believe, we'll just say generally speaking that we believe that stability in Syria and the greater region can only be achieved through a political process that represents the will of all Syrians. And we're committed to working with allies, partners, as well as the UN to ensure that a durable political solution remains within reach.

All right. That ends our call for today. Thank you for coming and we'll be back here at this same time tomorrow.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:36 p.m.)

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1. Yemen ↑

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[\*\*Senior Administration Officials Preview of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken's Trip to Anchorage, Alaska\*\*](#)

*03/16/2021 10:20 PM EDT*

Office of the Spokesperson

VIA TELECONFERENCE

MODERATOR: Hi, everyone. Good evening.

Our call today is going to be attributed to senior administration officials. Our speakers today are and . Again, on background, to SAOs, and the contents of this call are embargoed until its conclusion.

With that, I will turn it over to to open us up.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Well, thanks so much, , and thanks to all of you for joining us on the line this evening. I want to start off by situating the Anchorage meeting in the context of our broader Indo-Pacific Strategy, which many of you have seen that we've been rolling out on quite rapidly.

But starting on our approach to China as part of that broader Indo-Pacific Strategy, we've been clear from the beginning that there are three main pieces to our approach to China. The first is strengthening ourselves at home, and we see the – addressing the economic recovery, pandemic response, enhancing our competitiveness as absolutely critical and key to that. We've now seen in the 50-odd days under our belts here the American Recovery Act passed. We've seen vaccine distribution accelerated on a pretty significant scale. We've seen a lot of positive trend lines on what we can do at home on core domestic sources of strength. We've got more work to do, but we feel like we are off to a pretty good start with the domestic efforts that are going to give us the sources of strength that we need to compete with China and to have an affirmative approach to the Indo-Pacific region.

The second piece of it is our allies and partners and our work in international institutions. I think that all of you will have seen – and, of course, you've got the Secretary of State currently in the region, which I'll leave to to speak to – but we have had early and intensive engagements, virtually and now in person, to move out aggressively with our allies and partners. And this is about working with our allies and partners on our shared interests and our shared values, but also in terms of understanding where we face similar challenges, including from China.

I think sometimes folks think of our allies and partners piece here as just being about choreography, that somehow we just need to talk to our allies before we talk to China. And I want to stress that that's actually not the case. Obviously, that sequencing is part of the equation here, but we're working actually with allies and partners to strengthen our hand. I think that the Quad last week was probably

the most important very clear illustration in practical terms of exactly what we're trying to achieve here, bringing together the four leaders in a virtual summit for the first time to actually do something together that we couldn't do individually, particularly on the vaccine distribution deliverable. That was big and affirmative for the region. This isn't just about something that is here to counter China; this is about something that's actually about doing something that enhances our leverage, enhances the quality of life in the region in meaningful ways.

And so that work is well underway. I'd also just note that our diplomacy as it relates to the Indo-Pacific is not limited just to the Indo-Pacific. We have been engaged in some pretty intensive diplomacy with our European partners and allies on the Indo-Pacific region, including on China. We've had a series of engagements at all levels with European partners and allies. We've been doing a bit of a virtual roadshow with a number of different capitals, having interagency conversations with key interlocutors there to really compare notes.

And two, we've always said that the domestic piece, strengthening ourselves at home, and then working with allies, partners, and international institutions to strengthen ourselves globally is really key to setting up how we are going to both confront China where it is undermining our interests and values, and where we're going to cooperate with China where we have an interest in doing so. I think that it's really important that that is the backdrop for our conversations in Anchorage. We are coming in with what we feel like is an increasing – increasingly strong hand to come to the table with our Chinese interlocutors.

I think that the conversations in Anchorage are very much intended as an initial discussion to understand one another's interests – sorry, our interests, intentions, and priorities, and frankly, to get a bit of an understanding of where the Chinese are at.

We think it's really important that our Chinese interlocutors hear from Secretary Blinken and from National Security Advisor Sullivan directly about our priorities and about our intentions. We know that sometimes there is a sense, potentially a perception, or maybe it's a hope, in Beijing that our public message is somehow different than our private message. And we think it's really important that we dispel that idea very early and that we're very clear with delivering the same messages in private that you have heard from us in public. That includes making very clear our deep concerns about a range of issues, whether it's Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Chinese economic coercion of our allies and partners, China's increasingly aggressive activities across the Taiwan Strait. We will absolutely make those points very clear. But this is really about having a broader strategic conversation, it's about communicating the areas where we intend to take steps, and it's about understanding where our Chinese interlocutors are at.

Let me just make a couple of other specific points on the meeting itself and the goals around it. I know you've heard this from folks already, but just to reinforce it, that this really is a one-off meeting. This is not the resumption of a particular dialogue mechanism or the beginning of a dialogue process. This is very much about sitting down, getting an understanding of each other, and then taking that back and taking stock. Many of you know that we are in the middle of a pretty extensive China strategy development process, and the inputs that we're getting from our allies and partners are really core to that understanding where we have some opportunities to work together and where we can best build shared leverage. But in putting where our Chinese interlocutors are at as well, what we will hear from Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi in this conversation will be important to informing where we go in our China strategy going forward. And so we think it's really important to get that.

I also want to underscore one point, which I know that this is a little bit of a unique configuration. We've not had the national security advisor and secretary of state meet together with their Chinese interlocutors previously, and we actually think that this is really important, not just in terms of something for show; but rather, we've seen a track record from China in the past of attempting to try

to play favorites within an administration and, in particular, to play the secretary of state and national security advisor off each other. I've worked on China at both the State Department and the NSC previously, and I've seen this in action. And we felt it was really important to underscore from the get-go that this administration is unified and coordinated when it comes to China policy, and that the President's two closest foreign policy and national security advisors were going to be sitting down together to have this conversation, that there is not going to be daylight, and that the games that China has played in the past to divide us or attempt to divide us are simply not going to work here. And so this is a very deliberate and visual demonstration of that from the get-go that we think is really important for helping to inform and shape how China seeks to engage with us.

The last thing I would say before turning it over to is that I know there is a lot of questions from folks about whether we're going to get into detail of negotiating some of the specific issues that are outstanding in the U.S.-China relationship. And our own view is that we're simply not there yet. We need to have more detailed conversations with our allies and partners, that it's really important that we take this deliberate time to understand actually sort of what the landscape is and how to best position the United States for success in this competition. And that means getting inputs from a variety of places and putting it in a hopper and understanding actually what's going to give us the best hand.

And so the conversation in Anchorage is really going to be at that broader strategic level, where we will touch on some specific issues but aren't expecting to come out with specific negotiated deliverables that will answer the questions. Rather, this is just the beginning of that process.

So with that, let me hand it over to my colleague over at the State Department.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** Thank you so much, . Let me just point out, as you – mentioned all the great diplomacy that is happening all over the world but particularly here in the East Asia region. As folks probably are tracking, Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin had superb meetings with their Japanese counterparts yesterday and today the team is looking forward to a full day of engagement with our Korean counterparts. I think it's worth pointing out that we're receiving extraordinary hospitality from these two allies of ours in the midst of a pandemic, which I think really goes quite a ways to showing how important these alliances are. And of course, the fact that these are the first overseas trips by Biden Cabinet officials I think also makes very clear the point that was making earlier about how much we're focusing on conversations and getting ourselves aligned with our partners and allies.

I think did a great job of laying out what we expect to get out of Anchorage. The only point I would add on that is the – Beijing has been talking about its desire to change the tone of the relationship, and of course, we're going to be looking at deeds, not words on that front. And we're of course coming to these discussions with a very clear-eyed view about the PRC's pretty poor track record of keeping its promises.

So with that, I'm happy to turn it over, , for Qs and As. Thanks.

**MODERATOR:** Thanks very much, everyone. Operator, if you could please open the lines for our first question.

**OPERATOR:** Absolutely. Ladies and gentlemen, if you do have questions, press 1 then 0 on your touch tone phone. You'll hear an indication that you've been placed into queue, and you may remove yourself from queue by repeating the 1 then 0 command. If you're using a speaker phone, please pick up your handset before pressing any buttons and make certain your phone is unmuted before asking your question.

We'll go first to the line of Nick Schifrin with PBS. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Hey, . Hey, . Thank you for doing this. Two questions. The last time the U.S. met Yang Jiechi, the administration asked that there would be no follow-on meetings specifically until there was a behavior change from Beijing. Is that the same approach that you're taking? And a 30,000-foot question: Do you believe that Xi Jinping is willing to change his behavior based on U.S. pressure? Thanks.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Hi, operator, are you there? I think we might have muted the speaker.

**OPERATOR:** Yes, we'll go —

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** I'm — oh, I'm sorry. That was me muting myself. I apologize.

**OPERATOR:** No worries.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** (Laughter.) Nick, I was giving you a great answer there. Great to hear from you. So on your question, what I would say is that as just made clear, we believe particularly as Beijing is professing an interest in a change in tone in the relationship, what we're looking for is deed more than word. I think said that exactly right. And that, of course, does mean that we're going to lay down some specific areas where we believe that Beijing does need to take some steps to change course. And you've probably seen some comments specifically about China's economic coercion in some of our allies, including Australia, that we do believe need to change before we can take substantial steps forward in the relationship. And so that is absolutely one of the factors that we are looking at here as we map out the way forward, but I agree with 's point on being very clear-eyed and realistic about what that might mean.

**OPERATOR:** We will go next to the line of Christina Ruffini with CBS News.

**QUESTION:** Hi, everybody. Greetings from Japan. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how this meeting came about — who reached out to whom, who initiated it, how the venue was chosen, and what kind of format we're going to see in Anchorage. Thanks so much.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Hey, thanks for the question. So what I would say is that the U.S. felt that, number one, the timing of the meeting needed to occur after we had taken some of those steps to really strengthen ourselves that I laid out at the top — domestic renewal and reinvestment and some substantial engagement with allies and partners — and that it was very important to us that we had some of that work meaningfully underway before we had an engagement with our Chinese interlocutors at a senior level. And we've made clear to them from the get-go that the lines of communication are open. We think that's important. But again, in terms of a high-level meeting, that that needed to wait until we had some of those other steps in motion.

The other thing I'd say is that we also felt it was really important that we host the meeting on U.S. soil. We just felt for a variety of reasons that being on our own territory was extremely important for this meeting and of not attempting to meet in China. And so that's — and then I guess the last piece of it is in terms of the venue. A lot of it was sort of practicality involving travel and COVID protocols and challenges of meeting in different places, and so we sort of landed here for a variety of reasons, but that's kind of how we ended up with that.

But I do just want to underscore the point again of feeling very important, and I think Jen Psaki had said this from the podium previously, of actually hosting on U.S. soil as a key piece of this. I don't know if wants to add anything on that.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** Yeah, thanks, . You hit the point about the way the travel arrangements worked out. So, of course, Secretary Blinken and company will be traveling back from Korea and then – and Alaska makes a pretty good midpoint stop. And clearly, the fact that Director Yang is willing to come out to the States again, I think that we certainly welcome that. He made two visits in the last years of the previous administration. I think he was both in New York and in Honolulu, so happy that we'll be able to welcome him to Alaska. Over.

**OPERATOR:** We will go next to Owen Churchill with the *South China Morning Post*. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi there. Can you hear me?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Yep.

**QUESTION:** Great, thanks so much for doing this. A couple of quick questions. Just a broad one first about how you would characterize success and failure, respectively, when it comes to your expectations for this meeting. And then a second question about logistics: Are you anticipating releasing a joint statement after this, or would there be separate readouts from either side? Thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** There will not be a joint statement. I'm happy to take that one first. I guess in terms of the question of what does success look like, I want to situate this again in terms of a process. And I recognize that that is not necessarily the glitziest of a headline, but we really see this meeting, again, as both part of the broad Indo-Pacific diplomatic work underway and very much one piece of a continued ongoing – and there will be more to come after this, right?

And so I see this as being one data point in that overarching strategy and approach that we are running right now, and so I think the – frankly, a failure would be if somehow this meeting were to be seen to somehow be divorced from that overall strategy. And that's why I think it's really important for us that these conversations be situated – by the way, including the conversations we will have in the room in Anchorage – will be situated in what we are trying to achieve in our broader priorities across this administration.

And so for us, our China strategy fits within our broader Indo-Pacific Strategy, sits within our broader approach to national security. And you could see that in the Interim Strategic Guidance document that the administration released a couple weeks ago. And so I think that's a really critical piece of this.

And I think success – again, put this really well, so I just – I'm going to just keep quoting him back here, which is this is about understanding will there actually be any change indeed, but I think our expectations are really realistic there. And so for me, that's not necessarily where my focus is going to be. It's going to be much more understanding over time how do we – how do we shape that behavior change that we're trying to seek. probably has other even more insightful thoughts on this.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** Hey, don't raise the bar on me like that, . No, actually, I would say, look, success – , you said it up front. I mean, we don't have any unrealistic expectations for sure, but we do think it's an opening to open up these lines of communication and for our principals to be very, very blunt with their principals about the long list of concerns, quite a few of which ticked off at the top. We don't want them to be operating under illusions about our tough-minded approach to their very problematic behavior. And on the other hand, of course, it's an opportunity for our guys to hear from them. So without raising expectations unduly, I think we're looking to have a nice, robust, and very frank conversation with a power that is going to be a major competitor of ours. So it's good that we're opening up these channels of communication. Over.

**OPERATOR:** We'll go to the line of Lara Jakes with *New York Times*. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi, good morning from Japan. It's a beautiful day here. I wanted to pick up on what you just said, . And I'm wondering, as the United States' principals are just as blunt about your expectations, what happens if the Chinese come to the table and they are just as blunt about their expectations? They've been very clear in saying the United States should not be meddling in what they see as internal issues for China. What does that portend for the future of the relationship if they come to the table and they say, no, these are our principles, and we don't expect to move from that?

And then also, , I was wondering if you could just very quickly elaborate a little bit on what you said about how this may be the first time that a secretary of state and a national security advisor have sat down jointly with their Chinese counterparts. Are you making reference to the previous administration or to the Obama administration or going back to the Bush administration? How far back does that go? Thank you so much.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** Guess I'll try the first part there. Look, Secretary Blinken has said that the relationship with China, we – it's going to be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. And if we get to issues where we just have very different views, it'll be good to – it'll be good for both sides to hear one another out.

But our view is, listen, we're not asking the PRC to do anything other than abide by the international rules of the road, to honor its obligations, and to take – as said, take actions consonant with their words. They talk about being a responsible champion of the multilateral system, but their deeds fall far short of that in many, many respects.

So yeah, clearly, if we happen to have some serious disagreements in Anchorage, I'm not very confident that we're going to be able to persuade the Chinese of the error of their ways and the righteousness of ours just over the course of a couple of hours' worth of talks. But I think it is important that each side know where the other does stand. Over.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Yeah, I think put that really well. The only thing I would just add on that point is that many of the things that China professes are internal matters of concern are of concern to a great number of countries, not just the United States. And so we see these not just as issues in the bilateral context, but as issues of global concern, and in some cases, growing global concern. We see that in particular on Xinjiang. We see that on Hong Kong, where you're seeing mounting not only condemnation but action by a number of countries to really make clear that China's violation of international rules, norms, and universal values does have consequences for its relationships and its engagements with other countries.

On the history, I think we'd have to actually take that and get back to you on that, in terms of has a national security advisor and secretary of state ever sat in the room together. My point is largely in terms of a meeting like this, a standalone meeting like this where there is this kind of configuration. We'd have to go back and check if there's ever been a previous instance where one or the other joined them in a meeting in Washington, D.C. or something like that.

**OPERATOR:** We will go to the line of Andrea Mitchell from NBC. One moment, please, while we open your line. Your line is open. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** When you said you were going to raise – when you said you were going to raise all these issues, can you highlight what you think are the most critical issues that you definitely plan to raise? And what role will the cyber issue and Microsoft play in any expectations of actions, impending actions against China?



**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Thanks, Andrea. I'm going to confess that I don't want to give the Chinese our whole playbook in advance. So I'm going to save some of the answers of the most important issues that we plan to raise until we can read out things to you guys afterwards. I hope you'll be understanding of that. But obviously, some of the pieces that I mentioned earlier – Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, economic coercion of allies that you're well familiar with, our concerns about China's actions to impinge on freedom of navigation – it's taking increasingly aggressive actions with respect to some of those spaces as well, but of course we have concerns about – in the technology space, in the economic space. So – but we will in our readouts afterwards be able to give you a little bit more of a prioritized sense and a little bit more on maybe the nature of how we've raised those things when we're not going to be tipping our hand quite so much.

But cyber is absolutely an issue that we plan to discuss. Our U.S. concerns about Beijing's malicious cyber activity is not new, but it's a continued and ongoing concern and reports about recent activity only heighten that. And so this is definitely an issue where I think that we will be making a very clear point about our concerns and I think we'll have more for you, again, on that after the – after the meeting.

**OPERATOR:** For our last question we will go to Paris Huang with Voice of America. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, can you hear me?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** Mm-hmm.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** So, yes, thank you for doing this. My question is you talked about before this meeting, United States had talked with allies and partners in Asia and Europe. So where do you see Russia's role play in the United States and China relationship?

And also, China have influence over Africa and Latin America as well; for example, the One Belt and One Road Initiative has extended over there as well. Did the United States talk to the countries over there before this meeting? Thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE:** I'm going to defer – those are largely, I think, areas. Why don't I defer to on that.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO:** Sure, that's a great question. Thanks very much. And yes, look, the State Department is absolutely practicing the same diplomatic outreach that was referring to with our partners and allies across the globe. We have been in very, very close contact with capitals in Latin American and Africa, Central and Southeast Asia about all of our common agenda, whether it's things like addressing the COVID pandemic, climate, and, of course, resisting coercion and aggressive behavior by powers like China and Russia. So those conversations are global in scope.

You asked about in particular the role of Russia vis-a-vis China. I mean, neither nor I are Russia experts, but I would say to our colleagues that do cover Russia, in many ways I think Russia poses a similar set of challenges, perhaps not quite on the same scope and scale that China does, but ones that we feel the best way to push back on is by making a common cause, again, with our close allies and partners and making sure that we're holding them accountable when they take actions that run counter to sort of the international rules of the road, the international system that for seven or eight decades now has helped enable the entire planet to enjoy great levels of peace and prosperity. So I think probably a question that our Europe colleagues could answer in more detail, but I think the same general approach. Thanks. Over.

**MODERATOR:** Great. Thanks, everyone, for joining us tonight, and for our friends in Asia, have a good morning. Reminder, again, we are on background, attributed to senior administration officials, and with the conclusion of this call, the embargo is lifted. Thank you.

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Yuki Morikawa of TV Asahi](#)

*03/17/2021 10:19 AM EDT*

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

**QUESTION:** Hello, my name is Yuki, newscaster at TV Asahi, and thank you for accepting our offer this time, and it is a great honor to have you in our program. How is your first trip in Japan as a —

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you. So good to be with you.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thank you so much. How is your first trip in Japan as the Secretary of State so far?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** It's been wonderful, and it's so good to be back in Japan, in Tokyo. I've spent many, many days here before, and it's wonderful to reconnect with colleagues in government, with our team at the United States embassy, and I wish we had more of an opportunity to get out and about, but just being here is a really good thing. And it's very deliberate. This is my first overseas trip as Secretary of State, and we wanted to come to Japan along with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to demonstrate in a very, very concrete way the value that we place, President Biden places, on the alliance between the United State and Japan.

**QUESTION:** That's great. We have only 10 minutes and I have five to six questions to ask, so let's get started.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** So yesterday —

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Good.

**QUESTION:** — 2+2 was held in Tokyo, and in that meeting the U.S. and Japan shared their concerns about, like, various issues, but obviously that was mainly about China. So here's my question: What will be your demands to China at the meeting that's coming on Thursday, and do you think you can push China to change its behavior in East and South China Sea?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, first, I think both the United States and Japan are very concerned because we've seen in recent years China acting more repressively at home and more aggressively abroad, including with regard to the Senkaku Islands, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and that's a concern to both of us and it's also, I think, a concern to all of those who value peace and stability in this region. And of course, there are many other issues of real concern, including economic issues, including issues of human rights at home in China. And I think both of our countries as leading democracies really share that concern. So we spent some time talking about it.

But we'll have an opportunity, as you alluded to, to meet directly with senior Chinese counterparts in

Anchorage, Alaska at the end of the week. I'll be going there along with my colleague, the American National Security Advisory Jake Sullivan. And that's an opportunity for us to very directly, face to face, share with our Chinese counterparts the concerns that the United States has, that our allies and partners have about some of the things that China is doing. And I suspect it'll be an opportunity for China to share whatever concerns it has about us. But it's important that we have an opportunity to speak directly, to speak clearly, to speak openly, also to demonstrate to our counterparts that there is no difference between what we say in public and what we say in private. The concerns that we've expressed publicly are the same ones that we'll be expressing to them in private.

**QUESTION:** Okay. What are the priorities in that meeting?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, the priority really is this opportunity to lay out clearly, openly, directly our concerns, how we see our own interests, our own priorities, and of course we'll listen to our colleagues from Beijing. I suspect they want to do the same thing. And it's just important to make sure we understand each other, and in particular that our Chinese counterparts understand the concerns that we have, understand why so many countries are increasingly worried about the actions that China is taking, again, whether it's with regard to human rights at home or some of its aggressive actions in the region.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And Chinese foreign minister, Mr. Wang Yi, is asking to remove tariffs on trade. So how do you intend to halt this trade war?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, when it comes to trade, I think there are two important things. Of course, there are the questions of tariffs and of trade deficits, and these are important and we are looking at all of that. But even more important are some of the fundamental structural problems that China has not thus far addressed. For example, its support for state-owned enterprises, the subsidization, the technology transfer, the theft of intellectual property, and basically creating an uneven, unequal playing field that is tilted in China's favor and against the interests of our workers and our businesses. And in particular, when it comes to emerging technologies and technologies of the future, some of the practices that China puts into play would give them an unfair advantage as well. So it's going to be very important that China address these concerns, and again, these are concerns that are shared not just by the United States but by many other countries.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So about policy on North Korea, how different it will be from Trump administration?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** We're reviewing our North Korea policy, and we're doing that with a lot of inputs with – from various experts, including people outside of government, former officials, but also, and critically, from our closest partners – from Japan and from South Korea – because their interests are deeply implicated in this as well. And we're in the midst of that review. I imagine it'll be completed in the weeks ahead, and then we'll be able to move forward in close coordination with our partners to try to deal effectively with the challenge posed by North Korea, by its nuclear program, by its missile program, by its abuse of human rights, and of course, the tragedy of the abductees that will very much remain in our focus, and we're in absolute solidarity with Japan and the people of Japan on that issue.

**QUESTION:** Could the military option be taken into consideration?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, what we'll be looking at and what we are looking at in the course of this review are reviewing the different possibilities for pressure, also the different possibilities for diplomacy, and let's see where we come out. We want to make sure that we finish this process, that we share our findings and our conclusions with our closest partners in Japan and South Korea, and then we'll work on this together.

**QUESTION:** Okay. You said we work on it together, and about relationship with Japan. So a top-level meeting is set for April in Washington, and there are concerns in Japan that our country would enhance its military role. So would you ask Japan to beef up its self-defense force or to increase its share on the expense of U.S. troops in Japan?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, these are of course sovereign decisions for Japan to make, not for us to make. When it comes to our alliance, that of course has been a cornerstone for peace and stability in the region for decades, for generations, and a part of that – an important part of that alliance, of course, is the work that we do together to ensure our common defense. And we've – the United States has contributed significantly to that common defense, and we've benefited from the wonderful hospitality of Japan for many years as well as the host nation support. I'm very pleased that we were able to extend for one year the current agreement on host nation support and give us some time to work through a longer multiyear agreement that I'm confident we'll reach in the months ahead.

The – unfortunately, security, freedom, democracy isn't free. It does come with costs, and costs that we have to bear together in a fair and equitable way.

**QUESTION:** Okay. But what kind of costs we can pay as Japan?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, I'm not – I'm not going to get into the details of conversations or discussions or negotiations. But I really do appreciate the fact that we've extended the current agreement for a year and I think we're both engaged in a very good-faith effort to conclude a multiyear agreement in the months ahead.

**QUESTION:** Okay, thank you. The last question is, sorry, back to the Chinese question. Do you plan to impose new sanctions to China in response to Uyghurs and the Hong Kong issue?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, we'll be looking at all of that and also making sure that we're closely coordinated with allies and partners. One of the things that's so important, I think, when it comes to the challenges posed by China – and again, this is a complex relationship and maybe the most consequential relationship for both of our countries, and it has adversarial aspects, it has competitive aspects, and it has cooperative aspects – but the common denominator in dealing with each aspect of the relationship with China is to approach it from a position of strength. And that strength starts with our alliances and partnerships. It's a unique asset that we have and that China doesn't have. It's a real source of comparative advantage.

So however we deal with the challenges posed by China, the more we're doing it together in a coordinated fashion, the more effective we're going to be. That's what my friend the Japanese foreign minister called the power of solidarity, and that's what's animating our approach to China.

**QUESTION:** Okay, thank you very much for your answers. Next time I hope we will meet at the studio, though. Thank you so much.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** With pleasure.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thanks for having me. Good to be with you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 17, 2021](#)

*03/17/2021 04:45 PM EDT*

Jalina Porter, Principal Deputy Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

2:07 p.m. EST

**MS PORTER:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining today's briefing. I have one update at the top, and then I'll resume to taking your questions. Today, Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale met with Afghanistan Foreign Minister Mohammed Haneef Atmar and Tajikistan Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin for a virtual trilateral discussion on issues of mutual importance, including Afghanistan peace negotiations and regional security.

With Tajikistan's and Afghanistan's historical and cultural ties, overlapping political and security interests, including counterterrorism, and their shared eagerness for increased economic engagement, the meeting was an opportunity to collectively support the Afghan peace process and promote greater connectivity in Central Asia.

This meeting complements other trilateral engagements held separately last year between the United States, Afghanistan, and the governments of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Now, I'll give it a few minutes for others to join the queue, and we'll start taking questions.

All right. Can we go to the line of Nike Ching?

**OPERATOR:** I'm sorry. I don't see that line in the queue.

**MS PORTER:** Nike Ching isn't in the queue – VOA?

**OPERATOR:** Oh, I'm sorry. Thank you. One moment. That line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hello.

**MS PORTER:** Hi, Nike.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina, thank you very much for this call. I would like to ask about the Afghanistan peace process. How optimistic is the United States about the Moscow summit? Does the U.S. believe Russia can help the U.S. and allies with the peace process with the Taliban? And what are the priorities in Ambassador Khalilzad's agenda for participating in the Moscow summit? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question, Nike. You're correct. Ambassador Khalilzad will travel to Moscow tomorrow. And he'll be there to share perspectives on ways to bring about political settlement and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. And, of course, we're hopeful that the

gathering will be productive, and we certainly welcome international efforts aimed at accelerating progress towards a just and durable peace in Afghanistan. When it comes to engaging with Russia, again, we're clear that we'll engage with them in ways that always advance American interests, but we're also clear-eyed about the challenges that Russia poses. When there are opportunities for our relationship with Russia to be constructive and it's in our mutual interest to do work together, we intend to do so. And this simply will be our mindset going into the meeting tomorrow.

Can we go to the line of Rich Edson of Fox?

**QUESTION:** On the sanctions announcement that came out last evening, just given that it was less than two days prior to this summit tomorrow, was the timing of those sanctions meant to send a message ahead of tomorrow's meeting?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you, Rich. So yeah, as you saw yesterday, the Secretary released a statement announcing the update to the Hong Kong Autonomy Act report. And that simply underscores our deep concern with the National People's Congress March 11 decision to unilaterally undermine Hong Kong's electoral system. And again, we'll always advocate and promote for a stable and prosperous Hong Kong that respects human rights, freedoms, political pluralism, and that serves the interests of Hong Kong, mainland China, and the broader international community.

Let's go to the line of Kylie Atwood, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you for doing this. Two questions for you. On China and their vaccine diplomacy, they've obviously exported dozens of vaccines to other countries, secured vaccine production agreements with many other countries. Does the Biden administration believe that they can surpass China's vaccine diplomacy after taking care of vaccinations at home? And then I have a second question, but I'll let you do this one first.

**MS PORTER:** So let's talk about your first question, Kylie. Thank you. When it comes to vaccine diplomacy, we'll just keep that centered on our own goals. Again, as you know, President Biden has been strongly committed to ensuring that all Americans have access to safe and effective vaccines as soon as possible, and we've taken a lead role in beating this pandemic globally. As you know, we've provided \$2 billion in COVAX with another \$2 billion committed. At the same time, we know what work we had behind us with the amount Americans we've had lost, which has been half a million. But again, we're also working with partners on ways that we can increase global capacity.

**QUESTION:** And then could I just ask one more question? There are reports that the Russian ambassador to the U.S., Ambassador Antonov, has been invited back to Moscow for consultations to discuss what to do and where to go in the context of U.S.-Russia relations. Do you guys have any response to that? And has Ambassador Antonov met with Biden administration officials? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Well, there's certainly no meetings to read out. And we're aware of Moscow's recent announcement. But what we'll say is that as we engage in Russia in ways that advance American interests, we also remain clear-eyed about the challenges that Russia poses. We can't underscore that enough. And again, even as we work to – work with Russia to advance U.S. interests, we'll be able to hold Russia accountable for any of their malign actions.

Can we go to the line of Simon Lewis of Reuters?

**QUESTION:** Hi, Hi, thanks. I have a question on Iran. There's a report in *The Financial Times* that the U.S. is planning to continue enforcing sanctions from the Trump administration on Iranian oil exports even though the Chinese are ordering and importing a lot more oil, and quotes a senior administration official saying there's going to be no tacit green light for Iran's oil exports. So I wondered if this is a



policy that you're able to confirm, and if so, is this something that you can reasonably expect to be able to enforce given how difficult it is to track oil tankers? And it seems like this is already happening without any enforcement action being taken.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question, Simon. We don't have anything to report on that today, but we're happy to take that question back and get back to you on that.

Let's go to the line of Camilla Schick from CBS.

**QUESTION:** Hi, can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Hi, yes. I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks for this. Yesterday the NSC and State in a briefing previewed some of the priorities, the topics that would be discussed at the Anchorage meeting between Secretary Blinken and Jake Sullivan and the Chinese. On that list wasn't included specifically COVID or the pandemic. I wanted to ask what is the State Department's current or if there is a new line on what you expect to come out from the WHO COVID origins report that is expected this week or next and whether that will also be something that the Secretary would address with his Chinese counterparts in Anchorage. Thanks.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question. Well, we certainly won't get ahead of the outcome of the meeting. And when it comes to the WHO report directly, we expect transparency at the forefront of that report. And I'll just reiterate that we'll continue to press the PRC on issues where the U.S. and the international communities expect transparency and accountability; such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, pressure on Taiwan, human rights, South China Sea, the Mekong, and COVID-19, as well as other issues. And again, we'll explore all other avenues for cooperation in both of our nations' interests.

Can we go to the line of Casey O'Neill, Hearst?

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thanks so much. Thanks, Jalina, for doing this. I actually just had two quick questions regarding Israel and the Palestinian Authority. So I don't know if you've seen, but some of our colleagues at *The National* just broke a story on an internal memo that they got their hands on vis-a-vis Israeli-Palestinian affairs. So my two questions, quickly, just – can you confirm the \$15 million in COVID aid to the Palestinians? Can you confirm that amount, and if that's actually going to be going to them? And also related to this, is there any talk of reversing the administration's previously stated position and moving the U.S. embassy in Israel back to Tel Aviv? Thanks.

**MS PORTER:** So to your last question, our policy hasn't changed. And to your first question, we don't have any comments on that specific memo.

Can we go to the line of Jennifer Hansler of CNN?

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina. Thanks for doing this. I wanted to ask you, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif said in an interview today that there is no – they see no reason to talk with the U.S. at this point, and they want to see this coordinated action of a return to compliance with the JCPOA. And he also said that the – Iran is prepared to exchange the Americans who are detained there for Iranians who are detained in the U.S. And I was wondering if State has comments on either of those statements. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Well, of course we are always ready for – to engage meaningfully, in meaningful

diplomacy with Iran, and we welcome them to join us at that table. And simply, this is just one of the many issues that we'd like to discuss with Iran and that we're open to doing so.

Can we go to the line of Francesco Fontemaggi?

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina. Can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Thank you. Going back to Russia, is – more specifically, is the State Department considering recalling Ambassador Sullivan from Moscow for consultation as the Russians did with their ambassador? And also, after the President's interview this morning saying that he does believe that Vladimir Putin is a killer, is that also the assessment of the State Department? Does the State Department think, considers that President Putin is a killer? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** I have nothing to add – further to add on President Biden's comments. Again, when it comes to your question on the recall to our ambassador of Russia, I'll just reiterate what we said before. Again, as we engage in Russia in a way that advances American interests, again, we remain clear-eyed about the challenges that Russia poses, and even as we work with Russia to advance U.S. interests, we'll also work to hold them accountable. And so when it comes to any recall from us, we have nothing to comment on that.

Can we go to the line of Nadia Bilbassy?

**QUESTION:** Actually, Francesco answered my – asked my question. But let me follow up on Russia as well. You're saying that you – that you will cooperate with Russia when there is interest to the U.S. national security, but you're saying also that Ambassador Khalilzad will be in Moscow tomorrow. But do you believe that the language that the President used will complicate matters? And are you sure now that the Russians will receive Ambassador Khalilzad? And are you able to work on common ties of interests – like Syria, and Libya, and Iran – after these comments?

**MS PORTER:** Again, I have nothing to – further to add on what President Biden has already said. But I'll reiterate that what he did emphasize is that, again, when there are areas of cooperation with Russia, then there are – especially when they come – of the interests of American national security, then we will cooperate with them.

And when it comes to Ambassador Khalilzad, he has been engaging in meaningful diplomacy and his – again, his meetings in Moscow are obviously important in the region and they're important to us, and we're clear-eyed about anything that they are capable of. But again, this is a good opportunity to – for the ambassador to talk about our relationship with Russia to be constructive, and again, to work in mutual interest that – interests that allow us to work together when we intend to do so.

Let's go to the line of Michel Ghandour.

**QUESTION:** One on Yemen. Any update on the talks with the Houthis? And second, is the U.S. planning to send vaccines to the Palestinian Authority?

**MS PORTER:** I'll take your second question first. Again, we absolutely welcome the reports of the arrival of COVAX shipments for the Palestinians. This is a part of the COVAX facility's commitment to provide a total of 158,000 vaccine doses to the West Bank and Gaza, and as you know, the United States is COVAX's largest donor.

And when it comes to your question about the Houthis and Yemen, we'll just reiterate that, again, the

United States is building on a UN framework and amplifying it throughout our own diplomatic engagement and expanded regional support. And again, we call on all parties to seize this moment and come to the table when it comes to peace and diplomacy in Yemen.

Can we go to the line of Conor Finnegan – excuse me – of ABC?

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina. I'm just following up on vaccinations as well. There are reports that the U.S. is holding up to millions of AstraZeneca vaccines that haven't been approved yet by U.S. authorities. Why are there those – that surplus right now while they're not approved in the U.S. and vaccines are so desperately needed elsewhere, like in Latin America or Africa? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Hi, Conor. I'm going to do my best to answer your question. A part of it had cut out, but I – I know it was largely due to vaccines. And I'll just say that President Biden has made it clear that his current priority is to protect U.S. citizens from COVID-19. The accelerated vaccination schedule in the United States has been embraced under President Biden's leadership and is making that a reality and a goal. At the same time, the President is also focused on the issue of expanding global vaccinations, including manufacturing and delivery, and we know that will be critical in – to ending this pandemic. We certainly look forward to ending this pandemic globally and, again, making sure that we have safe and effective vaccines.

Let's go to the line of Jiha Ham.

**QUESTION:** Can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Oh, hi. So on North Korea, Secretary Blinken said in Seoul that the authoritarian regime in North Korea continues to commit systematic and widespread abuses against its own people. So my question is how you are going to handle this human rights issue. The U.S. has been dealing with North Korea's nuclear issue. So is this – human rights – something that you are trying to address as part of your efforts to achieve denuclearization of North Korea, or is it just a separate issue? Also, will there be a human rights envoy for North Korea in the State Department, which has been vacant more than four years? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Let me take your first question. So broadly speaking, we always center human rights at the forefront of our U.S. – our foreign policy and national security goals. We also remain concerned about North Korea's nuclear activities and we are committed to denuclearization of North Korea.

When it comes to your second question, if we have an update for you later, we'll be sure to announce that.

Let's take one final question from Janne Pak of USA Journal.

**QUESTION:** Hello?

**MS PORTER:** Hi, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Recently, North Korean Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, criticized the United States, but will the U.S. continue to a diplomatic approach to North Korea?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question. So we are conducting a thorough interagency review of U.S. policy towards North Korea, and that includes evaluation of all available options to address the increasing threat posed by North Korea and its neighbors and the broader international community. And we're continuing to lead a structured and detailed policy process that has integrated a diverse set

of voices from throughout the government, and also incorporated inputs from think tanks as well as outside experts.

This concludes today's briefing. Thank you, guys, so much for joining us today. We'll be back again tomorrow at the same time.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:30 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 18, 2021](#)

*03/18/2021 05:04 PM EDT*

Jalina Porter, Principal Deputy Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

2:01 p.m. EDT

**MS PORTER:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you so much for joining today’s briefing. I have three updates I’d like to share with you at the top, and then I will resume taking your questions.

Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin had positive meetings in Tokyo and Seoul from March 15th through 18th, reaffirming the United States commitment to strengthening two of our most important alliances and highlighting cooperation that promotes peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world.

Later today in Anchorage, Alaska, Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will meet with Director of the Office of Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi. The meeting will follow the important work we’re doing in the region.

The meetings in Anchorage will be an opportunity to make clear our priorities and interests, and to continue to press the PRC on issues where the U.S. and the international community expect transparency and accountability, and to understand where we may have interests in cooperating, including climate change.

This will be a frank conversation in calling out Beijing’s actions to defy their international commitments, undermine the rule-based international system, and challenge the security, prosperity, and values of the United States and our partners and alliances. We are coming to these discussions clear-eyed about China’s unsettling track record of failure to keep its promises.

Next, the United States welcomes UN Secretary-General Guterres’s announcement yesterday where he named Jean Arnault of France to be his personal envoy on Afghanistan and regional issues.

Mr. Arnault will assist with the achievement of a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, working closely with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan as well as regional partners. He brings decades of experience finding political solutions to some of the world’s most dire conflicts, including past service on Afghanistan and as the Secretary-General’s delegate to the Colombia peace talks.

The UN has a critical role to play in bringing the Afghan sides and regional stakeholders together to find a path toward a just and durable peace, and the United States strongly supports Mr. Arnault’s appointment to this important role.

Finally, today the United States announced nearly \$52 million in additional humanitarian assistance to

respond to the crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region. With this announcement, the United States has provided a total of nearly \$153 million in humanitarian assistance since the crisis began.

This assistance from the American people will help some of the estimated 4.5 million people in need in Tigray and the nearly 62,000 refugees who have fled to Sudan. It will allow our partners to provide lifesaving aid, including urgently needed food assistance, and also help our partners re-establish contact between family members who have been separated due to the conflict.

We will continue to call for the immediate, full, safe, and unhindered access for humanitarian organizations and workers and to emphasize the need for a political solution to the conflict and the immediate cessation of hostilities. We have repeatedly engaged with the Ethiopian Government on the importance of ending the violence and allowing full and independent international investigations into all reports of human rights abuses and atrocities.

And with that, can we go to the line of Michel Ghandour?

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) call. I have three questions, in fact. The first one, Iraqi President Barham Salih has said that the presence of the American and the Coalition troops in Iraq is about to end. Is there any American decision in this regard? And I will ask you the two questions later on.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you, Michel. I don't have any specific comment to make on the prime minister's remarks, but what I can say is that the topic is – the Coalition's troop presence is at the request of our Iraqi partners and that we remain committed to maintaining a security partnership.

All right. Your other two questions, please?

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) discuss the possibility of reopening the U.S. embassy in Tripoli with the new leadership with Libya during his last trip to Libya?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question. So our embassy inside Libya suspended operations in 2014. However, we still have an ambassador to the mission and mission to Libya based in our embassy in Tunisia. Ambassador Richard Norland has been the ambassador to Libya since 2019, and even though he works from Tunis, Ambassador Norland and his team travel periodically to Libya for meetings.

And I'll take your last question.

**QUESTION:** My last question: Is the U.S. considering providing any humanitarian aid to Lebanon or financial aid to the Lebanese army after the collapse of the financial institutions and the economy in Lebanon?

**MS PORTER:** Well, the United States has been long – has been a long-term commitment to the Lebanese people over several decades. And again, we'll continue to stand with them as they face multiple and ongoing crises.

In fact, we've been the largest international donor, having donated more than \$5.3 billion in foreign assistance since 2006. In the 2020 fiscal year alone, the United States contributed nearly \$396 million in humanitarian assistance to provide support for the efforts of refugees in crisis as well as COVID-19.

Let's go to the line of Laura Kelly from The Hill.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you so much for taking my question. It's on U.S. and Russia relations. How would you describe the U.S. approach to relations with Russia in light of how areas of cooperation compare to areas of confrontation? How much are areas of cooperation at risk because of conflict?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question, Laura. We'll say that our relationship with Russia, it will remain a challenge, but it's something that we're actually prepared for. But the goal of our relationship with Russia is one that we want to be predictable and stable down the line. When there are opportunities for us to be constructive and it's in our interest to do so, we'll definitely pursue them. But given Russia's conflict – conduct in the past couple months, there will obviously be areas, elements of the relationship, that are adversarial. And we won't shy away from those.

We believe that the United States as well as our partners must be clear and impose costs on Russia's behavior that crosses boundaries that are respected by responsible nations, and we also believe that we should be guardrails on how these adversarial aspects of our relationship tend to play out.

Let's go to the line of Casey O'Neil from Hearst.

**QUESTION:** Hi Jalina, can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Hi. Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Perfect. Thanks so much for doing this again. Just two quick questions for you. The first, I was just wondering if you could speak to State's involvement in Senator Coons's trip to Tigray that was announced earlier by the White House. And then the second question is just a very granular personnel question that I can ask after.

**MS PORTER:** Yes, thank you for the question on Senator Coons's travel. You might have noticed before that NSA Sullivan did issue a statement on that, and we would guide you to that statement because everything about that is up to date. And I'll take your second question, please.

**QUESTION:** Yes. So like I said, just a very granular personnel question. Regarding Special Envoy Kerry, I'm just wondering, is he based out of State, or is he working out of the White House?

**MS PORTER:** So on anything for personnel, I don't have anything for you. But thank you so much for calling in.

Can we go to the line of Jiha Ham of VOA?

**OPERATOR:** Apologies. I don't see that name.

**MS PORTER:** Okay, let's go to the line of Michele Kelemen of NPR, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks. I have one question on Russia and one on Belarus.

On Russia, I'm wondering if the kind of spat between Biden and Putin has had any effect on Khalilzad's diplomacy around Afghanistan in Moscow today.

And then on Belarus, is the State Department planning to have Ambassador Fisher move to Belarus to take up her assignment? Is it possible to do that without presenting credentials to Alexander Lukashenko? Thanks.

**MS PORTER:** So when it comes to your first question about Ambassador Khalilzad and his participation in Moscow today, again, this is an opportunity for him to explore our relationship with Russia where it can be constructive and, obviously, in our – with the forefront of our mutual interests to do so. When it comes to anything from the President or any of his comments, I have nothing more.

But again, as we engage with Russia that are in ways that advance American interests, we will always be clear-eyed about the challenges that Russia poses; and even as we do work with them to advance

our own interests, we'll still be able to hold them accountable.

And your second question I believe was on Belarus. What we'll say to that is, again, the United States strongly condemns the Lukashenko regime for its use of violence and repressive tactics against peaceful protesters and quite simply calls for an end to their crackdown and release of all those who are unjustly detained, including political prisoners; the conduct of free and fair elections; and the peaceful transfer of power.

I believe we have Jiha Ham from VOA back on the line.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Can you hear me now?

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Okay. That's good. Thank you. So not like the joint statement with Japan, the joint statement with South Korea doesn't mention denuclearization of North Korea. Also while Secretary Blinken called for denuclearization of North Korea, the South Korean ministers used the term denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. So I was wondering if you had any disagreements with South Korea on this when you were coordinating the joint statement.

Plus, if I may, do you have any response to the statement issued by North Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui yesterday? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** So to answer your question, North Korea's WMD programs, as reflected in multiple UN Security Council resolutions, are unlawful and constitute a threat to international peace and security. And again, to reduce tensions and explore potential for full diplomacy, the Biden administration has reached out to North Korea multiple times to restart that dialogue. And your – I didn't catch the part of your second question, so we'll have to take that back for you, okay? Thanks.

**QUESTION:** Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui yesterday was criticizing the U.S. about the reaching out.

**MS PORTER:** Yeah. So we don't have any comment to the rest of your question, so we'll move right along.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MS PORTER:** Let's go to the line of Alex DeMarban from *Anchorage Daily*.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, hi. Thank you for taking my question. Our leaders here in Alaska, our state leaders, are asking for some relief on tariffs, including the blanket exclusion for U.S. seafood products. I'm wondering where the administration will fall in these talks on that question and also the removal – also tariff relief when it comes to timber. Can you talk about that?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for calling. We'll have to take that question back for you.

Let's go to the line of Simon Lewis, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thank you, Jalina. I wanted to ask on Myanmar, a couple of points. The European Union is set to issue some sanctions on Monday. And I'm wondering if there's – if we can expect anything more from the U.S. in line with that and how the – could they be coordinated with the EU for another package of sanctions, because when you've released sanctions in the past, you've said this – we are urging the junta to reverse course and we'll ramp this up if they don't, and things only seem to be getting worse there.



And second part of that, there were charges the other day brought by a Burmese court against Dr. Sasa, who's the international representative of the CRPH group of MPs, who are sort of operating as a government in exile or an underground government. I wondered if the U.S. wanted to respond to charges of sedition against him, and do you support that effort to create a sort of alternative government rather than engaging with the military regime? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thanks for the question, Simon. So to your first question on the EU and as it aligns with us, we certainly won't preview sanctions from here, but we'll just reiterate that the United States will continue to support the people of Burma and call for an end of the violence and atrocities. And we certainly support their right to freedom of assembly and peacefully protest, and we call on other countries, as well as our partners and allies, to speak with a unified voice against the violence in Burma.

Let's go to the line of Kylie Atwood, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thank you for doing this once again. I am wondering if the administration has decided on what percent of ambassadors will be political versus career, and if there is a commitment on behalf of the administration to try and put career folks into spots where they can.

And then my second question is: Just what prompted Secretary Blinken's statement on Nord Stream 2 today? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you, Kylie. So to your first question, we don't have any personnel announcements regarding any type of staff person here at the department. But yeah, I will say to your second question on Nord Stream 2, and as I'm sure you've seen the statement and as the President has said and as Secretary Blinken has said before, that Nord Stream 2 is a bad deal. And again, the Biden administration is committed to complying with the legislation that's already been out. That's bipartisan legislation. And I would refer I think anyone else on the call who hasn't seen the statement that was recently released to our website for that.

Let's go to the line of Rosiland Jordan.

**OPERATOR:** I apologize, I don't see that party.

**MS PORTER:** All righty then. Let's go to the line of Francesco Fontemaggi.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I have two questions on Afghanistan. The first one is on the Moscow meeting. Do you have any readout? Is Special Representative Khalilzad satisfied with the outcome? Do you think that it help put an end to the stalemate of Doha – of the Doha talks?

And the other question is: Next week is the ministerial meeting of NATO. I know you haven't announced any travel, but whether it's in person or virtually, is the Secretary ready to share with the NATO allies its – the U.S. decision on the Afghanistan withdrawal that they are waiting for? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question. So to your first one, we don't yet have a readout of Ambassador Khalilzad's participation in Moscow and the conferences. But again, to your comment on Doha, this meeting won't replace Doha. I mean, they are – what we're engaged in are international efforts to support ongoing discussions, so I just definitely want to make sure that's clear.

As far as your second question, again, there's – our posture hasn't changed about anything in Afghanistan, so there's no announcement at this time.

It looks like Rosiland Jordan from Al Jazeera is back in the queue.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks for the call. Regarding the statement on the death of the Tanzanian president, John Magufuli, is the Biden administration concerned that the continuing government is up to the task or not up to the task of dealing with corruption in the wake of his legacy in that arena?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question, Rosiland. Let me start by saying that this administration strongly condemns corruption not only in Tanzania but anywhere around the world that it's happening. And again, we'll continue to extend our sincere condolences to all the Tanzanians who are mourning the passing of their president. And we certainly hope and – that Tanzania can move forward to a more democratic and prosperous path forward.

Let's go to the line of Conor Finnegan, please.

**QUESTION:** Hey, can you hear me better today?

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can. And let me just apologize for the name slip-up yesterday. I apologize for that.

**QUESTION:** That's okay. That's okay. Thanks, Jalina. I just wanted to try and follow up on my colleague's questions on Ethiopia. Is there an intended deliverable in sending Senator Coons there, or is it just to convey a message of the seriousness with which the administration takes the issue? And can you clarify, does this trip preclude appointing a special envoy for the Horn of Africa, as the Secretary previewed in his House testimony?

And just quickly as well, do you have any update on the DART from USAID? Has their access to Tigray been adequate in your view?

**MS PORTER:** Thanks for your question. So I'll just say that Senator Coons on this trip – he's going there to convey President Biden's message and his grave concerns about the humanitarian crisis and all the human rights abuses that are going on in the Tigray region and the risk of broader instability in the Horn of Africa. And again, we're – we continue to be gravely concerned by the reports of atrocities and overall deteriorating situation in Tigray and Ethiopia. We'll always call for an end to fighting and those responsible for those atrocities and human rights abuses, and we call for those who are responsible to be held accountable.

And again, when it comes to your question on personnel or any envoys, we don't have anything to announce at that time – at this time.

Can we go to the line of Nadia Bilbassy?

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina. Thank you for doing this. I'm sorry I joined late, so I don't know if you answered my questions, but I have two.

Mr. Malley said that he – you guys are willing to negotiate with Iran through a third party. What does that mean? I mean, do we expect a lot of countries like Switzerland? What do you mean by a third party, and where are we from the negotiation with Iran?

And second, would you consider a decision by the Trump administration to consider products produced at Israeli settlements – to reverse that, because they consider it all Israelis, and that was a clear distinction between products in the settlements and products produced by State of Israel. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your questions, Nadia. When it comes to your question on what Mr. Malley said, I'll just want to reiterate that we're committed to ensuring Iran never acquires a nuclear

weapon, and we believe in diplomacy and we implore them to meet us at the table of diplomacy. Whether that's in coordination with our allies and regional partners or whether that's bilaterally, either way, the best way to achieve that path is doing that together.

And to your second question, we just believe that it's critical for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to refrain from unilateral steps that would exacerbate tensions and further undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution, such as annexation of a territory, settlement activity or demolitions, incitement to violence, and providing compensation for individuals in prison for acts of terrorism.

Let's go to the line of Jennifer Hansler, please.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) much. I wanted to follow up on my colleague Kylie's question and see whether there were any conversations with the Hill on Nord Stream 2 prior to the Secretary's statement being released today. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you, Jennifer. I wouldn't be able to comment on any potential or private discussions with our partners on the Hill, but again, I would just guide people to our statement that came out recently, and again just reiterate that we strongly believe that – obviously, President Biden has said it, Secretary Blinken has said it, this has strong bipartisan support – that Nord Stream 2 is a bad deal for our European allies and partners.

Let's go to the line of Soyoung Kim, and I'll take this as our last question. Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Actually, I was going to ask similar questions that Jiha did, but if I may, one additional question: Is the U.S. going to give another try to reach out to North Korea soon or waiting until the policy review is done?

**QUESTION:** Hello? Hello?

**MS PORTER:** Yes. Thank you, thank you. So again, I'll just reiterate what we've said over the past few days: again, that we're conducting a thorough interagency review of our policy towards North Korea, which includes evaluating all options available to address an increasing threat that's posed by North Korea to its neighbors as well as the broader international community. And we're going to continue to lead a structured and detailed policy process that's integrated in a diverse set of voices from throughout the government as well as incorporated inputs from think tanks and outside experts.

But what we will say is that we're – we remain concerned about North Korea's nuclear activities and we are committed to denuclearization of North Korea.

Thank you, everyone, for joining today, and we will see you at the same – we will listen to you at the same time tomorrow. Have a good afternoon.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:29 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 19, 2021](#)

*03/19/2021 04:41 PM EDT*

Jalina Porter, Principal Deputy Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, D.C.

2:01 p.m. EDT

**MS PORTER:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining today's press briefing. I have two quick updates I'd like to share at the top, and then we will go into taking your questions.

Today, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale represented the United States at a meeting of the Coalition for the Sahel.

During his remarks, Under Secretary Hale announced then more than \$80 million in humanitarian assistance to respond to the crisis in the Sahel region.

This lifesaving assistance is critical for the survival of nearly three million refugees and internally displaced people in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. It will provide them with vital protections, economic opportunity, shelter, essential health care, emergency food assistance, safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene services. It will also help host communities across the Sahel.

The United States is the largest single donor of humanitarian assistance both in the Sahel region and globally, and encourages other donors to contribute to these lifesaving efforts.

Next, we strongly condemn today's drone attacks against Saudi Aramco facilities southeast of Riyadh.

We remain deeply concerned by the frequency of attacks on Saudi Arabia. We have seen that the Houthis claimed responsibility for these attacks and condemn the Houthis' attempts to disrupt global energy supplies by targeting Saudi infrastructure. This behavior shows an utter lack of concern for safety of the civilian population either working or living nearby the sites.

International voices have called for an end to the attacks and an end to the conflict in Yemen. Last week, the United States joined the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy in condemning Houthi aggressive acts directed toward Saudi Arabia and within Yemen itself.

This week, the Gulf Cooperation Council called for an end to the attacks and a return to the negotiating table to resolve the conflict and bring a lasting peace the Yemeni people deserve. And yesterday, the Members of the UN Security Council also condemned the Houthi offensive on Marib and the cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia.

These attacks threaten peace efforts at a critical moment when the international community is showing an increasingly united front in resolving the conflict in Yemen.

We call on all parties to seriously commit to a ceasefire and engage in negotiations under UN auspices, in conjunction with U.S. Special Envoy Tim Lenderking.

With that, I will wait a few minutes while our queue populates and start taking your questions.

Let's go to the line of Casey O'Neil, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina. Thanks so much for doing this again. Happy Friday. So just two quick questions for you, the first on Burma: Can you provide any update on the Department's review, the interagency review that they're undertaking – that you're undertaking, excuse me, with regard to the Rohingya?

And then second question on Senator Coons' trip to Ethiopia. I know I asked about it yesterday, but just wanted to follow up: Can you provide any additional information on State Department involvement in the trip, if any State Department officials are accompanying him and the like? Thanks.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you, Casey, and a Happy Friday to you as well. To answer your first question, Secretary Blinken has committed to reviewing whether the atrocities committed against the Rohingya in Burma constitute any specific atrocity crimes and has also expressed deep concern over the Burmese military's longstanding impunity for past and ongoing abuses. And I'll also say that the State Department continues to review information related to the military's abuses against all Burmese people, which includes the Rohingya, to inform and develop policies that help address these abuses and also prevent their future occurrences.

To your next question about the – Senator Coons going to Ethiopia, again, there – we'll just say that, again, he is there at the request of President Biden, and as you know, they have a close friendship and relationship. And he entrusts him to convey our concerns about the humanitarian crisis ongoing in the Tigray region in the Horn of Africa.

Let's please go to the line of Simon Lewis.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) Alaska, if you're able to talk about that. Obviously, there's been a lot of reporting since yesterday about how sort of tense the initial encounter was. And there's been discussions of – I think both sides have accused the other of breaking protocol in those initial exchanges. But I wonder if – does the State Department – based on the tone of that first meeting, does that give you any concern for the future of the relationship with China and the possibility of reaching some agreements or getting some achievables out of these meetings? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question, Simon, and just as a response to that, of course, as you know, Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan had their first meetings with Director Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi, and of course, are in sessions this morning. And these were serious discussions. Again, I'll just reiterate something that NSA Sullivan said. And of course, to your point about it, the – being contentious or not, again, we – he said we don't see conflict, but of course, welcome stiff competition.

Again, this was a single meeting, and again, we know that sometimes these diplomatic presentations can be exaggerated or maybe even aimed at a domestic audience, but we're not letting the theatrics from the other side stop us from doing what we were intending to do in Alaska, which is lay out our principles as well as our expectations and have these tough conversations early that we need to have with the PRC.

Let's go to the line of Edward Keenan.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) of the Alaska meetings, the two Michaels, Kovrig and – the two Canadian Michaels who are being held as political prisoners in China, widely perceived as leverage against the United States, who are going to trial now as these meetings take place. Secretary Blinken and President Biden expressed their desire to see those two Michaels released when they met with the Canadian prime minister recently. I wonder to what extent those cases are up for discussion in Alaska right now, and if so, like, to what extent and how?

**MS PORTER:** Well, let me start off by saying that the United States continues to publicly call on the PRC to end the arbitrary and unacceptable detentions of the Canadian citizens Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig. And again, the United States is deeply concerned by the PRC's decision to hold a closed-court hearing with the Canadian citizens. Obviously, no one from – no diplomat from Canada or the U.S. were involved in that. And we're also deeply alarmed by a report that the PRC will commence the trial of Canadian citizen Michael Kovrig on March 22nd and we renew our call for PRC authorities to attend this trial.

We'll always just reiterate that we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Canada in calling for their immediate release, and we also continue to condemn their lack of minimum procedural protections during their two-year arbitrary detention.

Let's go to the line of Rosalind Jordan.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) question about North Korea. Earlier today, the First Vice Foreign Minister of the DPRK, Choe Son-hui – and I may be saying his name incorrectly – issued a statement rebuffing the U.S.'s efforts to recommence contact. And I'm going to read a couple of quick quotes from his lengthy statement: "We make it clear...we won't give it," meaning the U.S., "such opportunities," again, my words, "as in Singapore and Hanoi again." And the final statement: "e will counter the U.S. on the principle of power for power and goodwill for goodwill." All of that to say that the U.S. needs to stop its hostile actions. In the DPRK's views, it needs to stop spying, military actions, sanctions, the whole list, before Kim Jong-un will decide to engage again with the Biden administration. Is there a response from the administration to this rebuffing? Does the U.S. believe that this is simply a way of the government trying to build domestic political support for its untenable position, as the global community has suggested?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question, Rosiland. We'll – I'll reiterate what we've said a few times this week in that the United States is conducting a thorough interagency review of the U.S. policy towards North Korea, and we're also evaluating all the options available to address the increasing threat posed by North Korea as well as to its neighbors and, quite frankly, our international community. And we're going to continue to lead a structured and detailed policy process that has an – integrated a diverse set of voices from the government as well as outside of the government, which includes think tanks and outside experts.

Let's go to the line of Jeongeun Ji.

**QUESTION:** Hello.

**MS PORTER:** Hi.

**QUESTION:** Hi. I also wanted to ask about North Korea's statement yesterday about Malaysia and the U.S. So North Korea said it will cut off diplomatic relations with Malaysia and the U.S. will pay a price because of the extradition of a North Korean to the U.S. So I wanted to see if you have any comments on this North Korea statement and the ongoing extradition process. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question. When it comes to the extradition and just all of that tied to

your question, I would have to refer you to the Department of Justice.

Let's go to the line of Pearl Matibe.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, and good morning to you, Jalina. My question is regarding the security trainings for forces in Uganda and Nigeria. Can you speak a little bit about the status of your relationship now? There was a report this week in a press conference accusing Uganda of more than 400 abductions, arrests, and so on. So I was wondering, do you feel that the trainings that were taking place in Uganda and Nigeria to take out the LRA and Boko Haram, respectively – do you think that that is working? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question. I won't comment specifically on trainings that are happening in country, but what we will say when it comes to just overall safety and security in the region, specifically to Nigeria and Uganda, that we will continue to support safety and security when it comes to – especially when it comes to children and people who have been targeted for kidnappings. And we remain concerned, especially in Nigeria, when it comes to an uptick in their kidnappings, especially for ransom.

We'll also say that the United States remains engaged to respond to all the security challenges in Africa, specifically when it comes to Nigeria and Uganda as well, and the State Department currently funds the majority of U.S. Government peace and security assistance in Africa and remains committed to these efforts. Diplomatic and security engagement with U.S. partners in Africa, quite frankly, advances our interests and values. Enhancing our alliances and partnerships in Africa through diplomatic development and security initiatives only enables us to better protect and serve interests – U.S. interests in Africa.

Let's go to the line of Beatriz Pascual.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you. I wanted to go back to China. The talks in Alaska are set to conclude today, so I wanted to see if you could please provide us some details about what specific issues are on the table today or some detail about the issues that were discussed yesterday. And also, what specific outcome does the U.S. hope to achieve out of these dialogues? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question. Again, we'll reiterate that Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan are in Anchorage having serious discussions. And the goal of the United States delegation coming to Anchorage was to lay out our principles, interests, and values, and that we animate our engagement with Beijing.

Knowing that the exaggerated diplomatic presentations in front of the media are aimed at a domestic audience, we will continue to map out our planned agenda. And again, as I said earlier, that's to make sure that we will still come from a position of strength and, again, lay out our common interests and principles from the United States.

And again, as Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan have already emphasized, America's approach will be undergirded by confidence in our dealings with Beijing, even as we have the humility to know that we are a country that's eternally striving to become a more perfect union regardless of any of our shortcomings and challenges we've had. We're always open to meeting these challenges, even in an open forum where everyone's watching globally, and we know we'll come out better because of that.

Let's go to the line of Jiha Ham.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina. Thank you. On your Human Rights Report on South Korea, not North Korea, there's one part talking about South Korea's law abandoning leaflet-sending activities. Some NGOs



and North Korean defectors in South Korea argued that they were providing outside information to North Korean people by sending leaflets. What's your view on this? Do you support these kinds of efforts – maybe not just the leaflets, but overall activities and efforts providing outside information to North Korea?

Also, could you tell us about the new Human Rights Report on North Korea? What's the State Department's position when it comes to improving the situation in North Korea? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** I thank you for your questions. So we actually have not yet rolled out our Human Rights Report. We'll actually – hopefully that happens soon. And we won't, again, get ahead of that, and you'll have an update when that does come out. But we'll say more broadly speaking, as a global policy, we advocate for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. When it comes to – with regards to the DPRK, we continue to campaign for the free flow of information into the DPRK.

We'll take one final question from Hiba Nasr.

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Thanks for doing this, Jalina. I want to go back to Yemen. I heard your statement, your opening statement, and we had several statements calling for the Houthis to stop attacks against Saudi Arabia. What is the next move? What's your next move? Are you considering designating the Houthis again? Are you waiting until you sit with the Iranians?

And I have one other question on Lebanon, if you don't mind, please. People are expecting a total collapse, maybe within weeks, maybe within months. Is the U.S. prepared for such a scenario?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your questions. Again, we will always condemn the Houthis for their attacks on Saudi Arabia. And again, we will always call on them and all parties to commit to a serious ceasefire and engage in negotiations that are specifically UN auspices and also in conjunction with U.S. Special Envoy Tim Lenderking.

I'll just reiterate that President Biden made it one of his first foreign policy priorities to end the terrible war in Yemen, and in doing so, of course, appointing Special Envoy Lenderking. And he has been engaged with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths in Saudi Arabia and regional states to put together elements to put together a nationwide ceasefire.

And when it comes to Lebanon, again, we remain deeply concerned about the developments in Lebanon and, of course, the apparent inaction of the country's leadership that face multiple ongoing crises. Lebanon's political leaders need to put aside their partisan brinkmanship and form a government that will quickly implement critical and long-needed reform, restore investor confidence, and as well rescue the country's economy.

That concludes today's briefing. Thank you again for joining me this Friday. I hope you all have a wonderful weekend, and we will see you next week.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:25 p.m.)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan Statements to the Press](#)

*03/19/2021 05:53 PM EDT*

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Anchorage, Alaska

Hotel Captain Cook

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Good morning, everyone. I just have a couple of things to say. Jake and I spent several hours in conversation with our Chinese counterparts over the last couple of days. And we certainly know and knew going in that there are a number of areas where we are fundamentally at odds, including China's actions in Xinjiang, with regard to Hong Kong, Tibet, increasingly Taiwan, as well as actions that it's taken in cyberspace.

And it's no surprise that when we raised those issues clearly and directly, we got a pensive response. But we were also able to have a very candid conversation over these many hours on an expansive agenda. On Iran, on North Korea, on Afghanistan, on climate, our interests intersect. On economics, on trade, on technology, we told our counterparts that we are reviewing these issues with close consultation with Congress, with our allies and partners. And we will move forward on – in a way that fully protects and advances the interests of workers and our businesses.

But just to take a step back for a moment, the two things that we wanted to do in coming here and meeting with our Chinese counterparts: first, we wanted to share with them the significant concerns that we have about a number of the actions that China's taken and the behavior it's exhibiting – concerns shared by our allies and partners. And we did that. We also wanted to lay out very clearly our own policies, priorities, and worldview, and we did that too.

Jake.

**NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR SULLIVAN:** Thanks, everybody. As the Secretary said, we expected to have tough and direct talks on a wide range of issues, and that's exactly what we had. We had the opportunity to lay out our priorities and intentions, and to hear from the Chinese side their priorities and intentions. We were clear-eyed coming in, we're clear-eyed coming out, and we will go back to Washington to take stock of where we are. We'll continue to consult with allies and partners on the way forward and, of course, on issues ranging from Iran to Afghanistan through the normal diplomatic channels. We'll continue to work with China going forward.

So we thank you all for the time you've taken here, and we look forward to getting down to business and to advancing the interests and values of America.

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 31, 2021](#)

*03/31/2021 05:51 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, D.C.

1:46 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. It's been a while. For those of you who don't remember, my name is Ned Price. I'm the spokesperson here. It's good to be back with you all. We have a few items at the top, starting with Belarus.

The United States has looked to improve the tenor of our bilateral relationship with Belarus; that effort has received broad bipartisan support across administrations. We still want to see Belarus succeed as an independent, prosperous, democratic country.

However, the events surrounding the conduct of the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, the violent and repressive tactics in its aftermath, and over 300 political prisoners cannot be ignored. Many American officials have conveyed these sentiments directly to Belarusian authorities since those elections.

In 2015, the Department of Treasury issued – and has since extended annually – a general license authorizing transactions with nine state-owned enterprises in Belarus. We did this because of notable progress at the time in the field of human rights and specifically due to the release of all political prisoners.

Regrettably, we find the human rights situation has deteriorated to arguably the worst point in Belarus' independent history. With more than 300 political prisoners currently detained in Belarus, the department is unable to recommend another extension at this time, particularly in light of the sense of Congress expressed in the 2020 Belarus Sovereignty and Democracy Act. The current extension will expire on April 26th.

This step is reversible, and we call on Belarusian authorities to take steps to allow us to do just that, specifically by releasing all political prisoners.

The Lukashenka regime is still able to take these necessary steps to reverse course, release all those wrongfully imprisoned simply for peacefully disagreeing with the authorities, espousing different views, or daring to compete in an election.

We call for the full and unconditional release of all political prisoners and the cessation of violence by the authorities against the Belarusian people.

Further, we continue our call for the authorities to commit to a meaningful dialogue with the leaders of the political opposition under the auspices of the OSCE leading to free and fair elections under

independent observation.

The United States will continue to support the Belarusian people in their aspirations for a democratic future.

**QUESTION:** Do you want to take questions on that, or go through all —

**MR PRICE:** We'll have a couple more; we can come back to it.

As you may have seen in the Secretary's recent statement, the Department of State is required by law to submit the Hong Kong Policy Act report and accompanying certification to Congress annually.

This year's report details the actions taken by PRC and Hong Kong authorities to further erode Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and freedoms during the reporting period, which entailed June 2020 to February of 2021. Based on the report's findings, the Secretary has certified to Congress that Hong Kong does not warrant treatment under U.S. law in the same manner as U.S. laws were applied to Hong Kong before July 1st of 1997 – the date, of course, of the handover from the UK to the PRC.

Today, therefore, we submitted the Hong Kong Policy Act report to Congress and certified for the second time that Hong Kong does not warrant differential treatment to the PRC under U.S. law because of the PRC and Hong Kong actions taken to dismantle Hong Kong's autonomy.

We also want to take this opportunity to strongly condemn the actions taken on March 30th by the PRC National People's Congress Standing Committee to further erode political participation and representation in Hong Kong. We are also deeply concerned by the delay of the September Legislative Council elections for the second time.

These changes to Hong Kong's electoral system defy the will of the people in Hong Kong, deny Hong Kongers a voice in their own governance. The changes, which will establish a committee to vet candidates for office based solely on their loyalty to Beijing and diminish the proportion of directly-elected members of the Legislative Council, will severely curtail meaningful pluralism and representative governance in Hong Kong. These changes are inconsistent with Hong Kong's Basic Law, which states that universal suffrage is the ultimate objective for the people in Hong Kong.

The United States stands united with our allies and partners in speaking out against the human rights and freedoms – speaking out for the human rights and freedoms of Hong Kongers, and we call on the PRC to uphold its international obligations and commitments under the Sino-British Joint Declaration. The voices of the people in Hong Kong must be heard and the Legislative Council elections should proceed in a free and fair manner that allows candidates to run for election irrespective of their political views.

Moving on to Syria. Yesterday, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, represented the United States at the fifth Brussels Conference: "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region." It was co-chaired by the European Union and the United Nations.

Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield announced more than \$596 million in new humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis response, continuing longstanding U.S. leadership in alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people in line with both our values as a nation and our national interests. This brings U.S. humanitarian assistance to more than \$13 billion since the start of the crisis.

This new assistance will help some of the 13 million Syrians who have been forced out of their homes, fleeing the horrific effects of the Assad regime's vicious campaign of unjust detention and violence. It will help those displaced inside Syria and those who sought refuge in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey and support the generous communities hosting them.

The United States will continue to be a leader in the humanitarian response and to advocate for unhindered humanitarian access to Syrians regardless of where they live. To that end, we will work with the UN Security Council to renew and expand the UN's authorization for cross-border access to deliver humanitarian aid to Syrians in need.

I'm sure many of you heard Secretary Blinken's impassioned plea during the UN Security Council session the other day to do just that.

In other news, yesterday, the United States and Cabo Verde participated in our third bilateral Partnership Dialogue, reaffirming cooperation between our two countries that will strengthen our economic ties, expand our educational exchanges, and further enhance our security coordination.

The United States is proud of its long friendship with Cabo Verde, which is a model of human rights and democracy, and we deeply value our rich history of relations over the past two centuries.

As yesterday's Partnership Dialogue underscored, we will continue to closely work with Cabo Verde to expand trade and investment and cooperation on secure telecommunications networks, as well as pressing challenges including recovering from the pandemic, confronting the climate crisis, and improving maritime security.

Focusing on the global pandemic for a moment, the U.S. announced on Monday that the U.S. Government will co-host a Vaccine Alliance event with Gavi, our partner in COVAX which is working to provide COVID-19 vaccines to 92 low- and middle-income countries. In February, President Biden announced the United States is providing an initial \$2 billion, out of a planned \$4 billion, to COVAX.

This event will bring together world leaders, the private sector, and partners from around the world to mobilize additional resources and commitments needed to end the pandemic. Secretary of State Blinken, U.S. Acting Administrator Gloria Steele, and Gavi Board Chair Jose Manuel Barroso will all deliver remarks.

While we continue to distribute vaccines for Americans as quickly as we can, it is also imperative that we contain the global spread of COVID-19 and emerging variants. We must win the race between getting all of humanity vaccinated and the emergence of new and even more dangerous variants that have the potential to threaten us all. While the U.S. – through USAID – is the world's largest donor to global COVID-19 vaccination effort, no nation can act alone in a global pandemic, and that includes the United States. Equitable access to vaccines is critical to reduce the tragic loss of life, end the pandemic, recover the U.S. and the global economy, and keep Americans safe.

And finally, in recognition of Transgender Day of Visibility, the United States stands with the international community to celebrate the courage and resilience of transgender and gender non-conforming persons around the world and to acknowledge their efforts to achieve equality and justice in the face of adversity.

The United States is committed to continuing to advance human rights and fundamental freedoms around the world. We call on all governments to honor their commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to promote and protect the human rights of all individuals, which, of course, includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons.

With that, Matt.

**QUESTION:** I think that was close to a record for the number of toppers – six, almost nine minutes.

Anyway, so I've got two very brief ones on the Middle East, but I want to start with Belarus, because I have some very quick questions about your opening on that. One, you said that these nine state-

owned businesses are basically at risk of losing their authorization. Is there any indication that they have taken advantage of the authorization since it was – I mean, what do they stand to lose here? Do you know, or could you find out?

Secondly, you said that the department is – at the moment, is unable to recommend another extension of this. Isn't it the case that this is a Treasury decision, so Secretary Yellen could basically say, "Yeah, well, that's a nice recommendation, but I don't agree with it," right, and then do it anyway?

And then lastly, I just wanted to – what's the status of the ambassador who has been kind of bouncing around in the region a bit?

**MR PRICE:** Yeah. Well, you're referring to Ambassador Julie Fisher. As you know, she continues to be our ambassador to Belarus to represent our interests and our values when it comes to the challenges in Belarus, when it comes to America's support for the people of Belarus who are standing firm against the repression of the Lukashenka government. She has traveled in the region. She was in Europe, I believe it was, just last month meeting with some of our allies and partners to explore and to coordinate our collective action to support – and collective efforts, I should say, to support the people of Belarus. And so she continues to do that important work.

When it comes to the general license, as we —

**QUESTION:** But wait, there's no progress in actually getting her to Minsk?

**MR PRICE:** She is not in Minsk. She is based here at the moment. When it comes to the general license, as I alluded to at the outset, this is in fact something that we hope does not come to pass. We have put forward, as I said just a moment ago, various demands that, if they were to be met, this would not go into effect. And in fact, it is our hope that we will be able to renew this general license before it is set to expire on April 26. You're right, this is a Treasury decision. The United – the Department of State works closely in all matters, including this, to coordinate providing recommendations, providing input to that Treasury decision.

**QUESTION:** Look, you expect that this building's recommendation would be accepted by Treasury, right?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we work closely together. We coordinate —

**QUESTION:** You're not aware of any pushback from —

**MR PRICE:** We coordinate closely together. I know when it comes to supporting the people of Belarus, supporting their aspirations for democracy, we have worked incredibly closely together not only with Treasury, but also with our partners throughout the government.

**QUESTION:** I can either do the two brief Mideast ones now or I can wait, however you want to do it.

**MR PRICE:** Let's come back to that. Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Sure. I'll go to the Middle East if you don't mind. Following up on yesterday, I know you had an entire briefing yesterday on the Human Rights Report, but the question of occupation – there's been quite a bit of attention to that, that the U.S. didn't use "occupied territories," that the State Department didn't in the report. Does this indicate a type of permanent change in policy? Is this a continuation of the policy under the Trump administration? How do you —

**MR PRICE:** Well, I addressed this from the podium several weeks ago now. What I said then, of course, remains true today, and that is it is a historical fact that Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza,



and the Golan Heights after the 1967 war. You mentioned the Human Rights Report that we rolled out yesterday. In fact, the 2020 Human Rights Report does use the term “occupation” in the context of the current status of the West Bank. This has been the longstanding position of previous administrations of both parties over the course of many decades.

**QUESTION:** To follow up on that, what are the implications for U.S. policy? Does the U.S. consider, for example, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories to be illegal as a result of this stance?

**MR PRICE:** This doesn’t change our position. We – as you have heard me say before, we continue to encourage all sides to avoid actions – both sides, I should say – to avoid actions that would put the two-state solution further out of reach. Again, our ultimate goal here is to facilitate – to help bring about – a two-state solution because it is the best path to preserve Israel’s identity as a Jewish and democratic state while bestowing on the Palestinians their legitimate aspirations of sovereignty and dignity in a state of their own.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on – just on assistance to the Palestinians? There have been some reports on that, but I know you had a statement – I believe it was last week – on COVID assistance to the Palestinians. Can you give an update on what the total assistance has been since the resumption under this administration?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as – you are right, we announced last week that we had granted \$15 million in COVID assistance to the Palestinian people. USAID, I believe it was, made that announcement. We continue to believe that American support for the Palestinian people, including financial support – it is in – it is consistent with our values. It is consistent with our interests. Of course, it is consistent with the interests of the Palestinian people. It’s also consistent with the interests of our partner Israel, and we’ll have more to say on that going forward.

**QUESTION:** Do you have a cumulative total?

**MR PRICE:** I don’t have a cumulative total on me, but we can look into that for you.

**QUESTION:** Does that mean that the “no comment” that I got earlier about my question on the Congressional notification stance? You don’t have anything to —

**MR PRICE:** I don’t have anything for you. As I mentioned, we announced \$15 million in COVID aid to the Palestinians. I believe it was last week.

**QUESTION:** Can I just get this – I know that you’re not going to have an answer, but I want to get it out there, and then that is – and I realize that ambassadorships haven’t been named yet and certainly not an ambassador to Israel, but that’s going to happen at some point, and currently whoever it is doesn’t have a place to live. So I’m just wondering, are you actively looking for a new property for the ambassador’s residence – ambassador to Israel residence? And if so, have you found one? It’s going to take time to get something up to the security needs and all that kind of thing.

**MR PRICE:** You’re right, Matt, I don’t have anything for you on the identity of that —

**QUESTION:** Well, I’m not asking for who. I’m asking where they’re going to live.

**MR PRICE:** — the forthcoming ambassador or the issue of the residence. I don’t have anything for you on that side.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I have two questions, one on the U.S. delegation that visited Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Congo. Do you have any update on this visit? And another question when you

answer my first question.

**MR PRICE:** If we do, we'll let you know. We'll get back to you on that.

**QUESTION:** You don't have —

**MR PRICE:** I don't have anything for you right now.

**QUESTION:** Okay. On China/Iran, did you review the agreement between the two countries? And what is your comment on it? And —

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to our broad posture, our current Iran-related sanctions remain in effect unless and until they are lifted as part of a diplomatic process. We will address any efforts at sanction evasion. Of course, our policy when it comes to sanctions has not changed at the moment. We won't comment on any specific bilateral discussions in this regard, though.

Competition, as you know, does define our relationship with China, but we do have in some cases rather narrow areas of tactical alignment. We've spoken to some of those in recent days, and it so happens that Iran is one of them. China has been cooperative in efforts to constrain Iran's nuclear program. Of course, China is an original member of the P5+1. Beijing, of course, has no interest in seeing Iran develop a nuclear weapon and the profoundly destabilizing impact that would have on a region upon which China does depend.

We have been engaged with all parties, to include China, on the question of the JCPOA and what comes next. We remain ready to engage in meaningful dialogue with Iran, as we have said, to find a mutual return to the JCPOA and a mutual return to those commitments. And, of course, we'll continue to engage China and other countries to discourage them from taking steps vis-a-vis Iran or any other issue that threaten our interests.

**QUESTION:** Ned, one follow-up: Will this agreement change your approach to the Iranian nuclear file and to the region as a whole too?

**MR PRICE:** No, it doesn't, precisely because of what I said earlier, and that is that we are aligned in our interests by and large with Beijing on this question. Beijing has no interest in seeing Iran either acquire a nuclear weapon or have the ability to acquire a nuclear weapon. That's precisely why China, Beijing was a member of the P5+1. It's precisely why we have this alignment of interests that we'll continue to pursue as we look to ways to find that mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

Yes, Pranshu.

**QUESTION:** Just to follow on Iran. Politico reported that the Biden administration plans to put forth a new proposal to jumpstart talks with Iran maybe as early as this week. Can you give us an update on timing and comment on that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have been clear for a number of weeks now – almost two months, I believe it has been – that we are ready to pursue a joint return to compliance with the JCPOA. We have been open that we are talking with our partners in the P5+1 and elsewhere about the best way to achieve this. We did so in Europe last week. Secretary Blinken met several of his counterparts at the NATO summit in Brussels, where Iran was a topic of discussion. We had a meeting with the E3 in the multilateral format last week as well. And those discussions have been ongoing about the best way to achieve that return to compliance, including through a series of initial and mutual steps.

We've been looking at options for doing so, including with indirect conversations with our European

partners. We're not going to comment on the details of our diplomatic conversations, but of course, we've been very clear that we want to see Iran constrained permanently and verifiably so that it can't produce or acquire or obtain a nuclear weapon. That remains our goal.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ned. Anthony Zurcher with BBC News.

**MR PRICE:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Does the department have a reaction to Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny announcing that he's going to go on a hunger strike because of what he says is a lack of proper medical treatment in the Russian penal colony where he's incarcerated?

**MR PRICE:** We've been very clear that Alexey Navalny, Mr. Navalny, is a political prisoner. His detention is politically motivated. We have continued to call for Mr. Navalny's release. We have done so both ourselves and in tandem with our allies and partners around the world. We'll continue to do that. We will continue to hold accountable – seek to hold accountable those in Russia who may be responsible for the attempt on his life, for the repression against his peaceful supporters who have taken to the streets, and we will continue to find ways to support Mr. Navalny and to call for his release.

**QUESTION:** And then you talked about that \$600 million in aid to Syria. Is there a concern that either Russia or China is going to veto the renewal of safe passage into northwestern Syria at the Security Council in July?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you heard Secretary Blinken speak to this in the UN Security Council meeting earlier this week that he chaired on humanitarian access in Syria. He was impassioned, I think rightly so. He invoked his own two children in speaking about the 13 million-plus Syrians who are food insecure at the moment, the Syrian children that have been affected by this humanitarian suffering. I think his words were "shame on us" if we are not able to address this. There is absolutely no reason any country, and that includes China or Russia, should stand in the way of offering humanitarian access to the people of Syria who have long suffered at the brutal repression and violence perpetrated by the Assad regime.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Hi. This is Muath Alamri from Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper. I have two questions about Iran and Yemen. So when you talked about the nuclear agreement about Iran, there is a multiple statement by U.S. officials. They haven't talked about the human rights abuse and the hostage swap. So any update on that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have made clear early in this administration – and the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has spoken to it, Secretary Blinken has spoken to it, others within this administration have spoken to it – that we have no higher priority than the safe return of Americans who are unjustly detained around the world, and that includes the Americans who are unjustly detained or who are missing in Iran. We will continue to make clear to the Iranians that that practice is unacceptable. Secretary Blinken, of course, issued a very strong message about the state taking of hostages, using people for political pawns. He condemned it. Just as importantly, he condemned it in the context of dozens of other world leaders who made clear that this practice is unacceptable.

I don't want to go into specific mechanics, but the Iranian – Iran's leaders are – they have no misimpression about where we stand on this issue. It is of paramount importance to us. Just as we

pursue a nuclear agreement that provides verifiable and permanent limits on Iran's nuclear program, we will not – we will persist, we will not desist in our efforts to secure a safe return of Americans who are detained inside Iran.

**QUESTION:** Okay, on Yemen.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** I'm sorry. Yeah, when Mr. Tim Lenderking, the U.S. special envoy to Yemen, returned from his second trip from the Gulf Arab region, he said he would go back if the Houthis are willing to speak or to talk. So now he is being there for the third trip. My question is: Did he meet with them, and what happened to his ceasefire plan?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me give you a little bit of context about Special Envoy Lenderking's travels and activities in the region. You are right that he is back from his trip to Riyadh and Muscat. In Muscat he had productive meetings with senior officials in coordination with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths. The U.S. special envoy's discussions were and continue to be focused on joint international efforts to promote a lasting ceasefire, political talks, and an inclusive peace agreement, along with our effort to address the country's dire humanitarian crisis.

To that end, we have been very encouraged that fuel ships continue to offload at Hodaydah Port, and we welcome Saudi Arabia's announcement yesterday to provide over \$400 million, \$422 million, in support to fuel products in Yemen. In terms of Special Envoy Lenderking's meetings in the region, he met with Omani, with Saudi, with Yemeni senior government officials, and as I said before, with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths during this trip. He and the UN special envoy continue to work side-by-side, and both, of course, are committed to bringing about a ceasefire and an end to this devastating conflict in the country of Yemen, which is now home to the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Meeting with the Houthis?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** Did he —

**MR PRICE:** As I said before, he's met with senior officials, including Omani, Saudi, and Yemeni senior government officials and, of course, with the UN special envoy.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I have two questions. One's about Spain and another one about Brazil. About Spain, in the Human Rights Report yesterday, the report included some complaints of Reporters Without Borders and other organizations about the situation of freedom of the press in Spain. So my question is: What is the U.S. opinion about the situation of the freedom of the press in Spain and if the – what was the U.S. intention including this in the report, if the intention was to express concern or to criticize the government of Pedro Sanchez?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as we mentioned yesterday, this is now the 45th year that the Department of State has proudly produced the Annual Human Rights Reports. As it does every year, this document provides a report on the world's countries; 198 countries were included in this year's report. Of course, it's no surprise that Spain was among them. Secretary Blinken was here yesterday rolling out this report himself because this administration is seeking to restore human rights and democracy to

the center of our foreign policy.

When it comes to the issues that you flagged in the report on Spain, ensuring proper focus on media freedom and freedom of expression is a priority ourselves within our own programming and our own diplomatic engagement, but we'll also continue to work with international partners in bilateral and multilateral fora to encourage strong and sustained support for media freedom and freedom of expression. That is around the world.

We consider freedom of expression, including freedom of the press, to be a critical component of vibrant democracies the world over. Peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive societies, in fact, do depend on the free flow of information and ideas, including the freedom to seek, to receive, to impart information. A free and professional press is a vital and core institution that undergirds healthy democracies, whether that is in North America, Asia, Europe, Africa, around the globe.

**QUESTION:** Let me follow up on that. It would be useful to get like a yes or no answer if the U.S. was intending to criticize the Government of Spain, if that was the intention when you included those complaints in the report, if that was the intention or not.

**MR PRICE:** These reports are factual reports. These are intended for countries around the world to report, of course, on issues pertaining to democracy and to human rights. So I would look at it through that lens.

Yes, Rich.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ned. I'm wondering if you can confirm a report in *The Wall Street Journal* that the Climate Envoy John Kerry will be traveling to India and the UAE, and if so, if there are any other countries as part of that trip.

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Rich, Special Envoy for Climate Kerry has been relentless in his work, in his work to increase climate ambition around the world, knowing that we have the President's Summit on Climate Change on April 22nd. That is quickly coming up. Of course, the White House issued invitations for that last week. Secretary Kerry has been working hard at that as well as working very closely on preparations for COP-26 that will follow on the April 22nd summit.

I believe his office later today will have some additional details on the next chapter of Special Envoy Kerry's efforts, including some upcoming travel.

**QUESTION:** When the climate envoy is having these meetings trying to get countries to curb their emissions, what is he telling them that the United States is willing or can do as part of that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the fact is very simple that the United States is the world's most influential country. What we do in the realm of climate, of course, has implications for the broader globe because, of course, we are one of the world's largest emitters. But we also set an example, and we are seeking to raise that climate ambition by not only asking countries to make these commitments themselves, but also to lead by example. And I suspect in the coming weeks you will hear more about the example we intend to set – the example we intend to set not to be virtuous, not to pat ourselves on the back, but to set this powerful example knowing that if we were to do this, we will see other countries raise their ambition. And more importantly, we will be able to make progress on this existential threat of climate change.

**QUESTION:** Is it a challenge given just the complicated nature of how things —

**QUESTION:** You don't have any interest in being virtuous? Is that what I hear?

**MR PRICE:** We're always interested in being virtuous —

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MR PRICE:** — but not just virtuous. Sorry, Rich.

**QUESTION:** Just the complicated nature of getting things through Congress or imposing certain mandates, what's that challenge like for the administration as it looks to set this example?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Congress is always a partner for the Department of State and well beyond. Secretary Blinken has spoken of our partnership with Congress, not only on the landing, as he likes to say, but also on the takeoff. And so across every challenge, we have been working closely with Congress to keep them apprised of our objectives, of our goals, of our activities. That includes when it comes to climate ambition as well.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On Syria, you spoke of the importance of getting aid to Syrians no matter where they live. I'm wondering about Rukban. The Syrian Government is not allowing UN aid to get to the camp. Would the Biden administration consider providing direct humanitarian assistance to these people, given that they're just miles away from an American military base?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to get ahead of that. Of course, you heard, as I mentioned earlier today, Secretary Blinken's first and foremost focus on ensuring there is adequate humanitarian access, and including by doing so in the context of the UN Security Council system. We did that because we know that there is no viable alternative to meet the scope and scale of UN cross-border assistance into Syria. That is precisely why you've seen the emphasis that Secretary Blinken has placed on it, that Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield has placed on it, that USAID has placed on it, precisely because there is no viable alternative to meet that scope and scale. And we also know at the same time that the humanitarian situation in Syria is already dire and it continues to worsen.

And so I think that is why no one should be surprised that Secretary Blinken was so impassioned earlier this week when he spoke about the need to ensure this humanitarian access, again, making clear that shame on us, shame on the international community if we're not able to do this, given the dire situation that so many millions of Syrians faced\* today.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Secretary Blinken yesterday called on international companies to consider cutting ties to enterprises that support Myanmar's military. U.S. company Chevron is still working in Myanmar and providing revenue to the junta. Isn't Chevron now supporting the junta, and will the U.S. take action to prevent natural gas revenues propping up this junta?

**MR PRICE:** Our focus has been on ensuring — seeking to assist the Burmese people in their aspirations for the restoration of civilian-led government and democracy in their own country, consistent with the November elections last year in Burma. We have sought to hold accountable leaders of this military junta in a number of ways. USTR, of course, announced an action yesterday together with our partners and allies around the world. We have enacted a number of sanctions on individuals and entities affiliated with the military to make clear that the United States will not stand by. Just as importantly, we have done that together, oftentimes in tandem with other international allies and partners, knowing that when we work in concert our actions will have an outsized effect and an outsized role.

It is also true that the international community can do more, and we have made that clear in any number of contexts. We, of course, continue to call on China, on the government in Beijing to use its influence to hold to account those responsible for this military coup. What the junta has done in Burma is not in the interest of the United States, it's not in the interest of our partners and allies, and it's not in the interest of Beijing. I wouldn't want to comment from here on any specific U.S. companies. The Secretary's focus is on diplomacy, is on working with countries around the world to make sure that we are doing all we can, again, to support those aspirations for the restoration of democracy of the Burmese people.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on that?

**MR PRICE:** Yep.

**QUESTION:** In Alaska – I know a lot happened in Alaska, but how much time, if any, did you get to address this issue with the Chinese? Were there any signals that they're willing to help or speak out loudly? And to that effect, how much did this come up with the Japanese who have been criticized for not speaking out on what's happening in – it's attributed wrongly or rightly to their economic ties they have with that country?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you were with us on that very memorable trip, so, as you know, the topic of Burma did come up in both Alaska and in Japan, and as well as in South Korea. It also came up, for that matter, in Brussels because this is an issue where we know that, again, concerted action, action that is coordinated with and among our closest partners and allies, is likely to have an outsized effect on the junta. So we discussed it in Tokyo, we discussed it in Anchorage. I think when it comes to Beijing, the government in Beijing can certainly do more, it can say more knowing that the PRC does have a good deal of influence that we want the government in Beijing to use constructively, to leverage constructively, again, to support the aspirations, the legitimate, absolutely legitimate aspirations of the people of Burma to see their democracy restored.

**QUESTION:** But was that topic shifted into the bucket of things we think the two countries have in common and can work on, or is that still in the contentious issues we're working through category?

**MR PRICE:** I would say that we do have overlapping interests when it comes to Burma. We would like to see the government in Beijing act on those interests and to do so constructively, again, in a way that supports the people of Burma. The government in Beijing has absolutely no interest in seeing instability in Burma. The United States has no interest in seeing instability in Burma. Just as importantly, the United States Government puts a premium on democracy, on human rights, on the legitimate aspirations for the restoration of democracy in Burma. Of course, the government in Beijing might see that slightly differently, but in many ways our interests are aligned in the end state that we would like to see in Burma, and we continue to encourage the government in Beijing to act in that regard.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Amanda Mars from *El Pais* newspaper. I've got a question regarding Brazil. I would like to know: Is the U.S. concerned by the resignation of several military chiefs yesterday, military chiefs that are knowingly opposed to some measures like the military rule?

**MR PRICE:** Well, of course, we're aware of developments in Brazil but we're not going to comment on it from here. We'd refer you to the government in Brazil. We continue to support Brazil's democratic institutions.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on Brazil? The – one of the issues with the Bolsonaro government, of

course, has been the supply of vaccines, and there have been agreements with China on the supply of vaccines. Do you have any concern about China's effort there or elsewhere in terms of how they're supplying vaccines? Do you see it as a conflict with what the U.S. wants strategically?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the United States has always stood by vaccines that are safe, that are effective, and with that in mind we remain a firm partner with Brazil in our joint fight against the pandemic. In the last couple months alone, the United States has delivered field hospitals to Brazil equipped with ventilators and other necessary equipment. We continue close cooperation and sharing information critical with Brazil's health agency to support their vaccine approval process on more and more. Earlier this month on March 21st, Brazil received its first one million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine through the COVAX facility. And this, of course, is a strategic multilateral mechanism to expand global access to vaccines that the United States has already supported to the tune of \$2 billion, and pledged \$2 billion more.

COVAX is an important mechanism when it comes to allowing Brazil that access to vaccines now, and it will continue to be in the coming months ahead. Our embassy in Brazil has also provided technical and financial support directly to public health and science experts in Brazil. So in all of these various ways, we continue to partner with the Government of Brazil on this challenge of the pandemic, and I would take it back to what Secretary Blinken has said before.

Of course, when it comes to this administration, our first priority is ensuring the vaccination of millions of Americans, and that campaign is well underway. But we know that as long as this virus continues unchecked, whether it is in the United States or around the world, all of us will continue to be threatened by it as it continues to mutate and as variants develop. So we all share an interest in seeing an end quickly to this virus in the United States, in Brazil, and around the world.

I'm sorry, I need to make that the final question. I have to run to a meeting but we will do this again tomorrow. Thank you all very much.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:27 p.m.)

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1. USAID ↑

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 1, 2021](#)

04/01/2021 05:49 PM EDT

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC

2:08 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Just a couple things at the top, not quite as many as yesterday.

But I'd like to call your attention briefly to the Secretary's announcement yesterday of the candidacy of Doreen Bogdan-Martin to become the next secretary general of the International Telecommunications Union. The United States strongly supports Ms. Bogdan-Martin, who is a leader deeply committed to inclusion, transparency, and performance and supremely qualified for the position.

The ICU of course is hardly a household name, but it probably should be.

**QUESTION:** You got it wrong just then. Underscoring it's the ITU, not CU.

**MR PRICE:** I intended to say ITU. I'm sorry if it came out wrong. But the ITU of course should be a household name. Every time you use a cell phone, watch television, get the weather forecast, or travel by air or sea, you are benefitting from work done at ITU to coordinate allocation of radio spectrum and facilitate seamless communication between and among countries.

If elected, Ms. Bogdan-Martin would be the first woman to serve as the ITU secretary general in the organization's 156 years of existence. U.S. support for Ms. Bogdan-Martin is yet another element of the administration's renewed emphasis on multilateral tools and fora to tackle global issues, playing a more prominent role in the multilateral space, all while working together with our allies and partners around the world. We know Doreen Bogdan-Martin is the right person for this important job.

Next, today the Department of State is proud to recognize April as National Arab American Heritage Month. The United States is home to more than 3.5 million Arab Americans, representing a diverse array of cultures and traditions. Like their fellow citizens, Americans of Arab heritage are very much a part of the fabric of this nation, and Arab Americans have contributed in every field and profession. Many of them, in fact, serve here at the State Department and throughout the interagency, and their careers are as diverse as their backgrounds. We mark National Arab American Heritage Month noting these contributions that are as old as America itself.

And with that —

**QUESTION:** Really? No April Fool's joke?

**MR PRICE:** You know, I thought about it. I thought about it.

**QUESTION:** No embassy in Wakanda? No —

**MR PRICE:** Thought about just not showing up. I thought that could be good enough.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you one very brief one on the ITU before we go to — I want to talk about — ask about the Middle East. But just on the ITU, you know the current secretary general is a Chinese gentleman. Is he running for reelection? Is that why you guys are coming out twice in two days to support this other candidacy?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it's still very early in the process. As you know, the elections aren't until next year, 2022. Right now we're aware of only one other candidate. That's a candidate from the Russian Federation.

**QUESTION:** Oh, okay. So it's either the current guy, if he runs for re-election, or a Russian.

**MR PRICE:** There — that could chance between now and 2022, but of course we are strongly supporting Ms. Bogdan-Martin.

**QUESTION:** All right. On the Middle East. Yesterday Shaun tried to nail you down without success — not his fault — on the question of settlements and the occupation. And I want to take another stab at it today, because frankly it's confused a lot of people and it's — your position is, to be frank, clear as mud, right? You said in response to him yesterday that, on settlement activity, that you want both sides to refrain from any actions that might hurt or will hurt a two-state solution. Does settlement activity in the West Bank or construction in East Jerusalem hurt prospects for a two-state solution or not?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, on this, I want to be clear. And we have said this from the start. We believe when it comes to settlement activity that Israel should refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions and that undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution. That includes the annexation of territory. That includes settlement activity. We've been equally clear when it comes to the potential actions of the Palestinians, whether that is incitement to violence, providing compensation for individuals in prison for acts of terrorism. That, too, moves us further away from a two-state solution. Our goal in all of this is to advance the prospects for that two-state solution.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So that's a little better, I think, or a little more clear, not like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. But does this administration intend to be as forceful in its opposition or criticism of settlement activity as the Obama administration was? Do you know?

**MR PRICE:** We intend to do everything we can to advance the prospects for a two-state solution. We intend to do that with the knowledge that it is in the interests of — consistent with the interest and values of the United States, but importantly, consistent with the values and the interests of Israelis and also Palestinians. This is something that successive administrations have sought to do; it's something that we will seek to do.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then do you know if the Secretary — not the President — does the Secretary intend to have someone dedicated to pursuing Israeli relations or Israel's engagement with the Arab world, someone specific in an envoy-type position?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I —

**QUESTION:** Or is Hady doing that right now and that's the way it's going to stay?

**MR PRICE:** So of course we do have people in our NEA Bureau who are engaged —

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** — very closely on this.

**QUESTION:** But I mean like a —

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to announce any plans for an additional envoy-type role, but there are people in this building, there are people throughout our government who are focused —

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** — on this process of normalization.

**QUESTION:** And then —

**MR PRICE:** That's something that we very much support.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then just as an aside, what does this — what do you call these agreements between —

**MR PRICE:** They're normalization agreements.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but what are the — what is the name for them?

**MR PRICE:** Normalization agreements.

**QUESTION:** No, there's a specific name that they all signed onto. I believe you know what it is.

**MR PRICE:** Look, we call them — we call them normalization agreements. That's —

**QUESTION:** Why do you not —

**MR PRICE:** That's precisely what they are.

**QUESTION:** — use the name that the leaders of these countries signed onto —

**MR PRICE:** We're —

**QUESTION:** — which is the Abraham Accords? Why is that —

**MR PRICE:** I'm not averse to using that. I'm describing what these are. These are normalization —

**QUESTION:** Well, then can you say it for me, please?

**MR PRICE:** Of course I can say the term "Abraham Accords," Matt.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** But we call them normalization agreements.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Just to be redundant on the issue of occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, why can't you say it is occupied, without all the caveats? Can you say that it is occupied, that you acknowledge that position? It's been like this since 1967.

**MR PRICE:** Well, Said, and that's precisely what I said yesterday.

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** It is a historical fact that Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights after the 1967 war. That's precisely why the 2020 Human Rights Report uses that term in the current context of the West Bank. It has been the longstanding position of previous administrations of both parties over the course of many decades. Do we think that the West Bank is occupied? Yes.

**QUESTION:** Mm-hmm. Okay. Let me just follow up on that. I mean, if you consider it occupied – I know you've taken a very strong position in the past; you've called for ending the occupation of the Ukraine immediately and so on. Why can't you call for this occupation to end immediately and all the human rights abuses that go along with enforcing it immediately? Why can't you call for that?

**MR PRICE:** Said, what we are calling for – and this really gets to the root of this challenge – is that two-state solution.

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** The two-state solution is precisely what will allow Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side in dignity and security, securing the interests – in the interests of Israelis, in the interests of Palestinians together. That's precisely why we are supporting this two-state solution, just as previous administrations of both political stripes have.

**QUESTION:** If you would allow me – and my colleagues indulge me – just I have a couple of other questions. It was conveyed – I think AP broke the story – that the administration has given an additional \$75 million to the Palestinians. Can you confirm that? And is that – is also – are we also headed towards, let's say, a resumption of aid to UNRWA?

**MR PRICE:** I'm happy to turn it over to my colleague Matt Lee from the AP to comment on this. (Laughter.) But look, we have been clear that resuming assistance to the Palestinian people is a priority, and we are working with Congress on this right now. All U.S. assistance to the Palestinian people will be provided consistent with requirements under U.S. law, and that includes the Taylor Force Act. We just announced – I believe it was last week, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, our ambassador to the UN announced – \$15 million in humanitarian assistance to some of the most vulnerable populations throughout the West Bank and Gaza. That was in the context of COVID. We don't have any additional announcements to make at this time. But again, we have been clear that we are resuming that assistance to the Palestinian people as a priority.

**QUESTION:** And lastly, I promise, on the Palestinian election. We heard that there are two Palestinian businessmen that are here, feeling out the administration or would be a reaction to, let's say, the cancelation of the elections and so on. What is your position on the election? Are you like, let's say, the European Union and you're pushing for these elections? Give us your —

**MR PRICE:** Well, the exercise of democratic elections is a matter for the Palestinian people to determine. We note that the U.S. and other key partners in the international community have long been clear about the importance of participants in that democratic process, renouncing violence and renouncing terrorism, recognizing Israel's right to exist. But Palestinian elections are ultimately a matter for the Palestinian people to decide.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask you on this. Has the Secretary been in touch or tried to be in touch with

the president of the Palestinian Authority? Because there are reports from the Israeli press that Mahmoud Abbas wouldn't talk to Secretary Blinken.

**MR PRICE:** We believe it's important to engage the Palestinian people. We believe it's important to engage the Palestinian leadership. The Secretary, for his part, has not had a conversation with the Palestinian prime minister. I imagine if there is a high-level call from here, including one from the Secretary, we'd be in a position to read that out.

**QUESTION:** Can I go to Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, so the European just announced that there will be a meeting of the joint commission of the JCPOA tomorrow, virtual meeting, without the U.S., if I understand, unless you will be observer or participant in some way. They also say in their statement that they are going to discuss the willing of the U.S. to get back to compliance for compliance. Does that mean that you have shared with the Europeans what you're ready to do, and that they will kind of mediate with the Iranians? And can you tell us what your stance before this meeting, which is the first one since —

**MR PRICE:** Well, I just saw this announcement from the Europeans before I came out here. We obviously welcome this as a positive step, and that's precisely because we have been clear for weeks now that we are ready to pursue a return to compliance with our JCPOA commitments, consistent with Iran also doing the same. We have also been open about the fact that we have been talking with our partners in the P5+1 context and elsewhere about the best way to achieve this, including through a series of initial mutual steps. We've been looking at options for doing so, including with indirect conversations through our European partners. I mentioned this yesterday, but when the Secretary was in Brussels last week, there was a meeting with the E3+1, or the European Quad, whichever term you want to use, where of course Iran was a topic of discussion. Iran was a topic of discussion in other meetings in Brussels as well. Iran was a topic of discussion in Anchorage with representatives of the PRC.

So we have been having these conversations in different fora and with different allies, and in some cases partners. We took note of the Europeans' announcement today. It's a positive step, especially if it moves the ball forward on that mutual return to compliance that we've talked about for a number of weeks now.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Following up on that, we understand there's an — the Iranians already met with other members of the other parties to the deal on Monday. And there's a — an Iranian proposal which sources tell us has been shared with the — with you guys. Can you comment on that, or tell us what — is there any substance to that?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not going to comment on the substance of any diplomatic conversations beyond the broad outlines of what we shared, namely that we have been looking at ways, proposing ways, exploring ways with our allies and our partners — principally our European allies in this case — to effect that mutual return to compliance with the deal.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Yeah. Sure.

**QUESTION:** One, there was the sanctions waiver for Iraq today. Can you describe, is that part of this

effort to explore ways to get back into the talks, or is that just – how do you characterize that?

And then also later this week, Siamak Namazi faces a grim milestone of 2,000 days in an Iranian jail. Can you update us on what efforts the administration is taking to get him released?

**MR PRICE:** When it comes to the energy waiver with Iraq, I would put that in the context of our partnership with the Government of Iraq. This renewal acknowledges the recent success the United States and Iraq have experienced through two rounds of our strategic dialogue with Baghdad, and several energy agreements signed by the Iraqi Government as well. These agreements will ultimately allow Iraq to develop its energy self-sufficiency and, we hope, to end its reliance on Iran.

In the interim, renewal of the sanctions waiver is appropriate until the agreement – agreements and development of the Iraqi energy sector can be fully realized and implemented. This is a 120-day waiver extension. We believe it is possible within the 120 days for the Government of Iraq to take meaningful action to promote energy self-sufficiency and to reduce its dependence on expensive Iranian energy.

When it comes to the Namazis, you're right. There is a grim milestone coming up: 2,000 days – 2,000 days separated from family, loved ones, held in – held unjustly in detention by the Iranians. This is something that I know we will mark here, we will mark here rhetorically, but also by renewing our calls that we have issued consistently, almost since day one, through different partners, means, and channels, to leave no doubt in the minds of Iranian leaders the priority we attach to this. We have no higher priority than seeing the return of Americans unjustly detained in Iran, Americans who may be missing in Iran. That remains our goal. We have been very clear. We have been working very closely with our allies and partners and being very clear with the Iranians as well on that score.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** I work for Kurdish TV, so I may ask questions in different countries, but starting with Iraq, the Iraqis and the Kurdish leadership have finally reached an agreement on the budget. I just wanted to see if you have a comment on that, but more importantly, the – according to some of the local sources or reporting, some of the Iraqi Shiite militias are saying that they are ceasing their attacks on the coalition forces with the condition that the U.S. withdraw troops in Iraq within a year. Is that something that you guys are also – is a goal for you to withdraw troops within a year?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'm obviously not going to comment on the intentions of Iran-backed militias inside of Iraq. What I can say, what I will say is that we have the strategic partnership with the Government of Iraq. We have had now two rounds, I believe it is I just said, in terms of that strategic dialogue. It's something that – it's a partnership that benefits both our countries. It's one that we look forward to deepening in the days, weeks, and years ahead.

**QUESTION:** And any comment on the issues between Baghdad and Erbil? Is that something that the U.S. tries to get them closer to a resolution?

**MR PRICE:** Well, of course, constructive relationship between Erbil and Baghdad is in our interests. It's in the interests of both those entities, but I'll leave it at that.

**QUESTION:** And one – can I – one more question about northeast Syria. Just couple of days ago, the SDF political missions representative here wrote that – and I quote – “President Biden can show the world that we can again trust the U.S. leadership calling on Turkey to withdraw from Syria.” Is that something that – are you willing to call on Turkey to withdraw from Afrin and other areas that we've seen multiple reports of human rights abuses?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have talked about our partnership with partners on the ground, the partners with whom we work to effect our important mission – namely, in this case, the counter – the D-ISIS mission that we have taken on for some time. But I don't have a specific comment on that call.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can we transition to Russia?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Foreign Minister Lavrov said U.S.-Russia relations have hit bottom today and said there's no date for their ambassador to come back to Washington. Do you have any response to this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think our response would be to point out why relationships – why the relations have – are in the state they are. And I think you can look at any number of reasons for that. We have spoken of several of them from this podium in recent weeks, and many of them remain the subject of inquiry, investigation, analysis by the U.S. Government, including our Intelligence Community. We've spoken about Russia's assault on our democracy in 2016 and more recently in 2020. We've spoken of reports of Russian bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan. We've spoken of Russia's malicious cyber operations, including in the context of Solar Winds. And we've spoken of Russia's imprisonment of Mr. Navalny and the repression and the arbitrary detention of those Russians who peacefully took to the streets to protest Mr. Navalny's arrest, all of which was preceded by Russia's attempt to assassinate Mr. Navalny.

So I'm aware of the comments of the Russian foreign minister, but I'm also aware of the backdrop. And that is what is important to us: why we are where we are in terms of the bilateral relationship with Russia. It remains true that we continue to look for a stable and predictable relationship with Russia. Just because we have these profound disagreements, just because the relationship is where it is right now, doesn't mean that there aren't going to be any areas of tactical alignment. And, of course, we demonstrated that early on in this administration by renewing the New START agreement for five years, precisely because – not because it's in Russia's interest but because it's in our interest. And so when there are areas for potential cooperation, areas that are in our – America's – national interest to pursue, we will do that. But that doesn't change the backdrop against which this activity is taking place.

**QUESTION:** And can I just follow up? One thing that you mentioned was the reported bounties on U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Over the weekend, Secretary Blinken was more definitive with his language. He said Russia, quote, "put bounties on U.S. troops." So is that now the definitive conclusion that the U.S. Government has come to, that they did actually put those bounties on U.S. troops, or are you guys still looking into it, investigating?

**MR PRICE:** The department is still deferring to the Intelligence Community. Those reports originated, as I understand it, with the Intelligence Community. That's where this analysis currently rests.

**QUESTION:** Hey, Ned, just on Russia, do you have anything to add to what your Pentagon counterpart and predecessor at this podium said yesterday about the Russian troop movements on the Ukrainian border? If it's the same as what you said yesterday, then I don't need it, but —

**MR PRICE:** I don't believe we addressed it yesterday.

**QUESTION:** But he said – I mean —

**MR PRICE:** Yeah, I don't think I —



**QUESTION:** Yeah he did, but – Kirby did.

**MR PRICE:** Yeah, he – he did, correct. No, but I think it's worth us reiterating it from here and, of course, when we talk about the state of the relationship between the United States and Russia, we can't forget Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine. And we're absolutely concerned by recent escalations of Russian aggressive and provocative actions in eastern Ukraine, including violations of the July 2020 ceasefire that led to the deaths of four Ukrainian soldiers on March 26th and injuries to others. Russia's destabilizing actions undermine the de-escalation intentions achieved through the OSCE-brokered agreement of July of last year.

Additionally, we are aware of Ukrainian military reports concerning Russian troop movements in – on Ukraine's borders. We are discussing our concerns about that increase in tensions and ceasefire violations and regional tensions with NATO Allies. You've heard from various departments and agencies including the State Department; Secretary Blinken had a call with his Ukrainian counterpart yesterday. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had a call with his counterpart. And National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had a call with Andriy Yermak in Ukraine as well. We will continue to be in close touch with our partners in Kyiv and in Ukraine more broadly in the face of these recent escalations.

**QUESTION:** But just to put a fine point on it, though, you don't have any indication that Russian troops have left Russian soil, do you?

**MR PRICE:** I would not want to go there. I will leave that to the Department of Defense to speak to any tactical movements. I am speaking to our broad concerns with these escalations on the part of Russian activities.

**QUESTION:** Granted the situation on that border is tense and not – it's not like the U.S.-Canadian – well, it's not like – it's a tense border, but in general, you don't have objections to Russia moving its own troops around in its own country, do you?

**MR PRICE:** I don't think anyone is – I think we – what we would object to are aggressive actions, actions that have an intent of intimidating, of threatening our partner in Ukraine.

**QUESTION:** Okay. But you have made the conclusion that these movements are intended to intimidate?

**MR PRICE:** We have made the conclusion that Russia's recent escalations and aggressive and provocative actions in eastern Ukraine are just that. They're —

**QUESTION:** All right. Well, no, no, that's eastern Ukraine.

**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** I'm talking about in Russia itself.

**MR PRICE:** I am speaking about our concern in terms of Russia's recent escalations and provocations in eastern Ukraine.

**QUESTION:** Right, and I'm talking about the troop movements, which you also talked —

**MR PRICE:** But I think my previous point stands that any efforts to intimidate Russia's neighbors is something that would be —

**QUESTION:** Do you think that the troop movements are – is an effort to intimidate the Ukrainians —

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I think —

**QUESTION:** — even though they haven't left —

**MR PRICE:** I think we're missing the forest for the trees because we are concerned about the concrete activities that are taking place in eastern Ukraine. That's what we're talking about today.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but the point is, is that the Russian troops' movements that you're talking about are inside of Russia.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, what I am talking about are recent escalations of Russian aggressive and provocative actions in eastern Ukraine. That —

**QUESTION:** So forget about the troop movements, then? (Inaudible.)

**MR PRICE:** That is the subject of this.

**QUESTION:** All right.

**MR PRICE:** Yes, please.

**QUESTION:** Do you include the troop movements —

**QUESTION:** A follow-up?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** Do you include the troop movements in Russia in this escalation?

**MR PRICE:** What we are talking about — our concern is predicated on Russian escalations and aggressions in eastern Ukraine. Of course, we would be concerned by any attempt on the part of the Russian Federation to intimidate its neighbors and our partners. Of course, Ukraine is among them.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I had a follow-up on Russia and then I wanted to ask a question about Afghanistan if that was possible.

**MR PRICE:** Okay. Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** You announced today that the U.S. was moving all consular services to the U.S. embassy in Moscow. I know that there had been a temporary decision along those lines that was notified to Congress in December based on staffing. I wonder if there was any other motivation or reason for making that decision today.

**MR PRICE:** Well, we announced today that the consulate general in Yekaterinburg remains open while operations at the CG in Vladivostok remain suspended due to COVID. We continue to review our diplomatic presence in Russia to ensure that we're able to carry out our important diplomatic activities, including providing services to Americans — American citizens safely and securely in the face of ongoing staffing challenges. We have been in close touch with Congress on this as well.

The decision to — the decision to continue the suspension of operations was made after months of careful review of U.S. foreign policy goals, the state of the bilateral relationship, which we were just

discussing, and ongoing staffing challenges as well as the safety and security of U.S. diplomatic personnel within the Russian Federation.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Does that mean, though – does that mean, though, that you're – you may not close down Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok?

**MR PRICE:** We don't have – look, we hope these – because of our strong connection with the Russian people, we hope one day it will be possible to reopen diplomatic missions across the Russian Federation, but it's – we're unable to predict at this point when that might be.

**QUESTION:** Well, yeah, but when you're reviewing – I mean, the previous administration, although it was the exact same ambassador, which remains – Ambassador Sullivan made the – made the recommendation to shut them both down. It sounds to me as though there's a review about whether those closures should continue and you should abandon the property rather than just leave —

**MR PRICE:** What we have said now is that we've informed the Russian Federation that our consulate in Vladivostok will remain in suspended status. The consulate general in Yekaterinburg will remain open, but it will suspend visa and American citizen services as of April 1st.

**QUESTION:** Right, but that is different than what the previous administration had said. Right?

**MR PRICE:** We're constantly – we are constantly evaluating.

**QUESTION:** Isn't that correct?

**MR PRICE:** We are —

**QUESTION:** It's different than what the previous administration had said.

**MR PRICE:** We are constantly evaluating the security situation, our ability to staff our missions around the world, and those decisions will be based on that.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan, Ambassador Khalilzad has been in the region meeting with, as I understand it, the Afghan Government as well as the Taliban. I wondered if you had any readouts of those meetings. And then can you provide any further details on the meeting between these groups in Turkey and will the Secretary have any participation in that meeting?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Ambassador Khalilzad, as you just alluded to, is currently in Doha. He is meeting both with the Islamic Republic and Taliban negotiating teams to push for further progress in negotiations and a reduction in violence. That has been our goal all along. He's also meeting with other international partners to explore how the international community can best help the two negotiating sides accelerate the peace process. Special Representative Khalilzad recently traveled to Turkey, as you also alluded to, to meet with Turkish counterparts on the upcoming international conference on the Afghanistan peace process to be held in Istanbul in the coming days. Building on recent international gatherings in support of the peace process, the Istanbul conference is meant to help Afghan negotiators make progress in their negotiations and will complement peace talks currently ongoing in Doha.

During his visit, Ambassador Khalilzad and Turkish officials agreed that an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned gathering supported by high-level attendance from the international community provides the best means to accelerate that peace process. They also agreed to urge the Afghan parties to prepare for

constructive participation in that conference.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I have two questions, both related to North Korea. First, on the North Korea policy review, I understand it's in the final stages, but how soon can we expect the outcome and what can we expect to see when it's – when the review is done? I mean, is there going to be a statement explaining what the new U.S. approach toward North Korea is going to look like?

And my second question is on the meeting tomorrow between the security advisors. The U.S. had said that – has said that coordinating U.S. policy with those allies, South Korea and Japan, is a very important part of the review process. Now, does that mean the U.S. policy approach toward North Korea could change or be modified in – at least in some way as a result of tomorrow's discussions given that South Korea just renewed its call for efforts to declare an official end to the Korean War as a way of restoring dialogue with North Korea, whereas the United States seems to believe that that should be part of the end game?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Secretary Blinken made this point when he was in Japan and South Korea earlier – I guess it was last month now. But he made this point in Japan and South Korea that we were there not only to share our initial thinking on our approach to issues of mutual concern, and, of course, North Korea is at or near the top of that list, but also to solicit input from our treaty allies, the ROK and, of course, Japan. Prior to that trip, Ambassador Sung Kim, the acting assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, held a meeting with – a trilateral meeting himself.

The meeting that National Security Advisor Sullivan will convene tomorrow with his counterparts, Secretary General Kitamura of Japan and National Security Advisor Suh Hoon of the Republic of Korea, follows on Secretary Blinken's engagement in the region last month, where we did emphasize the importance not only of close bilateral cooperation between the United States and the ROK, and the United States and Japan, but the imperative of close trilateral cooperation. And we are gratified to see this meeting coming along.

It will provide National Security Advisor Sullivan and other U.S. officials an opportunity to hear directly from these senior Japanese and South Korean officials to share, again, where we are in terms of our review. We did announce several days ago now that that review is coming to a conclusion, but it will also be an opportunity for them to share with us their thinking, their perspective that we have heard, at least from other Japanese and South Korean officials during our trilateral engagements here at various levels. But this will be an important opportunity to hear that in person from them at the Naval Academy with their national security advisors.

Now, I wouldn't want to prejudge the conclusion of any ongoing review, but we have said that denuclearization will remain at the center of American policy towards North Korea. We also know that any approach to North Korea in order to be effective will be one that we will have to execute in lockstep with our close allies, including in this case, our treaty allies, Japan and South Korea. And that's another reason why it's so important that this that these trilateral engagements, continue apace, and you'll see the next iteration of that tomorrow.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On China, is that okay?

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** The – a question about the U.S. ambassador of Palau's recent visit to Taiwan: What

message was meant to be sent to China by the visit, and does it represent a continuation of the Trump era policy of lifting restrictions on U.S. travel to Taiwan?

**MR PRICE:** Sorry, lifting restrictions on —

**QUESTION:** On U.S. official travel to Taiwan.

**MR PRICE:** Ah. Well, I think as a general matter, we are committed to deepening ties with Taiwan. Taiwan, of course, is a leading democracy; it's critical. It's a critical economic and security partner of the United States, and that's why we will continue to engage Taiwan consistent with the longstanding "one China" policy. We will consider, just as we have, opportunities for visits to Washington and Taipei by senior-level authorities that advance our unofficial relationship and enable substantive exchanges on issues of mutual concern.

**QUESTION:** And so just one last thing: Is there still no sort of tangible progress from the U.S.-China meeting in Alaska? I'm just following up on this because, as you know, that the Chinese announced a number of sort of smaller collaborative things that were worked on, such as a climate change working group, things like that. Those have not been confirmed by the U.S. side. But is it still the case that basically, from the U.S. perspective, there wasn't really any tangible progress made on specific issues stemming from that meeting?

**MR PRICE:** No. I would distinguish a bit, parse a bit what you are saying. Let me just back up for a moment and repeat what I said yesterday, that our relationship with the government in Beijing is one that is predicated on competition. As the Secretary has said, it is a relationship that has competitive elements, it is one that has adversarial elements, but it's also one that can, and in fact probably should, have cooperative elements. And we did have an opportunity in Anchorage to discuss with the PRC representatives some of those cooperative elements. Climate is one of them; Iran was one of them. As I talked about yesterday, there are some alignment of our interests when it comes to Burma and other regional challenges.

Now, I think there is a difference between saying there was no progress and not having a grand announcement about a new working group or a new initiative. There is work that is going on within this building, within other elements, within other departments and agencies of the Executive Branch that will help us further those areas of cooperation, those areas where it is in our interest to cooperate with the government in Beijing, that we will do so. And that work is ongoing.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** That's the first time from this podium anyone has agreed to parse something that someone else has said. I'll tell you that that's historic right there.

**MR PRICE:** There we go.

**QUESTION:** I feel honored.

**MR PRICE:** I will take it. Mark this moment.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. Just to follow up on the North Korea question, is tomorrow's trilateral meeting sort of the final stage before the review process is finished? Or do you anticipate you'll need further consultations with allies or within the U.S. Government before the review's complete?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to go beyond what we said before, and that is namely that our

review of our North Korea policy is coming to a conclusion. It is a review that has been informed throughout that process by consultations with our allies, in this case the South Koreans and the Japanese, but also with other partners. Secretary Blinken heard that directly, Ambassador Sung Kim; many others in this building have engaged in those consultations as well. This will just be the next iteration in that consultative process as we bring this review to a close, but I wouldn't want to put a firm deadline on it.

**QUESTION:** And then just quickly on Hong Kong, does the department have any statement regarding the verdict that was announced against the seven pro-democracy activists?

**MR PRICE:** We do. Today's convictions in Hong Kong of seven pro-democracy activists on politically motivated charges once again show the degree to which the PRC and Hong Kong authorities seek to crush all forms of peaceful dissent in the city. The United States continues to condemn the PRC's continuing assault on fundamental freedoms and democratic institutions in Hong Kong. The April 1 convictions are yet another example of the erosion of Hong Kong's freedoms by PRC and Hong Kong authorities. The seven pro-democracy activists – Martin Lee, Jimmy Lai, Albert Ho, Margaret Ng, Cyd Ho, Lee Cheuk-yan, and Leung Kwok – participated in a peaceful assembly attended by 1.7 million Hong Kongers.

The United States continues to stand with those millions of Hong Kongers who have peacefully demonstrated to protect the autonomy and freedoms promised to them by the PRC. And just as you saw earlier this week, and in fact last week too, we will continue to hold to account those authorities in Beijing, those authorities in Hong Kong who seek to erode those fundamental freedoms and those autonomies to which Hong Kong is due.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** There was an exclusive report on *Wall Street Journal* today that the U.S. has directed the Pentagon to begin withdrawing some military capabilities from the Gulf region. I know that this question should be asked to your colleagues in the Pentagon. I'm just wondering if you have anything to say on this.

And secondly, if I may on Syria, what's the U.S. policy towards the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad? Does the U.S. Government think that he shouldn't be part of that country's future? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, first starting with Saudi Arabia, the Department of Defense announced in February, early February, that DOD would conduct a global force posture review of the U.S. military footprint, resources, strategy, and missions at the directive of the President. We, of course, would in fact refer you to the Department of Defense for any details there and especially when it comes to potential troop movements or reallocations.

When it comes to our relationship with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia is a key partner on many priorities, including regional security and counterterrorism. Saudi Arabia faces significant threats to its territory from Yemen and elsewhere in the region. Attacks on Saudi Arabia put the lives of innocent civilians, including U.S. citizens, in danger. And that's why we're committed to working together to help Saudi Arabia strengthen its defenses against these threats. There are many areas where we believe it is in our interest to maintain strategic cooperation with Riyadh, and that includes working together to deter and defend against threats to the kingdom, including those ultimately emanating from Iran. We do want a working partnership with the Saudis to help defend against this aggression, to end the war in Yemen, and to take on other challenges.

Now, of course, we have talked about the ways in which we have sought to recalibrate that relationship, to recalibrate it in such a way that it corresponds both to our interests and to our values.

But we will continue to stand by our partner, Saudi Arabia, in the face of these threats that, as I've said before, jeopardize Saudi civilians as well as Americans in the region.

**QUESTION:** And on Syria, the U.S. position towards the – or the policy towards the Syrian president?

**MR PRICE:** Our policy towards Bashar al-Assad has not changed. He has slaughtered his own people. He has engaged in indiscriminate violence using chemical weapons against his own people. He has done nothing, of course, to regain legitimacy that he has long ago lost. Our goal is to work to ease the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people as we seek to bring about a political solution to this longstanding conflict.

**QUESTION:** But should he be excluded in any agreement in Syria or, like, how does the U.S. see the future of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria?

**MR PRICE:** We believe that stability in Syria – and, for that matter, within the greater region as well – can only be achieved through that political process that I spoke to, a political process that represents the will of all Syrians, and we're committed to working with allies, partners, and the UN to ensure that a durable political solution is within reach.

**QUESTION:** But just to follow up on that, Ned, I mean, I remember as far back as 2011, August 2011, when the secretary of state then said that he lost his right to govern, whatever; his days were numbered and so on. Now, if he enters, let's say, a legitimate election or election that you would approve of and can get the support of many Syrians – as there are a lot of Syrians that support him – would you then see a way of working with him?

**MR PRICE:** Again, our focus is on bringing about, advancing a political settlement that brings stability, security, and an end to the suffering of the Syrian people. As I said before, Assad has over the course of the many years since 2011 – the 10 years, that grim milestone that we just marked not all that long ago – he hasn't regained that legitimacy in our eyes, and there is absolutely no question of the United States normalizing relations with his government.

We are, at the same time, not in the business of trying to engineer regime change in the region. But we will demand accountability and justice for the Syrian people, the Syrian people that have suffered enormously and horrifically under the rule of Bashar al-Assad.

**QUESTION:** But he's now outlasted two presidents, U.S. presidents. He's on his third. I mean, he's not quite at the Fidel Castro level for someone that you guys consider to be a pariah, but he's – his days have been numbered for thousands and thousands – thousands of days now according to you guys.

So the point – I guess the question is: When you say that you will not normalize relations with his government, does that mean that you – the U.S. will not normalize relations with any government – with a government that he leads? Does he have to go in order for relations to get back to somewhat normal?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I wouldn't want to try and set out what that political settlement would look like here from the podium. What I will reiterate is that our goal is to advance that political settlement to bring precisely the security, stability, and an end to the humanitarian suffering of the people of Syria.

Thank you all.

**QUESTION:** Just quickly, does that —

**MR PRICE:** Yes, very quickly.

**QUESTION:** Does that also include the SDF having a seat at the table?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I'm not going to spell out what that political settlement might look like from here, but we hope to make progress on it. And I should say you heard from the Secretary earlier this week about the importance of humanitarian access. You heard from Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield about our profound financial commitment to the Syrian people, some \$500 million that was announced in U.S. funding just earlier this week.

So thank you all very much.

**QUESTION:** Thanks.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:56 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 2, 2021](#)

*04/02/2021 04:56 PM EDT*

Jalina Porter, Principal Deputy Spokesperson

Washington, DC

2:01 p.m. EDT

**MS PORTER:** Good afternoon and thank you for joining today's press briefing this Friday. I have two quick announcements at the top, and we'll start with your question and answers.

First, we are deeply saddened by the loss of life and casualties from the train derailment in Taiwan on April 2nd, 2021. We extend our deepest condolences to all those affected and stand ready to offer all possible assistance.

We are working closely with local authorities to determine if any U.S. citizens were affected. We wish Taiwan peace and comfort during this difficult time.

Next, this weekend marks 2,000 days since Iran arrested Siamak Namazi for being a U.S. citizen. Siamak Namazi was a businessman living in Tehran when he was arrested in October of 2015. When his father, 84-year-old Baquer Namazi, traveled to Iran to help free his son, the Iranian Government arrested him too.

Both Siamak and Baquer were arrested, were sentenced to 10 years in prison on baseless charges. As a result, the Namazi family has suffered for five and a half years while the Iranian Government continues to treat their husband, father, son, and brother as political pawns. This terrible milestone should offend all who believe in the rule of law.

We call on Iran to immediately and safely release all U.S. citizens who are wrongfully detained in Iran, including the Namazis, Emad Sharghi, and Morad Tahbaz, who is a U.K. citizen. Iran must also account for the fate of Robert Levinson and other U.S. citizens who are missing or abducted in Iran. The abhorrent act of unjust detentions for political gain must cease immediately – whether in Iran or anywhere around the world.

And with that, we'll give it a few minutes before we start taking your questions.

Let's go to the line of Carmen Rodriguez, please.

**OPERATOR:** One moment. Carmen Rodriguez, your line is open. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Thank you for this conference. My question is regarding what's going on right now in El Salvador. You may see there is an – a confronted attitude from the president of El Salvador regarding all the Biden administration's plans to fight against immigrations, or fight to combat the roots of immigrations. What will be the U.S. position in this matter, if this attitude continues and if there is no

way that President Bukele sits with the U.S. to work against immigration?

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question, Carmen. I'll first start off by saying that the President is serious about working and discovering the root causes of migration and working through those challenges in a way that requires systemic change and political will from government leaders. And we'll also say the United States stands ready to partner up with governments as well as the private sector and members of civil society who are ready and willing to rise to the situation at hand in El Salvador.

I'll also say that the United States, we're focused on working towards a more democratic, fair, and prosperous El Salvador, of course, where the people of El Salvador can thrive. And of course, we look forward to continuing to work with El Salvador to achieve these goals in the future.

Let's go to the line of Janne Pak, please.

**OPERATOR:** And Janne Pak, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Thank you very much. I have two questions for you. Can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Yes. As you know, the China is inviting foreign ministers from four ASEAN countries to talks at the same time as the U.S., South Korea, and Japan trilateral dialogue are held. The South Korean foreign minister and Chinese minister of foreign affairs talked – also talked today. I'm wondering why at this point the foreign minister of South Korea should go to China to talk with the Chinese foreign minister. Do you have any comment on this?

And secondly, what are the difference of view between South Korea and the United States in North Korea policy? And will the difference of view be reduced in this trilateral talk? Thank you very much.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your questions. I'll start with your first one, Janne, and to say that we – we aren't in a position to comment on the foreign minister's – of Korea's decision to engage in discussions with China. But to your second question, as you're probably already apprised of, NSA Jake Sullivan is again welcoming National Security Secretariat Secretary General Kitamura as well as National Security Advisor Hoon of Republic of Korea today in Annapolis, Maryland at the Naval Academy for these trilateral talks. And as you are well aware that our – the talks are ongoing, but it'll – will be drawn to a conclusion soon. We don't have any other announcements at this time other than that we remain committed to denuclearization of North Korea.

Please go to the line of Laura Kelly.

**OPERATOR:** Laura Kelly, your line's open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you for taking my question. I wonder if you can give more details on the meeting next week in Vienna with signatories to the Iran nuclear deal, what U.S. officials are going to be at the meeting, and what type of sanctions relief may be proposed for Iran to take steps to reverse its breaches of the agreement. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for the question. We don't have any specific announcements to make about details of who will participate from the U.S. in that meeting. And just as a reminder, this is a healthy first step forward, and we kind of – we definitely want to underscore that. And obviously, when it comes to issues that are discussed, we're going to talk about nuclear steps that Iran would need to take in order to return to a compliance with the terms of the JCPOA. And we won't preview any specific sanctions, but we'll definitely say that sanction relief steps that the U.S. would need to take in

order to return to that compliance as well will be up for discussion.

Let's go to the line of Shaun Tandon, please.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) Can I just follow up on Iran? What exactly do you think will be the – what you're looking for there? I know you mentioned actions by Iran. There's been some talk by the EU of having some synchronized action. Is that something that you are going to look to do there in Vienna, to try to coordinate the action?

And if you don't mind, could I also ask you the latest on Burma? There was an announcement yesterday by the junta of shutting down all internet connections, all internet service. Do you have any reaction to that? Is there any way to circumvent that? Thanks.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you. To your first question on talks in Vienna, I won't get ahead of the meeting, but I will underscore that obviously the goal is a mutual return to compliance of the JCPOA.

When it comes to internet shutdowns, unfortunate internet shutdowns in Burma, we certainly condemn all that's going on when it comes to internet shutdowns. This actually poses a serious security and health issue. As you know, using platforms as they've used before like Facebook and Twitter have been really crucial for the people of Burma to get what they need, and without access to internet they're not able to get access to programs when it comes to health relief. We certainly condemn the use of military-imposed internet shutdowns, and again, we hope this won't silence the voices of the people of Burma. But we will continue to encourage the military regime to push forward for Burma's path of democracy.

Let's go to the line of Jennifer Hansler.

**OPERATOR:** Ms. Hansler, you're open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks so much, and apologies if this was already asked. I had to drop off for a second. Can you confirm whether Rob Malley will be representing the U.S. at the talks in Vienna?

And then separately, given that the U.S. is vaccinating a lot of folks and there are these new CDC travel guidelines about folks who are vaccinated, are there any talks with the governments of Canada or Mexico about lifting some of the border restrictions for nonessential travelers? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Again, to your first question, I want to underscore that we don't have any announcements to make at this time as far as U.S. representation or personnel at the talks in Vienna. When it comes to lifted restrictions on travel restrictions for coronavirus, I would have to direct you to the CDC.

Let's go to the line of Ellen Knickmeyer.

**OPERATOR:** Ms. Knickmeyer —

**QUESTION:** Ready.

**OPERATOR:** — your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thank you. I unfortunately joined a couple minutes into the call and heard you finishing a statement about the detainees. I don't know if – about detainees held by Iran. I was wondering if it's possible to get the substance of that again. And along those lines, are there – are issues like American citizens held in Iran or Iran's intervention in the countries around it and other complaints against Iran going to be included in any talks next week and going forward in the Iran

nuclear deal?

**MS PORTER:** Thanks for your questions. I'll take your first one, and I'll start off by saying that the safe return of all U.S. citizens who are wrongfully detained, whether they're in Iran or anywhere in the world, is a top priority of the United States. And just because you missed the last portion of it, what we were discussing is this weekend marking the 2,000th day since Iran arrested Siamak Namazi for being a U.S. citizen as well as his father who came to try to help him and were imprisoned for 10 years simply on baseless causes. Again, we won't underscore enough that we call on Iran to immediately and safely release all U.S. citizens who are wrongfully detained in Iran. And Iran must also take into account the fate of Robert Levinson and all other U.S. citizens who were actually abducted in the country.

Let's go to the line of Joel Gehrke.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks for doing this. I have two very different questions. I'll start with the Russia and Ukraine. One, I just – I saw of course that President Biden spoke to President Zelenskyy and there's been a lot of focus on the military movements around the borders of Ukraine. I wonder, do you think that the Russian military is staging the kinds of forces that would be used in any kind of imminent – imminent invasion into Ukraine? Is that – is that your assessment right now?

**MS PORTER:** Well, I mean, I won't make a firm assessment, but I'll definitely say that we're aware of Ukrainian military reports concerning Russian troops' movements around their borders. And we're discussing our concerns about this increased tension and a ceasefire violation as well as regional tensions with NATO allies. And again, we remain concerned about these recent escalations of Russian aggression and provocative actions in eastern Ukraine. And you had a second question?

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I wondered since we're talking about Bob Levinson today – I wonder if you're aware of his name has come up in – of course in the context of a controversy involving Congressman Matt Gaetz, who claims that he's being extorted as part of a – as part of some kind of shadowy initiative to – where the people who approached him said they could – they could also help with the freeing of Robert Levinson. Have you heard anything about these allegations that would seem to implicate some of your equities if somebody were doing this? Is there any kind of – is there any kind of conversation underway to see what – what's going on there, if anything?

**MS PORTER:** I can't confirm that we've had any conversations when it comes to Mr. Levinson and Congressman Gaetz. And that being the case, I would have to refer you to the – either the campaign or the congressional office of Congressman Gaetz.

Let's go to the line of Jiha Ham.

**OPERATOR:** Okay, Jiha, your line is open. I apologize for the delay. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Hi, Jalina. Happy Friday. South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong said on Wednesday that he looks forward to seeing Washington to consider more positively on the idea of an end to the Korean War – so-called an end-of-war declaration. So what's the State Department's or this administration's position on this idea?

Also, could you give us an update or tell us more details on the meeting of the three national security advisors? I know you mentioned about this earlier, but I'm wondering if you could share with us more. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your questions. As far as meeting details from the trilateral meeting, I'll have to refer you to the White House. I'm sure they'll have a readout that they will publish after the

meeting. And as far as your first question, we'll have to take that back for you.

Let's go to the line of Pranshu Verma.

**OPERATOR:** And Pranshu, your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) confirm whether the Biden administration is going to reverse the executive order allowing – that President Trump passed authorizing sanctions on ICC personnel?

**MS PORTER:** We don't have anything to announce at this time on the ICC, but I suspect we'll actually have an announcement later today that will be published. Thanks.

Let's go to the line of Mouhamed Elahmed.

**OPERATOR:** Mouhamed, you're all open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Jalina. Thank you for doing this. (Inaudible.)

**MS PORTER:** Hi, I'm having trouble – I'm having trouble hearing you, Mouhamed.

**QUESTION:** Hello?

**MS PORTER:** Okay, I can hear you now.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Thank you for doing this. I have a question about Afghanistan. I'm wondering if you have any update about special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad's meetings and consultations in Doha. And also, how are the consultations and the preparations for the upcoming meeting in Istanbul going so far? Thank you so much.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question, Mouhamed. And as a matter of correction, yes, Ambassador Khalilzad is currently in Doha and he is currently meeting with both the Islamic Republic and Taliban negotiating teams to push for further progress and a reduction in violence. And of course he's meeting with other international partners to explore how the community can both help both sides accelerate the peace process.

Now, when it comes to the meeting, upcoming meeting in Turkey, Special Representative Khalilzad recently traveled to meet with Turkish counterparts on the upcoming conference on the Afghanistan peace process held in Istanbul. And we're encouraged by the international community's interest in accelerating the peace process. But for further details when it comes to Turkey specifically, I would have to refer you to the Turkish Government.

Let's go to the line of Muath Alamri.

**QUESTION:** Hello, can you hear me?

**MS PORTER:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Happy Friday. Thank you for doing this and allow me to ask. My question is about Iran. Since the U.S. and Iran agreed to talk to each other indirectly, who is going to be the mediator, your back channel here? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you. This definitely seems to be a common question today, but I'll just underscore that we don't have any announcements today on who will serve as U.S. representation in that meeting. We'll certainly share that when we do have those details.

Let's go to the line of Soyoung Kim, please.

**QUESTION:** Oh, hello.

**OPERATOR:** Soyoung, you're open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Mm-hmm. I was actually going to ask you a similar question regarding the trilateral meeting today, and then you answered. But if I could just make one – you said that the review of North Korea policy is complete soon. So when can we actually expect to see the result? And then, will there be, like, a report or a press briefing on this? So what kind of form that we are going to see the review. Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** Thank you for your question. We don't have a specific timeline on when the review will be complete. But of course, when we do have an update to that, I'm sure obviously through our channels at the State Department as well as the White House we will be releasing that through specific statements. But we don't have all those details ironed out at this time.

We'll take one final caller from Joseph Haboush.

**OPERATOR:** Mr. Haboush, your line is open. Go ahead, sir.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. I wanted to ask if the U.S. consulted with its allies in the Gulf and in Israel ahead of next week's talks. And secondly, will you guys be carrying any of their concerns into the talks next week? Thank you.

**MS PORTER:** So we certainly won't preview any private diplomatic discussions. But again, I'll reiterate what was shared earlier in that the issues that will be discussed are nuclear steps that Iran would need to take in order to return to compliance with the terms of the JCPOA as well as the sanction relief steps that the United States would need to take in order to return to the compliance as well.

This concludes today's briefing. Thank you all so much for joining today, and I hope you have a nice weekend ahead.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:26 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 5, 2021](#)

04/05/2021 06:04 PM EDT

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

1:00 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Okay, good afternoon. As you see, we have a couple guests with us today. We'll get to that in just a moment.

But first, today we celebrate 20 years of American leadership, cooperation, and support for the preservation of cultural heritage around the world through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. Since the fund launched on April 3rd, 2001, U.S. embassies have used this public diplomacy program to support disaster preparedness and response effort overseas, to spur economic development, to adapt to climate change, and promote American values, such as respect for cultural diversity. In the process, our embassies have provided educational and career development opportunities for American students and professionals from nearly all 50 states.

For example, in 2019, a 6.4 magnitude earthquake hit Albania and damaged three ancient fortifications. With a grant of nearly \$800,000, the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation is supporting the emergency stabilization of the structures, a conservation analysis for each fortification, and reconstruction of the damaged sections. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and other post-conflict countries, embassies have incorporated the fund into the recovery and reconciliation efforts. In Rwanda, our embassy used the program to help preserve the memory and evidence of lives lost in 1994. And in northern Iraq, our embassy has used the program to mitigate the effects of genocide by preserving cultural sites of terrorized communities.

Through more than 1,000 projects thus far, the Ambassadors Fund continues to incorporate cultural preservation and protection into American diplomacy.

Moving on to the release of the department's newly published report, *To Walk the Earth in Safety*, which those of you in the room have in front of you, and which is also available on our website [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov), this annual report highlights the United States' enduring commitment to making post-conflict communities safer and setting the stage for their recovery and development.

I would like to introduce Acting Assistant Secretary Tim Betts from our Political-Military Affairs Bureau, who will first make brief remarks along with Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Stan Brown, who is then prepared to take your questions.

So with that, Acting Assistant Secretary Betts, the floor is yours.

**MR BETTS:** Well, thank you very much, Ned, for that introduction and good afternoon, everyone. Today I have the pleasure to release the 20th edition of *To Walk the Earth in Safety*, the annual report of the U.S. conventional weapons destruction, or CWD, program.



For more than 25 years, the United States has demonstrated its commitment to protecting civilians through support for destruction of at-risk conventional weapons and the clearance of landmines, IEDs, and unexploded ordnance. Over that period, we have provided more than \$4 billion in CWD assistance in more than a hundred countries.

The success of the U.S. CWD programs relies not only on the technical abilities of our implementing partners but also on the active support and participation of the affected states and communities.

Early on we recognized that every individual should be included in mine action activities for peace and security gains to be sustained. One way NGO implementing partners encouraged inclusivity was to recruit women deminers. Today women across the globe work in all aspects of mine action, making their families and communities stronger.

From leading survivor advocacy in the Democratic Republic of Congo to providing municipal government oversight in Bosnia and Herzegovina to training deminers in Laos, this edition of *To Walk the Earth in Safety* highlights the accomplishments of women in our “Improving lives Through U.S. CWD Programs” segments.

Protecting civilians is at the core of the U.S. CWD assistance. These programs help to protect our nation and our citizens, promote economic opportunity and prosperity, and build strong partners who will help us advance America’s interests on the global stage.

Projects to secure state-held small arms and light weapons from Africa to Europe to Central America supports security. The disposal of excess and unserviceable munitions reduces the risk of unplanned explosions at military storage sites located close to populated areas. For example, in – where did my prep go? Here it is.

For example, as illustrated in the report’s cover photo, ITF Enhancing Human Security, one of our longest-standing partners, in coordination with the Kyrgyz Ministry of Defense demilitarized more than 45,000 pieces, or more than 200 metric tons, of expired large-caliber ammunition.

Even with such assistance, unplanned explosions continue to happen, and we’re prepared to respond on short notice. Most recently our Quick Reaction Force, which is highlighted in the report, deployed to Equatorial Guinea to assist with ordnance disposal following the March 7th explosion at the military base in Bata.

Following the Port of Beirut explosion on August 4th of last year, State Department funded teams undertook a stockpile security assessment that led to upgrades to the Lebanese Armed Forces’ First Artillery Regiment ammunition depot to reduce the risk of another catastrophic explosion.

The Interagency Man-Portable Air Defense Systems, or MANPADS, Task Force supports MANPADS Recognition Training seminars to assist foreign security officials at airports, border crossings, and seaports in their advanced weapons systems counterproliferation efforts. Adapting the course curriculum to a virtual format enabled the training of officials from the Middle East and North Africa in our pandemic-constrained environment, providing them with the skills needed to reduce the threat to civil aviation from MANPADS.

Implementing partners have also adapted as traditional methods of in-person delivery are complicated by the global pandemic. For example, the Swiss Federation for Demining ran an Explosive Ordnance Risk Education campaign in Iraq on Facebook that reached more than 230,000 people.

The Department successfully partnered with Facebook and NGO Mine Action Group, or MAG, in 2019 to pilot risk education over social media in areas of northern Iraq liberated from ISIS. It was effective

in reaching far more civilians than traditional methods – over 983,000 persons in three months. In November of 2020, we launched phase two of that program, which will deliver risk education to more than nine million at-risk civilians in Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, and Vietnam.

CWD assistance for the clearance of explosive hazards reduces the risk to civilians from accident or injury from unexploded ordnance or IEDs in post-conflict areas in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. As can be seen on the back cover, civilians often return home to a sobering reality in the search for – in seeing that their homes had been searched and marked “safe”. These projects provide safe access to buildings and other infrastructure, which is necessary to rebuild their communities.

Finally, the U.S. commitment is grounded in over 25 years of bipartisan congressional support combined with the experience and determination of our implementing partners. Together, we have worked with host governments as well as communities at the local level to create a resilient program that has evolved and adapted along with the explosive remnants of war threat.

Our CWD program has been flexible enough to continue performing and producing tangible results despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to seeing our programs running at full capacity again in the near future.

That’s all I’ve got as far as an overview of the report. Now Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Stan Brown and I will be happy to take your questions, mainly him. (Laughter.)

**MR PRICE:** Matt, do you want to go ahead?

**QUESTION:** Yeah, please. So last – and I’m sure you’re prepared for this, so I’ll expect a fairly concise recitation of whatever talking points you have down there.

**MR PRICE:** Are you saying we’re predictable?

**QUESTION:** I’m saying that what you’re going to say is predictable. (Laughter.)

**MR BROWN:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** So last year, the former administration rescinded the landmine policy as it relates to the Ottawa Treaty, and I just want to know if you guys are considering reinstating what that policy had been. And I’m familiar with what it was before and what it is now. Are you going back to that old policy, or are you going to stick with it?

**MR BROWN:** So right now, that policy is in effect, as you well know, and we haven’t had any discussions yet in the administration on changing the policy. So basically, it removed the geographic restriction of Korea and now geographic commanders can decide the use of land mines, which is a pretty high bar. So no decision has been made and no study has been done yet.

**QUESTION:** Is this something the administration is looking into? Is it prepared to review or what? Where does it stand? Or is it not an – is it not a priority right now?

**MR BROWN:** It has not been —

**QUESTION:** Because this is a long book, which 72 pages —

**MR BROWN:** Correct.

**QUESTION:** — including the back cover, which your colleague mentioned, about the problem that this

**MR BROWN:** Right. No, I understand. So the United States will continue to be the largest donor. As you say – it talked about the book – we've donated 4 billion since 1993 to 100 countries. We continue to be the larger donor to this effort and have impacted countries – 49 countries around the world. I'm sure there'll be a discussion on this, but we haven't started that discussion yet.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. Egypt is listed as one of the most contaminated countries with land mines despite the fact that the last war they had was in 1973. Why is that – why does it continue to be such a daunting task? I mean, there are something like 23,000 – maybe 25,000 mines and so on, despite these treaties, despite U.S. involvement.

**MR BROWN:** Right. So the process of removing land mines is – and if you look through the publication, you'll see the work is very much done by individuals from the local communities. It's very intensive. It takes a long time. It may vary from anything from a requirement for the host country to want to remove them, a request for assistance if they need assistance to move them, as well as looking at it from the type of devices, the type of geography, vegetation, and otherwise, and the tools that are needed to remove those things. So we are still removing ordnance from World War II in the Pacific Islands. And you'd think that, that would be done by now, but it's – it takes a long time, and it's very painstaking to do so.

**QUESTION:** Could they be banned? Could you envision a future without land mines? I mean, considering they're a very cheap weapon.

**MR BROWN:** One hundred sixty-four countries have signed up to the Ottawa Convention Ban. The United States has not, I think as Matt has pointed out here. And – owing to our commitment to Korea under the last administration was where the restriction rest, or the requirements rest. And currently the Department of Defense owns the policy. So I would defer you to them for the operational reasons why they would still need them.

**MR PRICE:** Yeah, Conor.

**QUESTION:** Could you speak to U.S.-sponsored programming in Syria and whether or not this administration shares the view of the previous administration that such stabilization programs should be the job of other countries in the region and not the U.S. Government?

**MR BROWN:** Syria specifically is under review as far as what kind of assistance we might add there. We have provided the UN – I think it was a million dollars – for mostly risk education in regards to Syria. Prior to that, we did have extensive clearance operations on the ground basically around IEDs to clear the critical infrastructure and to provide for populations going back to Syria. That kind of work still continues on in Iraq after ISIS's departure and clearing about 500, I guess, critical infrastructure type facilities there. So we're still doing the work that has been, I guess, characterized as stabilization in some of these areas immediately after conflict and when conflict's over.

**MR PRICE:** Any final questions? Okay. Gentlemen, thank you very much.

**MR BROWN:** Thank you.

**MR BETTS:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Congratulations on the rollout. Do you have a question for them?

**QUESTION:** No. No, for you.

**MR PRICE:** Oh, okay. (Laughter.)

**MR BROWN:** He's staying. He's staying.

**QUESTION:** Well, I would like to congratulate you on this very glossy book.

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** This is very nice.

**MR BETTS:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Hopefully, you'll be able to —

**QUESTION:** Well, let's see. I'll have to delve into the content to see.

**MR PRICE:** Exactly.

(Laughter.)

**MR BROWN:** Well, thank you.

**MR BETTS:** Yeah, I think it has contact information if you have other questions.

**QUESTION:** Excellent. Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you both very much. Congratulations.

**QUESTION:** Ned, do you have a topper?

**MR PRICE:** The only topper I had was what I delivered at first.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Can I go ahead?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Sure.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Sorry. Thank you. I just got back from holiday and very keen, clearly.

**MR PRICE:** Well, welcome back, I should say.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thanks. Just wanted to ask about Ukraine. So I just want to ask very clearly: What is the U.S. assessment on Russian troop movements near the eastern Donbas region in Ukraine? Do you believe Russia is getting ready for a fresh offensive? And what is the United States prepared to stop that? President Biden said — offered his unwavering support. In what form will that be?

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm. Well, it's not my job to speak to what might be motivating the Russians. It is my job to speak to what the United States Government is doing about it. And let me say very clearly, as I did last week, that we are concerned by recent escalating Russian aggressions in eastern Ukraine, including the credible reports that have been emanating about Russian troop movements on Ukraine's borders and occupied Crimea. The movements were, of course, preceded by violations of the mid-2020 – the July 2020 – ceasefire that led the deaths of four Ukrainian soldiers last month on March 26th, I believe it was, and the wounding of two other Ukrainian personnel. Russia's destabilizing actions undermine the de-escalation intentions achieved through the OSCE-brokered agreement of July of last year.

In addition to our reassurances to Ukrainian officials, we're discussing our concerns about this increase in tensions and ceasefire violations and regional tensions with NATO allies, of course. And the other week in Brussels, this was a broad topic of discussions.

We have asked Russia for an explanation of these provocations, but most importantly what we have signaled directly with our Ukrainian partners is a message of reassurance. You saw that in the readout that President Biden had of his call with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine. Of course, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke with the Head of the Presidential Office Andriy Yermak last week as well, Secretary Blinken in this building spoke with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba, and Secretary Austin spoke with Defense Minister Andrii Taran, and I believe the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff also spoke with his counterpart.

So at the highest levels of government, literally, across multiple institutions, we have sent that message very clearly to our Ukrainian counterparts, and implicitly to the Russians as well, that we stand by Kyiv, we stand by our partner, Ukraine, in the face of this intimidation and aggression.

**QUESTION:** Can I have just a follow-up on that? Can I just ask you once again? I mean, do you believe that this build-up on the Russian side of the border, on Russian territory, is a provocation in that you think it's some kind of build-up for an invasion? Or is it – do you have a – do you just have an objection to Russia moving its troops around inside of its own territory?

**MR PRICE:** What we certainly have an objection to, and what certainly is a cause for concern for us, is Russia's escalating aggression in eastern Ukraine – including, as I mentioned, the troop movements on Ukraine's borders and occupied Crimea.

**QUESTION:** Okay, but wait —

**MR PRICE:** But now let me just say I will leave it to Moscow to speak to what it is they may be in the process of doing, any signals they want to send. But I will say that the United States would certainly be concerned by any effort on the part of Moscow – whether it is within Russian territory, or within sovereign Ukraine – to intimidate our partner, Ukraine.

**QUESTION:** Okay, fair enough. So you think – you believe that their troop movements, Russian troop movements that are happening inside of Russia, are an attempt to intimidate Ukraine?

**MR PRICE:** I said we would be concerned by attempts on the —

**QUESTION:** I'm asking you whether you think that it is or not.

**MR PRICE:** This involves assessments that are in many cases going to be undergirded by non-public information. So I wouldn't want to speak from here —

**QUESTION:** Well, then —

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't know. My point is I wouldn't want to —

**QUESTION:** But you are speaking from here. So —

**MR PRICE:** No, I am speaking from here about our policy concerns.

**QUESTION:** Okay, fine.

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't want to speak from here about what it is that Russia may be attempting to do or attempting to signal.

**QUESTION:** I understand —

**MR PRICE:** I will say that if the implication of this is intimidation —

**QUESTION:** If —

**MR PRICE:** — intimidation of our Ukrainian partners —

**QUESTION:** Yes, but is it? Is that your assessment, that it is intimidation? Or is it just a country moving troops inside its own borders? Which you do, which China does, which Kenya does, which Brazil does. I mean —

**MR PRICE:** I think you are throwing a lot of apples and oranges together with this. I think —

**QUESTION:** No, I'm just trying to find out if you think that Russia moving its own troops inside its own territory is intimidation towards Ukraine, I mean, fine. But say that, don't just say "If it is, then we would have a problem with it."

**MR PRICE:** Obviously, there is a history here that goes back to 2014 —

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MR PRICE:** — and even before that.

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MR PRICE:** And so I think that is relevant context when we talk about, and when we think about, and when we respond on a policy basis to what we are currently seeing in eastern Ukraine, in occupied Crimea, and within Russia itself. Of course, the Russians have for quite some time sought to intimidate and to bully their neighbors —

**QUESTION:** I am not doubting that. I just want to know — I just want to know if you think that these specific troop movements that you've been talking about for the last ten days, or week now, you think that those are intended to be intimidation.

**MR PRICE:** Well, the message we are sending to Ukraine is one of reassurance. And you have heard that at the highest levels. The United States continues to stand by our Ukrainian partners. We will do that without exception.

Other questions — yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I move to Jordan, please?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Does the State Department have clear picture now of what's going on in Jordan? I mean what the Jordanian officials described as plot to destabilize the country.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would leave it to our Jordanian partners to speak to what they may have found. What I will say is that we are following the situation in Jordan closely – we made that very clear over the weekend – and we have been in touch with Jordanian officials because Jordan, of course, is a strategic partner of the United States. We value immensely our relationship and King Abdullah II's leadership. We value his integrity, his vision. And as we said over the weekend very clearly, that the king has our full support. And that is in large part because Jordan is a close friend. It is an invaluable strategic partner. And it's an indispensable partner on a range of shared concerns and challenges throughout the region. The United States and Jordan, of course, share the mutual goal of a negotiated two-state solution in which Israel lives in peace and security alongside a viable Palestinian state. We support jointly an end to violent extremism that threatens security in the region, including within the kingdom.

And more broadly as well, of course, Jordan has also been an invaluable partner in addressing virtually all of the highest-priority challenges facing the region, including by helping to mitigate the humanitarian crisis caused by the Syrian conflict. Jordan has helped to make progress towards a political transition in Syria, ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS as well. We've said before that we value and appreciate the Jordanians' extraordinary assistance to the Syrian people, including by hosting so many refugees. And we remain committed to working with Jordan to address the threat posed by ISIS and also supporting Jordan in any threats to its borders, including those posed by ISIS as well.

**QUESTION:** And I have another question on Iran. On the eve of Vienna talks tomorrow, I'm wondering who is going to participate from the American officials. Some media reports revealed that the goal is to achieve two separate deals with the U.S. and Iran agreeing on certain steps with clear timetables, so can you confirm that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as we announced last week, as we announced on Friday, we have agreed to participate in talks with our European, Russian, and Chinese partners, the P5+1 partners who are – who remain party to the JCPOA to discuss the issues involved in a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, "mutual" meaning on the part of Iran and on the part of the United States. That has long been the proposition on the table. I can confirm that Special Envoy for Iran Rob Malley will lead the U.S. delegation to Vienna. These talks are scheduled to start tomorrow.

I would also hasten to add, as we did late last week, that we don't underestimate the scale of the challenges ahead. These are early days. We don't anticipate an early or immediate breakthrough, as these discussions we fully expect will be difficult. But we do believe that these discussions with our partners and, in turn, our partners with Iran is a healthy step forward.

Now, you asked about how these talks will be structured and what they'll be predicated on. They'll be structured around working groups that our European – that the EU is going to form with the remaining parties to the JCPOA, and that includes Iran. The primary issues to be discussed are actually quite simple. They're, on the one hand, the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take in order for Iran to return to that desired end state – and again, that is an end state of compliance with the JCPOA – and the sanctions relief steps that the United States would need to take in order for us to return to compliance with the JCPOA. So again, that is what we aspire over the longer term to achieve, that mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. It's precisely what President Biden – then-candidate Biden – laid out on the campaign trail.

Now, we don't anticipate at present that there will be direct talks with Iran, though, of course, we remain open to them. And so we'll have to see how things go starting early this week.

**QUESTION:** I have —

**MR PRICE:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** I have two quick follow-ups on that. There was a *Los Angeles Times* report quoting some Pentagon officials saying that the tensions are so severe that it might not be possible to delay further without a deal, a deal restricting the Iranian nuclear program. And they are warning of a confrontation in case there is no deal. And also I — like, my question is: How urgent does the U.S. Government feel that it is necessary to reach a deal in the coming two months? And also, a Western official was quoted as saying that the aim during those talks is to reach an agreement within two months. Do you share this hope?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, I'm not going to put a timeframe on it. We are conducting principled diplomacy. We are conducting that principled diplomacy in close coordination with our European allies, with whom we discussed the broad challenge of Iran the other week in Brussels. Of course, we do have some area of tactical alignment in this case with China and Russia as well. So the diplomacy will move at the speed that we deem it appropriate to move at.

To your question about the urgency of this challenge, look, there's no denying that we are approaching this with urgency. And we are doing so because even in recent weeks, Iran has continued to take steps away from the JCPOA, and our concern with that is that over time, Iran's — the so-called breakout time has continued to shrink.

Just a reminder that at the end of the Obama administration, the Obama-Biden administration, that breakout time when the JCPOA was fully in effect was 12 months. That breakout time into the last administration, the Trump administration, was 12 months when the JCPOA was fully in effect, with the — with both sides having distanced itself from the JCPOA and Iran taking these steps, including the steps that have been reported on in recent days.

That time has dwindled. Our goal is, of course, to see to it that that breakout time is as long as possible. Our overarching goal is to ensure that Iran's nuclear program is permanently and verifiably constrained, and that on a permanent and verifiable basis, Iran will not be able to obtain a nuclear weapon. That is not just our goal. That is the goal of our remaining partners in the P5+1, it is the goal of our partners and allies in the region, and it's certainly a goal that has broad support within Congress as well. So we are not seeking to drag these talks on any longer than necessary, but we're also not going to cut corners given that — given the profound stakes that are at play here.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Well — but hold on a second, just on — your remaining partners in the P5+1? You guys are — no —

**MR PRICE:** The — the participants in the P5+1 and the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, well — you have no partners in the —

**MR PRICE:** We — well, we are a — we're still in the P5. Let's not —

**QUESTION:** Well, yes, but not in the deal. So can you say, though, that you are not prepared to lift any sanctions or ease any sanctions that are non-nuclear related?



**MR PRICE:** Well, I can be —

**QUESTION:** As part of this —

**MR PRICE:** I —

**QUESTION:** Because there are plenty of sanctions, as you know —

**MR PRICE:** Right.

**QUESTION:** — there are plenty of sciences that are non-nuclear related, that are not contingent on the deal.

**MR PRICE:** Right. What I can say is that we certainly will not entertain unilateral gestures or concessions to get Iran – to induce Iran to a better place. Our goal at these talks in Vienna, again, is to set the stage for that mutual return to compliance. The original formulation is one that still holds today. It's the limited lifting of sanctions, nuclear sanctions, in return for permanent and verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear program.

**QUESTION:** Okay. But when you say —

**MR PRICE:** Now, I'm not going to preview from here what that look – might look like on our side, but I think that formulation is one that the JCPOA remains in existence. It is one that the JCPOA itself continues to call for. So I would imagine that as we look at the steps that we need to take, we'll be guided by the original formulation that was in the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So when you say you're not prepared to make any inducements, that means no non-nuclear sanctions relief?

**MR PRICE:** I will leave it to the negotiators to detail positions.

**QUESTION:** Well, that's not going to – that's going to be a problem. If you say that you're prepared to lift non-nuclear sanctions —

**MR PRICE:** I am not. I am absolutely not saying that. I am saying that our —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, you're saying you're going to leave it to the negotiators, so it seems it might be open.

**MR PRICE:** I am saying that our negotiators will go to – are headed to Vienna to take part in talks with our partners, starting tomorrow, to discuss how Iran might get back into compliance with the JCPOA. And Iran getting back into compliance would mean the strict and verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear program, permanent limits on Iran's nuclear program. They will also discuss the sanctions relief that the United States would be prepared to take. And, of course, we'll continue to be guided by what the original JCPOA called for.

**MR PRICE:** Which is nuclear sanctions, so I, again – yeah.

**QUESTION:** All right.

**MR PRICE:** Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. Couple questions on the Palestinian issue. Couple —

**MR PRICE:** Anything else on Iran before we move one?

**QUESTION:** Can I ask one more thing on Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Sure, yeah.

**QUESTION:** So I'm just wondering what a productive result from these meetings would look like. Is it that the U.S. writes down exactly what concessions they're willing to give and Iran writes down what nuclear concessions they're willing to give? Like, what should we be looking for at the end of this?

**MR PRICE:** I think we are looking for a better understanding of how we might arrive at that desired end state, and that desired end state remains compliance for compliance. Of course, we haven't had direct discussions with the Iranians about this. We'll be working indirectly through primarily our European partners on this. But if we come away from Vienna with a better understanding of how both sides can get there and – the result of which would be how Iran could move back into compliance with the JCPOA and what we would need to do to see to that. I think that's what we're after.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. A couple days ago, Secretary Blinken spoke to his Israeli counterpart, Ashkenazi, but he has not – maybe for the third time. I think this was his third conversation with him as Secretary of State. He has not spoken to any Palestinian leader. Why is that? Why has he not reached out to Dr. Riyad Maliki, the foreign minister of the Palestinian Authority?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have been clear that it is a priority of this administration to engage the Palestinian people as well as the Palestinian leadership. And we've talked about resuming assistance to the Palestinian people and the priority that we attach to it. Just the other week, of course, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced \$15 million in humanitarian assistance to provide relief to Palestinians throughout the West Bank and Gaza who are currently suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. We will continue to provide assistance to benefit all Palestinians, including refugees, and we're determining at the moment how to move forward with that.

Look, I would fully expect that there will continue to be engagement with the Palestinian people and Palestinian leaders as well.

**QUESTION:** Are you engaging with any Palestinians? I mean, what level of engagement do you have right now?

**MR PRICE:** Yeah, I – we typically don't read out conversations at the working level, but certainly we are prepared to continue to engage the Palestinians, including Palestinian government officials, on ways we can provide assistance to the Palestinian people.

**QUESTION:** So during the campaign, there were unambiguous statements by – by candidate Joe Biden then about resuming aid to UNRWA and so on. We have not heard anything since the administration has assumed office, and —

**MR PRICE:** Well, that's not true. That's not true. Of course, you heard from —

**QUESTION:** On UNRWA. On UNRWA. I know that there's been aid for – to combat COVID. There's probably been an increase in aid to the PA. But on UNRWA, there has not been any clear messaging.

**MR PRICE:** It is certainly true – it remains true today – that we intend to provide assistance that will benefit all Palestinians. We've – Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield spoke to that the other week, and

that includes, of course, refugees. We're in the process —

**QUESTION:** You keep saying “refugees,” but UNRWA is —

**MR PRICE:** We are in the process of determining how exactly we'll move forward on providing that assistance, of course, at all times consistent with U.S. law.

**QUESTION:** Will you resume aid to UNRWA?

**MR PRICE:** We are looking at the ways we can provide assistance to Palestinians, including Palestinian refugees.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask three questions where — they're yes or no, very easy — on this issue?

**MR PRICE:** These are — yes-no questions are usually not the easy ones.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Oh, yeah, they are. You said that you're not going to move the embassy out of Jerusalem, but does this administration still regard Jerusalem as Israel's capital and do you still believe that a two-state solution would result in Palestinians having a capital in East Jerusalem?

**MR PRICE:** These are not yes-no questions, Matt, just to clarify.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but it's a — yes or no. I mean —

**MR PRICE:** There has been no change on our position in Jerusalem, and, of course, Jerusalem is a final status issue that is to be negotiated by the two parties.

**QUESTION:** But the previous administration declared — said that Jerusalem is Israel's capital. And that —

**MR PRICE:** That's — and I said there's been no change on our position in Jerusalem.

**QUESTION:** There's been no change? Okay. And on the Golan?

**MR PRICE:** There has been no change in our position.

**QUESTION:** And then back on Jerusalem, on the passport issue?

**MR PRICE:** There has been no change in our position.

**QUESTION:** There's no — is there any thought of changing it?

**MR PRICE:** We, of course, don't discuss internal deliberations, but there's been no change in our position.

**QUESTION:** But you know what I'm talking about?

**MR PRICE:** I do know what you're talking about.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** And I will just note we unfortunately need to conclude here in the next few minutes given the event with the Secretary, but yes.

**QUESTION:** A couple questions on Ethiopia.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Last – at the end of last week, Amnesty International, CNN, BBC verified videos that they say show a massacre by Ethiopian forces. Do you have any response to that? And is it something that the U.S. Government has confirmed as well?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we are gravely concerned by reported human rights violations, abuses, and atrocities in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. We strongly condemn the killings, the forced removals, the sexual assaults, the other human rights abuses that multiple organizations have reported.

**QUESTION:** But any word on whether or not you believe Ethiopian forces have conducted these particular massacres?

**MR PRICE:** We are, of course, looking into these reports. We have taken close note of them and we'll continue to pay close attention.

**QUESTION:** And then on Saturday, the Ethiopian foreign ministry said that Eritrean forces have begun to leave the country. Is that something that you've been able to verify as well?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have taken note of the – what we heard from Ethiopian authorities. We are encouraged by the prime minister's announcement that the Government of the State of Eritrea has agreed to withdraw its forces from Ethiopia. The immediate and complete withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray will be an important step forward in de-escalating the conflict and restoring peace and regional stability.

**QUESTION:** But you haven't seen whether or not they've started that process?

**MR PRICE:** We've – we've – encouraged by that report and we'll be paying close attention, of course.

**QUESTION:** Can I – just one other quick question on the special envoy for the Northern Triangle's visit. He's traveling to Guatemala and El Salvador but not to Honduras. And so far at least, Vice President Harris hasn't called President Juan Orlando Hernandez of Honduras as well. Are you trying to isolate or send some sort of message to his government given the allegations against him by U.S. federal prosecutors?

**MR PRICE:** I fully expect that we will be engaging with appropriate Honduran Government officials, including upon their return. There will be a meeting, I expect, with the Honduran foreign minister, who will be visiting the United States upon their return. As we've said before, we are deeply concerned about the challenges that the people of Honduras are facing right now –the effects of COVID-19 compounded by the impacts of not one but two hurricanes. It's led to a 15 percent economic contraction as well as food insecurity.

We continue to stand with the Honduran people as they confront these challenges. We will continue to stand with the Honduran people and civil society and those members of the Honduran Government that are committed to fighting corruption with us, because we know that our goal has to be to address these root causes, these root drivers of migration if we're going to find a long-term solution to this challenge.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Does President Hernandez present one of those challenges?

**MR PRICE:** Hearing a lot of things coming at me.

**QUESTION:** Sorry. Does President Hernandez present one of those challenges?

**MR PRICE:** I will say that corruption continues to be a challenge when it comes to our relationship with Honduras. We are committed to partnering with the Honduran people, with elements of Honduran civil society, and with those in the Honduran Government that are committed to working with us to root out the corruption that has become really endemic to that country.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. My question is regarding El Salvador, too. President Bukele announced a couple of hours ago a series of donations that it will receive from the Chinese Government. And on the other hand, in recent days we have seen evident distancing of the Salvadoran Government with the Biden administration. We even saw President Bukele insult and attack Congresswoman Norma Torres, and he also asked Latina community do not vote for her in California.

What is the position of the Biden administration regarding this relationship between El Salvador and China? And China's approach with the Northern Triangle region represent any concerns for you?

And the other question is regarding the combat to the root causes on immigration. President Bukele said that he will veto a law that was approved last week for the National Assembly to punish all the smugglers and in Central America. So what's the position?

**MR PRICE:** To punish all the – I'm sorry, I didn't hear.

**QUESTION:** The traffickers —

**MR PRICE:** Traffickers.

**QUESTION:** — and coyotes, yeah, in Central America.

**MR PRICE:** Well, Secretary Blinken spoke to this broad challenge the other week in his remarks from Brussels, and he said at the time that it would not be the policy of the United States to force our partners to choose between the United States and China. We will offer a partnership that works in our interests and also that works towards the interests of our partners, including our partners in our own hemisphere, the Western Hemisphere.

When it comes to El Salvador, we enjoy a strong relation – relationship with El Salvador and its people. We'll continue to work closely with our Salvadorian partners to address the challenges we've talked about in this broader realm. That includes irregular migration, it includes corruption, it includes impunity, governance, respect for human rights, economic opportunity, and security as well.

We'll also focus on preserving democratic standards, and we look forward to President Bukele to restore strong separation of powers where they've been eroded and demonstrate his government's commitment to transparency and accountability to the people of El Salvador. We'll continue to emphasize to political leaders the importance of appropriate democratic institutions as we partner with them. And, of course, we'll also engage with civil society groups and to promote freedom of expression and, independent media, and the protection of journalists. Our goal in all of this is to create the conditions where the people of El Salvador can live healthy, successful lives and to thrive. We value this relationship. We value this partnership. It's a partnership that is not only in the interests of the people of El Salvador, but it's also in the interests of the American people.

I'm sorry we have to cut this short, but —

**QUESTION:** Ahead of the 2:00 p.m. coronavirus conference, do you have an estimate on how many State Department staff globally, including local staff, have been vaccinated?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have that number in front of me. What I can say is that we will soon have an update on our efforts to provide the vaccine to embassies and missions worldwide. I think we have made tremendous progress. As you know, some 80 percent of our vaccine supply has been sent to missions and to embassies around the world, and I think within weeks we will be in a position to say that all of our officials around the world have received access to the vaccine.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on Yemen?

**QUESTION:** Can we get back here?

**QUESTION:** On Iran, how long —

**MR PRICE:** Sorry, we haven't gotten to the back.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. Following the Human Rights Report detailing egregious abuses in China, do you think that American companies should re-evaluate their participation in the Olympics next year in a sponsorship role?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, I will — the Human Rights Report was quite strong when it came to what we are seeing in China, what we have seen in China. It, of course, called what has transpired, what is transpiring in Xinjiang, genocide. I'm not going to offer advice to U.S. companies from this podium.

What I can say is that when it comes to the issues of — the issue of the Beijing Olympics, that's something that we're consulting closely with our allies and partners. We are consulting closely with them not only on that specific issue but also on the broader issue of China's human rights record. You saw a concrete manifestation of that when together with our Canadian, Brits, and European partners we rolled out sanctions in recent days targeting those who have been responsible for some of the most egregious abuses of human rights when it comes to Xinjiang.

So we'll coordinate with them very closely on the question of the Olympics, but I don't have an update to share at this time.

**QUESTION:** On Yemen, please. Is there any update about the diplomatic efforts about Yemen, and when would the Special Envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking go back again to the region?

And on Afghanistan, there are some reports that the upcoming Istanbul — the conference will begin April 16 and would last 10 days. Do you confirm the date and the —

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to confirm anything about an upcoming conference in Turkey vis-a-vis Afghanistan.

Very quickly and finally on Yemen, we released statements last week to note that Special Envoy Lenderking returned on March 31st, late last week, from his travel to Saudi Arabia and Oman. He held productive meetings with Omani, Saudi, and Yemeni senior leaders in coordination with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths. Special Envoy Lenderking and the UN special envoy continue to work side by side to help bring about a ceasefire, inclusive political talks, as well as a durable agreement that addresses the needs of all Yemenis.

They also discussed the dire humanitarian needs for the people of Yemen. To that end we — and I said this the other week — we welcomed the Saudis' announcement last week to provide more than \$400 million — I believe it was \$422 million — in support for fuel products in Yemen. That, of course, is

in addition to what we announced in the not-too-distant past regarding our own support to the people of Yemen as well.

Thank you all very much. We have to rush up to get to the Secretary, but we'll do this again tomorrow, of course.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:50 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 6, 2021](#)

04/06/2021 06:39 PM EDT

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:08 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon.

**QUESTION:** Good afternoon.

**MR PRICE:** I actually do not have anything at the top, so ready to dive right in.

**QUESTION:** Oh really? Wow. Okay, let's start with the most obvious, I think: Iran. So I presume that you've gotten an update from Vienna?

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** Can you tell us what — well, if you have, can you tell us what it is? And if you haven't, can you tell us why you haven't gotten an update?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Matt, the discussions just commenced today at 2:30 p.m. local time in Vienna. It's my understanding that they were scheduled to go until just about now. So they are still underway. I think you have probably seen what one of the European officials described as a "constructive" meeting of the joint commission. Of course, Special Envoy Rob Malley is representing the United States in these discussions.

I think what I said yesterday also remains true. These are early days; we don't anticipate any immediate breakthrough. We don't anticipate being in a position to provide any sort of live commentary on these discussions. We know these will be tough talks. We know there will be difficult discussions ahead. But again, this is a healthy step forward. It's a healthy step forward because it allows us to move forward with what we see is — as the only path to achieve what President Biden — and as a candidate, Candidate Biden — laid out, and that is a mutual return to compliance: "mutual" meaning Iran returning to its commitments under the 2015 JCPOA, those commitments spelling out the parameters under which Iran is permanently and verifiably prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon; and on our side, what we might need to do to return to compliance ourselves.

Those are the two working groups. Those are the two issues that are on the table. The shorthand is "compliance for compliance." There are also — there are obviously many more complexities involved in that, but that will be the task ahead for the — our partners, the Europeans, as well as the Russians and the Chinese, in their talks with the Iranians going forward.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Well, you said you weren't going to be offering any live commentary, but in fact, you offered some live commentary, even if it wasn't even your own. It was a European official's commentary. Would you agree with the European official? I assume this is Mora, or —



**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Would you agree with that assessment that this whatever it was that has happened so far has been constructive?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we weren't a part of that joint commission meeting, obviously. I'm just relaying what Mr. Mora said in his statement. But certainly as a step forward, as a broad step forward, these discussions in Vienna, even though we are not meeting directly with the Iranians, as we have said, it is a welcome step, it is a constructive step, it is a potentially useful step as we seek to determine what it is that the Iranians are prepared to do to return to compliance with the stringent limitations under the 2015 deal, and as a result, what we might need to do to return to compliance ourselves.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So what interaction do you expect the U.S. Envoy Malley and the rest of – other U.S. officials to have? If they weren't – they weren't, obviously, in this meeting of the joint commission. You quoted a European as saying it was constructive. But do they even need to be there right now? What are they doing? What —

**MR PRICE:** Well, they do need to be there, because there are, as I said before —

**QUESTION:** What are they – when do they get involved in whatever talks there's going to be?

**MR PRICE:** Well, so they're involved on a daily basis. So as we have said, we do not at this point anticipate direct talks between the United States and Iran. We are open to them because we are open to diplomacy. We know that we can engage in clear-eyed, principled diplomacy even with a country like Iran, with whom, of course, we have tremendous and profound differences.

But the Iranians want to do this indirectly. We are comfortable with that. So what we will be doing is engaging in discussions with our allies, principally our European allies, who, in turn, together with the Chinese and Russians, will be engaging directly with the Iranians. Our allies —

**QUESTION:** But have those started yet? Have they started engaging with their – with the Europeans?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it has started really since January 20th. That's the —

**QUESTION:** Well, today, in Vienna.

**MR PRICE:** That's been the —

**QUESTION:** No, come on, I'm not trying to be obtuse.

**MR PRICE:** No, no, no, I —

**QUESTION:** I mean, you're being obtuse.

**MR PRICE:** No, I just —

**QUESTION:** Wait, wait. Have they met? Have they – has there been – has Malley and the – have they and the Europeans actually sat down after this joint commission meeting, or are we still waiting for that? Is that going to happen tomorrow? Will it happen tonight?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me —

**QUESTION:** Are they going to go out and have wienerschnitzel and —

**MR PRICE:** Well, Vienna, as is much of Europe, is under stringent COVID conditions.

**QUESTION:** Yes. But I mean, is that going to happen today, or when?

**MR PRICE:** So I don't expect them to be going out into public to have discussions over drinks.

But what I will say – and I think this context is useful, because this has been the activity in which we have engaged since the very early days of this administration – we undertook intensive consultations with our allies, with our partners, and with members of Congress to explain to them what we might be prepared to do, and more to the point, what we sought to do to bring Iran back into compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal. Most recently – and we were just in Brussels with Secretary Blinken the other week when we had a meeting with our E3 partners – Iran, as I have said, was a primary topic of conversation. This was, in fact, the third meeting with the E3 that Secretary Blinken had had – not meeting but consultation because the first two were, of course, virtual.

But Iran has been a consistent topic of conversation with our allies. It's also been a topic of conversation with our partners. We have talked about Special Envoy Malley's engagement with the Russians and the Chinese, two of the original members of the P5+1 who were, of course, engaged in these talks, again, in Vienna.

So all that to say our European allies certainly are not going to be surprised by what they hear from us. The utility of this setting in Vienna is that there can be real-time interaction, albeit indirect, between the United States and, in turn, the Iranians with those messages ferried back and forth between – by our allies and partners.

So yes, we do see this as a constructive and certainly welcome step. And in the end, we hope that we are able to leave Vienna, return to the United States – our negotiating team, I should say – with a better understanding of a roadmap for how we get to that end state: mutual compliance; Iranian compliance with the deal, and how the United States might also resume its compliance with the deal.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** How difficult would it be to unwind the Trump sanctions given how many were layered on, especially the terrorist designation?

**MR PRICE:** Well, that will be one of the topics of conversation in Vienna, and in fact, it is the focus of one of the two working groups. Because again, one of the working groups is focused precisely on what the Iranians will need to do given the steps away from the Iran deal that they have taken since May of 2018. We have even yesterday and in recent weeks, of course, expressed our concern with those steps because of the implications they hold for Iran's nuclear program. It's precisely why we are approaching this challenge with a great degree of urgency.

So the primary issues that will be discussed are, as I said, the nuclear steps that Iran will need to take in order to return to its compliance with the JCPOA, and on the other hand the other working group will be focused on the sanctions relief steps that the United States will need to take in order to return to compliance with the JCPOA. And so precisely that is what we'll discuss in this context.

**QUESTION:** And in terms of the terror designation, what steps have to be taken to reverse that if and when Iran has complied? And one further question is: Do you agree with the commonly described position which Secretary Blinken himself has said in other interviews that Iran would be theoretically within months of having a nuclear weapon at the current state of their progress?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'm not going to get into any intelligence assessments. What I will say is to reiterate

what I said yesterday most recently, and that is a reminder that when the Iran deal was fully in effect – that is to say, from implementation day January of 2016 until 2018 – Iran’s breakout time was at 12 months. That was one of the primary objectives, one of the many virtues, of the Iran deal when Iran was in full compliance with the deal.

What that means is that if Iran made the strategic decision to pursue a nuclear weapon, if somehow Iran were able to evade the stringent verification and monitoring parameters associated with the deal, it would take them a full 12 months to produce the fissile material alone that would be required for a nuclear weapon. And of course, that doesn’t include the weaponization aspects of that activity.

Now that Iran has distanced itself from the deal, there are various estimates out there. Various public assessments have put Iran’s breakout time in the single digits, in a handful of months. To us, that is not acceptable. To us, our goal is, again, to ensure that that breakout time is as long as possible but more broadly to ensure that Iran is once again subject to a deal that will permanently and verifiably prevent Iran from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Now this takes me to another point. We have talked about mutual resumption of compliance with the JCPOA as a necessary but insufficient step, because we have also talked about, once we are there, working on what we are calling a longer and stronger deal, using the original JCPOA as the baseline for those discussions, but then not stopping there, because we have also made no secret of our other profound concerns with Iran’s behavior, Iran’s malign activity in the region. That includes its support for terrorism; it includes its ballistic missile programs; it includes the activities of its proxies. All of these are issues that not only the United States but also together with our allies and many of our partners that we seek to constrain. So that will be the broader effort here.

Now, what is on the table in Vienna today and over the next handful of days are those initial, indirect discussions about that first step. What Iran would need to do to resume compliance with the JCPOA and what the United States would need to do to resume its compliance with the JCPOA – that task alone won’t be easy; it won’t be simple. These talks will not be uncomplicated, but again, we are encouraged by the fact that they are taking place, because it is a necessary first step to get to that desired end state.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** And the terror designation, just very briefly?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, the second working group – one of two – is going to be focused on the steps the United States would need to undertake. Our – what we recognize is that we will need to provide sanctions relief – with – for sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA. But again, that’s why we have a working group focused on this, and I wouldn’t want to discuss it from here.

**QUESTION:** Wait. Consistent, not inconsistent.

**MR PRICE:** We need – we would need to provide sanctions relief for sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** Oh, no. Really? You – no, I think what the Iranians are looking for is an easing of sanctions that were lifted, consistent with the JCPOA.

**MR PRICE:** I think we’re saying the name thing.

**QUESTION:** I.e., nuclear sanctions.

**MR PRICE:** We're saying exactly the same thing.

**QUESTION:** All right.

**QUESTION:** Iran.

**MR PRICE:** Yes, Iran.

**QUESTION:** So you said a handful of days. There's going to be another meeting tomorrow and then the day after that? I mean, could you give us some idea of how long this presumably first round is? That's one. Two, since you're talking about a roadmap, does that suggest the possibility of simultaneous steps being taken towards compliance? And three, since the Iranians are still saying publicly the supreme leader's statement, which is that they want all sanctions lifted at once and not step by step, is that even something that's being considered on the table? I mean, is there some way you could work with that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Special Envoy Malley has spoken to this in recent days, and he has made the point that maximalist demands are not going to get us anywhere. The reason we are in Vienna is to discuss what those steps might look like to return to mutual compliance. Calls for the United States to take unilateral gestures or conciliatory overtures that are unmatched by the Iranians – I don't think that is constructive; we don't think that is constructive. And so we're focused and the team is focused in Vienna on what would be constructive, on what would be reasonable to achieve that desired end state of mutual compliance for compliance.

**QUESTION:** But in terms of the roadmap, does that suggest the possibility of simultaneous steps?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, I'm going to leave that to our negotiating team in Vienna to work that out with our European allies and our other partners. I think what we can essentially rule out are the maximalist demands that the United States do everything first and only in turn would Iran then act. I don't think anyone is under the impression that that would be a viable proposal. What we are looking forward to hearing – again, indirectly, via our European allies in the first instance – are constructive proposals for how we might get to that desired end state.

Now, in terms of what this might look like in the coming days, I think it is a fair expectation that Special Envoy Malley will be in Vienna for at least the better part of this week. I think – I am not sure that he has yet a return ticket in hand. I think his schedule is going to be somewhat flexible, as will the schedules of other members of our negotiating team here at the Department of State.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. On Iran's eastern neighbor Afghanistan, can you give us an update on where we stand on the peace process, what's going to happen after May 1st?

**QUESTION:** Can we stay in Iran, the nuclear —

**MR PRICE:** Let's take one or two more questions on Iran – on Afghanistan and – sorry. One or two more questions on Iran, and then we will go to Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Are you planning to achieve an agreement with the Iranians before the elections in June? And what kind of sanctions you will take off the table? And then when will you discuss the missile program and the activities – Iranian activities in the region, before you get back to the agreement or

after?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as we all know, there are elections upcoming in Iran in the coming months. The point remains, however, that we are not seeking to accelerate our diplomacy, nor are we seeking to stall our diplomacy. We are seeking to move in a manner that is consistent with our interests and in lockstep primarily with our European allies in this case. So again, these negotiations will take however long they will need to take, if we are able to reach that desired end state – again, that end state being compliance for compliance.

Now, in terms of the other phases of this – and I spoke of this in response to Andrea’s question before – but again, we do see this as a necessary but insufficient step, albeit an important early one, to seek to return to compliance with the JCPOA, consistent with Iran also doing so. The goal from there will be to build that longer and stronger agreement, building, using the JCPOA as a baseline. At that point, we also want to work very closely with our allies, with our partners, including our regional partners, to do all we can to seek to constrain in important ways the other areas of malign activity that we have spoken to, and that includes ballistic missiles, it includes support for terrorism, it includes support for regional proxies. But again, today in Vienna and this week in Vienna, our teams are focused on that first step, an important first step, because it is necessary – if not sufficient – to what we want to do over the longer term.

One more question on Iran, and then we’ll move on.

**QUESTION:** Ned, does the administration believe that Russia and China have a constructive role to play here? Or are you concerned that they may play a sort of spoiler role, given evidence, for example, that China is ramping up its purchases of Iranian oil and undermining the sanctions that are in place?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we do have alignment in many areas when it comes to our interests with those of Moscow and Beijing. It is certainly not in the interests of Moscow, it is certainly not in the interests of Beijing for Iran to be on the path to a nuclear weapon or for Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon, of course.

Now, what we have said when it comes to sanctions enforcement is that right now all of our sanctions, of course, remain in effect. We will continue to work with our partners and our allies around the world to enforce that sanctions regime. If we get to a point by mutual agreement where it is appropriate for us to remove sanctions, we will do that in the context of Iran also resuming compliance with the deal.

But obviously, we’re not there yet, and I think principally and strategically this is an area where we do have aligned interests with Moscow and aligned interests with Beijing. They were original members of the P5+1. They have sought to uphold the JCPOA, and we do see them as partners in this fairly narrow effort.

Moving on. Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan, just 24 days are left for the May 1 deadline. Can you tell us what’s going to happen after that? Where are we on the Afghanistan peace process?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I don’t have an update for you in terms of where we are. But I think the broader context here is also useful, because again, President Biden has been clear that he wants to see an end to our military presence in Afghanistan. As he has said, as Secretary Blinken has said, as Secretary Austin has said, as others have said, we are committed to bringing a responsible end to the conflict, removing our troops from harm’s way, and ensuring – importantly – that Afghanistan can never again become a platform, become a launch pad, for terrorist attacks that would threaten the

United States or our allies.

We heard this in Brussels the other week, that there is a good deal of agreement with our NATO allies on the path forward when it comes to Afghanistan. The international community is similarly united in the belief that there isn't a military solution to what we have long faced in Afghanistan. It's a conflict that has to end through a political solution and a comprehensive ceasefire, processes that are at their core Afghan-owned and Afghan-led.

So, of course, I don't have any updates to share for you now in terms of where the President may be. He has obviously spoken to this in recent days, in the context of the impending May 1 deadline. What I can say is that any removal of troops, any withdrawal plan, would be orderly and it would, of course, be informed by those consultations with our partners and allies.

**QUESTION:** And Mr. Khalilzad has been talking to the Taliban for more than two years now and he has continued in his position in the new administration. Do you see a commitment or honesty, sincerity from the Taliban's side towards the peace process or just – they are just dilly-dallying as they have done in the past?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we know that there is no military solution to this. We know that a comprehensive ceasefire and a political settlement has to be arrived at through diplomacy, and that is precisely what Ambassador Khalilzad, what his team is engaged in. He is currently in Doha, meeting with both the Islamic Republic and the Taliban negotiating teams to push for farther – further progress in negotiations and a reduction in that violence. He's also meeting with other international partners to explore how it might be that the international community can best help the two negotiating sides accelerate that process.

Now, we have also said in recent days that levels of violence are unacceptably high, and we have consistently called on the Taliban to reduce those levels of violence. And that is precisely because we want to create conditions that are conducive to those peace negotiations moving forward in a way that is constructive and in a way that is promising. The extended Troika – the United States together with Russia, China, and Japan – released a statement – it's now last month – calling for the Taliban not to launch a spring offensive and to avoid further casualties, helping to create, again, an environment that is, in fact, conducive to a negotiated political settlement that Ambassador Khalilzad, his team, and our partners are seeking to achieve.

**QUESTION:** Staying in the region, last week, Pakistan – senior ministry in the Pakistan has asked for import of sugar and cotton from India, who is the – Pakistani cabinet declined it. What do – do you have any views on that?

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't want to comment on that specifically. What I would say is that we continue to support direct dialogue between India and Pakistan on issues of concern.

**QUESTION:** Well, I have one more question, follow-up from what the Secretary did yesterday upstairs on COVID-19 vaccine. Several countries led by India and South Africa have reached out to WTO for TRIPS waiver of certain COVID-19 vaccines. I think 60 congressmen here in the U.S. have also written a letter to President in support of that cause. The commerce or the companies here are opposing that, but what is the administration's positions or the State Department position on it? Because it's going to be a key element in what Secretary of State said yesterday, that everyone has to be vaccinated at a affordable cost.

**MR PRICE:** Yeah. Well, what the Secretary said yesterday, and what President Biden has consistently said, is that our first priority as the American Government is to take care of the American people. We are a country, of course, that has suffered tremendously from the toll of the pandemic.

We have suffered more deaths in this country than any other country around the world. And given the unpredictability of this virus, the surges, the spikes that we have seen here, the mutations that we can continue to see take hold, not only here but around the world, we need to be prepared for a variety of scenarios. And that is precisely what we are doing.

At the same time, as we increase confidence that we have enough vaccine for the American people, that we have accounted for various scenarios, we will look at options for sharing doses globally, including through Gavi and the COVAX Advance Market Commitment or the AMC. But we already have taken important steps to demonstrate the sort of international leadership that Secretary Blinken referred to yesterday. His point is a profoundly important one, and that is principally that in order for us to be able to fully protect the American people, we must address COVID not only here in the United States, but also around the world. Because as long as the virus is circulating in the wild, as long as the virus is not controlled anywhere, it has the potential to mutate. It has the potential to come back to this country.

And so that is why from literally day one, we have demonstrated our commitment to working closely with the international community. We, of course, re-engaged the WHO on President Biden's first day in office. We committed to providing the most funding to COVAX of any other country in the world – \$2 billion initially, another 2 billion over time. We have, of course, spoken about the arrangement that we have reached with our Mexican and Canadian partners. And we announced with our Quad partners that we're working to achieve expanded manufacturing of safe and effective vaccines at facilities in India. This in turn produced a boost production globally, so this – we will continue to be engaged on the international stage just as we continue to focus on a safe and effective distribution of the vaccine here at home.

**QUESTION:** But what is going to be U.S. position at WTO where India and South Africa are asking for TRIPS waiver of COVID-19 vaccines?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I don't have anything specific to preview or to add on our position at the WHO. I think what is – it is safe to say that the President is deeply focused, Secretary Blinken is deeply focused, on the issue of expanding global vaccine manufacturing and delivery, which, of course, will be critical to ending this pandemic.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Jordan? In your assessment, has the conflict there been resolved, and did anyone from the administration call the king during the last two days?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I don't have any calls to read out at the moment. Of course, we said over the weekend that we were in close touch with Jordanian officials, starting when those reports began to emerge, and we were in close touch with Jordanian officials precisely because we value King Abdullah II's leadership, we value his integrity, we value his vision.

And again, he has our full support. He has our full support for all of those facets in all of those regions, in addition to the mutual interests that we have with the Kingdom of Jordan, on top of the fact that the king has demonstrated remarkable leadership in the humanitarian gestures, in what he has done for the people of Syria who have suffered so tremendously under the brutal dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. So we have been in close touch with our Jordanian partners —

**QUESTION:** Did the Secretary call him? Did anyone call him from —

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any calls to read out at the moment.

**QUESTION:** And did you provide them with any kind of any support?

**MR PRICE:** I am not aware that they made any requests for support. Of course, we do have a strategic partnership with the Kingdom of Jordan. We stand by Jordan, but I'm not aware of any such requests that came in.

**QUESTION:** My last question on the Iraq-U.S. talks tomorrow: What are your expectations from the strategic dialogue?

**MR PRICE:** Well, this, of course, will be the third strategic dialogue that the United States will hold with our strategic partner, Iraq. Secretary Blinken will engage with his counterpart. They will discuss the entirety of the relationship. I would expect after tomorrow's session that we'll have more to say and that we'll have more details to share.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Changing subject, Egypt foreign minister warned that his country will act if any water damage is caused to it by the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia after the failure of the talks in Kinshasa. Would the U.S. Government plan to exercise more pressure on the parties, even hosting the parties back to D.C., in order to find a solution to this water crisis?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think as you know, a U.S. delegation traveled to the region to engage our partners on issues related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam or the GERD. The delegation included Ambassador Don Booth, it included our OES Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Jonathan Moore, as well as NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary Karen Sasahara.

Through this mission and this concluded exchange, we heard from all interested parties, including from the Congolese presidency of the African Union, about how best the United States and our European partners can support their efforts, our collective efforts, to find a path forward to constructive negotiations. The team held consultations in Kinshasa, in Addis Ababa, in Cairo, and Khartoum, and these consultations were done in conjunction with our European – with European Union representatives.

I think the key point is that we understand the importance of Nile waters to all three countries, and we continue to encourage a resumption of productive dialogue when it comes to the GERD. Now, what exactly that might look like, I don't have anything to preview for you at the moment. But we will continue to encourage a productive dialogue, and we have continued to stress our impartial approach towards the GERD.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Just the other day, you guys filed a motion – I presume through DOJ, but you – in a lawsuit against an Egyptian official who's accused of torture and other bad things related to detainees there. And I'm just wondering, given the administration's focus or its intended focus, claimed focus, on human rights, why exactly would you be supporting his claim of diplomatic immunity in this case?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I do understand that there was a brief filed with the court. This does have to do with issues of diplomatic immunity that I wouldn't want to get into from here. But what I will say is that we continue to seek to promote a stable and prosperous Egypt where, importantly, the government protects the rights of all individuals and fulfills the aspirations of the Egyptian people. That is, in fact, a core objective of U.S. policy. President Biden has made clear, we made clear with the release of the



Human Rights Report in recent days, that human rights will be at the center of our foreign policy.

And that does, in fact, include with Egypt. The Secretary told Foreign Minister Shoukry in a recent call that human rights will be at the center of our relations with Egypt, and we look forward to strengthening not only our partnership, but to strengthening that respect for democracy and human rights in Egypt.

**QUESTION:** Okay. They'll be center – central to your foreign policy going towards Egypt, except in this case?

**MR PRICE:** No, I would not say that. I would say that human rights are —

**QUESTION:** Well, I mean, let's look at the two most recent things: this one, and Saudi Arabia. Right, okay? So you come out, you release the intel report on Khashoggi's murder, you directly tie the crown prince to it, but you don't do anything to him about it. And now here's an actual lawsuit that's going forward, and you are arguing on behalf of a person who is accused of being involved in the same kind of human rights abuses that you say that you're against and that you're going to punish. So square that for me.

**MR PRICE:** This is a matter before the court, so again, I wouldn't want to weigh in from here on a particular court case. What I would say is that our commitment to human rights globally, in the Middle East, and when it comes to Saudi Arabia, and as you mentioned, Egypt – nothing can stand in the way of that. We will continue to raise cases. We will continue to monitor how these partners respond when it comes to the cases that we raise bilaterally with them. You mentioned Saudi Arabia. Of course, we have seen the Saudi regime take some welcome steps in the right direction when it comes to Saudi Arabia.

**QUESTION:** You just put out a statement —

**MR PRICE:** Exactly.

**QUESTION:** — this morning criticizing the Saudis for sentencing – right? Was that this morning?

**MR PRICE:** That was this morning.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. I'm sorry, so I don't see where the – where is the right direction? What – was there any statement praising something else that the Saudis did?

**MR PRICE:** No, obviously, Matt. We – the case of – there have been other cases in Saudi Arabia where they have made – where they have taken constructive steps forward. We did put out, as you said, a statement this morning, which I think speaks to the fact that even when it comes to our close security partners, that we won't turn a blind eye when it comes to what we consider to be violations of human rights.

**QUESTION:** Unless someone claims diplomatic immunity, or he happens to be the de facto head of state. Right?

**MR PRICE:** Was that rhetorical?

**QUESTION:** It's not rhetorical, because I just don't see how you can square the two. But go ahead.

**MR PRICE:** Please.

**QUESTION:** Two question on North Korea. Recently, North Korea is ratcheting up the tension in

Northeast Asia, and it – now it announced that it will strengthen the nuclear capability and ballistic missile launch technology. So President Biden said that the U.S. will respond accordingly. So my question is: What is U.S. redline on that? And secondly, North Korean Government announced that it will not participate in the Tokyo Olympics this year. So it could have been a catalyst for South Korea with talks about the denuclearization talks. Was that the issue and case for the United States? Any comment on that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, your second question first. We are aware of reports that North Korea has decided not to participate in the summer Olympics, which would appear consistent, in fact, with the DPRK's stringent response to COVID-19. We will continue to coordinate closely with the Republic of Korea and with Japan on DPRK issues in pursuit of our shared goals of peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and across the Indo-Pacific. Of course, the White House spoke late last week to the trilateral meeting between the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his South Korean and Japanese counterparts at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. All of this is part of the ongoing review that we have underway when it comes to our North Korea policy.

This is something that we have spoken of for several weeks now. The review that we are undertaking – the review that we are undertaking in close consultation with our allies and partners, including our treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific – it is a part of the reason why Secretary Blinken thought it so important that for his first physical travel overseas that he travel to Tokyo and that he travel to Seoul so that we could compare notes, so that we could share thinking on a number of common challenges and common threats. And of course, North Korea is a common threat to all three of us.

So this review is still underway. I wouldn't want to get ahead of where this review might end up, but we will continue to focus on reducing the threat to the United States as well as to our partners as well as to our treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific as we remain committed to the principle of denuclearization of North Korea.

**QUESTION:** Can I stay in that region?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** And on Olympics. With regard to participating in the Beijing Olympics, can you detail how the State Department has been or will be involved in the administration's decision on that front?

**MR PRICE:** Well, part of our review of those Olympics and our thinking will involve close consultations with partners and allies around the world. We have consistently said, when it comes to our concerns with the government in Beijing, including Beijing's egregious human rights violations, its conduct of genocide in the case of Xinjiang, that what the United States does is meaningful, what the United States does will have impact, but everything we do that is – that brings along our allies and partners will have all the more influence with Beijing.

And so that is why the Department of State, as part of our thinking on the Beijing Olympics, is engaging with partners, with allies to coordinate – coordinate closely on decisions and approaches to the government in Beijing. You saw an illustration of that only the other week when the United States, together with United Kingdom, together with Canada, together with the EU, enacted a set of sanctions against those responsible for some of the atrocities in Xinjiang. So clearly, we are coordinating on all of these issues of concern, and, of course, the Beijing Olympics is an area that we will continue to discuss.

**QUESTION:** And when do you think those discussions will – specifically on the Olympics will be concluded with partners and allies?

**MR PRICE:** Well, of course, this is – we’re talking about 2022 and we are still in April of 2021. So these games remain some time away. I wouldn’t want to put a timeframe on it, but these discussions are underway.

**QUESTION:** And how complicated would U.S.-China diplomacy become if the U.S. decided to boycott the Olympics?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I wouldn’t want to comment on a hypothetical. We know that when it comes to our engagement with the government in Beijing, the – principally, it is a relationship predicated on competition. There are also adversarial aspects of that relationship. There are also some cooperative aspects of those relationships – of that relationship. Really, all three of those were on display in Anchorage, both in the session that was public as well as in the discussions that were behind closed doors.

But with our approach to Beijing, we will continue to be guided by two things and two things only. Those are our interests, including the interests we share with allies and partners around the world, and our values. And those are the values we share with our allies and many of our closest partners around the world.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. A couple of follow-ups of – on vaccine, if I may. First question is about Johnson & Johnson is its vaccine from Netherlands. And I wonder why the U.S. Government doesn’t allow the export of AstraZeneca vaccine, 30 million doses, that are still here in U.S. and except for 4 million doses, if not mistaken, lend to Mexico and Canada. The rest are there, although those vaccines are not yet approved – have not yet been approved by FDA. So I wonder if you, as a government, can stretch a point – I know there is a law that don’t allow – doesn’t allow so far to make this export possible, but can you stretch a point since you get Johnson & Johnson vaccine from Netherlands? It’s a European country. This is my first question.

The second one, if I may, is about the restrictions on travel, if you have any signs of ease of the restriction for travel from Europe and to Europe.

**MR PRICE:** Well, your second question, that will be a question that will be guided by the science. It will be guided by what our Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, what our broader set of scientists and medical experts advise. Obviously, the CDC has recently issued new guidance on some elements of travel. I would refer you there for more information on that, but at its core, these will be decisions that, again, will be based on science, on expertise, on epidemiology in this case.

When it comes to the vaccine, I just want to be very clear – and I know the White House has made this point as well – that there is no outright export ban on vaccines. But the point I was making before when we were talking in the context of – with Lalit remains, and that is that this administration, this President, this Secretary of State are focused first and foremost on protecting the American people. And we are in the midst of an ambitious, a heretofore successful distribution of safe and effective vaccine to millions of Americans.

But we also know that over the longer term, Americans won’t be fully safe until this virus is contained not only in this country but around the world as well. And so that is why we know that America needs to continue to play that leadership role when it comes to global public health. It’s precisely what we have done, and I have spoken to some of those steps, from re-engaging with the WHO; our ambitious, bold commitments to COVAX; the arrangements that we have arrived at with the Quad; the arrangement that we have arrived at with Canada and Mexico that you mentioned as well.

But right now, we are focused on that safe and effective vaccine distribution here at home, planning for what might allow us to vaccinate as many Americans as quickly as possible while also accounting for scenarios that may develop. But we fully expect as we become more comfortable in our position here at home and this vaccination campaign here at home that we'll be able to continue to engage the international community on this important challenge, because we know, again, that is a challenge that we must address collectively, and no one has the potential to galvanize international action – collective action – like the United States. And that's what we'll continue to do.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to get your response on a couple of pieces of news. I think this broke just before you started talking, but Al Arabiya is reporting that an Iranian cargo ship, possibly affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, has been – come under attack in the Red Sea. If you have anything on that, that would be great.

And just secondly, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy has called on NATO to support a path to membership for his country. Does the U.S. support that, bearing in mind this buildup that you've expressed concerns over?

**MR PRICE:** Well, this administration is committed to ensuring that NATO's door remains open to aspirants when they are able to meet the commitments and obligations of membership and contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic area. We affirm our support for that open door policy that was expressed in the 2008 Bucharest declaration, and we stand by the right of each sovereign country to choose for itself whether it joins any treaty or alliance, and, of course, that does include NATO.

We are committed to ensuring that aspirant countries wishing to join NATO meet the organization's standard for membership. To that end, we continue to urge the Government of Ukraine to implement the deep, comprehensive, and timely reforms necessary to build a more stable, democratic, prosperous, and free country. We support Ukraine's efforts to advance the rule of law. We support reforms and economic growth, and we, of course, continue to support our partner Ukraine in the fight against Russian aggression.

And you're right that we have spoken about this in recent days. More importantly, several of the most senior members of this administration have spoken to their NATO counterparts, starting with the President of the United States. The Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of Defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others have been in close touch with their Ukrainian counterparts.

**QUESTION:** So that doesn't change your view on Ukraine in NATO given what's happening on the border? You don't want to kind of give more impetus to that push now?

**MR PRICE:** Oh, we are certainly supportive of all the reforms that Ukraine is engaged in on all of the areas that I just listed. Again, we are fully supportive and affirm NATO's open door policy, and we continue to look forward to working closely with Ukraine on all of these reforms that are in train.

**QUESTION:** Ned —

**QUESTION:** On the Iranian ship?

**MR PRICE:** On the Iranian ship, I don't have anything immediately to offer, but if we do, we can get back to you.

**QUESTION:** Two things I think you can dispatch with extremely quickly. One, the administration came in saying it's going to reverse the Trump-era refugee admission policy, but it hasn't done it yet. Do you have any idea what's taking so long for the cap to be elevated?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what —

**QUESTION:** What's going on?

**MR PRICE:** President Biden has spoken both on the campaign trail as a candidate and —

**QUESTION:** Yes. Yes, he has. But he hasn't actually done anything about it yet, so I'm wondering what the holdup is.

**MR PRICE:** And more recently as President about his commitment to ensuring that the United States is again a leader when it comes to refugees and when it comes to providing humanitarian relief to those fleeing violence, to those fleeing persecution the world over. It is also true that our — the United States refugee program was left in a state of disarray by the past administration. There is a great deal of rebuilding that needs to take place in order to have a refugee program that allows us to achieve what we want it to achieve in a way that is both effective and that is safe.

**QUESTION:** So is that what's taking time? You have to rebuild the program?

**MR PRICE:** There is a great deal of rebuilding given the state of disrepair it was left in.

**QUESTION:** Secondly, the Secretary met with the acting head of the U.S. Agency for Global Media today. As you will recall, the previous administration also left that agency in a bit of a — well, it did what it did. Anyway, one of the things that the previous CEO did was to change the composition of the board, the directors. And I'm just wondering if the meeting today between the Secretary and the acting AGM head means that the State Department is going to or wants to take a more active role, to retake an active role, in the running of VOA and the other networks.

**MR PRICE:** Well, the Secretary certainly understands the importance of USAGM. He does have an opportunity to meet with Kellie Chao, who is currently at the helm of USAGM. We understand the important function that USAGM's component elements provide in the dissemination of information the world over, including in places that lack options to hear messages that are unadulterated by the host government.

At the same time, we also recognize the important editorial independence that comes with those elements. The Secretary respects that editorial independence. He thinks that it is important that we continue to adhere to that firewall when it comes to editorial independence. But we can do both: We can ensure that USAGM has the backing, has the support it needs, to accomplish its important mission without interfering in that important mission.

**QUESTION:** Right. But is there a desire on his part to get back onto the board? Just there was a State Department seat on what used to be the BBG and then turned — and then it was eliminated under the previous CEO.

**MR PRICE:** If we have anything on that, we'll be happy to get back to you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** We'll take a final question.

**QUESTION:** Just a follow-up on Kylie's question. You seemed to suggest on the Olympics that the U.S. is in consultations with allies discussing whether to consider or plan some sort of joint boycott. Is that the case?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it is something that we certainly wish to discuss and that it is certainly something

that we understand that a coordinated approach will be not only in our interests but also in the interests of our allies and partners. So this is one of the issues that is on the agenda both now and going forward, and when we have something to announce, we will be sure to do that.

Thank you very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:01 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 8, 2021](#)

*04/08/2021 07:09 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:10 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Today Secretary Blinken delivered remarks at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Yom HaShoah commemoration. If you haven’t already seen it, the video is posted on the Secretary’s twitter account and on our website, [state.gov](https://www.state.gov).

The Secretary’s words on this solemn occasion were powerful and they underlined why remembrance is so vital. He said in that message:

We remember to honor the lives of the six million Jews, as well as the Roma, the Sinti, the Slavs, disabled persons, LGBTQ+ individuals, and many others, who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

We remember to recognize, to recognize the innate dignity of those killed and those who survived – something their killers sought to strip away with each dehumanizing act.

We remember that before these people were victims, they were girls and boys, they were women and men, with distinct lives, distinct hopes.

And we remember not only what happened, but also how, how it was allowed to happen.

We remember to look at the institutions and societies we are part of and to understand better, understand better what they do and what they did not do.

We remember to learn. And we learn so that we do not repeat. Never again.

Next, today the United States Government, through USAID, announced more than 152 million in additional humanitarian assistance to help the people affected by the crisis in Tigray’s Ethiopia region – I’m sorry, Ethiopia’s Tigray region. This announcement of additional funding brings the total U.S. humanitarian assistance for the Tigray response to \$305 million since the crisis began in Fiscal Year 2020.

This new assistance will provide lifesaving food, water, medical and health support, shelter, and protection for the most vulnerable – and that includes support for women and girls, case management for survivors of gender-based violence, training for social workers and community case workers, and programs to reunite children separated from their families.

With this funding, USAID will provide more than 148,000 metric tons of urgently needed food assistance, including wheat, yellow split peas, vegetable oil, and specialized nutritious foods. In total, USAID has now provided more than 206,000 metric tons of food – enough to feed 4 million people for

nearly three months.

We also must take this opportunity to raise that as more information comes to light regarding the scope of human rights violations, abuses, and atrocities, assistance in protection of the most vulnerable is more important than ever.

Finally, in keeping with the Department of State's commitment to facilitate legitimate travel to the United States, Secretary Blinken determined today that it is in the national interest to exempt all immigrant and fiance(e) visa applicants from the regional travel restrictions currently in effect due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beginning today, immigrant and fiance(e) visa applicants in a country affected by a geographic COVID-19 visa restriction who believe they may fall under these exceptions should check the website of the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate to determine their next steps.

As the global situation evolves, the department continues to seek ways to process visa applications around the world, in keeping with guidance from health authorities and with the U.S. travel restrictions currently in place.

So with that, Matt.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Just on the last one, these people still, if they're going to come, still need to be negative, right?

**MR PRICE:** That's right. This does not change any of the restrictions and guidelines that are in place when it comes to COVID.

**QUESTION:** Secondly, on your remarks about the Holocaust Remembrance Day and Secretary Blinken's speech or his comments to the Holocaust Museum, it was quite a mea culpa, right? Singling out one specific former State Department employee by name for not doing or, in fact, apparently contributing to the Holocaust, and also mentioning that the rest of the department, or a lot of the rest of the department with some exceptions, did the same thing, or didn't do enough, I mean.

When you look at that and the whole idea of "never again" and China and Xinjiang, are you confident that a future secretary of state is not going to have to make the same kind of confession, I'll say, but it's not really a confession? Does this – make the same kind of comments 70 years from now?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I think what Secretary Blinken said in that note is a sentiment he has reflected any number of times in any number of public fora both in his time in this role, in his limited time in this role, but of course, long before it. It is something – that sentiment "never again," it is something that is not only meaningful for him; it is personal for him. As you know, his family story, the values, the spirit of this country that is imbued within him as a result of that story, that heritage, I think is something he feels very personally every day across every realm. It is precisely why he has spoken so passionately about human rights violations, abuses, atrocities that are taking place around the world. He, as you alluded to, has spoken to it in the context of Xinjiang. He has spoken to it of repression in other parts of the world. He spoke to it in the context of Tigray during his recent appearance on the Hill as well.

But it's not just words. This Secretary is committed that – committed to the fact that in both word and in deed, this department and this administration and this government will stand up to human rights abuses. We will do what we can, cognizant of this idea of acting confidently but also with humility – the two flip-sides of the coin that Secretary Blinken often refers to – to do what we can and as much as we can, oftentimes in concert with our allies and partners, to stand up to these atrocities that have no place in the 21st century, have no place in 2021, but yet horrendously continue to be perpetrated



today.

**QUESTION:** So you're confident that in 75, 100 years from now, a future secretary of state is not going to have to – or not feel compelled to make the same kind of statements that he did?

**MR PRICE:** I am confident, Matt, that —

**QUESTION:** About the (inaudible) during the '30s.

**MR PRICE:** I am confident, Matt, that this Secretary of State, this department, this administration will continue to be clear-eyed and speak with a clear voice when it comes to human rights violations.

**QUESTION:** Last one, just on the – very, extremely briefly on Afghanistan. This conference in Turkey is supposed to be happening. Is it correct that it's happening on the 16th, and is someone other than Zal going to be there? What's the – and what's the – what do you expect from it?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'm going to allow the hosts of this conference to speak to the details of it. What I can say is that planning is underway for a conference in Istanbul to accelerate the peace process. The gathering, as in all facets of this process, will be Afghan-owned and supported by high-level attendants from the international community, building on recent international meetings in support of the peace process.

This upcoming conference, it's meant to help Afghan negotiators to make progress, to make progress in their negotiations, and will complement the peace talks that are currently ongoing in Doha. Of course, Ambassador Khalilzad remains in Doha. He continues to engage with the parties on this very task, helping the parties, supporting the parties in this Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process to reach a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire. We are working with our Turkish counterparts and the Afghan parties to prepare for constructive participation in this conference.

**QUESTION:** Who are the attendants?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** You don't have anything to say about who's going to be —

**MR PRICE:** I will let the host speak to the details of it. Yes.

**QUESTION:** No, no, no. On your side.

**MR PRICE:** Oh, I don't have any details to share just yet. Yes.

**QUESTION:** On Iran. Could you address the comments by the Iranian chief negotiator in Vienna, where he essentially said that they're working on an approach that would not be step-by-step but would remove sanctions in one go? And then also one of his comments was, "In our view, America has to take its actions in one step, then we'll verify, and then Iran will follow with its own actions." What's your response to the Iranian view on how this is going to go?

**MR PRICE:** Well, our response to specific proposals is best delivered in engagement with our European allies and with the Russian and Chinese partners on the ground in Vienna. As you know, Special Envoy Rob Malley remains in Vienna, where he has had occasion to meet with our allies and partners in this effort, the remaining elements of the P5 – original P5+1. He's had an opportunity to meet with the IAEA director general as well. He issued or noted in a tweet today that he had met also on a bilateral basis with the Austrian foreign minister, who is helping to host these.

I think broadly speaking, what I will say is actually to repeat probably what you've heard me say before, and that is that the primary issues to be discussed in Vienna are twofold: on the one hand, the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take in order to effect its return to compliance with the JCPOA; and on the other hand, the sanctions relief steps that we would need to take in order to return to compliance as well. You mentioned one comment from the Iranians. I think we've all seen some of the commentary, including on social media, that these talks have been described as constructive, as businesslike, as accomplishing what they set out to do. And that is true; we would characterize it that way as well.

We would also, however, hasten to not allow expectations to outpace where we are. After all, we have said this will be hard. And yesterday, I explained many of the reasons why it will be difficult, while it will be hard. Just to quickly recap, it will be hard because these are indirect engagements, and obviously the mechanics of this are not un-cumbersome. It'll be hard because the subject at hand is very technical; it's very complex, and it is technical and complex precisely because we have arrived at a strategic formulation, something that candidate Biden and now President Biden has called compliance for compliance. We know that is the desired strategic endpoint, so we need not have broad, strategic talks at this stage; we are engaged in technical talks about how we might get to that endpoint. And it will be hard, of course, because there is no insignificant degree of distrust between the United States and Iran, between the United States and the broader international community.

Now, we're not going to let any of that be insurmountable, to potentially stand in the way. And in fact, these discussions have been constructive. This forum has been constructive; it has been businesslike; this has been a step forward. I think you probably saw the announcement that the Joint Commission will meet tomorrow. We expect the talks may resume in the coming days, potentially next week.

**QUESTION:** But just to follow up on that, I mean, it seems like when you boil everything down you still have this fundamental problem which is – at the heart of this, which is Iran essentially is insisting that you go first and you're insisting that Iran go first. So where does that leave us?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it leaves us where we started, really, with the knowledge that maximalist demands probably are not going to get us very far. But problems are addressed in most cases, in almost all cases – we would hope in all cases – with diplomacy. This is precisely why Rob Malley is in Vienna, because this is a challenge, this is a problem. We started from very different places. And his job on the ground with the support of a team there and a team here is to determine if we can move slightly closer, if – consistent with our principled diplomacy, consistent with what's in our interest, and that is principally an Iran that is permanently and verifiably prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon, if we can move – if the two parties can move closer together and we can arrive at an arrangement that would allow for the United States to resume compliance with the deal and Iran to do so, Iran to again be subject to the strictest verification and monitoring regime ever negotiated.

**QUESTION:** And just – sorry – last thing. So is it – I know you had an extensive back-and-forth with Matt and others about this the last couple of days, but is it your expectation that if there is a deal that you would see not only the nuclear sanctions relived but then also the terrorism sanctions, designations on the Central Bank, and things like that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it comes to the two tasks, the Iranians have a task and that is to determine if and how they might return to compliance with the nuclear deal, to return to compliance with the strictest verification and monitoring regime ever negotiated. Our task, if it gets there, is to determine how we might resume compliance with our commitments under the JCPOA. And if we get there – which of course remains an if – we have said that we are prepared to take the necessary steps to return to compliance with the JCPOA and that would include lifting sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA. The dynamics of that, the mechanics of that, is precisely what Rob and others are discussing

right now with our European allies and our Russian and Chinese partners in this endeavor and that we may have occasion down the road to discuss with the Iranians, but obviously we're not there yet.

**QUESTION:** But that still leaves open the question of whether you guys think the terrorism sanctions, ballistic missile sanctions, human rights sanctions are inconsistent with the JCPOA. Do you think that they are?

**MR PRICE:** We believe that Iran's ballistic missile program, that Iran's violation of the – Iran's human rights abuses, that Iran's support for malign proxies, Iran's support for terrorism – we believe all of those things pose a profound challenge to us as well as to our regional partners. That is why we will continue, including through sanctions, to push back on those issues.

**QUESTION:** Well, why couldn't you have said this like yesterday or the day before?

**MR PRICE:** I did. I did. I absolutely did.

**QUESTION:** No, no, you didn't. You left it open, and so, like, it's been – it's crazy. I mean, you said "I'm not going to characterize whether we think the FTO designation on the IRGC" —

**MR PRICE:** Well, I didn't. I'm not characterizing specific sanctions. Again, this is why we have a negotiator in Vienna and a team in Vienna, to speak to specific – the specifics of this. The point I'm making is precisely the same point I made yesterday, perhaps inartfully, but the same point I tried to make yesterday: namely, that when it comes to Iran's nefarious activities – support for terrorism, its human rights abuses, its ballistic missile program, its support for proxies – we will continue to push back on that. Sanctions will continue to be important tools for doing that.

**QUESTION:** Just one more on that. Is Rob Malley staying in Vienna next week?

**MR PRICE:** I expect Rob will be returning to the United States as these talks break for the weekend. I don't have any details to provide just yet on his – any return travel.

**QUESTION:** And who'd he meet with while he was —

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** And who'd he meet with while he was there?

**MR PRICE:** He had an opportunity to meet with the IAEA director general; he had an opportunity to meet with his Austrian – not his Austrian counterpart, but the Austrian foreign minister. He had an opportunity to meet with representatives of the P5+1.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Different topic, Northern Ireland.

**PARTICIPANT:** Yep.

**QUESTION:** I know Jen spoke to this a little bit a moment ago. How concerned are you with the – what we've seen in recent days with the violence in Northern Ireland? And does the administration have any plans diplomatically on this, such as the appointment of a special envoy in Northern Ireland again?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we are deeply concerned by the violence in Northern Ireland, and we join the British, the Irish, and the Northern Irish leaders in their calls for calm. We remain, as you have heard us say

before, steadfast supporters of a secure and prosperous Northern Ireland in which all communities have a voice and all communities enjoy the gains of a hard-won peace. This is something that the President has spoken to quite passionately in the past. We welcome the provisions in both the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol, which help to protect the gains of the Belfast and the Good Friday agreements.

As the United Kingdom and the EU implement Brexit-related provisions, this administration encourages them to prioritize political and economic stability in Northern Ireland. As I said before, President Biden has been unequivocal in his support for the Belfast and Good Friday agreement, which was an historic achievement. We believe that we must protect it and we believe that we must ensure it doesn't become a casualty of Brexit.

When it comes to personnel moves on our side, I don't have anything to preview or to forecast, but suffice it to say that we are – our partners in Northern Ireland, in the UK – I'm sorry, in the UK, in Ireland, Northern Ireland – of course, they are close friends. We, of course, are willing and ready to support them.

**QUESTION:** If I could press you on one part. You said it shouldn't become the casualty of Brexit. Is it the view of this administration that these problems could have been avoided had Brexit not occurred?

**MR PRICE:** Well, this administration wants to see a strong UK and a strong EU. I'm not going to go back and litigate the past.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow on that and then ask another question about Afghanistan? Is there – what is the status of any bilateral trade talks with the UK, in light of what's happening with Northern Ireland?

**MR PRICE:** Well, this President has been very clear about where he stands when it comes to trade agreements. He believes that we must first invest in ourselves. He believes that we must first take stock of where we are, what we can do here at home, because he knows, Secretary Blinken knows, that in many ways – and I believe Jake Sullivan often uses this phrase – that domestic policy is foreign policy and foreign policy is domestic policy. We know that our vitality here at home is our vitality on the world stage. It is a key source of strength, and we've spoken to that domestic vitality as a source of strength vis-a-vis any challenge we face, whether it is a nation-state, whether it is a non-state threat, but across the board.

And so that is why this administration is first and foremost focused on investing in ourselves before we then go back and take a look at free trade agreements, whether it's in the context of Europe, whether it's in the context of Asia, whether it's in any other context.

**QUESTION:** Well, that raises the question as to whether you don't – the administration does not believe that free trade agreements lead to vitality here, that they are a win-win.

**MR PRICE:** This administration believes in deep economic cooperation, economic cooperation that is guided by what's in our economic interests and that's consistent with our values. We believe in high labor standards. We believe in high – when it comes to climate, green technologies. We believe that American workers need to be protected. So we believe absolutely in deep economic ties, deep economic ties with our allies and partners around the world, but we also believe that we have to effect those agreements consist with what is in the best interest of the American people and what is in the collective interest, and whether that's in terms of labor standards, whether that's in terms of the environment, those are absolutely elements that this administration will be looking at.

**QUESTION:** Let me just ask you about Afghanistan. As we approach May 1st, there's reporting that there is frustration with – among the military – not the cabinet level, but among the military that there is – let's just say indecision or no clear timeline as we approach May 1st. And I'm just wondering how close we are to a decision on —

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** — the Afghanistan withdrawal.

**MR PRICE:** So I think I will not break any new ground by saying that May 1st is three weeks away.

**QUESTION:** You're going out on a limb there. Wow. (Laughter.)

**MR PRICE:** That is on the record. You can lead with that. But the broader point, of course, is that we have been engaged in this review of what has been agreed to as we look to this May 1st deadline. The President has spoken specifically to the deadline. I think you should expect that the President will – have an opportunity to speak to this issue again before we reach that deadline, which again is only a few weeks away. This is something that across the interagency, this department, the military, the intelligence community, all of the relevant components have been engaged in.

Knowing that, the decisions ahead will have implications for this country, and the President has been very clear: He wants to see our military presence end in Afghanistan. This is not a position he has arrived at recently. It's also not a position he has arrived at lightly. The administration is committed to bringing a responsible end to the conflict, committed to removing our troops from harm's way, and committed to ensuring that Afghanistan can never again become a haven for terrorists who would threaten the United States or our allies. Those are the principles that are guiding these discussions. And those are the principles that will guide what we ultimately will hear from this administration. This is not a decision that any administration should take lightly. It's certainly not one that this administration takes lightly.

**QUESTION:** Is there any anticipation that you will have – any assurance that Afghanistan will not become a haven for terrorists given the state of the talks right now?

**MR PRICE:** I – it's – I will say a couple things. As you know, we have sought to galvanize the diplomacy between the parties knowing that there is no military solution to what we face in Afghanistan. It's precisely why at all levels, the President, the Secretary of State, the – Ambassador Khalilzad and his team have been working tirelessly, including in the region, including in Doha, including in Turkey, including in Russia just the other week to see to it or to lay the groundwork as best we can for those two things we seek to accomplish: a comprehensive political settlement, and a comprehensive ceasefire.

We know that in the end diplomacy is what will allow for the people of Afghanistan to have the best shot at what they deserve, and that is peace, it is security, it is prosperity, it is dignity. And that is what – that is a task we've been engaged in at all levels since January 20th of this year.

**QUESTION:** China – I wanted to ask – Senators Menendez and Risch unveiled their comprehensive bipartisan China legislation, the Strategic Competition Act. I haven't gone all the way through it, but it mentions sanctions a couple dozen times. Is the State Department or the administration involved in working with them on that? Does it approve of this legislation? Is it a good idea for Congress to be setting foreign policy and sanctions rules, or is that something that the administration would prefer to do in consultation with Congress and allies?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as a general rule, we don't comment on pending legislation, so I won't comment on

this legislation specifically. What I will say, however, is that we know when it comes to the challenges we face in the world – and of course we have spoken of competition with China as a defining challenge for this administration – that we will enjoy the greatest amount of success when we work hand-in-hand with Congress, and when our proposals find support on both sides of the aisle in Congress, and that when we work closely with Congress on their proposals.

We have been heartened that there is a good deal of bipartisan agreement when it comes to how we should and could approach the government in Beijing, the PRC. This is precisely one of the reasons why, following their consultations, their discussions, I should say, with their Chinese – with their PRC counterparts, National Security Advisor Sullivan and Secretary Blinken met with Alaska’s two Republican senators. We know that any approach to the PRC has to be – has to have bipartisan support. It has to have the support of Congress. It’s precisely why this Secretary has committed to consultations with Congress, as he likes to say, not only on the landing but also at takeoff, also mid-air. And that’s precisely what we’ve been doing, and we look forward to continuing that engagement on China.

**QUESTION:** Has that engagement begun with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on China and other issues?

**MR PRICE:** I’m sorry?

**QUESTION:** Has that engagement already begun with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as it —

**MR PRICE:** We have had a number of occasion to – I don’t want to read out specific briefings, but we have had a number of occasions to send briefers from this building to offer insight into our thinking on any number of challenges, to update lawmakers on what it is we’re doing, to seek their ideas on how we could work together to take on challenges. And, of course, as I said before, our approach to the PRC and the competition with China is a defining challenge for this administration.

**QUESTION:** Ned, just on your takeoff, mid-flight, and landing consultations with Congress, I want to go back to something yesterday, the resumption of aid to the Palestinians. You said, as you were announcing it, that we have been gratified by the bipartisan support or by the reaction that we have had from Congress on a bipartisan basis. What’s the basis for that? I’m – are you aware of a single Republican who has come out in support of this?

**MR PRICE:** The basis for that, Matt, are reactions we have heard, again, in our consultations with Congress, as you may know – as you may know better than most, given your reporting. We have consulted with Congress and we did consult with Congress on this funding decision.

Let me also make another point, though. The funding we were speaking about yesterday was funding that was set aside not during this Congress, but during the last Congress.

**QUESTION:** Oh, you’re talking about when it was actually – what – you’re talking about prior.

**MR PRICE:** No, I —

**QUESTION:** Since the announcement.

**MR PRICE:** I am talking about what we have – and again, I wouldn’t —

**QUESTION:** Which was not – which was – maybe there were a couple of Republicans who voted for it when it was in the budget bill or whatever – the reconciliation bill or whatever it was —

**MR PRICE:** It was —

**QUESTION:** — but I —

**MR PRICE:** It was appropriated by the last Congress.

**QUESTION:** Have you heard support —

**MR PRICE:** — a Republican Congress during a Republican administration.

**QUESTION:** Can you identify some — any specific example —

**MR PRICE:** I am —

**QUESTION:** — of support for what you have announced over the last day or so from Republicans?

**MR PRICE:** I am not going to speak for members. I'm not going to speak for members. But I think there is broad consensus. There is consensus, certainly, that supporting a two-state solution is consistent with our values. It's consistent with our interests, that's supporting the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people. It's consistent with our values. It's consistent with our interest in supporting the security and providing the security assistance, which in turn redounds positively on the security of our ally, Israel.

**QUESTION:** But that's — that's far different than claiming to have bipartisan support for specific assistance that many — not just Republicans, but also Democrats — think may violate the law.

**MR PRICE:** And I think —

**QUESTION:** So I'm just curious, when you say that you have bipartisan support for this, you're referring to the passage, which was contested, of the previous budget, and not the announcement yesterday, right?

**MR PRICE:** The funding that was approved during the last administration, a Republican administration, by a Republican Congress —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, yeah, yeah —

**MR PRICE:** But also — but also — but also, we —

**QUESTION:** I get that, but the last administration also cut all of that funding, right. So I just want to know, yesterday — since yesterday, since you announced this and made it public, for UNRWA, for the — and for the other stuff, have you have you heard from any Republicans saying yes, we're on board?

**MR PRICE:** I would not want to speak to individual conversations, but as you know, Matt, we have had consultations with Congress on this, going back to my earlier point about consultations at takeoff and on the landing, and we have had many opportunities to hear from Congress about this.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask on the North Korea review, we've been hearing that it's in the final stages for a couple of weeks now. Wondering if you could comment on what's the holdup with that. Are you waiting for an assistant secretary to be confirmed or is there something else? And also, when that review is complete, how are we going to know? What sort of format is it going to take?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would contest the idea there's any sort of holdup. We were talking earlier in this briefing about the careful consideration of a major decision in a completely different context. And I think that would also apply to this case. North Korea's nuclear program, North Korea's ballistic missile program of course is a profound challenge, not only, again, for the United States, but also for our allies in the Indo-Pacific and our partners as well.

And so of course, we want to make sure we do a number of things: Number one, we want to make sure we know and have a good understanding of what has been tried in the past. And we've said before that we have consulted widely, including with former administration officials, about their approach, their strategy, their tactics. We want to make sure we understand fully the nature of North Korea's programs, where they are, what their intentions and capabilities might be. We want to ensure that we have consulted broadly and widely and deeply with our partners and, of course, with our treaty allies.

And that is precisely why as his first physical trip Secretary Blinken went to Japan, went to the Republic of Korea. It's precisely why Acting Assistant Secretary Kim hosted a trilateral meeting among his – with his South Korean and Japanese counterparts. It's why National Security Advisor Sullivan hosted his South Korean and Japanese counterparts at the Naval Academy only a few days ago to make sure that we understand the concerns of our allies, to make sure we understand and to see to it that we are working in concert and in coordination with one another.

And so I would suspect, and the White House has said this, that the review is in its – entering its final stages. I wouldn't want to get ahead of the White House or get ahead of that review and to offer a timeline on it, but we are undertaking this review with careful consideration given the nature of this challenge and the many stakeholders that are involved.

**QUESTION:** Separate question on the COVAX – sorry, vaccine diplomacy that you've been talking about this week. You – the Secretary sort of talked about giving money to COVAX separately, loans and giving vaccines themselves to allies. Is there a prioritization issue here? Why not give the excess vaccines to COVAX, who can give them to the middle and lower-income countries that seem – surely that's the priority?

**MR PRICE:** Well, there is a prioritization issue here. And this administration – this President – Secretary Blinken mentioned it on Monday as well – has been very clear that first and foremost our primary task is to ensure the distribution of a safe and effective vaccine to Americans here at home. That is what we are focused on at the moment.

Now, that doesn't mean that we can't play a leadership role when it comes to helping the world address this virus, knowing that Americans here at home can't be fully safe if this virus is mutating in the wild. And that's precisely why the administration has contributed \$2 billion to COVAX with a pledge of 2 billion more. It's precisely why have spoken to our efforts in the context of the Quad, our efforts in the context of the – our partnership with our Canadian and Mexican partners as well.

Now, as the virus comes under control in this country and distribution of a safe and effective vaccine continues, as we account for contingencies and scenarios that could come to pass here, could come to pass elsewhere, it's certainly our hope that we'll be in a position to do more. But again, right now, we're focused on ensuring we do everything we can to beat this disease here at home just as we help the other countries with our profound assistance that has already gone out the door.

**QUESTION:** When you do get to that point of we're ready to give away – to provide vaccines to other parts of the world, where is the priority in terms of – yeah, COVAX – giving money to COVAX is one thing, but COVAX needs vaccines rather than cash, right?



**MR PRICE:** Right, but I'm just not today in a position to entertain a hypothetical. That's something that we may be able to speak more about in the coming days.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Or any day.

**QUESTION:** So there are growing concerns that elections in Chad and Benin this weekend may accelerate the erosion of democracy in Africa given criticism that governments in these two countries have suppressed opposition. How does the U.S. see the elections and how might the outcome of the – these two elections affect relations with the – with these two countries? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would start by saying we are watching these elections very closely. We call on all actors to remain peaceful. We share with the people of Benin and Chad their desire for democratic, peaceful elections that ensure voters have a choice, and that is a choice among candidates who share their perspectives. Of course, we don't support any one candidate. What we do support is a credible democratic process itself. That is true in Chad and Benin. That is true around the world.

We further underscore the importance of protecting freedoms of assembly and expression, including opinions about any candidate or political party online and in the media. We urge all parties to express their perspectives peacefully and we urge the electoral institutions and courts overseeing these processes and verifying these results to ensure these elections are conducted freely, fairly, and transparently. And we'll be watching in the days ahead.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Opposition and civil – sorry, if I may just follow up, quick question: Opposition and civil society groups in Chad have said that Western countries, including the United States, have overlooked the human rights abuse in Chad because of the President Deby's role in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel region. Would you like to comment on such allegation?

**MR PRICE:** I would say – I would make two broad points. Number one is that security engagement with Chad, and across the African continent for that matter, keeps Americans safe and it keeps our African partners safe. I would also add that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is a pillar of our foreign policy, and we've had an opportunity to speak about that in this briefing room in recent days. So we will certainly take a holistic approach to security challenges, ensuring that our security assistance and approaches to governance are mutually reinforcing and sufficiently comprehensive as well.

We continuously work closely with our partners at DOD, the Intelligence Community, and other stakeholders to review all of our overseas deployments, including in Africa, to ensure they are the right size, to ensure that they are protecting and promoting human rights, and to assist our partners on a comprehensive basis in confronting the threats they pose from terrorists and other violent extremist organizations.

Rosiland, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to go back to the Ethiopia announcement. \$152 million is a sizable amount of money, and noting that the National Security Advisor had a conversation yesterday with the deputy prime minister, is this administration growing frustrated with Ethiopia's treatment of people in the Tigray region? What pressure is the administration putting on the Ethiopian Government to stop committing human rights violations? And finally, is this administration worried that there may be actions verging on genocide happening in Tigray?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have had an occasion to engage directly with the Ethiopian Government. You mentioned the call that National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan had with the Ethiopian deputy prime minister. Secretary Blinken has spoken with the Ethiopian prime minister. Senator Coons, acting at President Biden's behalf, has recently traveled to the region. And our messaging across all of those engagements has been consistent. We are deeply concerned about the – what we have – the reports that are emanating from Tigray about the humanitarian plight of the Tigrayan people. And I would say that while the recent announcement of the Ethiopian Government's commitment to providing humanitarian access to Tigray are welcome, we are, of course, looking for deeds to match those words.

And we continue to monitor the implementation of what we have heard emanate from Addis Ababa. We have called for full and unhindered access consistently since the start of this crisis. It is absolutely critical for humanitarian community to – not only to scale up its response, but also to ensure that that humanitarian assistance is reaching the people in need. As I said, we are we are also encouraged by Prime Minister Abiy's announcement that the Government of Eritrea has agreed to withdraw its forces from Ethiopia. But we also want to see follow-through on this commitment and to see the immediate and complete withdrawal of Eritrean forces.

We know that a cessation of hostilities and an end to the Ethiopian Government's deployment of Amhara regional forces in Tigray – both of these things are essential to ensuring full and unhindered humanitarian access. And we continue to urge the government to implement even further, even additional methods to ensure this unhindered humanitarian access, knowing how important it is.

**QUESTION:** Well, it would appear that President Abiy and his government are resisting if the U.S. is having to repeat its calls for access, for relief, for not harming its citizens in Tigray. What is this administration prepared to do to make President Abiy know that you're serious about this? Are there repercussions coming?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think the Ethiopian leadership knows just how serious we are. It is a message the leadership has heard directly. It is a message we have relayed via different channels, different messengers. But again, the message has been consistent. Our concern for the reports that are emanating, that have emanated from Tigray, we have made no secret of that. We have gone to tremendous lengths to provide, to make available, I should say, humanitarian assistance. Of course, the U.S. Agency for National Development has deployed a DART, a Disaster Assistance Response Team, as well.

And now the task ahead of us is to make sure that these welcome, these constructive statements emanating from Addis, that again, they are met with concrete action, and that there is follow-through. We have left no doubt with our – with the Ethiopian leadership that there needs to be follow through given the humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Tigray.

Kylie.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) guys's statement on being disturbed about Aleksey Navalny, but I'm just wondering if there's any action that is being considered right now in terms of further advocating for his release.

**MR PRICE:** Well, you've heard this from the department, you've heard this from the White House, but it bears repeating that Mr. Navalny exposure of the regime's corruption in the first instance prompted his politically motivated detention and arrest. And we are of course disturbed by these reports that Mr. Navalny's health is worsening and that he is on a hunger strike to demand access to outside medical care. We urge authorities to take all necessary action to ensure his safety and to ensure his good health. And we reiterate our call for his immediate release as well as an end to the persecution of his

supporters.

It was only last month – it was on March 2nd that we took action to impose costs on Russia for the events surrounding Mr. Navalny – of course, his attempted murder, his attempted assassination using chemical weapons, his subsequent arrests and imprisonment. And in doing so, we mirrored actions taken both by the EU and the UK, again understanding that when we act in concert we have – our actions carry much more heft. We know that Russia’s use of chemical weapons has consequences, and it did have consequence – consequences for Moscow.

I wouldn’t want to preview what may lie ahead if Moscow continues down this road, but we’ve made abundantly clear that we will continue to hold Moscow to account. And we’ve spoken of many areas of that malign activity. We’ve spoken about SolarWinds. We have referred to Moscow’s interference in our elections. We have spoken to Mr. Navalny – his attempted assassination, his arrest, his continued detention, the repression of his supporters, and of course the reports of bounties on the heads of American soldiers in Afghanistan. Moscow is – or at least should be – under no illusion that we do intend to hold Russia to account for these actions. We can, and we will, just as we seek more broadly a relationship that is stable and a relationship that is predictable. Up until now it has been the Russian Government, the Kremlin that has injected that instability into the relationship, including through these malign activities.

That may be an indication that we have gone on for too long. And unfortunately, I do have to run to a meeting. Very quick question.

**QUESTION:** How soon will you hold Russia accountable? We’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop.

**MR PRICE:** President Biden has made very clear that Russia will be held to account. President Biden is a man of his word, and I think you will have another reminder of that. Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:58 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 20, 2021](#)

*04/20/2021 07:03 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:21 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Good to see you all again. Some of you I've seen quite a bit of over the last few weeks, but – last few days, I should say, but not all of you. But it's good to be back. We have a few items at the top.

First, on behalf of the United States, we offer the people of Chad our sincere condolences as they mourn the passing of President Deby.

We condemn recent violence and loss of life in Chad.

The United States stands with the people of Chad during this difficult time. We support a peaceful transition of power in accordance with the Chadian constitution.

Next, we welcome the agreement reached in Georgia yesterday, April 19th, to bring an end to the country's political crisis.

This agreement, reached under the auspices of EU President Michel's mediation, required difficult compromises by all sides. Above all, it required political courage and a commitment to the people of Georgia to continue the hard work of building democratic institutions and strengthening the rule of law. It's a sign of the important progress for Georgia's democratic development. Implementation, of course, will be equally important.

And we invite individual members of parliament and remaining parties to sign the agreement so that all of Georgia's elected representatives can begin working together on the pressing issues facing Georgia.

The United States is committed to assisting the Georgian parliament to ensure this agreement achieves its aspirations. And, as always, we stand ready to support Georgia on its path towards full integration into the Euro-Atlantic family of nations.

Next, Secretary Blinken will meet tomorrow with 15 foreign ministers of the Caribbean Community, known also as CARICOM.

They will discuss a number of issues affecting our region, including climate change and disaster resilience, and reinforce the deep bond we share with our Caribbean neighbors.

The United States is continuing to support the people of Saint Vincent as they deal with the eruption of La Soufriere volcano.

Yesterday, the Sudan Sovereign Council and Council of Ministers voted to repeal its more than six-decade-long boycott of Israel. The United States welcomes the announcement. It's an important step that will create new, promising opportunities for the people of Sudan, Israel, and across the region.

The announcement brings Sudan and Israel closer to normalizing relations and will have tangible, immediate impacts on the lives of the Sudanese and Israelis, allowing trade and investment that was previously blocked.

This announcement was the result of hard work by our diplomats and their counterparts in Sudan and Israel. We are pleased to welcome this new era in Sudanese-Israeli relations, and we look forward to seeing the fruits, the fruits this boycott's end will bear.

And finally, I wanted to make note that as of Sunday, we can confirm that the department has completed deployment of vaccines to all of our posts abroad. This announcement represents over 190,000 doses distributed to 220 postings around the world, allowing us to offer the vaccine to all direct-hire employees, locally engaged staff, and eligible family members.

Thanks to the work of countless people – our diplomatic couriers, post representatives, logisticians, and clinicians both here in the United States and around the world – not a single dose was lost in transit since we began our vaccine rollout in December of last year.

This collective effort is reflective of the Secretary's commitment to support the health, safety, and the security of the department's workforce so that we can continue to carry out our mission on behalf of the American people.

With that —

**QUESTION:** Really? Not a single dose was lost – like, not even one fell off the cart?

**MR PRICE:** Not – from Belize to Belgium, not a single dose was lost.

**QUESTION:** This is like when you went out to play golf for the first time and you got 17 holes-in-one, right? Not a single dose was lost. Right.

**MR PRICE:** Not – our – this is a true testament to the experts in this building and everyone who had a hand in this. And of course, we know this has been on the minds of our employees around the world, and so we wanted to make note of this important news.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Can I – I do want to ask about Chad, but first just two really brief ones, and I'll let someone else go after I'm done with this.

But on Sudan, when you talk about the lifting of the Israeli boycott, how much of this work was done to get them to lift it post-January 20th, and how much of it was done by the previous administration?

**MR PRICE:** Right. Well, Matt, the way we look at this, this was an accomplishment for America, for the Israeli people, for the Sudanese people, and of course, for the American people. Now, it is true that it was the result of work that spanned two administrations. We have said repeatedly – and I'm not saying this for the first time today – that the normalization agreements that were started by the previous administration – certainly something we want to build upon. It is one of those areas of agreement, one of those areas we share with the previous administration. We look to build on them. We herald the progress that this news today signifies.

**QUESTION:** And then on Chad, so you said you're offering sincere condolence – unless anyone else wants to ask on Sudan. No?

**MR PRICE:** Please.

**QUESTION:** No. Just on Chad. Do you think that the appointment of now the late President Deby's son is in keeping with this Chadian constitution?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Matt, what I would say is, again, we are – our thoughts are with the Chadian people at this time. We stand with them. We continue to condemn recent violence and loss of life in Chad, and importantly, we support a peaceful transition of power in accordance with the Chadian constitution. That's what is important here in terms of what this means going forward.

**QUESTION:** Okay. But that didn't answer my question at all.

**MR PRICE:** What we are saying and what is important to us —

**QUESTION:** You get that it doesn't answer my question, right?

**MR PRICE:** But Matt, our —

**QUESTION:** Not but. You get that it doesn't answer my question?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, our focus now is that what happens next is a peaceful transition of power in accordance with the Chadian constitution.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** But you're not going to weigh in on whether —

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) what happened is – happened based on the constitution?

**MR PRICE:** We are standing, of course, with the people of Chad. We will be watching very closely. We will be supporting the people of Chad and seeking to ensure – to help them ensure that everything going forward is in accordance with their constitution.

**QUESTION:** More on Chad?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** So given Deby was an ally in the fight against Islamist militant groups, how worried is the United States that his death is going to – the counterterrorism effort will be disrupted? And also, have you guys reached out to his son or the transition council, tried to make any contact?

**MR PRICE:** So, of course, we will continue work with our regional partners such as the G5 and the Multinational Joint Task Force to combat violent extremist organizations in the region. I suspect that and I am confident that work will continue. I don't have any details of calls to read out at this time. But we wanted to make clear that our support for the Chadian people remains strong.

Obviously, we continue to condemn the violence, and the United States will continue to partner with them. In recent months, we've provided millions of dollars in humanitarian support to the Chadian people, and we will continue to do everything we can to support the peaceful transition of power, again, that's in accordance with their constitution.

**QUESTION:** Have you reached out to the son?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any calls to read out.

**QUESTION:** Or the transitional council?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any calls to read out at this time.

**QUESTION:** Can I move on to Russia?

**QUESTION:** One on Chad? You have one on Chad?

**QUESTION:** Just briefly on Chad. Just one thing about it is that the parliament has been dissolved. Is that problematic in any way? Is this still something that you see as consistent with the transition that you mentioned?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, what we want to see is a transition that is consistent with Chad's constitution. Obviously, Chad's institutions are enshrined in its constitution. We want to see the elements of that constitution protected going forward, whether that entails a transition of power or the sanctity and integrity of Chad's institutions.

I heard Russia.

**QUESTION:** Can you talk about – a little bit about the circumstances of his death? Do you have any more details? And what about embassy staff, Americans there? What's your advice to people?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we don't have any details to share regarding the circumstances of his death. I know that Chadian authorities have spoken to this. I would need to refer you there.

In terms of what this means for the American embassy there, effective April 17th, the U.S. Embassy in Chad remains on ordered departure status. We continually adjust our posture at embassies, in consulates, missions around the world in line with local security concerns and the health situation on the ground. We are committed, even though we remain on ordered departure, to a strong, diplomatic partnership with Chad. That will not change. The charge remains in Chad and the embassy there continues to operate.

**QUESTION:** A follow-up on that?

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Before the border shut down, you were advising Americans to get on commercial flights to leave.

**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** Given that that's no longer possible, what efforts are being undertaken to help Americans still on the ground?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the embassy does remain open. We are providing services, as we always do, consular services to American citizens. The embassy has been in contact with public messages to the American community in Chad. As you mentioned, we did pass on messages to them in the context of this violence and will continue to support them to the best of our ability, given the status, the operating status of the embassy in Chad.

**QUESTION:** Can I quickly follow up? Are you planning any evacuation flights now that commercial options are no longer available?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have anything to preview at this time. Of course, the safety and security of our



citizens around the world, including those citizens who remain in Chad, are – is a paramount concern. The embassy and the department will continue to support them.

Russia.

**QUESTION:** Yes. So as Ambassador Sullivan is returning to Washington, can you just like give a broad assessment of how would the State Department characterize the current state of relationship with Russia? Are you seeing signs from Moscow of potentially deepening crisis, or contrary, do they seem to be de-escalating? And I have a follow-up.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would start by saying what we would like to see of our relationship with Moscow. And as I have said before, we would like to see a relationship with Moscow that is stable and that is predictable. Now, of course, there has been instability and unpredictability injected into this relationship, and that has been done by the actions of the Russian Federation and by President Putin. And we have spoken to those actions in the past.

And in fact, as we have said from the earliest days of this administration, we undertook a review of a discrete set of actions: the SolarWinds cyber activity, election interference, the attack on Mr. Navalny's life, the assassination attempt using a banned chemical weapon against him, the crackdown we have since seen on his supporters, and, as we have mentioned, the reports on bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan.

All of those things, of course, injected instability, unpredictability, and frankly, danger into a relationship that we would like to see predictable and stable going forward. That is why President Biden has been resolute. Even before he became President, in July of last year, he made clear that if Moscow interfered in the 2020 election, there would be a price to pay once he became President. We have seen a response in March, last month, to what the Russian Federation has done vis-a-vis Mr. Navalny and his supporters. And then last week, of course, we saw a response to what has transpired in the broader context, and that includes SolarWinds, that includes the election interference. Of course, that announcement also spoke to what has become of Mr. Navalny, his supporters, and the reports of bounties on the heads of U.S. soldiers.

So we announced a series of actions that were proportionate and that were appropriate to respond to Russia's harmful activities. Now, of course, we have heard various reports emanate from Russia about their potential response from Moscow. We have not yet received any official diplomatic correspondence providing details of the Russian Government's actions against the diplomatic mission of the United States of America in Russia. We have seen those reports, but we haven't seen any official communication from Moscow.

Of course, when we do receive any correspondence from Russian authorities, we will review that, and we reserve the right, of course, to respond as we see fit.

**QUESTION:** I didn't hear an answer, but let me quickly go to Navalny, and I'm going to leave it to others to follow up. Jake Sullivan over the weekend said there is going to be consequences if Navalny dies. Why wait? Couldn't the United States do something to avoid that outcome?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't say we've waited. I would say a couple things. On March 2nd, I believe it was, we announced a series of sanctions together with our partners in the international community to hold accountable the Russian authorities for what they had done to Mr. Navalny: the attempted assassination attempt – again, using a banned chemical weapon – the repression of his supporters who had taken to the streets seeking to do nothing more than to exercise the rights that are guaranteed to them under their very own constitution, under the Russian constitution.

So last month, we enacted a series of measures together with some of our closest allies around the world to respond to that. I would say that it is – we are certainly looking and will not hesitate to use additional policy tools should that be in our interest and in the interest of human rights in Russia in the context of Mr. Navalny going forward.

Now, we are holding Russia and Moscow accountable for anything that does happen to Mr. Navalny because they are responsible for his deteriorating health state. We call on them to allow for access to necessary and independent medical care immediately in response to these disturbing reports that his health has worsened rapidly. We have communicated this in no uncertain terms. We've done so publicly, as I have done just now, and we have done so through other channels as well. There should be no question for the Russian Government that there will be consequences if something becomes of Mr. Navalny while he's in their custody.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, Ned. Just two really brief ones. When you say you have not yet received any official communication from Moscow, that's about the retaliatory – the reciprocal expulsion of 10 Americans?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we wouldn't call it reciprocal —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, all right —

**MR PRICE:** — because, again, our actions were not escalatory.

**QUESTION:** They would – they would call it reciprocal.

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** You kicked out 10, they're going to kick out 10. But anyway, is that what you're talking about?

**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** So it doesn't have any – that's it on what you have not received communication?

**MR PRICE:** That is correct.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then secondly, you talk a lot about Navalny, which is fair enough, but there are a couple of Americans —

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** — actual American citizens. Navalny, of course, is not an American citizen. So what do you make of the situation involving Trevor Reed and the others?

**MR PRICE:** Yes. Well, we continue to be seriously concerned, as we have said on a number of occasions, regarding the treatment of Americans who are unjustly detained in Moscow. That includes Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed. Both of them traveled to Russia as tourists. They were arrested. They have been convicted without credible evidence. We expect Russia to do the right thing, and that is to authorize their release and return them to their families in the United States. Both of these individuals have been deprived of their freedom for far too long. I can tell you that the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, Ambassador Carstens, is working these cases aggressively, doing all we can to provide support not only to these individuals, but also to their families.

**QUESTION:** So that means you regard them as hostages?

**MR PRICE:** It means that we believe they are being held unjustly in Russia.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Just two on Russia. One, I mean, are you seeking clarification from Russia on what those reciprocal measures will be? How many diplomats have to leave? And what about Russian – local Russian staff who work for the U.S. embassy?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we're going to leave it to the Russian Government to determine when and how they want to relay any communication to the United States Government, whether that's through our embassy or otherwise.

When it comes to the local staff, we – and this goes back to what we have heard publicly – the Russian Government has made an unfortunate public announcement regarding locally employed staff. It goes without saying that steps to prohibit the employment of local staff members will impact our personnel in the American community in Russia. Our local staff are key members of our workforce around the world. That includes in the Russian Federation. Their contributions are important to our operations and to our bilateral mission, and they're important to our overall goal of having a relationship – seeking, I should say, a relationship with Russia that is stable and predictable.

This is a key point. We seek to have continued diplomatic access to the Russian Federation, knowing that it is in our interest, knowing that only through diplomatic channels will we be able to move in the direction of a relationship that we would like to see with Russia over time. That is precisely one of the reasons why President Biden in his call with President Putin last week held out the opportunity for a meeting between the two presidents in the coming months.

Even as we have these tremendous disagreements – and that certainly understates what we face from the Russian Federation and their malign activities, their efforts to undermine democracy, territorial integrity, to violate the human rights of their own citizens – we seek to have a constructive dialogue, and a dialogue that can work to our national interest. We made this point in the earliest days of this administration when we extended the New START agreement by five years. We didn't do that as a gift to Moscow. We didn't do that because the Russians asked for it or because the Russians wanted it. We did that because it was, and it is, in our national interest.

Something else that is in our national interest is strategic stability. It is in no one's interest to have and to see the proliferation of nuclear weapons, an untold number of nuclear weapons, that whether by accident or intentionally could unleash catastrophe on the world. And so of course that is why we would also be open to strategic stability talks in the context of any discussions with – high-level discussions with the Russian Federation.

The point remains that it is – there are certain elements that are absolutely in our national interest, and that is why we seek to have a fully functioning embassy on the ground, and why we continue to engage, as appropriate, the Russian Federation.

**QUESTION:** Two quick ones —

**QUESTION:** So – but just to follow up on that quickly, so they – you have – aside from that public announcement on local staff, you've gotten no direct notification on —

**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** — on them? Okay. And then also on the Ukraine military buildup, does the Secretary or the State Department or the administration have an official view, or do you have any thoughts on why they're doing this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to get into the motivations of the Russians. I – there may be assessments within the U.S. Government. Rather than speak to the motivations of the Russian Federation, I would speak to what we are concerned about, and what we are doing about it. And it goes without saying that we are deeply concerned by Russia's ongoing aggressive actions and rhetoric against Ukraine. As we've talked about last week when the Secretary was in Brussels meeting with his NATO counterparts, as I mentioned the week before that from here, these actions include credible reports of Russian troop buildup in occupied Crimea and around Ukraine's borders. And importantly, we are now seeing a presence of Russian troops at levels not seen since Russia's invasion in 2014, as well as continued attacks and other provocative actions by Russian-led forces at the line of control.

So let me be clear: Russia is the aggressor here. We have seen no indication whatsoever that Ukraine is engaging in provocations or escalating intentions – tensions. What we have seen is a Russian disinformation campaign designed to falsely blame Ukraine for the Kremlin's own actions. This was one of the primary discussions in Brussels last week at NATO Headquarters. It featured in every discussion the Secretary had. The NATO alliance is resolute. We are – we spoke with one voice as we continue to stand by our partner Ukraine, and of course, the Secretary last week had a meeting in Brussels to meet with Foreign Minister Kuleba, his Ukrainian counterpart. We – the Secretary relayed that message in private, made clear that the United States Government stands by Ukraine. We will continue to support the government and the people of Ukraine in the face of what appears to be intimidation.

**QUESTION:** On Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Anything else on Russia, or —

**QUESTION:** Two just quick – quick on Russia. So it sounds like – that the U.S. mission still employs Russian local staff and that hasn't changed because there hasn't been follow-up.

And then the second thing is just the strategic stability talks. Is there any way that you can talk a little bit about what the U.S. conception is of that in terms of what aspects of the Russian arsenal is the impetus behind the President wanting to talk to Putin about strategic stability?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to get ahead of any discussions, and, of course, these discussions are still hypothetical. The – as you saw from the readout from the White House yesterday, National Security Advisor Sullivan had an opportunity to speak to his counterpart. Discussions have begun about the possibility of a meeting between the two presidents in the coming weeks or months, and strategic stability, of course, is one of those areas of mutual interest. But I wouldn't want to get ahead of that right now, and you are correct about locally employed staff and their current status.

I heard Iran. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** How long will Ambassador Sullivan be back in D.C., and who specifically will he be meeting with while he's here?

**MR PRICE:** So Ambassador Sullivan, of course, is an ambassador whom the incoming administration asked to remain in his post. He very graciously agreed to remain for an initial period. He subsequently even more graciously agreed to remain indefinitely. Ambassador Sullivan, as the ambassador to Moscow, has worked in that country under very difficult, trying, I'm sure highly pressurized conditions since he arrived in Moscow in January of 2021, I believe it was. He is —

**QUESTION:** 2020.

**MR PRICE:** January 2020. You are right. Thank you. That would have been just a couple months ago. Yes, 2020.

And as I understand it, he has not had an opportunity to return to the United States for some time, including to see his family or to meet with incoming members – members of the current administration.

This, of course, is also an opportune time for the ambassador to return. He has been an integral member of the team as the new administration has sought to plot out a new and – a new approach to Moscow as we engaged in the policy planning process for the actions that have been rolled out in recent weeks, including sanctions, including what you saw last week as well. And now, with those elements behind us, this is a good time for the ambassador to come back, to undertake those consultations, to see his family, of course, importantly, and I expect he will return to Moscow in the coming weeks.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on that?

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Was that done at the request of the Russian Government, his return to the United States?

**MR PRICE:** The ambassador has not been expelled. The ambassador's – has not been ordered out of the country. The ambassador is returning now at an opportune time to undertake consultations here, to see his family, and again, I expect he'll return to Moscow in the coming weeks.

**QUESTION:** And just to follow up to – I mean, Russia had advised him to go home. So you're saying there's no link between his decision to come home and the Russian advice that he return home?

**MR PRICE:** Look, I will allow the Russian Government to speak to any advice they may have offered the ambassador. I think for his part, for our part, Ambassador Sullivan is still very much Ambassador Sullivan. He will be returning home to undertake consultations with the administration, to take a break, to see his family, and again, I fully expect he will be returning to Moscow in the coming weeks.

**QUESTION:** What about the timing?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** What about the timing? Why now?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the timing I just mentioned. I just mentioned the timing. Of course, Ambassador Sullivan has been deeply engaged in our new approach to Russia. He's been deeply engaged in some of the policy measures – in all of the policy measures, I should say, that we have spoken to in recent days and recent weeks. Of course, with the announcement late last week and the prospect of a meeting between President Biden and President Putin now weeks away, this is an opportune time for the ambassador to return home to undertake those consultations and to do what's important: to see family and perhaps even take a little bit of R&R.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) on behalf of the Russian Government, but the fact of the matter is is that Foreign Minister Lavrov and other people in the Foreign Ministry made it very clear last week that they thought it would be – that he should come back for consultations. And just can we get a straight up answer: Did that – did those comments, regardless of what you – regardless of what their motivation was – did those comments have anything to do with his decision today, earlier today, to come back? That's it.

**MR PRICE:** Ambassador Sullivan is still Ambassador Sullivan.

**QUESTION:** It's a really easy question.

**MR PRICE:** He is – no, no, no, but – but no, just —

**QUESTION:** Did the Russian – did the comments from the Russians suggesting that he – it may be a good time for him to come back and – for consultations, did that have anything to do —

**MR PRICE:** We are at an opportune moment —

**QUESTION:** — with this?

**MR PRICE:** — for a number of reasons, as I said, in part because several actions are now in the rearview mirror. The potential meeting between President Biden and President Putin is now weeks away or longer, and so this is an opportune time for the ambassador to return home.

**QUESTION:** That is not a “no,” though.

**MR PRICE:** It's an opportune time for the ambassador to return home.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) saying that it's not a no. So I don't know if it —

**QUESTION:** Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Any update on the talks in Vienna, and any comments on Iranian President Rouhani's comment? He said today that the talks in Vienna have progressed by about 60 to 70 percent. He added if Americans act within the framework of honesty – of honesty, we will achieve results in a short time.

**MR PRICE:** Well, before I get to that, I would just say generally that the talks have continued in Vienna, as we know. The United States and Iran, we have together a stated common objective of returning to mutual compliance with the JCPOA. We have been engaged constructively in a diplomatic process to achieve that goal. I think it is – continues to be fair to say that the talks have been businesslike; they have been positive. Yes, there has been some progress, but there remains a long road ahead. And I think it's fair to say that we have more road ahead of us than we do in the rearview mirror.

We welcome – and you may have seen the statement from the Joint Commission today – we welcome the Joint Commission's establishment of a third working group. The chair of the Joint Commission put out a statement on this working group, so we would refer you there for additional details. Of course, Rob Malley has been leading the delegation and he's been exploring concrete approaches concerning the steps both Iran and the United States would need to take to return to mutual compliance. Again, these discussions, they have been thorough, they have been thoughtful. Of course, they have not been without difficulty, in part because these talks are indirect, and so, of course, there are going to be logistical hurdles associated with that.

We have shared ideas among the delegations present. It's fair to say that there have been no breakthroughs, but we've always said that this process, even if it were going quite well, would not be easy or quick, and, of course, that remains true. I think you may have also seen in the statement issued by the Joint Commission that delegations are returning to their respective capitals. That will be true of Rob Malley, who will be returning here in the coming day or so for consultations in the coming

days back here in Washington.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Tomorrow, do you mean?

**MR PRICE:** So I believe the Joint Commission statement said that they would expect talks to resume in the coming week.

**QUESTION:** On Iran?

**QUESTION:** Sorry. He will be back tomorrow?

**MR PRICE:** I expect he'll be back in the next day or two.

**QUESTION:** So Iranian officials yesterday were suggesting the possibility of Iran suspending 20 percent enrichment in return for the release of some of the frozen Iranian funds abroad. There are various estimates of it: 15 billion, 20 billion. So why would the U.S. do that, which would in effect be pay Iran to stop doing things that it should not be doing under the JCPOA? How could they be suggesting that or is – the U.S. has any intention to do anything like that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I certainly wouldn't want to comment on a proposal that hasn't come from us. What I will say, and you heard National Security Advisor Sullivan this Sunday speak to what we have been very clear about from the outset, and what he said is this: He says, "What I will say is that the United States is not going to lift sanctions unless we have clarity and confidence that Iran will fully return to compliance with its obligations under the deal, that it will put a lid on its nuclear program, that will expand its breakout time, that it will reduce the level of enrichment and the scope of enrichment in its country. And until we have confidence in all those things, the United States is not going to make any concessions." That remains true today.

**QUESTION:** If you have confidence, then, could this be a suggestion that you can entertain?

**MR PRICE:** I am certainly not going to entertain any suggestions from the podium.

**QUESTION:** Do you expect Malley to go back when the – next week if the talks reconvene?

**MR PRICE:** I certainly expect Rob to continue to lead the delegation, and I expect he'll be going back at the appropriate time. The Joint Commission statement said that the talks would resume in the coming week.

**QUESTION:** Are you saying – Jake's statement, you're saying – the clarity and confidence of Iran – that Iran will go back – is this at all saying that – maybe this is reading tea leaves a bit, but is this at all (inaudible) with what was said before? Previously, the U.S. was saying that Iran should come back into compliance. Does this mean if just that there's confidence in it, that if there's a roadmap for it, that the U.S. could lift sanctions?

**MR PRICE:** That absolutely remains our position. Iran must come back into compliance. The name of the game since even before this administration, the proposal and proposition that President Biden put on the table, was compliance for compliance. That remains where we are today. What we have always said, though, is that we are not going to offer unilateral gestures or unilateral concessions. Our goal is to have Iran back into compliance, and what that means is to have Iran once again subject to the most stringent verification and monitoring regime ever negotiated. Because again, our objective – the objective of our allies and partners in all of this, including in the case of the P5+1, a couple

partners with whom we always don't see eye to eye, to put it – to once again understate it – is to ensure that Iran can never develop a nuclear weapon. That's precisely what the JCPOA does. That's precisely why the proposition on the table for some months now has been compliance for compliance.

**QUESTION:** Ned, but —

**QUESTION:** But the —

**QUESTION:** Do you agree with President Rouhani that you made 60 to 70 percent —

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't want to put a number on it. Again, the road ahead remains long. There will be, I am sure, difficult moments. We are – we certainly have a ways to go. I think what I said before is accurate, that we probably have more road ahead of us than we do behind us at this stage.

**QUESTION:** Does that mean that you guys have abandoned the 12 demands that Secretary Pompeo made back —

**MR PRICE:** The 12 demands, Matt, were part of the maximum pressure campaign. It is certainly true that we have seen a real-life experiment when it comes to the maximum —

**QUESTION:** You still want them to do those —

**MR PRICE:** When it comes to the maximum pressure campaign. And you look at the results of that experiment compared to what maximum pressure was supposed to deliver. It was supposed to deliver a better deal, a stronger deal, a longer deal with Iran. It was supposed to cow Iran and its proxies. It was supposed to bring us together with our allies and partners around the world.

In fact, all of those things, the opposite has come true. Under the previous administration, we got nowhere closer to a better deal. There was always the myth of the better deal. And in fact, Iran accelerated its nuclear program and enacted measures that would have been prohibited under the JCPOA. Of course, its proxies —

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) Do the 12 – do the 12 demands still stand?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** Do you still want them to do those 12 things or not?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, maximum pressure has proved to be an inappropriate course given what we have seen from the real-life experiment over the past several years.

**QUESTION:** Okay, but you just said hanging out there all the time in the previous administration was the myth of a better deal. Isn't that what you guys are looking for?

**MR PRICE:** The myth of a better deal that maximum pressure would bring. And we have —

**QUESTION:** Okay, you guys think you can get a better deal without any pressure?

**MR PRICE:** We – Matt —

**QUESTION:** What's – okay, but just tell me. I mean, you still think you can get a better deal, right? That's your idea.

**MR PRICE:** Our goal —



**QUESTION:** Or lengthen – lengthen and strengthen, right? That’s a better deal.

**MR PRICE:** Our goal – our goal first and foremost to focus on compliance for compliance. That is what the team in Vienna is focused on right now. They are focused on that right now because compliance on the part of Iran would mean that Iran would once again be subject to the strictest verification and monitoring regime ever negotiated.

Now, we have spoken to that as a necessary but not sufficient step. We do remain from there focused on lengthening and strengthening the provisions of that deal, and from there, working on addressing other areas of malign Iranian behavior, whether it is Iran’s ballistic missile program, whether it is its support for terrorism, whether it is its egregious violations of human rights. That – those latter areas are certainly areas that – where we think we have a good deal of partnership and seek to leverage cooperation with our allies and partners, including our partners in the region.

Yes. Let’s go where we haven’t gone yet. Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Can I talk about the conversations with Brazil about the climate summit that will happen this week? In a letter to President Biden, the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, committed to ending illegal deforestation by 2030, but we also know that the U.S. Government is saying that it would like to see Brazil showing more than just words, and that it is necessary to engage in immediate actions that produce tangible results. So what would be those immediate actions that the U.S. is expecting from Brazil during the summit?

And a second question, if I may: The Brazilian Government is asking for resources to support the environmental protection. Should we expect from the U.S. any financial support or funds for the Amazon rainforest, for example?

**MR PRICE:** Well, to your first question, this is something that special envoy – Special Presidential Envoy Kerry spoke to. I believe he issued a tweet just a few days ago speaking to President Bolsonaro’s recommitment to eliminating illegal deforestation. He called it “important.” He said that “We look forward to immediate actions and engagement with indigenous populations and civil society so this announcement can deliver tangible results.” Of course, we note Brazil’s commitment to ending that deforestation by 2030. We want to see very clear and tangible steps to increase effective enforcement, and a political signal that illegal deforestation and encroachment won’t be tolerated. Tackling the climate crisis requires global partnerships with big impacts, and, of course, Brazil will be a key partner here in finding and implementing solutions to this crisis. Brazil is one of the world’s largest economies and a regional leader. It has a responsibility to lead, and we look forward to Brazil’s participation in the upcoming climate summit.

Now, in terms of the funding, to your second question, we have continued to focus our conversation around steps that need to be taken to halt that illegal deforestation – the subject of the recommitment from President Bolsonaro – rather than looking at specific funding streams, but that’s been the focus so far.

**QUESTION:** Is there a specific target for decreasing deforestation this year, for example, that the U.S. would like to see, to consider there is a concrete step from Brazil?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I’m going to let Secretary Kerry’s office speak to this. I think when it comes to what we would like to see, we would like to see very clear, tangible steps to increase effective enforcement, and a political signal that illegal deforestation encroachment won’t be tolerated going forward.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** On Afghanistan? Sure.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Is – are the talks in Istanbul now off? Can you just give us an update on where things are diplomatically? And are you worried at all about that, Taliban not going there?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to the talks in Istanbul, this gets to the point that from the various early – very earliest days of the Biden administration, we have recognized, number one, that there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, and only through a political settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire will we be able to support a resolution that brings security, stability, and prosperity to the people of Afghanistan. The conference in Istanbul is part of that broader effort, that broader diplomatic engagement. We are grateful to the hosts – Turkey, Qatar, and the UN – for convening it. I would need to refer to them when it comes to the current status of that timing of it or timing of it going forward.

But what I will say more broadly is that our diplomatic efforts have spanned months now. Special Ambassador Khalilzad has spent the better part of two months in the region, whether it's Doha, whether it's Kabul, whether it's Islamabad – of course, he was in Moscow for the extended Troika – and throughout the region, seeking not only to achieve progress between the Afghan parties, but also, again, to bring in the international community in a way that several of these countries have not been brought in before.

We recognize – and I can tell you from discussions with President Ghani last week in Kabul that the Afghan Government recognizes – that there are countries in the region, and in some cases even slightly beyond, that have a role to play, a supporting role to play in the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process. We want to see the international community and many of these countries serve as effective and constructive stakeholders in this, supporting and lending assistance to the process that we hope and we have invested in to bring about a political settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire going forward.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** He spent a lot longer than just two months. (Laughter.) In fact, I think the Qataris might be giving him honorary citizenship. He's been over there for the last two years, so like – but speaking of people who have been in places for a long time, do you guys have anything to say about Raul Castro's retirement, resignation? He's been a fixture of the Cuban Government for longer than I've been alive, for longer than you've been alive —

**MR PRICE:** I —

**QUESTION:** — I think probably everybody in this room has been alive.

**MR PRICE:** I appreciate the transition there. What I would say is, of course, it is for the Cuban people to speak to the results of the Cuban party congress. We have spoken about our review of our Cuba policy, which remains ongoing, but we know, of course, that will be governed by two principles. First, support for democracy and human rights will be at the core of those efforts, and we will seek to empower the Cuban people to determine their own future. And second, Americans, as we've said, are – tend to be the best ambassadors for freedom in Cuba. Don't have anything to add about the change that has been announced. Again, it's for the Cuban people to speak to the results of their party congress.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Yep.

**QUESTION:** Ned, we've known a little bit about where some of the senior officials came down on the decision to withdraw. It's become reported, about General Milley's position and Secretary Austin's position. Where did Secretary Blinken come down on the decision to withdraw by September 11th?

**MR PRICE:** Look, I think as we have said, as the White House has said, as the Pentagon has said, this was a rigorous process; it was an inclusive process; it was a process that certainly wasn't whitewashed. President Biden was determined that he wanted all of the inputs, he wanted the unvarnished truth. He wanted the unvarnished assessments, knowing that any effort to put spin on the ball ultimately would not redound well, either on the people of Afghanistan, the Government of Afghanistan, or the American people and our interests there, and of course, the significant investment that the American people have made in Afghanistan over the past 20 years in terms of blood, in terms of treasure.

What Secretary Blinken has been focused on since his earliest days in this office has been seeking to support the Afghan parties as we seek to advance a diplomatic solution and a comprehensive ceasefire, and again, to bring in the international community. Secretary Blinken has had a number of opportunities to speak to NATO Allies, other regional players, including about Afghanistan. And we have consulted closely and he has consulted closely with his counterparts around the world.

Of course, we went to Brussels in March. We went – we returned just a few weeks later on the eve of the President's announcement. That has all been part and parcel of our efforts not only to – in the case of NATO – speak and to act with one alliance voice, but also in the broader sense to ensure that this is an effort that enjoys the support of stakeholders throughout the region. Because again, recognizing that there are countries in the region, slightly beyond, that do and should have a constructive role to play to support the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process, that's been our focus at the State Department. That will be our focus going forward.

**QUESTION:** Follow-up, Afghanistan?

**QUESTION:** But if Blinken had opposed this, would you tell us?

**MR PRICE:** (Laughter.) I would probably not read out any internal deliberations. That's just now what we do.

**QUESTION:** On the U.S. assistance to the Palestinians, there are criticism —

**QUESTION:** Wait. Can I go on Afghanistan? Before we move?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** You can.

**QUESTION:** I'm sorry. Thank you. We just put out reporting that Afghan peace conference in Turkey now postponed over non-participation by Taliban. It just hit out, hit the wire. What's your response?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you're telling me something that apparently just hit the wire, so what I would do is refer you to the host. Again, this is part and parcel of a broader diplomatic process. This is a process that has been ongoing in Doha for quite some time now. Ambassador Khalilzad, during this course of this administration, has spent the brunt of his time traveling, attempting to bring the parties together —

**QUESTION:** How is that diplomatic process going to continue if this conference is postponed?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I would fully expect that broader diplomatic efforts will continue. I would, again,

refer you to the hosts for any details on when a conference in Istanbul may take place going forward. But again, we've always been very clear. Istanbul was not a replacement for Doha. It was not intended to subsume the broader diplomatic effort. That is an effort that continues to be ongoing and it's an effort where we will continue to invest our resources, our political heft, knowing again that only through diplomacy, only through a political settlement, an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led process, will we be able to help support bringing peace, stability, and security to the people of Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Can I do one more follow-up on Afghanistan? Has there been a decision on the diplomatic presence for future U.S. footprint in Afghanistan? Is that something Secretary Blinken will be able to tell members of Congress today?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Secretary Blinken is up on the Hill today. He is briefing all members of the House and the Senate, together with several of his counterparts, on our approach to Afghanistan going forward. What we have said and what President Biden announced last week is that by later this year, by September, all American service members will be out of Afghanistan except for those required for the continued operation of our embassy in Kabul. We believe it is important to continue the partnership between the United States and the Afghan Government as well as the Afghan people.

That's precisely why within hours of President Biden's announcement, Secretary Blinken and President Biden, of course, thought it important for Secretary Blinken and his team to get on a plane, to go directly to Kabul, to meet with President Ghani, to meet with Chairman Abdullah, and to meet with representatives of civil society. And of course, while there, we had a very interesting and I think time well spent, a roundtable with members of Afghan civil society, all but one of whom were women – an attorney, a mayor, a member of parliament, a reporter, a human rights advocate – to ensure that we sent a very strong signal to this small but important cross-section of the Afghan people that the United States will continue that partnership. And of course, a diplomatic relationship, a continuing diplomatic relationship with Afghanistan, is part and parcel of that, and it's something we will expect to see going forward.

**QUESTION:** So as it regards the status of the Istanbul conference, your short answer is that's nobody's business but the Turks?

**MR PRICE:** No, I don't believe I said anything of the sort.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) it's a joke.

**MR PRICE:** I see. Okay. Explain it to me afterwards.

Yes, Said.

**QUESTION:** Michel. There are criticisms for the U.S. renewal of funding to UNRWA and calls for its reform. Do you take these calls or those concerns seriously, and are you planning to do anything with the UNRWA?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we spoke to this when we announced our resumption of funding to UNRWA a couple weeks ago now, and I made the broader point at the time that our disposition is that when we engage, when we are back at the table, the United States can have influence that we otherwise wouldn't have. And you've seen that in any number of other contexts. We rejoined the World Health – we re-engaged with the World Health Organization on day one of this administration. We have announced our observer status with the Human Rights Council and announced our intention to seek a seat on the council going forward. Of course, the Paris Agreement, any number of other international bodies and institutions.

And that's true of UNRWA, too. In our communication with UNRWA prior to the announcement, UNRWA made firm commitments to the United States on the issues of transparency, of accountability, and neutrality in all of its operations. The commitment to neutrality, importantly, includes zero tolerance for racism, discrimination, and anti-Semitism. UNRWA's head commissioner, in fact, General Philippe Lazzarini, who was newly appointed just last year, conveyed his utmost commitment to these very same principles.

In the months ahead, looking forward, we plan to negotiate a new framework with UNRWA in which the principles of transparency, accountability, and neutrality will again be affirmed. I made the point when we were speaking to our re-engagement with UNRWA just a couple weeks ago that even when the United States was not supporting UNRWA, the relationship with UNRWA remained. We were in the room under the previous administration and in the first couple months of this administration, but we weren't at the table. By re-engaging, by re-supporting and reaffirming our support for UNRWA, we are now back at the table; we are in a position to secure those commitments from UNRWA's leadership, and we are in a position to see to it that those commitments are upheld. We can hold the commissioner general and now UNRWA accountable to these commitments since we are now back at the table. And with our seat at the table restored, along with some of our key allies and partners, many of whom are major donors – that includes the Japanese, Germany, Norway, the UK, the EU, among others – we'll once again have a position to advocate so that our assistance is used in ways that not only meet our interests but are consistent with our values.

So I think it's fair to say that if anyone tells you that the United States has not secured any sort of commitments from UNRWA on these core issues – again, that includes accountability, it includes transparency, it includes neutrality – they are simply wrong. We have very solid commitments, and we will make them even more solid in the months ahead.

We'll take a final question. Lalit.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I have two questions on India and COVID. Adar Poonawalla, who is the CEO of Serum Institute, has urged the U.S. and President Biden in particular to lift the ban on export of certain raw materials which are used in manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines in India. But Serum Institute – Serum Institute, as you know, is the world's largest manufacturer of vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines, and any delay in that might cause – impact the vaccination process not only in India but globally as well. What do you have to say on that part?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we wouldn't want to weigh in on that from here. I would refer you to USTR as well as the White House, and I believe the White House press secretary has spoken to this as recently as yesterday.

What I would say more broadly is that President Biden, Secretary Blinken, they're deeply focused on the issue of expanding global vaccination, manufacturing, and delivery – all of which will be critical to ending the pandemic. Secretary Blinken consistently makes the point that as long as the virus is out of control, is uncontained anywhere around the world, whether that is here in the United States, whether that is elsewhere, it continues to present a risk to the American people.

So of course, first and foremost, our priority is ensuring the distribution of a safe and effective vaccine to millions of Americans, to all Americans who are able to take advantage of it. But we also know that we need to continue to demonstrate that leadership when it comes to countries beyond our borders, and that's precisely what we've done. As I mentioned before, we've re-engaged the WHO; we've committed \$2 billion to COVAX, another \$2 billion over time; we've spoken to our partnership with Canada and Mexico when it comes to vaccines, and we've spoken to the arrangement we have with the Quad and the increased production capacity that that will bring about.

It is not only in our interest to ensure that the American people are vaccinated, the other point I would make is that the rest of the world also has an interest in seeing to it that the American people are vaccinated and that the virus is brought under control here. I don't have to tell you that this country has suffered tremendously. We have more deaths than any other country around the world, more than 550,000 at this point, tens of millions of cases. So again, as long as the virus is uncontrolled anywhere, it is a threat to people everywhere. That is true in the United States; that is true in countries around the world, and it's precisely why we're taking this approach.

**QUESTION:** Did this issue come up when Secretary Blinken spoke to India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar yesterday?

**MR PRICE:** So we issued a readout of that call. They did discuss COVID, but I wouldn't want to go beyond that readout.

**QUESTION:** One more question. India is experiencing a second wave of COVID spread. It's very serious right now. CDC yesterday issued some kind of travel advisory asking all Americans not to travel to India. Is the U.S. considering any kind of restrictions on travel from India to the U.S.?

**MR PRICE:** Restrictions on travel from India to the U.S.? Of course, there are protocols in place requiring testing for international travel. What is true is that we are tracking the course of the COVID outbreak in India very closely. As I mentioned before, Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Jaishankar did discuss it yesterday. It is also the case that whether it's India, whether it is any other country, we are committed to doing what we can both at the present and going forward to see to it that this virus is brought under control. And I've spoke, again, of our engagement with the WHO, our funding to COVAX, the Quad arrangement that, of course, implicates what we're seeing in India and what we've done in our own hemisphere as well.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you very much.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:20 p.m.)

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## [Briefing with Senior State Department Official On Recent U.S. Engagement in Vienna Regarding the JCPOA](#)

04/21/2021 08:34 PM EDT

Via Teleconference

**MODERATOR:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thanks very much for joining this call. We wanted to take an opportunity to provide an update on the diplomacy that has been ongoing in Vienna. As a reminder, this call is on background. It is also embargoed until the conclusion of the call. Just for your awareness and not for reporting, our speaker today is . So again, you can refer to him as a senior State Department official, and what you hear will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call.

With that, I will turn it over to our speaker. Go ahead.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thanks, . So for those of you who were on the briefing about a week ago, I want to say something that shouldn't be surprising, which is that what you're going to hear today is not radically different from what you heard then. That's because talks between the P5+1 and Iran have always been a slow process, made all the slower this time by the fact that we're not talking directly to Iran and because the only thing that's happened since then has been six days of the second round of what is likely to be a multi-round negotiation.

So we made some progress, but we're not in a situation that's radically different from where we were at the conclusion of round one. I'll make a few points on that.

First, what we did achieve is greater clarification. In other words, I think the United States has a better idea of what it will need to do to come back into full compliance with the JCPOA, and Iran has a better idea of what it will need to do to come back into compliance with the JCPOA.

The next point is that clarification doesn't necessarily mean consensus. There still are disagreements and, in some cases, pretty important ones on our respective views about what is required to – what is meant by a return to full compliance. And the distance that remains to be traveled is greater than the distance that we've traveled so far. So we're not near the conclusion of these negotiations. The outcome is still uncertain. We've made some progress. The talks have been business-like, productive, but with still many differences that would need to be overcome.

Two last points. First, our view remains that if we can come back into a mutual compliance with the JCPOA, we do that, as the President has said many times, as a platform from which we would like to discuss a longer, stronger, broader set of understandings with Iran. And second, as in all of these conversations indirect we have with – indirect conversations we have with Iran, we always insist on the necessity of releasing our four wrongfully detained citizens. That was the case again during this round and it will be true anytime we have contact with the Iranians, whether it's about the nuclear deal or not.

So with that, I'm happy to take your questions.



**OPERATOR:** Ladies and gentlemen, if you'd like to ask a question, please press 1 then 0 on your telephone keypad. You may withdraw your question at any time by repeating the 1-0 command. If you're using a speakerphone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, if you have a question, you may press 1 and then 0 at this time. And one moment for the first question.

**MODERATOR:** Great. We'll start with the line of Nick Wadhams, please.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is now open.

**QUESTION:** Hey, thanks very much. , could you offer a little more detail on the sanctions you're prepared to lift? There are reports out there obviously from *The Wall Street Journal* that you're willing to lift the terror sanctions on Iran's Central Bank, its national oil and tanker companies. Could you shed some light into that in light of, obviously, your previous remarks that some sanctions were not applied on the nuclear program and, thus, were under review? And also, are you any closer on a sense of sequencing? Could there be a scenario where both sides just re-enter the deal at the exact same time and you forgo the previous demand that Iran come back into compliance before you do? Thanks.

And you may be muted.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Sorry. Thanks, Nick. I think there have been many reports and there will be many reports as to who has said what during these talks, and we're not going to comment on each and every one of them. As I said, it's already a complicated negotiation enough without adding to the complexity by negotiating it in public.

What I will say, and as I said last time, but this time we have gone into more detail is that we have provided Iran with a number of examples of the kind of sanctions that we believe we would need to lift in order to come back into compliance, and the sanctions that we believe we would not need to lift and we would not lift as part of a return into compliance with the JCPOA.

And then a third category, which are the difficult cases for – difficult cases because this is a complex process, but also because the Trump administration deliberately and avowedly imposed sanctions by invoking labels – terrorism labels and other labels even though it was done purely for the purpose of preventing or hindering a return to the – compliance with the JCPOA. So that has made it more difficult. We have to go through every sanction to make sure whether – to look at whether they were legitimately or not legitimately imposed.

So I'm not going to get into precisely the examples that we gave, but we gave Iran examples of the three categories that I mentioned.

On sequencing, there has not been much of a discussion because we're still at the – in the process of describing and detailing the steps that each side is going to have to take. We have not gotten into the discussion of sequencing. What we can say is that a sequence in which the U.S. does everything before Iran does nothing is not an acceptable sequence. We made that clear to Iran. And beyond that, we're prepared and we're open to different kinds of sequencing which meet our interests, which is to see both sides in full compliance and not us coming into full compliance before Iran has acted.

**MODERATOR:** Can we go to the line of Farnaz Fassihi?

**OPERATOR:** What was that name again? I apologize.

**MODERATOR:** Farnaz Fassihi.

**OPERATOR:** Okay, your line is now open. Thank you, sir.

**QUESTION:** Hello?

**MODERATOR:** Yes, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Okay. The Iranians were saying that they're insisting on getting a written guarantee from the U.S. that a future administration will not abandon the deal. How does that look to you and is this negotiable? They're also insisting on having some time to verify sanctions relief before they decrease enriching uranium or turn the switch off. How does that look? That would – at least the optics of it would seem like the U.S. is returning first.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So thanks, Farnaz. So on the question of a written guarantee, I think it's clear there is no such thing as a guarantee. This is a political understanding in which – and it was clear at the time of the JCPOA that it is the sovereign right of all participants to decide whether they want to maintain their participation or not. We – I think the Biden administration, if it decides – if it reaches an understanding with Iran and the other P5+1 to come back into compliance with the deal, it would be with the intent of acting in good faith and not of departing the deal for no good – for no good reason. But there is no such thing as a guarantee and I think, again, we have made that clear to Iran that it's not something that the U.S. can or will give. This is a political understanding that relies on the good faith of all actors. Iran has the experience, and understandably a – not a very pleasant one, of the U.S. withdrawing unilaterally from the deal, but certainly the Biden administration's intent if it were to come back into compliance would be to act in good faith if Iran did the same. As for verifying the sanctions, I mean, if – as we've said, if Iran's position is that the United States needs to lift all sanctions to come back into compliance, then Iran would verify that only then would Iran take action. That's not a sequence that we could accept and, frankly, I don't think it's a sequence that the other participants in the JCPOA believes is a reasonable one. There are many other forms of sequencing that one could discuss, and we're open to that, but we're not going to accept a process in which the U.S. acts first and removes all of the sanctions that it is committed to removing before Iran does anything.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to the line of Michele Kelemen.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is now open, Ms. Kelemen.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. In your consultations back here, will you be talking to members of Congress about what sanctions are on the table? Are there any plans for small kind of reciprocal gestures, building confidence? Or is the plan – is the conversation just about both sides going back in all at once? And then on – and then you mentioned the detainees. I wonder if you've heard – has there been any progress on that topic?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So, Michele, on the on the question of whether there'd be confidence-building steps or full compliance, I think, as you know, several weeks ago, Iran had expressed an interest in first steps that each side could take. That's no longer on the agenda. At this point, the discussions taking place in Vienna are about full compliance for full compliance, and that's the discussions that we're engaged in. So not necessarily going to rule anything out, but I think at this point the discussions that all the participants are engaged in are what the U.S. would need to do to come into full compliance and what Iran would need to do to come into full compliance.

On the detainees, all I will say about that is that we have pressed very hard, we have an indirect channel of communication with the Iranians on it, and we very much hope that we'll be able to resolve it because it's an imperative and it is – as we said many times, it is unconscionable that Iran would hold American citizens for no reason other than the fact that they're American, because they have not done anything wrong and Iran knows that.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to the line of Arshad Mohammed.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is now open.

**QUESTION:** Two things. One, European diplomats have been talking about their hope to have something concrete in hand by mid-May. And as you know, Iranian officials have also been pushing this, pointing to the expiration of their agreement with the IAEA. One, do you think it is even remotely conceivable that you could have some kind of an agreement in place within a month? And two, do you see any reason to push hard for that given that that deadline or marker is entirely self-imposed by the Iranians, given their legislation and then their deal with the IAEA? And I guess the last thing would be: What can you say about the nature of the pretty significant or pretty important differences that remain?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So Arshad, I'd say, on the question of timing, it's a position that we've taken from the outset that we're not going to drag our feet. As – the moment there's an understanding between us, Iran, the other P5+1 is the moment that there'll be an understanding that we – that will be official. But before that time, we're not going to rush in order to meet a deadline. We will be dictated by whether we think the understandings that have been reached, if they are reached, are satisfactory. And I think that's the – that's what we need to do.

There is the IAEA technical understanding with Iran. There are also the Iranian elections. This is something that commentators bring up as reasons to move by mid-May. Again, if we can get it by mid-May – and I'm not – we're certainly not going to rule that out. If we can make enough progress, we'll make enough progress by the time it's made. And it may be within weeks; it may not be within weeks. But our hope is to get it as soon as possible, not at the expense of getting a deal that's wrong the kind of deal for us. So we'll keep saying that. We're not going to (inaudible) anything down. We'll go as fast as we can. But we're not going to go fast at the expense of the solidity of the understanding that we're seeking to reach.

As for the nature of the differences, well, the differences are very simply which sanctions we – both sides believe, Iran and the U.S. believe are going to need to be lifted in order for us to be back in full compliance with (inaudible). And what steps Iran is going to have to take to come back into compliance with its nuclear obligations, there certainly is no (inaudible) there either. So we're hoping that Iran will understand that the goal here is to come back into compliance with the JCPOA, all of the JCPOA, and nothing but the JCPOA, which means that demands that the United States lift sanctions that are consistent with the JCPOA should not be part of this conversation. And Iran – if Iran thinks or if Iran hopes that it could do less than come back into compliance with its nuclear obligations under the JCPOA, that won't work either. So we're prepared to do everything that we need to do to be back in full compliance with the – with the deal, and we hope that Iran will do the same.

**MODERATOR:** Go to the line of Kylie Atwood.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is now open.

**QUESTION:** Hello, thank you for doing the call. I am wondering – the Iranians have also said that they must be the ones who are the arbiters to judge and verify if the lifted U.S. sanctions are actually working and benefiting them in the way that they want them to. Does the U.S. accept that that judgment should be made by the Iranians, or is there an outside party that should be judging?

And then my second question is: How long does the U.S. believe it would take to actually lift the sanctions that you guys decide are going to be lifted? I know this is a tricky process, so it can't happen overnight. Once the decision is made, how long does it take? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So on the first question, I'm not – it's not entirely clear what that means. We will lift the sanctions and we'll do our part. We'll meet our obligation. It's not a matter of judging whether we've lifted the sanctions. We will have lifted the sanctions and Iran will have to then decide if it does not want to – if it doesn't believe that its needs are being met and it wants to leave the deal, then it will leave the deal and we could do the same. That's the nature of this understanding. But we will meet our obligation lifting the sanctions as we did in 2016, and we believe that that's what the JCPOA requires.

How long it will take – it wouldn't take that long, but I don't want to get – I can't get into the details. As you said, it's complex, but we don't think this is something that would be very time-consuming. Once we make the decision to lift the sanctions, it's something we believe we could execute relatively quickly.

**MODERATOR:** We'll to Mohammed Elehad.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is now open, sir.

**MODERATOR:** Mohammed —

**OPERATOR:** Mr. Elehad?

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Can you hear me, please?

**MODERATOR:** Yes, we can.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. There are some media reports that South Korea released around \$30 million to Iran as part of the unfrozen assets there. Do you have any confirmation about that, sir? Thank you so much.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So we have not taken any action regarding the South Korean assets. We see reports floating every now and then, but we have not taken any action regarding those assets.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Barak Ravid.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible), for doing this.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is now open.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks for doing this. Two questions. First, about this third category of sanctions, the sanctions that were imposed by the Trump administration on the nuclear deal but under terror designations or human rights, what's the – in comparison to the two other groups of sanctions, how many of the sanctions are under this group, under the third category?

And second question: Israeli officials are saying that they feel that the U.S. is not transparent enough with them about which sanctions that are non-nuclear-related it's planning on removing as part of the talks with Iran. What do you say about that?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So I'm not going to give numbers of the kind of sanctions. As I said, the third category is the one that is more ambiguous in terms of our – our – I mean, we have to look into whether we conclude in the end that they are – whether the sanctions will consist – whether lifting the sanctions is necessary in order to come back into the JCPOA or not, and for that we have to consider a number of factors, including the reality that the Trump administration, as I said earlier, professed to be imposing these – this wall of sanctions in order to prevent a return to

the JCPOA. So that's one of the considerations. It's not the only one, of course, but we are going to looking into – we're looking into those.

I believe we have had numerous conversations with Israeli officials before and after every round of talks. We certainly will have one again. We believe we've been transparent. We've been in the process of – as I said, of looking into which sanctions we would – we believe would need to be lifted as part of the return to the JCPOA. But we've been very transparent that we believe it's the – it's sanctions that we need to lift to be consistent with the – sanctions that are required for a return to the JCPOA and for Iran benefiting from what a return to the JCPOA would mean. And I think we've said that explicitly to the Israelis. We've discussed it. We'll discuss it at further length this week and coming out of these talks. So we intend to be as transparent as we can. We know there's a disagreement with Israel's perspective and we respect that. We'll try to be as transparent as we can about how we see things and how we want to go and listen to their perspective as well.

**MODERATOR:** We'll take a couple final questions. We'll go to Nadia Bilbassy.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is still open.

**QUESTION:** You know there are worries among your allies in the region that the money that Iran gets from any sanction relief might go actually to support terrorist organizations and cause more havoc in the Middle East. Is there kind of any verification that you can impose to make sure that this money won't go to people like Hizballah and the like?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So first, thanks for the question, because I wanted to say, obviously, we do consult and discuss with our Israeli allies, but we also are very transparent with our partners as we talk to them regularly, again, both before and sometimes during and after every round of talks, and we intend to continue doing that.

As for your specific question, first of all, our view is that the situation only became worse from their perspective – from our perspective and their perspective during the years of maximum pressure. Those are the years when the activities – Iran's activities, Iran's direct activities against some of our Gulf partners, the direct attacks against Saudi Arabia, those grew during the period of maximum pressure. So there's no direct correlation between lifting of sanctions and Iran's conduct in the region. I think that's been proven by simply the experience of the last four and more years.

We do – we certainly intend to continue to pressure Iran and to counter their activities in the region that are destabilizing and that are going after our interests or the interests of our partners. And we also, of course, retain sanctions on Hizballah and other such organizations and the ability to go after any support that is given to them. Those sanctions, of course, will remain in place.

So we understand that what – that lifting sanctions is something that will have to come from a return – lifting of some sanctions will have to come from a return to the JCPOA, but that doesn't mean that we can't continue to counter Iranian activities in the region that are destabilizing and that go against our interests or those of our partners or allies in the region.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to the line of Matt Lee.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to try to dig down a little bit into the three baskets of sanctions, recognizing that you didn't want to say how many are actually in the third category. But if we look at all three categories – the ones that you would need to lift, the ones that you wouldn't need to lift, and then this third category – can you give a rough percentage as to – out of 100 percent of the sanctions that would be – like, what percent fall into each category? And even if you can't do that, is there a rough agreement between you guys, or do you understand that there's a rough agreement between you and

the Iranians on the first two baskets? Or is that still something that needs to be decided?

Secondly, would – forgetting about who was the arbiter of whether the sanctions relief is actually effective or not, is this administration prepared, like the Obama administration was, to go out and do these, for lack of a better word, road shows where you try to encourage other countries and other – and businesses and other countries to do business with Iran? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So Matt, yeah, no, I'm not going to give a percentage, partly because this is still a work in progress, so we are not – we're not about to give numbers. And we have to be in agreement for what these baskets are. There's no agreement with Iran on anything at this point, and that's – I'm not saying that as a measure of pessimism, but it's the nature of these talks that the parties are not going to agree to anything until they see the full – the full picture. So it's not a surprise at this point that there's no agreement on any of the categories at this point. These are discussions in which ideas are being exchanged, but there's been nothing at this point that I would point to and say, "Here's something that's been agreed that we could put to the side." Nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed. I think that's clearly the principle behind these talks.

And I'm sorry, I forgot your – oh, your other question about – I'm not going to begin to talk about what we will do if and when we reach an understanding. I think the first step is to get there and we're not there yet. I mean, we hope we'll get there, but we – there's certainly no certainty, and we can then figure out what we will – what steps each side will take to make sure that their commitments are fully implemented.

**MODERATOR:** We'll take a final question from Francesco Fontemaggi.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is now open.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thank you. Thank you, and . I want to just to go a little bit more into the process. When you said that you shared examples of the sanctions that you can lift, the ones that you'd want to lift and the ones that are in between, have you shared the full list of the sanctions that you're ready to lift and the ones you are not ready to lift or just examples? And also on the second thing, when Jake Sullivan said last Sunday that you won't lift any sanctions until the U.S. has the assurance that Iran is ready to go back to compliance, is that a fair description of the stance you're defending in Vienna? I mean not having the compliance but the assurance of this compliance. Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So I'm going to start with your last question because we've had – as you know, I mean, there's been many questions about sequence and we're not ready to discuss that yet, whether directly – certainly not – but even indirectly. The sequence has not been the focus of the discussions. The focus of the discussion is on defining the steps that both sides need to take.

So there are many ways of choreographing this. There are many ways that one could do it. We know what we think would be unacceptable for us, which is that we do everything first, and then Iran acts, and we assume that it would be unacceptable for Iran to do everything first and then the U.S. acts. In between, there are many ways and many, many possibilities that we could consider.

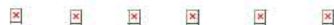
As to your first question, which is what we have provided with – what we have provided Iran with, we have given them many examples. I'm not going to get into the details, but I think they have a pretty clear sense at this point of our understanding, of our view about the sanctions that we're going to have to lift and those that we don't think we need to – we would not lift. And then as we said, there's some issues that we're still working through in our own system because this is, as I said, a very complicated assessment. There's no – it's not as if – when the former administration reimposed sanctions, they labeled them: 'These are sanctions that are consistent with the JCPOA, and these are the kind of

sanctions that are not consistent with the JCPOA.' So it is a much more difficult work that we are doing to try to understand the nature of the sanctions and on what basis they were imposed.

**MODERATOR:** Well, thanks very much, everyone. Just a reminder, this call is on background to a senior State Department official. And the embargo is now lifted. Thanks for joining.

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 22, 2021](#)

*04/22/2021 07:00 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:43 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Happy Earth Day, everyone. With that in mind, just a couple things at the top. I'll start on that subject.

We are grateful to each and every leader who has participated in today's Leaders Summit on Climate. And of course, we look forward to the summit's continuation tomorrow.

I think President Biden's announcement speaks for itself: The United States has put forward a more ambitious target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 50 to 52 percent below the 2005 levels by 2030.

I do want to highlight just a few encouraging announcements by several key allies. With ambitious new 2030 commitments by Japan and Canada, and the European Union's move to put their 2030 target into law, and the UK's new pace-setting 2035 goal, more than half of the world's economy is now committed to the pace of emission reductions required globally to keep a 1.5 degree Celsius future within reach. And we know this coalition is growing – including with South Korea's newly announced commitment that it will strengthen its 2030 target.

We saw a variety of other announcements today about the increasing scope and pace of action around the world. For example, Argentina announced an increase in its nationally determined contribution, or NDC, as well as new steps to make it happen, including scaling renewables and addressing deforestation as well as methane pollution. India is formally stepping up its commitment to accelerate renewable energy deployment. South Africa is strengthening its own NDC. The Republic of Korea announced an end to external coal finance. And countries are moving in the right direction, but of course, we know there is more to do.

Again, we are grateful to each nation that has contributed to the summit's success thus far and, most importantly, we look forward to working with all nations to increase ambition during this decade of action to put the world on a sustainable path towards climate reduction.

Next, April 25th will mark the 32nd birthday of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima – the 11th Panchen Lama – the Panchen Lama who is forced to spend another year disappeared, separated from his community, and denied his rightful place as a prominent Tibetan Buddhist leader. The United States supports Tibetans' religious freedom and their unique religious, cultural, and linguistic identity. We respect Tibetans' right to select, educate, and venerate their own leaders, like the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, according to their own beliefs, and without government interference.

We call on the PRC Government to immediately make public the Tibetan-venerated Panchen Lama's whereabouts and to give us this opportunity to meet with the Panchen Lama in person.



With that, I'm happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, actually I've got a bunch of kind of minor things but nothing that really merits leading off, so I'll pass to – as long as I can come back.

**QUESTION:** Russia?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** That's unexpected. Russia and Myanmar actually. So Russia said it was ordering troops back to base from the area near the border with Ukraine. What is the U.S. assessment on this view? Are you seeing some weaponry also being moved back? What do you think this is?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have heard Russia's announcement – its announcement that it would begin withdrawing troops from the border of Ukraine. As I've said, we've heard words. I think what we'll be looking for is action. The United States will continue to monitor the situation. We'll do that closely and we'll – we'll coordinate closely with Ukrainian officials as well as other – as well as allies and partners throughout.

We have made clear in our engagement with the Russian Government that it needs to refrain from escalatory actions and immediately cease all its aggressive activity in and around Ukraine, including its recent military buildup in occupied Crimea and on Ukraine's border and its intention to block specific vessels in the parts of the Black Sea. We of course reaffirm our support for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrities, and of course that extends to Ukraine's territorial waters. So our message is we've heard the announcement. We'll be watching closely for that follow-through.

**QUESTION:** So yesterday, before this, Ukrainian foreign minister gave an interview with Reuters, and he talked about how they needed more Western support. What else the United States could do about that?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** Well, he – do you want me to go —

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry. What —

**QUESTION:** What else the United States can do about that? He reiterated that Ukraine needs more Western support.

**MR PRICE:** I see.

**QUESTION:** Obviously, there was, like, a NATO meeting, and there has been a serious of statements, but he – nevertheless, he mentioned this again yesterday that he needs more from the West. What can the U.S. do?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have provided our partner, Ukraine, with significant support since 2014. We have stood by Ukraine. We have committed more than \$2 billion in security assistance to Ukraine over the years. And of course, we'll continue working to provide Ukraine the security assistance it needs to defend itself against Russian aggression, including the lethal defensive weapons based on an evolving assessment of Kyiv's needs.

**QUESTION:** Is there a specific new plan on that assistance?

**MR PRICE:** It is something we are always taking a close look at. It's something we're always evaluating. Of course, the Secretary had an opportunity to meet with his counterpart, Foreign Minister Kuleba, just a few days ago in Brussels. We discussed continuing to work closely together and to standing by as a partner, including when it comes to Ukraine's security needs.

**QUESTION:** Two on Russia?

**QUESTION:** Can I ask (inaudible) follow-up on that? So just to put a finer point on it, are you currently considering the option of sending more lethal weaponry to Ukraine?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not going to get ahead of any additional moves we might make. But look, the Ukrainian Government has no doubt where we stand. Similarly, I think it is also fair to say that Moscow has no doubt where we stand, and that is firmly in support with our partner, Ukraine, including its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and that includes in the maritime domain.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On the troop withdrawal from the Ukrainian border, was this signaled in any way ahead of time? In other words, was the Biden administration surprised to see this happen? And then also, I see that Slovakia and the Czech Republic have both expelled more Russian diplomats over the last 12 hours. Notwithstanding the expulsions that were announced here last week, I'm wondering if there's any additional considerations to shut down more consulates in – Russian consulates in the United States to bring it in line with the American consulates that have been shut down in Russia.

**MR PRICE:** Well, as we said yesterday, we have had an opportunity to engage in discussion in Moscow. Our embassy took part in a discussion with Moscow authorities, and we expect those discussions will continue in the coming days, perhaps even the coming weeks. So we're not going to get ahead of where those discussions might lead. Of course, President Biden announced just a few days ago a very strong response to the different categories of Russia's malign activity, and that includes its interference in our democracy; that includes what we have seen vis-a-vis Mr. Navalny; it includes the reports of bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan; and of course, it includes SolarWinds. And so we will continue to have discussions in Moscow, but again, I don't think it's appropriate for us to get ahead of those discussions right now.

**QUESTION:** How about were you all surprised about the troop withdrawal from the Ukrainian border? Was this —

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, we've heard the announcement. And to the best of our knowledge, it remains an announcement. That's why we're going to continue to watch very closely.

**QUESTION:** I'm sorry, I just need to be clear on this. I mean, were you all signaled ahead of time that this might be happening?

**MR PRICE:** We've heard the announcement, but you'll have to speak to Russian authorities when it comes to their future plans or their motives.

Yeah.

**QUESTION:** To follow up on my colleague's question, were you signaled ahead of time that there would be the announcement?

**MR PRICE:** Did the Russians tell us ahead of time that they planned to make an announcement that —

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, that's the question.

**MR PRICE:** (Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** That's not a ridiculous question.

**QUESTION:** In the phone call, for example, between the two presidents, was there a hint that some kind of drawdown might be coming?

**MR PRICE:** We have – we have read out the phone call between President Biden and his counterpart, Russian President Putin. We've read out the phone call between National Security Advisor Sullivan and his counterpart. I'll have to refer you to those readouts. I don't have any more to add to that. But look, our point is that we have heard words from Moscow. The entire world has heard those words. It's an announcement insofar as we know yet. We'll be looking for follow-through when it comes to what the Russians actually do.

**QUESTION:** Okay, can I try a different one then?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** The Russian MFA has said that it's going to prohibit local staff from working at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Can you give us an idea of how many people that is? Is there a deadline for when they have to stop working? Some of these people have worked there for more than decades. Is this going to force a drawdown of the embassy, and how is it going to impact operations?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it is true that we have had discussions with the Russian Government, and they have relayed their – elements of their response. We were – we have received the official diplomatic correspondence, as I mentioned yesterday, that lists the diplomats that the Russian Government has PNG'd. Now, the Russian Government has made a public announcement when it comes to locally employed staff. That is an unfortunate announcement. As we have said, steps to prohibit locally employed staff will impact our personnel. It will impact the community. We know that locally employed staff in Moscow and around the world – they are key members of our workforce and their contributions are important to our operations. They're also important to the bilateral mission.

Even as we have these profound disagreements with Moscow, even as we enact our own policy response in the aftermath of Russia's malign activity and behavior, we know that only through continued engagement and diplomacy will we be able to aspire to have that predictable and that stable relationship with Moscow that we seek to have. Now, locally employed staff are a key component of our embassy operations. That, in turn, makes them a key component of that ability to engage diplomatically. So again, we haven't received formal notification when it comes to locally employed staff, but we've heard the announcement and we continue to consider that quite unfortunate.

**QUESTION:** Just on climate, you asked people – countries to come to the summit with more ambitious targets. You've mentioned allies that did; Australia did not. Is that a disappointment to you?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what is true is that we have heard ambitious announcements from partners, allies, even some countries that don't often fall into either of those categories. Now, of course, Australia is a very close ally and we're pushing countries around the world, including ourselves, to be as ambitious as we can be, knowing the stakes of this existential threat. We know that we can solve this, but we know that in order to do it we'll have to work together.

Australia is a strong ally across the board, in technology development and the opportunities – and in opportunities for policy development. We have a long history of cooperation with our Australian allies, and we see enormous potential for joint work between our two countries.

At the same time, we know that cooperation on technology or any other innovative climate solutions will only achieve the necessary scale if they are, in fact, coupled with ambitious climate policy and commitment. And that's why we know that the coming decade will be decisive. The steps that countries commit to now will set us up for success or they will set us up for failure. And to keep that goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius within reach we know we have to get on that right path now. That's why we've been pushing our allies, our partners, even countries that don't fall – typically don't fall into either category towards that direction.

**QUESTION:** So you're saying you would have liked to have seen Australia commit to a more ambitious target?

**MR PRICE:** The entire world needs to do more. That is precisely why President Biden and the White House announced an ambitious NDC on our part; it's precisely why we have encouraged countries around the world to do more. We'll keep doing that. This climate summit is not the end of the road. This is, in fact, the start of the road to Glasgow, and of course we'll continue from there. So we will keep this up. We will keep the pressure on ourselves as well, knowing that what the United States does tends to have a catalytic effect. And that's why, for us, it was so important to announce an ambitious NDC, 50 to 52 percent below the 2005 levels by 2030. And that's what we hope to see from countries around the world.

**QUESTION:** Just to follow up. Prime Minister Scott Morrison was pretty far down the list of speakers, I think 21 out of 27, even behind Bhutan for instance. Is that any sort of reflection on Australia's perceived lack of commitment to climate change?

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't read more into the order or the sequence than is necessary. Of course, Australia is a close ally. We have an incredibly close partnership across many realms, and just as we do with all countries, we hope and expect Australia will commit to bold ambition when it comes to climate. It's what we have sought to do ourselves and we'll continue to have those conversations going forward.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Wait. How much is necessary?

**MR PRICE:** How much is necessary? Well —

**QUESTION:** Well, you said don't read anything more into the placement of speakers than is necessary. So how much is necessary? It clearly wasn't alphabetical if she's right and Bhutan went ahead of Australia; I'm pretty sure B comes after A. So how much do we read into the fact that he was – whatever he was – 21st, or 27th?

**MR PRICE:** I do not think order was indicative of anything other than temporal sequencing. So I think you're probably reading too much into it.

**QUESTION:** I'm not reading anything into it. You're the one who said don't read more into it than you should, and so how much should we read into it?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think just the fact that the question is being asked is perhaps parsing things. But look, we are gratified at the 39 other countries that have showed up at this summit. We are gratified

at the commitments that we've heard today, the commitments that we've heard preceding this, and – knock on wood – the commitments that we'll hear going forward as well.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On climate, in your opening remarks you didn't mention China. Has China's commitment today met your expectation, and what role do you like to see China to play in the next phase?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we know that every major economy, every country that is responsible for a large share of global emissions – and China would certainly fall into that category as the world's largest emitter – has a special responsibility. That is precisely why we have not shirked our own responsibility as the world's second-largest emitter. It's precisely why President Biden and the White House put forward that ambitious nationally determined contribution in the last day or so.

So I'm not going to speak to what we would like to see specifically from Beijing, but it is absolutely true that China, the United States, other major emitting countries do have a special responsibility to step up, if we are going to remain – to keep that target of 1.5 degrees Celsius within reach.

**QUESTION:** So at this summit, while the former secretary, the – Special Envoy Kerry is talking about cooperation, but this week Secretary Blinken, he actually said the USA is falling behind on the renewable energy, and it's difficult to imagine the United States winning the long-term strategic competition with China. Are you sending a mixed message?

**MR PRICE:** No. I think if you look at the fuller context of what he said, that the – that we see climate both as an existential threat, which is what has in many ways galvanized our action, but we also see it – and this may sound like a paradox, but it's absolutely true – as an opportunity. It is an opportunity for us to create opportunity within this country – good-paying, green jobs for American workers. That is what Secretary Blinken was speaking to, the two sides of this climate coin, the threat and the opportunity.

And certainly I think it is fair to say that the United States has not done enough yet to seek to seize that opportunity, to seek to seize what this climate challenge has put before us in terms of the economic opportunities for American workers, in terms of our ability to demonstrate our own ambition, and to galvanize the rest of the world to action. That's precisely what this administration has sought to do really since day one by rejoining Paris, by putting forward this NDC, by convening this summit of 40 countries from around the world, to focus the world's attention on the threat while also making clear that here at home domestically, this presents an opportunity for us that we would be unwise to pass up.

**QUESTION:** I have a last question. Two days ago, you said the department has completed deployment of vaccines to all the posts abroad. Does it mean that the United States embassies and consulates around the world are going to restore the full capacity of your visa service? And also, are you considering ease the travel restriction between United States and China, given the United States is the most vaccinated country, and China has controlled the virus pretty successfully?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we're always going to listen to science. We're always going to listen to medical professionals and public health professionals when it comes to that guidance. That is why CDC is in the lead on these issues. And so this isn't a question of politics; it is a question of public health. And that's how we're going to treat it. So when the science says that it is safe to ease restrictions or if the science requires that we impose additional barriers, whether that pertains to China or any other country, I suspect that's what you'll see us do.

When it comes – remind me of your first question.

**QUESTION:** The embassy and the consulates, are they going to restore the full capacity?

**MR PRICE:** So certainly our hope is that over time, we will be able to restore the capacity within our embassies, our posts, missions, consulates around the world. We need to take into account not only the vaccination status of our own employees, but also the rate of the virus, the virus's toll in that particular country. So there are a number of factors that go into this, but certainly our hope going forward in the coming months is that we will be able to restore a good deal of that functionality in our missions around the world.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Any comment on the pressure between Israel and Syria, and on the Iranian announcement that the missile that targeted Israel and landed near Dimona facility is an old generation Iranian? Do you view an Iranian escalation or an escalation in the region?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we support Israel's ability to exercise its inherent right of self-defense. We condemn any actions that threaten Israel and regional security more broadly. I would need to refer you to the Government of Israel for more details about its operations. I know they've spoken to it, but I would need to refer you there for a reaction.

**QUESTION:** Do you view any Iranian role, and especially after confirming that the missile was Iranian?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have a confirmation of that that I'm prepared to offer from here. What I would say is that we condemn any action that threatens Israel and regional security more broadly.

**QUESTION:** And one more, please. Do you welcome the meetings between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Iraq, and it looks like there's another meeting?

**MR PRICE:** I would need to refer you to those two governments to speak to that.

**QUESTION:** Thanks.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) Australia has moved to cancel two projects that the Victorian government had with China regarding the Belt and Road Initiative. Of course, it has been labeled by critics as a debt trap diplomacy, and also a scheme to take over parts of the world. Is the U.S. looking at taking similar sort of moves, or has the U.S. spoken to Australia at all about that move?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to that move, this is a decision made by the Australian Government. We would refer all questions on Australian law and the substance of these decisions to the Australian Government, our ally there. We continue to stand with the people of Australia as they bear the brunt of the PRC's coercive behavior. I believe it was Foreign Minister Payne who made clear in her statement that the Australian Government has determined that the agreements you refer to – to be inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy or adverse to Australia's foreign relations. The government's cancellation of these additional arrangements with entities in Iran and entities in Syria further demonstrate that Australia is focused on protecting its national interest from all international concerns – this is not unique to the PRC – but these are decisions by the Australian Government.

**QUESTION:** But is the U.S. talking to partners about potentially pushing back against the Belt and Road Initiative?

**MR PRICE:** What we've made clear is that what unites us are our shared values, are our shared interests. We know that allies around the world, we know that partners around the world are going to have relationships with Beijing that may look slightly different than the relationship that we have. That's okay. As Secretary Blinken said recently, we're not going to put our allies or our partners in a position to choose between the United States and Beijing. We are going to focus on what unites us. There is much more that unites us with our partners and certainly our allies, and certainly that's the case with Australia, than any disagreement we may have when it comes to China or any other issue.

**QUESTION:** Did the U.S. express its concerns about this agreement? Did the U.S. induce the Australians in any way to consider canceling these agreements?

**MR PRICE:** This is an – again, this is an action that is internal to Australia, so we would need to refer you there. Of course, it is also true that Australia has borne a tremendous toll of the coercive actions on the part of the PRC. So this is a country that has been really on the front lines of this coercive diplomacy. But when it comes to their actions, we would need to refer you to Australian authorities.

**QUESTION:** Is the U.S. pleased that the Australians have canceled this deal?

**MR PRICE:** Look, we continue to work closely with our ally Australia on any number of fronts. We – a number of senior officials have made comments that the United States is standing with Australia in the face of coercive action, coercive diplomacy by the PRC. But these decisions to cancel arrangements at the sub-national level, that's a matter for the Australian Government.

**QUESTION:** Are you then having conversations with Australia regarding the cancellation of the contracts?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any conversations to read out on that.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Two questions, if I may. The first is on Japan's announced targets of 46 percent cut to emissions by 2030. During Prime Minister Suga's visit, there were some reports that the U.S. was seeking a 50 percent cut. So I just wanted to ask if the U.S. is satisfied with Japan's announced target of 46 percent.

And then separately on Taiwan, on Monday, the head of Taiwan's defense ministry's strategic planning office said that he was seeking U.S. long-range cruise missiles. Is this something that Taiwan has been in contact with the State Department about? Is this something that the U.S. is open to providing Taiwan?

**MR PRICE:** When it comes to Japan and Tokyo's target, just as the question that pertained to Beijing, I'm not going to prescribe from here. The United States Government is not going to prescribe specifically what targets certain countries should have. Our goal is to raise ambition across the board. And again, we have sought to do that in any number of ways, including through conversations, but also including through the catalytic power of our example. And that is why President Biden thought it was so important and the White House released the United States NDC, which is quite ambitious, for the rest of the world to see. And so we will continue these conversations, whether it is with our allies in the Indo-Pacific, our allies in Europe, and in some cases, countries that have not been allies nor would not be allies going forward.

When it comes to Taiwan, our commitment, I would say, to Taiwan is rock solid. It contributes to the maintenance of peace and security in the Taiwan Strait and within the region. It has been longstanding U.S. policy and it is reflected in the Taiwan Relations Act that the United States maintains the capacity

to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, social, or economic system of the people on Taiwan. We'll continue to work with allies and partners in support of our shared prosperity, security, and values in the Indo-Pacific and that includes peace and security in the Taiwan Strait.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on Taiwan? Is it possible for the U.S. to speed up the delivery of arms to Taiwan that have already been sold but have not yet been delivered there?

**MR PRICE:** I am not in a position to speak to the logistics of that or what might be required there.

**QUESTION:** Right, but is it under consideration?

**MR PRICE:** Look, I – again, our support for Taiwan is rock solid. We continue to have a dialogue with Taiwan on a range of issues. Security, of course, is one of them. But I'm not going to get into the details of that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then can I just ask a question on Navalny? So yesterday National Security Advisor Sullivan said that he reiterated that in private conversations, Navalny's been discussed. And he said that U.S. officials have told Russian officials, quote, what would unfold should the worst befall Navalny. I'm just wondering what the strategy is behind that. Why tell the Russians privately what the U.S. would do if Navalny dies but not publicly? Describe that – what's the benefit there?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think what – and by the fact that you're asking about it, what you heard is that we have had those private discussions. I think the National Security Advisor made the point that sometimes points are conveyed and have more effectiveness when they are conveyed privately, in private channels, and perhaps in a different level of detail as well. But also, he made the point that we've had these discussions privately, that we have made very clear to the Russians in private and now we've made this public for all the world to know that we – that we consider Russia, Moscow, responsible for anything that would befall Mr. Navalny while he is in detention.

I don't think it does Mr. Navalny any good, I don't think it does the United States any good for us to forecast specifically what that might look like if something were to befall Mr. Navalny. The point we have made to the Russians privately and the broader point we have made publicly is that there would be consequences, there would be severe consequences were something to happen to him in their custody.

**QUESTION:** Can you describe for us an example of when having these private discussions with Russia has actually benefited a situation and produced tangible results?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, I would hesitate to do that in any specific case. I will say, broadly speaking, there are certain cases when private diplomatic exchanges and keeping a matter in those channels could be to our benefit. Hostage negotiations, for example, or the negotiations over a wrongful detainee, someone who is wrongfully held, could be one such example of it. But when it comes to our relationship with Russia, I wouldn't want to go into those details.

**QUESTION:** So this strategy hasn't worked during the Biden administration to date yet?

**MR PRICE:** You certainly didn't hear me say that.

**QUESTION:** Well, no Americans have been released from Russia since the Biden administration came in.

**MR PRICE:** We – this is now month three, I suppose. It is certainly the case when it comes to Trevor



Reed, when it comes to Paul Whelan, when it comes to the Americans who are being held unjustly in Russia that we have regularly raised their cases, that we have continued to work closely with their families. Our embassy in Moscow continues to provide the level of support that we can, and it remains a priority for us to see them safely and quickly reunited with their families.

**QUESTION:** Just a follow-up on Mr. Navalny. Given all these high-level conversations about him recently, is it fair to assume that his fate has become a national security priority for the Biden administration?

**MR PRICE:** Certainly, human rights in Russia has always been a concern for us. Mr. Navalny, I think, embodies and in many ways personifies what has befallen to the broader issue of human rights in Russia. The fact that the Russian Government has sought to silence Mr. Navalny, has literally attempted to assassinate him using a banned chemical weapon; the fact that he now sits in their custody, is in their custody; the fact that the Russian Government has clamped down, including even in recent hours, on those Russians who have peacefully taken to the street to do nothing more than to exercise the rights that are guaranteed to them under their own constitution, the Russian constitution, I think is emblematic of what has become of human rights in Russia. That is what we are standing up for. Mr. Navalny has long sought to be an advocate and has long been an advocate for human rights, for anticorruption in Moscow. It's precisely why he now sits in Russian custody.

So that is why his case is of such interest to us, but we also would note that it is not just an interest to us. It's an interest to our allies, to our partners around the world. We've seen multilateral statements, very powerful multilateral statements on paper. You have seen messaging from some of our closest allies and partners that has been coordinated to make clear that this is not a question of the United States, of Washington versus Moscow. This is a question of countries standing up for basic values, universal human rights, values that have come under tremendous threat, tremendous strain from President Putin and Moscow.

**QUESTION:** Armenia?

**QUESTION:** Can I —

**MR PRICE:** I heard Armenia.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, sure.

**QUESTION:** So ahead of this Saturday's Armenian Remembrance Day, does this administration has anything new to say about what happened in 1915 regarding the deportations and massacres against Armenians?

**MR PRICE:** I know that the White House press secretary was asked about this. I know that she said that there would be more to say in the coming days, so I would just leave it there.

**QUESTION:** Well, in 2019 – the end of 2019, the U.S. Senate adopted unanimously S.Res. 150 to recognize the Armenian genocide. Does the State Department endorse this congressional action?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I'm going to defer to the White House. I know that, as the press secretary said, there will be more to say on this subject, but I'm going to leave it there for now.

**QUESTION:** One more on Turkey and Ukraine.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Do you support Turkey providing drones to Ukraine?

**MR PRICE:** I – we’ll – if we have anything to say on that, we’ll get back to you.

**QUESTION:** Okay, I’ll ask —

**QUESTION:** Can we go to Afghanistan?

**QUESTION:** Oh, let me follow up on Turkey then.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** So the expectation is that the President is going to recognize Armenian genocide. Relations with Turkey are already in a pretty bad situation. Where do you think that is going to leave things on – after this? How do you expect to have any further leverage on Ankara?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I’m not going to weigh in on a hypothetical. Again, when it comes to any announcements that the White House would make, I would refer to and defer to the White House. What I would say more broadly and taking a step back from the immediate question is that Turkey, as you know, is a longstanding and valued ally and NATO ally.

**QUESTION:** That we have a lot of problems with.

**MR PRICE:** We have shared interests with Ankara, and that includes countering terrorism. It includes ending the conflict in Syria. It includes deterring broader malign influence in the region. And we seek that cooperation on common priorities because, again, Turkey is an ally. And where we do have disagreements, as you referred to, we engage in dialogue as allies do.

**QUESTION:** So what is the current dialogue then?

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** What is it about? Is it about S-400s?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, the Secretary had an opportunity to meet with his Turkish counterpart twice recently. They met in – they were together in Brussels. They had a bilateral meeting at our – during our first trip to Brussels. And so the bilateral – the dialogue there reflects the bilateral relationship in that —

**QUESTION:** Have you gotten any indications from Turks that they might back down from the S-400s or even if they wouldn’t back down, there would be a way going forward?

**MR PRICE:** What I will say is that bilateral meeting that they had reflected the relationship. We talked about those shared interest. We talked about security challenges. We talked about terrorism and countering terrorism. But Secretary Blinken, as he does in all engagements, as appropriate, does not hesitate to raise those areas of disagreement. And of course, there are some when it comes to our alliance with Turkey: the S-400 you raised; human rights is another. And we won’t shy away from raising those. We know that we can do those two things simultaneously. As friends, as allies, when we have disagreements, we raise those. We discuss those. And there’s no – there’s no papering over them.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Can I go to vaccine diplomacy?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** So India is currently facing a horrible surge in coronavirus infections.

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** And we reported that they've asked United States to lift a ban on the export of —

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** — vaccine raw materials, which basically threatens to slow the country's vaccination drive. When will the administration decide on that?

**MR PRICE:** So we've addressed this a couple times in the briefing. As I've said, this is a question for USTR when it comes to —

**QUESTION:** But why is it a question for USTR? Blinken had — Secretary Blinken had a phone call with his counterpart.

**MR PRICE:** That's right. And they did discuss COVID. But when it comes —

**QUESTION:** And this didn't come up?

**MR PRICE:** We issued a readout of that call. And as that call — as the readout of the call notes, they did discuss the COVID-19 response. You asked about intellectual property and certain controls. That was — is within the purview of USTR. What I will say broadly is that the United States first and foremost is engaged in an ambitious and effective and, so far, successful effort to vaccinate the American people. That campaign is well underway, and we're doing that for a couple of reasons.

Number one, we have a special responsibility to the American people. Number two, the American people, this country has been hit harder than any other country around the world — more than 550,000 deaths, tens of millions of infections in this country alone. But there's also a broader point here that I made yesterday that it's, of course, not only in our interest to see Americans vaccinated; it's in the interests of the rest of the world to see Americans vaccinated. The point the Secretary has made repeatedly is that as long as the virus is spreading anywhere, it is a threat to people everywhere. So as long as the virus is spreading uncontrolled in this country, it can mutate and it can travel beyond our borders. That, in turn, poses a threat well beyond the United States.

It is true that even as we focus on this, we have also played a leadership role when it comes to containing, seeking to contain the virus beyond our borders. We have re-engaged with the WHO on day one, the \$2 billion we've contributed to COVAX, with 2 billion more on the way. When it comes to our own hemisphere, the loan arrangement with Canada and Mexico, and when it comes to India, the Quad and the arrangement with the Quad, including to increase production capacity in India.

So as we are more comfortable in our position here at home, as we are confident that we are able to address any contingencies as they may arise, I expect we'll be able to do more. And we will, of course, always do as much as we can, consistent with our first obligation.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you two really brief ones?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Well, they should be really brief, I think. Yesterday, as I'm sure you're aware, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee cleared off on two more State Department nominees, but also at the same time unanimously approved an amendment that would kind of force the administration's hand on Nord Stream 2 sanctions. So I'm wondering, while you — I'm sure you welcome the movement to the

floor for votes on Toria Nuland and Uzra Zeya. What do you think of the Nord Stream 2 provisions?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Matt, we don't comment on legislation. But I think the – what is true is that this administration, the President, Secretary Blinken, we share an overall attitude towards Nord Stream 2 with many on Capitol Hill. And that is the position that it is a bad deal. We have called it a Russian geopolitical project that threatens European energy security, and that of Ukraine and the eastern flank of our NATO Allies. That's why the Secretary has emphasized that he opposes it, the President opposes it, and will continue to do everything we can, including consistent with legislation that's already on the books, to oppose its construction and finalization.

**QUESTION:** So you do comment on legislation?

**MR PRICE:** I —

**QUESTION:** You comment on legislation all the time.

**MR PRICE:** No.

**QUESTION:** It's only when you don't want to that you say, we never – oh, no, no, we never comment on legislation.

**MR PRICE:** That's not true. That's not true. That's not true. I didn't – I did not comment on legislation that is pending.

**QUESTION:** You do it all the time.

**MR PRICE:** I commented on the law that's on the book – on the books, PEESA and PEESCA

**QUESTION:** That's legislation. Anyway, number two. Yesterday, a senior State Department official talked about this administration's belief that the previous administration had disingenuously or improperly imposed sanctions on Iran for terrorism, ostensibly for terrorism reasons, but they were really designed to make it harder for any future administration to return to the nuclear deal. In other words, they labeled what – nuclear sanctions as terrorism sanctions, or human rights sanctions, things that would be exempted or wouldn't be allowed to be done under the deal. Can you give us an example of one sanction, or set of sanctions, that you think fits that category?

**MR PRICE:** Well, your question is a very good way, device, to seek me to – an attempt to elicit some more detail on the various sanctions —

**QUESTION:** No.

**MR PRICE:** — and the categories of sanctions. But let me make the broader point —

**QUESTION:** I'm not. I just want one example of a sanction, or set of sanctions, that you think was improperly or illegitimately or that the – that the Trump administration imposed with an ulterior motive of tying your – of tying this administration or any other administration's hands in returning to the deal. Just one. Just one. I'm not asking for the whole set.

**MR PRICE:** I would make – I would make the point that there are sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA. And as we have said, if Iran resumes its compliance with the nuclear deal – meaning that if Iran once again becomes subject to the most stringent verification and monitoring regime ever negotiated – we would be prepared to lift those sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA. There are sanctions that are consistent with the JCPOA. I —

**QUESTION:** And then there's the third category that this official talked about. And all I'm asking for is one example. There are —

**MR PRICE:** There are sanctions that are consistent with the JCPOA. And the point —

**QUESTION:** No, one example of what you think was duplicitously or disingenuously imposed.

**MR PRICE:** The point I made yesterday is that there is nothing in the JCPOA that does not, that prohibits us from countering Iran's broader malign behavior — its ballistic missiles program, support for terrorism, support for proxies in the region.

Now, the point of these negotiations, and the point of these talks, is that if it were very clear if sanctions were — came to us, came to this administration, labeled green or red, it would be a much easier proposition for us to resume compliance, to do what we would need to do to resume compliance if Iran committed to do the same. As you know, sanctions do not come pre-packaged. The diplomacy did not come pre-arranged for us. And that's why we're engaging in these talks in Vienna. This is precisely —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but then you can't have it — make an accusation like this official did that the previous administration acted in bad faith, that it was only attempting to screw over anyone who came after them who might want to get back into the deal by mislabeling or improperly labeling nuclear sanctions as terrorism sanctions, I think you have an obligation to give one example of the kind of sanction that you think needs further study so that you can determine what the motive is. I mean, it's a pretty serious allegation, right? Is it not?

**MR PRICE:** The challenge, though, Matt, is that this is very much the subject of diplomacy in Vienna. And again —

**QUESTION:** You've already identified the three baskets, according to this official. You've got these three baskets: consistent, inconsistent, and gray area that you're trying to determine. I don't see what the problem is in identifying one example of something that falls into a gray area.

**MR PRICE:** It's a little more complicated than that, in part because there are going to be differences of opinion between the United States and Iran as to what may fall within that gray area as you —

**QUESTION:** But Ned, there's clearly a difference of opinion between this administration and the previous administration.

**MR PRICE:** Of course.

**QUESTION:** Okay? So talk — let's forget about the Iranians for a second. What does this administration — give me one example of what this administration thinks was a — is a sanction that may have been duplicitously imposed by the previous administration for — in an attempt to tie your hands.

**MR PRICE:** The reason I am hesitant to do that is because you're asking me to prejudge what may happen withing —

**QUESTION:** You already have decided which there — which sanctions fit into that third basket.

**MR PRICE:** No, Matt, I think that the comments yesterday made very clear that this is a subject of ongoing diplomacy, ongoing discussions in Vienna. Again, if it were clear cut, if they came pre-labeled and pre-packaged for us, it would be a much easier proposition. It's precisely why —

**QUESTION:** But they did come pre — they came pre-labeled. You're saying you don't agree with the

label and that they were acting in bad faith when they did it. So just one.

**MR PRICE:** Matt —

**QUESTION:** All right. Really —

**MR PRICE:** This is the point of diplomacy.

**QUESTION:** Just a follow up. So when you guys do roll out this sanctions relief, can you identify some of those as having been disingenuously put into place by the Trump administration?

**MR PRICE:** I would suspect that if, and that remains a big “if,” we are able to get to a point where Iran has committed to resume its compliance with the nuclear deal, that is to say, once again be subject to the most stringent verification and monitoring regime of a nuclear program ever negotiated, and we have found a way for us and devise what it is that we would need to do to resume our own compliance with the JCPOA, that that roadmap will become clear. Because if we get back to that point, we will need to lift sanctions that are inconsistent with the deal.

**QUESTION:** Can we – can I go at it a slightly different way? Can you define what makes the sanction inconsistent? What are the qualifications that make it inconsistent versus – is it they’ve sanctioned a certain group, a certain military group, for example, a certain individual, versus consistent? How are you defining those two baskets?

**MR PRICE:** The JCPOA, the original agreement, makes that very clear. It lays out precisely what the sides would need to do. So this is not something that we are writing on the fly. Again, our – the proposition that has always been on the table is compliance for compliance. If Iran were to resume its full compliance with the JCPOA, we would do the same. So the JCPOA, that original agreement, spells out precisely what is allowed, precisely what is prohibited in order for a country to be in compliance with it. That remains the blueprint for all of this.

**QUESTION:** But that’s up for interpretation, as we’ve all been discussing. So if you’re narrowing that, can you say what would make something consistent? Could you give us an example of what would make a sanction inconsistent?

**MR PRICE:** What would make a sanction consistent?

**QUESTION:** Inconsistent. Sorry, masks.

**MR PRICE:** Inconsistent. There are very clear cases, as you heard yesterday. Sanctions – nuclear sanctions would be inconsistent.

Anyone else? Okay.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:27 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 26, 2021](#)

*04/26/2021 10:21 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

3:25 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** All right. Good afternoon. Our apologies for starting a bit late today. Couple items at the top. First, Secretary of State Blinken will travel tomorrow, April 27th, on his first virtual trip to Africa, where he will visit Kenya and Nigeria and meet with young people from across the continent.

He will begin his virtual travel meeting with Young African Leadership Initiative, or YALI, alumni. Through YALI, the United States signature effort to invest in the next generation of African leaders, we work with partners across the continent to develop initiatives and economic opportunities to support the creativity, innovativeness, and energy of Africa's youth.

Secretary Blinken will then visit Nigeria, where he will meet with President Buhari and Foreign Minister Onyeama to underscore our shared goals of strengthening democratic governance, building lasting security, promoting economic prosperity, and defending human rights. Secretary Blinken will also participate in a health partnership event to emphasize U.S. health care support through the PEPFAR program and in response to COVID-19.

Finally, during his visit to Kenya he will meet with President Kenyatta and Cabinet Secretary Omamo to reaffirm our strategic partnership. Secretary Blinken will also visit Kenyan-based renewable energy companies and, in solidarity with Kenya amidst the pandemic, we will highlight a U.S.-donated mobile field hospital providing essential COVID-19 medical supplies via AFRICOM and the Massachusetts National Guard's State Partnership Program.

Next, today, we remember human rights activist Xulhaz Mannan, who was murdered five years ago for his courageous work on behalf of marginalized communities in Bangladesh. At the time of his death, he worked in USAID's Bangladesh Office of Democracy and Governance, where he helped lead programs to combat trafficking in persons, reduce gender-based violence, and promote human rights. Before joining USAID, he served for nine years as the protocol specialist for the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, where he was a founding member of the embassy's diversity committee.

Xulhaz's selfless dedication to advancing the principles of diversity, acceptance, and inclusion exemplified the best of Bangladesh, as did his generosity of spirit, devotion to family, and dedication to community. Today, we honor his fearless advocacy on behalf of his fellow Bangladeshis and recommit to upholding the dignity and human rights of people around the world.

So with that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Where to begin. Let's start with East Africa or the – in addition to this virtual trip to Kenya tomorrow, Kenya is of course a key player in the whole IGAD process. The Secretary spoke



with the prime minister of Ethiopia today, and the message seems to be getting increasingly impatient, perhaps, for the fact that there is still Eritrean troops in Tigray. And I'm just wondering, apart from the talk and the pushing, pressing for them to get moving on this withdrawal – if and when it's going to happen – are you prepared to do anything else to make your case either with the Ethiopians or the Eritreans?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me make a couple of broad points. As you noted, the Secretary did have an opportunity today to speak to Prime Minister Abiy. The message he conveyed, and we read that out, but the message he conveyed is one that we have made at many levels in recent days. We remain, of course, committed to building an enduring partnership with the Ethiopian people, and we remain committed to the territorial integrity and unity of Ethiopia. All that said, we are gravely concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Tigray and the reports of human rights abuses, violations, and atrocities that have emanated from there.

This administration has encouraged international partners, including the AU and regional partners, to work with us to address the crisis in Tigray, including through action at the UN and other relevant bodies. Now, of course, we have heard statements emanate from the region. We have heard the Eritrean Government's public statement that will – that it will withdraw its forces from Tigray, but that must still be implemented in practice. There is no evidence that such a withdrawal is underway, and any such withdrawal must be immediate and verifiable.

We also call and continue to call for a withdrawal of Amhara regional forces from Tigray for an immediate end to the hostilities, all of which are critical to protecting civilians and ensuring unhindered humanitarian access.

We continue to raise our grave concerns over the abuses and violations, human rights violations that I mentioned before. We condemn in the strongest terms specifically the killings, the forced removals, the sexual violence and rape, and other human rights abuses that multiple organizations have reported on the ground in the region.

As more information comes to light, the urgency to meet those commitments and to move forward with independent international investigations and accountability only increases. You probably noticed that at the end of the readout of the Secretary's call today, he did note that our new special envoy for the Horn, Jeff Feltman – Ambassador Jeff Feltman – will be traveling to the region in the coming days, and, of course, we expect this to be a topic of his conversations there.

**QUESTION:** But are you not at the point where you're warning them that there could be specific measures taken against either country?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would say that, of course, there have been some private communications, including between the Secretary and the prime minister. Of course, Senator Coons recently undertook travel to the region at the behest of the President and the administration to convey similar messages to Prime Minister Abiy and others, and I would expect these will be conversations that the special envoy will have when he travels to the region in the coming days.

**QUESTION:** When that happens, can you give us like dates and —

**MR PRICE:** Certainly. We will provide more details on his travel before it takes place.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Great. Yes.

**QUESTION:** There's been some news about vaccines and the White House saying that these AstraZeneca vaccines are going to start going to other countries. I wondered if you could give us a bit more on the process for deciding who's going to get vaccines when the U.S. is giving them out. I guess – is this – you've talked before about giving money to COVAX. I think what the word from the White House today was that these would be distributed through direct partnerships. Does that mean not through COVAX? And are you choosing to give these to countries based on need or is this based on relationships and not – obviously, what the Secretary said – not political favors, but what is the basis for this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would say broadly that it's based on a couple things. One is the broad recognition that as long as this virus is spreading anywhere, it is a threat to people everywhere. That point applies to COVID in India, it applies to COVID in the United States, it applies to COVID anywhere around the world. And so that is why we have consistently spoken of our efforts not only to get the virus under control here, recognizing that the United States has been the site of the world's worst outbreak to date, but also recognizing that as long as the virus is circulating here, it poses a threat and continues and has the potential to continue to mutate to pose a threat well beyond our borders.

But that's also why, since the very first days of this administration – in fact, the very first day of this administration – President Biden has committed the United States to be a leader when it comes to global public health, re-engaging with the WHO on day one; committing \$2 billion to COVAX immediately, another \$2 billion over time as well; the loan arrangements we have discussed and we've talked about in the context of Mexico and Canada; and, of course, our engagement with the Quad that will seek to increase production capacity within India itself.

Let me just spend a moment on the situation in India, which, of course, is of great concern to the United States, and we have always stood in solidarity with our friends and our partners in India. We are working nonstop across the government to do all we can to deliver on an urgent basis the supplies most needed within India, and that includes oxygen assistance and related materials, but it also includes supplies of therapeutics, rapid diagnostic test kits, ventilators, personal protective equipment or PPE – all supplies to protect India's frontline health care workers. It includes raw material urgently required for the manufacture of the Covishield vaccine, and we've also – deploying an expert team of public health advisors from the CDC to work in close collaboration with our embassy on the ground, India's health ministries, and India's epidemic intelligence staff.

Now, of course, these details that we've released in recent days follow regular consultation and discussions with our partners in the Indian Government. Of course, the President had an opportunity today to speak to Prime Minister Modi. The Secretary has had an opportunity in recent days to speak to his counterpart, Foreign Minister Jaishankar. Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, spoke to his counterpart; Wendy Sherman, the deputy secretary of state, spoke to her counterpart. And we've been doing that to demonstrate our solidarity with the Indian Government, with the Indian people, but also to hear about the needs of the Indian Government and to assess, based on our own capacity, what more we could do. We've always said that as we are in a position to do more, we will do more. And this gets back to the issue of President Biden's commitment on the part of the United States to be – to continue to be a leader when it comes to humanitarian relief and a leader when it comes to global public health. What we are talking about today in the context of India is a natural complement to what we've been doing over the course of this administration, doing what we can to be a leader in terms of the global response to this virus, even as we continue to address it here at home with our vaccination drive.

**QUESTION:** Does that mean India is a priority, or how are you prioritizing the – those?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it is – it certainly goes without saying that India is enduring a horrific outbreak. India

is a global – we have a Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with India. But the Secretary has been clear: This is not about shots in arms in return for political favors, in return for any sort of transactionalism. This is about America's humanitarian leadership, the commitment that this administration has, to help those most in need. And, of course, what India is enduring now is profoundly concerning on so many levels.

And so that's why you've seen not only the United States stepping up, but other countries in the region and well beyond stepping up to attempt to help and do all we can to help India in its time of need.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Yeah, why is it taking so long? You say you have these public health advisors and intelligence people on the ground. We – presumably they saw this coming. Is it China's criticism? Is it – what's causing it? Is it the stories in the press? Is it – it seems like the Quad would be monitoring this. Isn't disaster relief one of the founding parts of the Quad?

I'm just wondering why we're just seeing this surge of attention on India right now when we talk about this deep and strategic partnership?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would take issue with the premise that it has taken us a long time. I would note that, of course, we have talked about our stepped-up assistance to India in recent hours. And we've always said as we assess we're in a position to do more, we will do more, and you have heard us make good on that pledge.

But from the earliest days of this pandemic, we have provided much-needed assistance to India, just as India came to our aid when we were enduring the worst of the pandemic here in this country. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the United States has provided more – nearly \$19 million in total assistance, and that includes nearly 11 million in health assistance to help India slow the spread of COVID-19. We have – our assistance has helped India provide care for the affected, disseminate essential public health messages to various communities, strengthen the epidemiological surveillance capabilities, mobilize innovative financing mechanisms for emergency preparedness in response to the pandemic.

These funds – this nearly \$19 million in support that we've provided since the start of the outbreak – have also supported Indian state-specific COVID-19 challenges and addressed bottlenecks in supply chains that stemmed from the lockdown on India's border. Two million dollars in that assistance is also supporting micro and small and medium enterprises in areas hardest hit by COVID-19. And as I alluded to before, the CDC has committed \$3.6 million to assist the Government of India's response to the epidemic. Those resources are trained at prevention, preparedness, and response activities in India.

So it is certainly not the case that what we have spoken to in recent hours is the start of our engagement, but we recognize that as the current outbreak has taken incredibly concerning turns in India, that there was more we could do. And we, in consultation with our Indian partners, have determined that the steps I referred to earlier are available to us and they would be of great benefit to our partners in India.

**QUESTION:** I mean, is there more to come? You talk about 19 million here and 3.6 million there in a country of – that measures population in terms of a billion. Is that going to be enough to stop or to address the pandemic there?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think the two premises I referred to earlier: As we are able to do more, we will be doing more – we are making good on that promise now; and also the recognition, again, that as long as the virus is circulating unfettered anywhere, whether that's here in the United States, whether that is around the world, that poses a threat not only to the American people but, in turn, to people well

beyond our borders with the ability to redound back on us.

So we are doing what is in our national interest, but we're also doing what's in the collective interest. And it just so happens when it comes to global health, oftentimes what's in our national interest is also in the collective interest, and that's what we're seeing here.

**QUESTION:** Ned, what does the State Department – does the State Department have any specific role in getting the vaccines out to the – or is – are you —

**MR PRICE:** In terms of the logistics of that?

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MR PRICE:** So I would refer you to the White House to discuss logistics. They've obviously talked about AstraZeneca in the context – in today's context.

Now, of course, we do have Gayle Smith who is playing a key role in all of these efforts, but I would make the point, I would hasten to add, that her role goes well beyond vaccines. And I know there has been a lot of attention paid to vaccines, but that's really just one element. When you talk about Gayle's role as coordinator for global COVID response and health security, she has a role that involves diplomacy; that is to say, leading engagement for the U.S. Government with foreign governments and partners around the world, multilateral entities, other executive branch agencies, Congress, the private sector, and the general public. There is a strategic element to all of this as well, providing strategic guidance, coherence, and prioritization for the formulation and implementation of an effective global response to COVID-19.

Of course, that requires coordination, which is also a big part of her role, driving that coordination, driving that prioritization within the department and throughout the interagency, pursuant to what's most effective for global response efforts. And she's also undertaking and participating in the department's structural review of the longer-term organization of State's global health security portfolio. We know that COVID, unfortunately, will not – it was – is not the first outbreak or epidemic, and unfortunately, we know it won't be the last. And so we want to ensure that this institution, both now and going forward, is best structured to respond effectively. And that's part of Gayle Smith's role here as well.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** One more on India?

**MR PRICE:** One more on India? Sure.

**QUESTION:** Can you speak to reports of a outbreak among U.S. diplomatic staff in India, say how many are affected, and if perhaps, considering that, the U.S. might be looking at authorized departure?

**MR PRICE:** So I'm not in the position to confirm any cases within our staff. Obviously, privacy considerations limit what we can say. But as I have mentioned during the course of this briefing alone, India is enduring a deeply concerning outbreak, and the entire country has been affected. We obviously do have a large diplomatic presence within India. It is tantamount to the deep engagement and partnership we have with India. But I'm not in a position to speak to any cases within our staff or embassy community.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Two questions. The President, and by extension this administration, will be marking hundred days in office on Thursday. What would you say have been the biggest or the top achievement of this administration in the past hundred days —

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** — in terms of Africa?

**MR PRICE:** Oh, for Africa. Well, certainly, of course, the Secretary will have much more to say on this in the course of his virtual trip tomorrow. We're also — and I'm mindful of the clock, because we are doing a preview of that trip at 4 o'clock, where you will hear more. But what I will say is that we have engaged the African continent deeply during the course — during the short course of this administration. You may recall that President Biden addressed the African Union Summit, his first direct address to foreign leaders in this administration. And I think that was noteworthy not only because of its — because of how early it came within this administration, but as a signal to our commitment to our partners on the continent and to the AU as a multilateral institution in this case.

We'll continue to engage regularly, openly, and candidly as partners in pursuing those shared interests and shared values. We have much in common that goes well beyond security and includes global health and includes climate change and includes freedom and democracy and shared prosperity.

We have engaged deeply within the Horn of Africa, of course, and we've spoken already to Senator Coons' engagement. We announced last Friday the appointment of Ambassador Jeff Feltman as a special envoy for the Horn of Africa, which is emblematic of the level of priority this administration is attaching to issues on the continent and issues that affect the totality of the continent.

We also — and Secretary Blinken will have an opportunity to engage tomorrow — will continue our people-to-people programs. With a population of 1.3 billion and a median age of some 19 years, we recognize that Africa's youth are one of the continent's most important resources, and that's why programs like YALI, that is why the public diplomacy work that takes place within and on the part of our embassies and posts throughout the continent are so important, and we'll continue to develop those going forward as well.

**QUESTION:** Okay. The second question. On Nigeria, I don't know if you are aware, the Nigerian Government today suspended Channels TV, one of the most wide TV station in Nigeria. I would like you to react to that. And also, if the Secretary would discuss human rights abuses in Nigeria with President Buhari tomorrow.

**MR PRICE:** Well, human rights are always on the agenda when it comes to this administration's foreign policy. Whether that is Africa, whether that is any other region. So I can guarantee you that issues of democracy and human rights will be on the agenda in both countries.

When it comes to the suspension of the channel you noted, I don't have a specific response except to say that it is a hallmark of media freedom, plurality of media venues. Those are hallmarks of any democracy, and it — those are important. We will continue to advocate for them in our foreign policy going forward.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thanks. You've probably seen these leaked remarks by Iran's foreign minister in an interview that he evidently did not think would become public for a long time. One of his key points was that the Iranian military, the IRGC, according to him, is basically calling the shots in Iranian foreign policy. So does that give this administration any pause about Mr. Zarif as an interlocutor in the nuclear

negotiations? He also seemed to suggest that Russia had been essentially trying to sabotage the nuclear talks during the Obama administration. Do you – does that give you guys any concern about Russia’s intentions? Do you believe that Russia is fully supportive of restoring the JCPOA and the larger process with Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I will start by saying – and you won’t be surprised to hear – that we don’t comment on purportedly leaked material. Of course, we can’t vouch for the authenticity of it, for the accuracy of it, and so of course I’m not going to comment directly on what’s on that tape, on that recording.

The broader point is that with any negotiation, we don’t have control of the internal decision-making process of our counterparts. In this case, through our partners – because these negotiations continue to be indirect – we’re communicating with the officials the Iranian Government has put forward to take part in these talks in Vienna. You mentioned the talks in the previous iteration. When it comes to both Iran and Russia, for both of those, I would say there is a proof point here that we point to, and that gives us some degree of confidence that there is potential here. And it’s the JCPOA itself. Whatever the internal politics that were involved, whatever the geopolitical dynamic in – that culminated with the July 2015 agreement, we were able to negotiate successfully with Iran in the past, in the context of the P5+1. It’s precisely the context we are in now. Our focus today remains on determining, through these indirect talks in Vienna, whether we can do so again.

**QUESTION:** If I could just follow up on that. I understand you can’t address the comments directly, but maybe you would find a way to help provide some context. There’s been some criticism of John Kerry, who, according to Mr. Zarif, when he was secretary of state, had spoken to Mr. Zarif about 200 Israeli operations in Syria. And Foreign Minister Zarif said he was astonished to hear about this. Can you say anything about whether John Kerry, as secretary of state, was talking about Israeli operations in Syria that were not supposed to be discussed?

**MR PRICE:** Again, these are – this is purportedly leaked material. Can’t speak to the authenticity, can’t speak to the accuracy of it, can’t speak to any motives that may be behind its dissemination. I would just make the broad point that if you go back and look at press reporting from the time, this certainly was not secret, and governments that were involved were speaking to this publicly on the record.

**QUESTION:** What’s your understanding of what’s going to happen this week in Vienna?

**MR PRICE:** So in terms of what’s next, Special Envoy Malley is returning to Vienna early this week, I expect as soon as tomorrow. He will be on the way back to Vienna. We have completed two rounds of negotiations, indirect negotiations. Special Envoy Malley will be back on the ground with his team in Vienna to start a third round this week.

**QUESTION:** How long will it last? You’re not expecting anything to be finalized at this third round?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think you heard from State Department officials last week that there remains a long road ahead of us. We expect it to be a long road, at least. I think what I said last week remains true today, that we probably have more road ahead of us than we do behind us. We’ll just have to see what Special Envoy Malley and his team find on the ground in Vienna.

Yes, Joel.

**QUESTION:** Ned, staying on Iran, I kind of want to just reiterate my colleague’s questions, but with the preface that the Iranian Foreign Ministry appears to have said that the recording “was by no means an interview” or “supposed to be an interview...it was part of a routine and confidential dialogue that takes place within the administration.”

So they appear to be confirming the authenticity of the tape, but saying that some parts are taken out of context, and I – and so I then kind of wonder, once again, as was asked here, one, do you see the Russians as a credible partner here in good faith working to advance a common goal? And also, then, as you engage with the foreign minister, do you see him as – is the organizing dynamic here that this is somebody who you need to give some – give talking points to go back home to manage pressures domestically, or is he somebody who is not a decision maker?

**MR PRICE:** What I would say generally is that it is not for us to comment on any sort of political pressures that may be on Foreign Minister Zarif. What we are focused on is one thing and one thing only, and that is achieving and securing an agreement that verifiably and permanently prevents Iran from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon would not be in the interests of the United States, it would not be in the interests of our European partners, it would not be in the interest of the Chinese, it would not be in the interest of the Russians. And so to – as you reiterated the previous question, I would again point to the fact that we were able to achieve the JCPOA in 2015 and implement it in early 2016 with this same set of partners, the P5+1. And I think that speaks to some potential possibility of us being able to do this again if we find that commitment on the Iranian side, and that remains an "if" and we've been able – we've been speaking to that in recent days.

But when you ask about the Russian motivation, I'm going to let the Russians speak for themselves. I would just add the point that a nuclear-armed Iran is not in Moscow's interest.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, one more on Iran, unrelated to this, though.

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** Last week, Iran was elected to the commission – at ECOWAS, to the commission on the status of women. How did the U.S. vote?

**MR PRICE:** I will have to get back to you on that.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** A question from a colleague who couldn't be here today on China. She says: What is the Biden administration's view of – does it agree with the previous administration that the policy of engaging China to spur liberalization was misguided? And how does the Biden administration look at engagement now, broadly speaking?

**MR PRICE:** Right. Well, we have spoken broadly to our approach to Beijing, and what we have always said is that it is a relationship that is multifaceted. It is a relationship that will have competitive elements. It is a relationship that will have adversarial elements. And it is a relationship that will have some cooperative elements.

When you look at the totality of that relationship – and it is quite an expansive bilateral relationship – on balance, it is a relationship that is predicated on competition. Our goal in not only engaging with Beijing, but also with our partners and allies and also here at home, harnessing our domestic sources of strength, is to be able to compete and ultimately to outcompete with China. This is an approach that in – that, while it has human rights at the center, it is not an approach that requires any rose-colored glasses about the nature of the PRC, the nature of its leadership.

We are focused first and foremost on competing with and outcompeting the PRC, and that's what we're doing, calling upon those sources of strength, our allies and partners, our values, our domestic

sources of strength to use them in this relationship that is fundamentally one of competition.

**QUESTION:** But do you think that the previous policies of engagement were misguided?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not going to speak to previous administrations. I'm going to speak to this administration's approach, and that's precisely our approach. It is a clear-eyed, principled approach to the PRC that recognizes competition at the center of that relationship.

We can – have time for a quick final question. I know we're running to another engagement.

**QUESTION:** Just following up on that. So by stressing this competition is clear-eyed and there's no rose-colored glasses, you're basically saying you don't expect China to change; when Special Envoy Kerry goes there, he's not going to win change in China's energy policies; when our trade officials go there, they're not going to get a reform in China's economy? Is that —

**MR PRICE:** No, I'm not saying that at all, and in fact, I said at the outset it's a relationship that has competitive aspects, adversarial aspects, and also cooperative elements to it as well. When you think about the – those areas of shared interest that we have, you named a couple of them. Climate, of course, is one. Secretary Kerry was just in China several days ago and you saw the joint statement that emanated from that visit. Nonproliferation is another one. Iran, we've talked about in this context already, is another one. There may be others as well.

And so we certainly do hope and expect that we'll be able to achieve progress vis-a-vis all of those priorities, not because it's in the PRC's interest, but because it's in our interest. It's in our interest to see the world's largest emitter curb its emissions and it's in our interest to see Beijing play a productive and constructive role, as it has in the context of the P5+1 with Iran. It's in our interest to see other cooperative aspects of these – of this relationship be furthered.

But what I'm saying is that at the core, we recognize this to be a relationship predicated on competition, and our goal throughout is to compete and to call upon our sources of strength to outcompete with Beijing going forward.

Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:59 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – April 29, 2021](#)

*04/29/2021 07:06 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:45 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Okay. Good afternoon. A couple things at the top before we turn to your questions.

First, reflecting the United States' solidarity with India as it battles a new wave of COVID-19 cases, the United States is delivering supplies worth more than \$100 million in the coming days to provide urgent relief to our partners in India.

In addition, U.S. state governments, private companies, nongovernmental organizations, and thousands of Americans from across the country have mobilized to deliver vital oxygen, related equipment, and essential supplies for Indian hospitals to support frontline health care workers and the people of India most affected during this current outbreak.

U.S. government flights will start arriving in India tonight and they will continue into next week.

Just as India sent assistance to the United States when our hospitals were strained early in the pandemic, the United States is determined to help India in its time of need.

Next, we are deeply concerned by the Ukrainian cabinet of ministers' recent actions to manipulate existing resolutions – sorry – regulations to dismiss the supervisory board and replace the management of Ukraine's leading energy company.

This calculated move – using a procedural loophole – to oust well-regarded experts from the boards of several key state-owned enterprises reflects a disregard for fair and transparent corporate governance practices and complicates longstanding efforts to reform Ukraine's energy sector and improve its investment climate.

Unfortunately, these actions are just the latest example of ignoring best practices and putting Ukraine's hard-fought economic progress at risk.

We will continue to support Ukraine in strengthening its institutions, including advancing democratic institutions and corporate governance reforms, but Ukraine's leaders must do their part as well.

So with that, happy to turn to your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Before we turn to India for a second, I just want – did you get an – I asked you on I think it was Monday about the vote at the UN on the – or Iran's election to the Commission on the Status of Women. Did you get answer on how you voted?

**MR PRICE:** So what I can say, Matt, is that the unopposed candidacies of countries that engage in

torture, in abuse, violations of human rights and due process – it was a troubling feature of this election, the election that you referred to. That’s why – that’s precisely why the United States called for the vote on the Commission of the Status of Women, specifically to allow countries to register their opposition. The United States supports candidates in the UN system that seek to contribute positively to its work and mission and reinforce the foundational values of the UN system, including human rights. And that’s precisely why we have re-engaged with the UN, re-engaged with its human rights body, and will continue to do that throughout the UN system.

**QUESTION:** So you voted against them?

**MR PRICE:** It was a private vote, but we called the vote specifically to allow countries to register their concern.

**QUESTION:** Okay. It was a private vote. Well, what do you think? Is it appropriate for them to be on this commission, this council?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would point you to what I just said. It is a troubling feature when countries run unopposed, countries that have —

**QUESTION:** Well, I’m talking about Iran specifically.

**MR PRICE:** Well, and I’m – and in this case —

**QUESTION:** Do you guys have an issue with them being on this commission?

**MR PRICE:** In this case, I think that Iran would qualify for much of what I just said: countries that have very troubling records, deeply disturbing records.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but you said it was – but you said it was – you didn’t say that it was troubling for them to be on it; you said it was a troubling feature for these kinds of countries to run unopposed.

**MR PRICE:** Well, and it’s precisely why we called this vote.

**QUESTION:** So is it an issue —

**MR PRICE:** So countries could register their concern.

**QUESTION:** So is it safe to say – would someone be wrong in writing that the U.S. thinks it’s a bad idea for Iran to be on this commission?

**MR PRICE:** With a commission like this, we think that members should reflect the values underlying the commission.

**QUESTION:** And Iran doesn’t. All right. I’ll drop it there.

On India.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** The – in addition to this aid, you guys put out this new travel notice, travel alert today, which mentioned the authorized departure for families of U.S. government personnel at the embassy and the, what is it, four consulates. I’m just curious. Is this by popular demand? Were there people – and I know you don’t want to get into numbers or anything, but were people wanting to leave and have people left already under this – the authorized departure?

**MR PRICE:** Well, thanks for that question. And I think it's important to speak for just a moment about what this was and importantly what this was not. Out of an abundance of caution, the Department of State authorized the voluntary departure, so-called authorized departure, of family members of embassy – at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi and the consulates throughout the country. Authorized departure doesn't force anyone to leave; it doesn't require anyone to leave. It gives these family members the option to depart if they wish. Departure, again, is not required.

There's also been I think some misreporting, perhaps a misperception, that we provided revised guidance to private American citizens in India. That is not true. There was a pro forma reissuance of the travel advisory, the level four travel advisory that had previously been in effect, given COVID not only in India but also globally as well.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but are people taking advantage of it? Were people wanting this, or was it just decided from here and from the ambassador or whoever the charge is that this would be a good idea? I mean, is there a rush to the exits?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have the numbers. I'm not sure we'd be able to provide them, regardless, given —

**QUESTION:** I don't want your numbers. I just want to know if people are taking advantage of this.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think it speaks to the fact that we put the safety and health of our employees and their families, in this case – we prioritize that, and so that is why the department thought it prudent to give them the option to depart the country if they so wished.

(Inaudible.)

**QUESTION:** Okay, thanks.

**QUESTION:** Also on India. So I'm wondering how that's connected to the outbreak that's been reported from inside the U.S. embassy or among U.S. embassy staff. Do you have any update on how many people have been infected among staff there and how many fatalities there are and what the embassy and the government have been able to do to protect staff at the mission?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we addressed this the other day, and to Matt's point, numbers are difficult for us to offer publicly, given privacy concerns. What we will say is that, of course, our hearts go out to the people of India as they navigate this surge. It is fair to say that COVID has touched every – just about every element of Indian society, and of course, we do have a large diplomatic presence in India, as you might expect, given our global comprehensive partnership with India. So while I can't offer any specifics on U.S. embassy employees or family members or locally employed staff, clearly this is a pandemic; this is an outbreak, a surge of cases in India that has left no part of the country untouched.

**QUESTION:** And has that outbreak happened sort of despite vaccine? You've obviously been sending vaccines out to different embassies. Was there a delay getting them to the embassies in India that perhaps has led to this?

**MR PRICE:** So as we mentioned I believe as of mid-April, our missions around the world, all of them have had access to the vaccine. It was an effort that was conducted as expeditiously as possible. The vaccines have been in India for – to – available to our employees, to embassy staffers in India for several weeks now. But obviously, with any global distribution effort, it's a complex undertaking, but it's something we did as quickly as we could and it's something we're proud of. As we mentioned the other day, not a single vaccine dose was lost in that massive undertaking – nearly 200,000 doses worldwide, including to our mission in India.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Well, certainly related to – related to this in India, one of the things that’s happened in India is the number of critics of the Modi government’s performance, let’s say opposition politicians, by request of the Indian Government, their posts have been removed at least internally in India from Twitter and other social media outlets. Does this give you pause to the United States? Do you think that’s within the rights of the Indian Government? Do you have anything to say about this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we’ve made the point both when it comes to India and to countries around the world that freedom of expression, freedom of information is a hallmark of any democracy. Of course, India is a large democracy with whom we share foundational values, and freedom of information, freedom of expression is something we support around the world.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask on India?

**MR PRICE:** Sure, we’ll go to Lalit and then Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Yes. I would like to follow up on the comment that what you say when the tool of freedom of expression or social media is used as a tool to incite violence against the government or the – disturb law and order? How do the government handle that?

**MR PRICE:** How does – how does the government handle – I’m sorry?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. When that tool is used as – social media is used as a tool to incite violence —

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** — like what some section of the society has been doing there, right.

**MR PRICE:** Of course. And of course, hate speech, incitement to violence is something that we oppose everywhere. But clearly, we support freedom of expression, while still calling out and condemning when we see incitement to violence and hate speech.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for all the aid that you have been providing to India. But I’d like to ask you about what is the U.S. assessment of the situation of pandemic in India right now. How serious it is? This is the worst outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic anywhere in the world?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would be hesitant to offer a sweeping judgment like that. I think you can look at any number of metrics, and of course, if you look at the case count, the daily case count, of course, you see a case count that is very concerning and you see an epidemic that just about by any metric is incredibly concerning. And that is why the U.S. Government has been engaged, deeply engaged in supporting the Indian Government. As I mentioned the other day, even since the start of this outbreak, prior to the recent assistance that we just announced, the United States had delivered some \$19 million in support to India’s public health system.

Of course, we have spoken to a great deal more in recent days, not only from the U.S. Government, from the State Department, from USAID, from CDC, but also, we have undertaken an effort to galvanize the private sector. Secretary Blinken, as you know, took part in a call earlier this week and actually led the call earlier this week with the Chamber of Commerce. Commerce – Gayle Smith took part in that call. She took part in a subsequent call with the Chamber of Commerce to make the point that if we are to make progress against this current surge of cases in India, it can’t be something that

the Indian Government tackles alone, it can't be something that the United States Government tackles alone. Everyone has a role to play, including the private sector, including the advocacy community, including civil society, and that's what we're seeking to do. We're seeking to – our assistance, we hope, will have a catalytic effect on society more broadly here and around the world to come to the aid of the Indian people.

**QUESTION:** Is there any differences between the U.S. Government and the Indian Government about how the aid has to be distributed? I've heard somewhere that U.S. wants to distribute this aid through NGOs and send directly to the local government. Indian Government wanted to route it through the federal government itself.

**MR PRICE:** Our goal is to see to it that this aid – and this is a goal, of course, that we share with the Indian Government – is to see to it that this aid is put to immediate and effective use. For the details of that, I would refer you to those that are implementing this on the ground.

**QUESTION:** And how do you describe the India-U.S. relations in first 100 days of this administration?

**MR PRICE:** Well, of course, there's been a concerted focus on India over the past 100 days. President Biden, of course, did make mention of India in his address last night. And I think you can look at that deep partnership and commitment to partnership through any number of lenses.

As you know, President Biden himself had an opportunity to speak to Prime Minister Modi in recent days. Secretary Blinken has engaged with his foreign minister counterpart, Jaishankar, several times as well. There have been several high-level delegations. Secretary Kerry was in India not all that long ago to discuss climate. Secretary Austin, the Secretary of Defense, was in India not all that long ago to discuss elements of our security cooperation.

We have engaged with India in the multilateral context as well, through the Quad, both at the ministerial level and for the first time ever at the leader level. I've mentioned our climate cooperation, but also our health cooperation. And this was something that predates the pandemic, but it is something that intensified with the onset of the pandemic and intensified even further with the uptick in cases, the very concerning uptick in cases that we've seen in India in recent days.

So I think it is engagement that reflects our global comprehensive partnership.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you. Kylie, India.

**QUESTION:** So I just want to ask about the travel advisory this morning. In addition to what it said about U.S. diplomats there, it also said to U.S. citizens in India who wish to depart that they should take advantage of available commercial transportation options and warned against other Americans traveling there.

So is the administration considering stopping all flights from India to the U.S. in coming days or weeks?

**MR PRICE:** So the travel advisory – and you know this; I think we discussed this in a recent briefing – but as you know, the State Department recently adopted the CDC framework when it comes to our travel advisories. And so that's why many countries – I believe 80 percent of countries around the world – are now at Level 4 Travel Advisories. It is a consequence of the State Department adopting that uniform approach that the CDC uses.

So when it comes to our guidance to Americans in India, that did not change. What did change was the ability of American family members to depart India on a voluntary basis should they choose to do so. My understanding is that commercial travel continues, commercial flights continue to take off and land in India. When it comes to any travel restrictions, as you know, that is something that is determined in close coordination and under the advice of public health professionals at CDC and HHS.

**QUESTION:** But if those flights were under consideration to shut down, it would obviously be up to the State Department to give Americans heads up that that was a possibility. So given that you guys haven't issued any of those warnings, should we assume that no shutdown of those flights is anytime imminent?

**MR PRICE:** Again, that's not for me to speak to. I wouldn't read anything beyond – read anything into the updated travel advisory that you saw today. Again, my understanding is that those commercial flights continue to take off and land. Any changes to entry requirements or restrictions would be dictated by public health and in coordination with medical professionals and CDC.

**QUESTION:** And the State Department would give Americans heads up well in advance of that?

**MR PRICE:** The State Department as a regular course communicates with Americans around the world through our embassies.

**QUESTION:** When you said you adopted the CDC standard, I just want to make sure, that's just for like health and diseases?

**MR PRICE:** That's correct. That's correct.

**QUESTION:** Because the CDC is good at that, but they don't – maybe not know so much about the political ramifications.

**MR PRICE:** Well, and some 80 percent of countries around the world are at this Level 4 precisely because of public health concerns.

**QUESTION:** For disease reasons.

**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** But you're still doing – you're still factoring your own metrics into – for violence, or —

**MR PRICE:** Of course. Of course. Yes.

**QUESTION:** A quick follow-up on India. Do you know when the CDC is sending its team of officials to the U.S. Embassy in Delhi?

**MR PRICE:** As quickly as possible – as soon as possible, I should say. The CDC team was mentioned in the White House fact sheet, as you know. I know they will be engaging as quickly as possible, but I'd have to refer you to the CDC for specific details.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, sir. My name is Nazira Azim Karimi. I'm an Afghan independent journalist. As you know, sir, nowadays Afghanistan has a sensitive time. Afghan women, they are very worried, although they have a lot of achievement. This is a few example that I brought with myself. And they

are really under bad situation psychologically. Can you give me some details, short information that – what will be their situation in future? They are really worried about their future.

And also, Istanbul conference for peace process – as you know, Taliban postponed it, and it look that Taliban is more powerful now. Istanbul conference will take place or not?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to the Istanbul conference, we've heard from the organizers that they would – it's unlikely to take place during the month of Ramadan, but would need to refer you to the organizers for updates when it comes to that.

When it comes to women and girls – and thank you for those illustrations – as you know, Secretary Blinken traveled to Afghanistan shortly after President Biden – within hours of President Biden's speech from the White House. And, of course, while there we met with President Ghani, we met with Chairman Abdullah, but importantly, we also met with representatives of civil society. And there were some half dozen or a couple more participants in that meeting, all of – all but one of whom were women, women who had been at the front lines of the gains that the Afghan people – the hard-won gains, I should say – that the Afghan people have achieved over the past 20 years.

And Secretary Blinken determined that it was especially important for him to – not only to go to Afghanistan but to meet with representatives of civil society and with Afghan women, precisely to send the signal that even as we withdraw militarily from Afghanistan, our partnership with the people of Afghanistan will endure. We have made clear that any country that seeks international legitimacy, that wishes not to be a pariah, needs to respect women and girls, and that includes any future government in Afghanistan. The United States will continue to provide support through the Department of State, through USAID for the important programs that have supported many of, again, the hard-won gains of Afghanistan's women and girls over the past 20 years.

As you know, we are continuing to have a diplomatic presence on the ground in Afghanistan. That's especially important as an element of that enduring partnership with the people of Afghanistan going forward.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on that?

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up?

**MR PRICE:** Yes. Oh, sorry, I didn't see who it was. Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, sorry. There's news today that the U.S. troops are beginning to withdraw. I wonder if you can describe the situation at the embassy. Has the drawdown there begun?

**MR PRICE:** So I would need to refer you to the Department of Defense to speak to the drawdown of troops, but the broad point is that – and President Biden laid this out in his speech – that the only military presence that will remain in Afghanistan is the very limited presence required to protect our embassy, and that's important for the reason I was just discussing. Even as we disengage militarily from 20 years of military involvement in Afghanistan, our presence on the ground will remain through our embassy, through our civilian representatives, including our diplomats.

The – as you know, there was an announcement earlier this week that we will be relocating some personnel from Kabul. These are personnel who can do their jobs elsewhere. It is a repositioning of



personnel that will allow us to place them elsewhere and also to bring in additional personnel who will be able to help manage the drawdown and the implications that has for our embassy presence and for those who will be able to help be the conduits, the diplomatic conduits to the government and the people of Afghanistan going forward. As we mentioned, this was a drawdown order that affects only a relatively small number of diplomats who are based at our embassy in Kabul.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. It's a hundred days into this administration, and among ambassadorial appointments, only a handful has been nominated and none from the larger missions, I guess with the exception of the UN. Why is the process going so slowly? And does that create a void or a vacuum in your stated efforts to repair the damage, the diplomatic damage of the last four years?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'd make a couple points. As you know, there have been 11 ambassadors put forward – nine career ambassadors, two political ambassadors; those two political ambassadors being Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at our mission to the UN and Chris Lu, who would hold another position at our mission to the UN. But even as – even for those posts that do not yet have a nominee, we are incredibly fortunate to have career women and men at the Department of State serving in the function and the capacity of charge. We have – in the course of our travels already, Secretary Blinken has had an opportunity to meet with those individuals, all of whom are, again, career professionals who have years if not, in most cases, decades of experience in the Department of State. So it's not that there is a leadership vacuum anywhere in the world here, not here at Main State, not anywhere around the world. And those charges will continue until they, in some cases, have a confirmed ambassador in place to serve and to serve exceptionally well.

**QUESTION:** Any reason, though, for the slowness of the process?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it's – as you know, this is a process that is handled by the White House, by the Presidential Personnel Office. It's an office that not only oversees nominations for ambassadors here at the Department of State but appointees and nominees throughout the Executive Branch. So they clearly have a lot of work. As we've said before, we've – the White House has put forward nearly a dozen nominees for ambassadorial positions. That's in addition to the nominees that have been put forward for other positions here at State, including assistant secretary and under secretary positions as well.

So there has been good progress that we've already seen, and I expect you'll be hearing more from President Biden and from the White House when it comes to personnel announcements going forward.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, can I just make a point that what you've just said in the terms of the career people, that there's no dearth of leadership experience or – that when the previous administration had the same – made the similar argument about lack of ambassadors or lack of people, that people – many people who are involved in this administration, including, I believe, yourself – were pretty dismissive of that argument, scoffed at it, saying people are being sidelined and that kind of thing. And so I'd just like to make the point that the same explanation you just gave or the same reasoning was not well received by people in the current administration, politicals, when it was made by the previous administration.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'd be interested, perhaps in another venue, in hearing exactly what remarks you're referring to. But I think you may be referring to efforts to sideline individuals rather than nominate individuals in the first place, but that may be for another venue.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I have a couple of questions, but I would start by Iran. A team of U.S. officials is traveling to the Middle East this week for talks with U.S. allies there. Can you share any information on who from State Department would participate in those talks? What are the main stops of the U.S. delegation? And is that part of paving the ground from now for a potential deal with Iran that would come within weeks, as predicted by the Israeli ambassador here in Washington?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we don't have details to share at this point. What I can confirm, however, is that a senior interagency delegation will be traveling over the coming week to discuss a number of important matters related to U.S. national security and ongoing efforts to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East. I suppose I would hasten to add that this delegation is not focused on any one issue, certainly not focused just on Iran and anything that may emanate from the ongoing discussions in Vienna.

When it comes to those discussions in Vienna, I would use this as an opportunity to make the point that we are now in the third round of what promises to be a multi-round exercise. It continues to be a venue that – where we've been able to engage indirectly with the Iranian delegation in largely thoughtful, businesslike, constructive dialogue. But there is still a great distance to travel, and what we have said before about having more road ahead of us than road behind us remains accurate.

**QUESTION:** But there are positive signs from everyone. All the parties that participate in those talks agree that there is sort of breakthrough. So is it fair to say that a deal is within reach?

**MR PRICE:** It is fair to say that some progress has been made. We have a better understanding of what we might need to do were Iran to go back into compliance, and it is our assessment that the Iranians have a better sense of what they would need to do to resume their compliance with the JCPOA. But that remains a hypothetical; it remains an if. And big challenges remain. I think it is fair to say that we are not on the cusp of any breakthrough, and again, there is a potentially long road ahead of us.

I think since you raised it, I would just make the point that there has been a heavy focus on what the United States might need to do were Iran to resume its compliance with the JCPOA. I think what is often omitted from that discussion is the other side of that equation, and that is what Iran would need to do to resume its compliance with its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal. The fact is that Iran's nuclear program has been galloping ahead since the previous administration left the nuclear deal in 2018. Iran, as of recently, had 10 times the amount of enriched uranium permitted under the deal, and it has made more ever since that assessment came down. It is spinning cascades of advanced centrifuges that are prohibited by the deal. Its breakout time, which, as you may recall, was at a full year when the deal was in effect, is by most accounts now a matter of months. So it is fair to say that this is a crisis that we inherited. This was a crisis that was precipitated by both sides distancing themselves from the Iran deal.

If Iran were to resume its compliance with the nuclear deal, it would, of course, require Iran to significantly roll back its nuclear program and once again block every conceivable pathway to a nuclear weapon. That is precisely what the JCPOA did. It set forth in verifiable and permanent terms restrictions that would permanently prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. That's what is at stake here for us. That remains our ultimate objective, to see Iran's pathways to a nuclear weapon once again permanently and verifiably blocked.

**QUESTION:** I believe Iran was the main topic of discussion today, in today's meeting between Secretary Blinken and U.S. officials including the chief of Mossad and the Israeli ambassador in Washington. Can you share any readout of this meeting, please?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any such meeting to confirm or to read out. What I will say, however, is that we have been in close contact with our Israeli counterparts. As you know, Jake Sullivan met in Washington with Israeli National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat earlier this week, where, of course, Iran was on the agenda. Rob Malley was – briefed the group for part of that. We have, as you heard from State Department officials, updated our Israeli counterparts before every round of negotiations, after every round of negotiations, and we've been consulting with them during these negotiations as well.

So we have conducted ourselves with a great deal of transparency, knowing that the United States and Israel share a common interest here, of course, and that is seeing to it – again, as I said before – that Iran is verifiably and permanently prevented from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

**QUESTION:** But Iran also welcomed what it called the change of tone from Saudi Arabia. How would this conciliatory tone between the two sides affect the so many crises in the region, including Yemen, with the fourth visit of the Special Envoy Tim Lenderking to the region?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to characterize the tone that may be heard from Iran, or heard from Riyadh for that matter. But since you raised it, as you heard from us last night, Special Envoy Lenderking is, as of today, in Saudi Arabia. He'll also travel to Oman on this trip. He's meeting with senior government officials and is always working closely with the UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths as part of this. His discussions are focused on ensuring the regular and unimpeded delivery of commodities and humanitarian assistance throughout Yemen, and of course, promoting that lasting ceasefire and advancing that political process that we've invested in since the earliest days, earliest hours even, of this administration.

**QUESTION:** And lastly, the Iraqi News Agency quoted the Iraqi oil minister, Ihsan Abdul Jabbar, as saying that his country intends to import gas from Syria, without giving details. But he was speaking after a meeting with his Syrian counterpart. I'm wondering if you are aware of those reports and if such move would violate the U.S. sanctions on al-Assad regime.

**MR PRICE:** We'll see if we can get you a response there.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Can we stay in the region? Just in the past few hours, Palestinian Authority President Abbas saying that Palestinian elections can go ahead if there's voting in Jerusalem, in East Jerusalem. Does the U.S. have any position on – first of all, on voting in Jerusalem, whether that should go ahead again this time and whether the Palestinian elections should be held on schedule?

**MR PRICE:** We do have an opinion, and it's our opinion, as we have always said, that the exercise of democratic elections is a matter for the Palestinian people and for the Palestinian leadership to determine.

**QUESTION:** But the vote in Jerusalem —

**QUESTION:** Well, it sounds like you don't have an opinion at all.

**MR PRICE:** Well, no. It is actually an affirmative position. We believe in an inclusive political process —

**QUESTION:** And that's what the Bush administration said when there was an election in Gaza, too.

**MR PRICE:** Well, so it —

**QUESTION:** Look – and look how that – so —

**MR PRICE:** It continues to be our position that democratic elections are a matter for the people and the Palestinian leadership to determine. By the way, that happens to be our position on elections around the world. We never dictate when it comes to elections, when it comes to the outcome of elections.

**QUESTION:** So it's okay if it's not democratic?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** So it's okay if the election isn't democratic, too?

**MR PRICE:** Free and fair is —

**QUESTION:** When it comes to democratic elections, we think it's up to the people. I mean, don't you want – shouldn't they always be democratic?

**MR PRICE:** I —

**QUESTION:** So if the Palestinian —

**QUESTION:** About voting in Jerusalem? Sorry.

**QUESTION:** If the Palestinian leadership decides it wants to hold elections in Jerusalem, they should be allowed? It should happen, is what you're saying? Or no?

**MR PRICE:** It is a matter for the Palestinian leadership and the Palestinian people to decide.

**QUESTION:** They decide, and if they want it, they should have it.

**QUESTION:** Not Israel.

**QUESTION:** Not – it's not up to the Israelis.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** It is a matter for the Palestinian people and leadership to decide on the exercise of democratic elections.

**QUESTION:** And Israel should not interfere? And Israel should not interfere?

**MR PRICE:** It is a matter for the Palestinian people and leadership.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Just one more question about Afghanistan. There is expert talk that Taliban still have relationship with al-Qaida. If they don't disconnect their relationship, what will be the U.S. reaction to the Taliban? And also, based off your opinion, United States win the war in Afghanistan or lost the war?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry, I didn't catch the last part of your question.

**QUESTION:** United States winners or they lost war in Afghanistan, or still war continuing —

**MR PRICE:** Oh, did we win or did we lose the war in Afghanistan?

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MR PRICE:** So the point that I think is critically important to understanding this administration's position, what President Biden laid out, is the very simple fact that we went into Afghanistan together with our partners in 2001, in October 2001, with one goal in mind, and that was to degrade al-Qaida, the al-Qaida presence that was there, the al-Qaida leadership that had directed the attack on the United States on 9/11. Usama bin Ladin was killed more – just about 10 years ago. That is a mission that due to the heroics of our military and other interagency partners we were able to accomplish. It is a mission that was not only accomplished successfully and that was in our interests but also in the interests of all of our partners around the world who had come under threat from al-Qaida that was at the time based in Afghanistan.

So the President made very clear that having accomplished that military mission, it was time for our service members to depart. But again, he was equally clear that even as we withdraw militarily we will remain engaged diplomatically, remain engaged diplomatically with the Afghan leadership and remain engaged diplomatically with the Afghan people.

When it comes to the Taliban, as you know, we spent quite some time studying the agreement that the previous administration agreed to, the stipulation that was in the agreement from the previous administration that American troops needed to be on the way out as of May 1st. We've spoken of the mixed record when it comes to the Taliban in adhering to the agreement. We've spoken to the levels of violence in Afghanistan that remain unacceptably high. And I think the point remains that if the Taliban wants any semblance of international legitimacy, if the Taliban does not wish to be a international, a global pariah, that it must cease any ties with al-Qaida or other terrorist groups.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** What makes you guys so convinced that the Taliban fear being a pariah? I mean, they were pretty much a pariah back in the '90s, and they didn't seem to mind. Do you think things have changed that much that they now are so eager to be a part of the international community that they will change their ways?

**MR PRICE:** The consequence of being a pariah, of lacking any international legitimacy, is, I think in our minds, the inability to have any durability to that sort of movement. If the Taliban wants to be part of Afghanistan's future, they're not going to be able to do so if they do not respect the rights of women and girls, if they do not sever ties with al-Qaida or other terrorist groups. So it is not only consistent with our values and with our interests that the Taliban do this, but if the Taliban think they have a future in Afghanistan, it's also in their interest.

**QUESTION:** But the Taliban don't care about what your values are. They care about their values. And I – why are you guys convinced that their values include not being an international pariah when the evidence – strong evidence from the previous time they were in power – showed that they didn't care?

**MR PRICE:** Because engaging in these sorts of practices or failing to follow through with these sorts of commitments won't afford the Taliban any degree of legitimacy or durability. And I think durability is certainly something that the Taliban seeks to achieve. They would not be able to achieve that absent these steps.

**QUESTION:** Ned, Russia?

**MR PRICE:** Russia, sure.

**QUESTION:** The – Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said that he’s going to attend the meeting of Arctic nations in Iceland. And he said he’s ready to meet Secretary Blinken at that location. Does Secretary Blinken feel the same way? Is he open to meeting Minister Lavrov?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn’t want to get ahead of things. I would make the broader point that in the midst of these very challenging times in the bilateral relationship with Russia, in the context of a relationship that we would like to be both stable and predictable. We know that an ingredient to seeing that through is engagement, should be engagement. That is why we hope and we expect that not all avenues for engagement will be shut off. And that is why you have heard us object to the steps that we’ve heard from Moscow to limit our diplomatic presence in Russia. We know that if we are to inject some degree of stability, some degree of predictability into this relationship, there has to be or there needs to be some semblance of engagement.

And so that’s why President Biden, in his conversation with President Putin the other day, held out the prospect of a meeting between the two presidents in the coming weeks. But when it comes to the upcoming Arctic conference, I just don’t have anything to preview at this time.

**QUESTION:** And the status of the Russian local staff at the missions, is that still in limbo or has that been clarified by Moscow, the status?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what I will say – and to go back to what I was referencing a moment ago – is that Moscow formally notified the State Department of portions of the additional actions it is choosing to impose on our mission to Russia, but we don’t have the full details of that yet. We’re in the process of reviewing the measures that have been formally relayed to us. We know that they would have a negative impact on our mission’s ability to operate and, again, consequently on our ability to engage diplomatically with our Russian counterparts. And we, of course, do reserve the right to respond.

What we have always said is that the measures that the White House, that President Biden announced the other week – those were not escalatory. Those were a response to the attack on our democracy that we had seen from the Russians; it was a response to SolarWinds. And so that’s how we look at it. It is not that we have escalated. And we continue to review the – what the Russians have communicated to us, knowing that we do reserve the right to respond, depending on what we hear and what we assess going forward, but also knowing that, again, we need to keep those lines of communication open if we are to inject some degree of stability and predictability into the relationship.

Yeah.

**QUESTION:** One other follow-up on Russia. The Secretary yesterday mentioned that he’s raised the issue of RFE/RL. Can you be any more specific about what the U.S. wants to see there and how you hope to resolve that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, media freedom, as we know, is – has come increasingly under threat from Moscow. The Russian Government’s long-running campaign against independent media and voices has only intensified in recent months. We’ve seen, of course, a broad crackdown on human rights and those seeking to achieve a greater degree of inclusiveness and participation in Russian society, only to see the Russians attempt to quash that.

For more than 70 years now, RFE/RL has been a vital source of objective news and information for the people of Russia and an important link between our two countries. As Secretary Blinken said, he has raised this issue with Foreign Minister Lavrov. He and other officials have called on the Russian Government to reconsider its actions against RFE/RL and we have heard – we’ve been gratified to hear statements from some of our international partners joining that call.

Unfortunately, the Russian Government is increasingly intolerant of outside perspectives. We've made clear that Russia's actions against RFE/RL and other media organizations labeled as so-called foreign agents reflect significant intolerance and oppressive restrictions. We'll continue to raise this case, the case of RFE/RL, freedom of expression within Russia more broadly, and human rights more broadly as well with our Russian counterparts. Should the Russian Government continue to move to forcibly shut down RFE/RL, we will respond.

Yeah, Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Different topic. Haiti. This week, Chairman Meeks wrote a letter saying – basically quite critical of policy currently on Haiti. One of the more specific things he was saying is that the U.S. shouldn't support the constitutional referendum that's coming up. I know that generally you don't want to respond to everything from the Hill, but in this case does the United States still support the – or does the United States support the constitutional referendum in Haiti?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you're right, we don't comment on correspondence from the Hill. But let me just give you a sense of our view of this, and that is that holding overdue elections are the democratic means to end Haiti's irregular and prolonged rule by decree, and to restore the legislature's role in Haitian democracy. Presidential elections scheduled for the fall of this year are necessary to transfer power peacefully and on a timely basis from one democratically elected leader to another. We have repeatedly stated that constitutional reform is for the Haitian people to decide. We've emphasized – and this goes back to part of your question – that the U.S. Government – we've emphasized to the Government of Haiti that the U.S. Government will not provide financial support for a constitutional referendum.

**QUESTION:** Will not support the constitutional referendum?

**MR PRICE:** Will not, for a constitutional referendum.

**QUESTION:** Do you oppose it being held or is it just a matter of U.S. support? It is – again, when it comes to those moves, these are for the Haitian people to decide. But when it comes to that referendum, it is not something that we will provide financial support for.

**QUESTION:** Ned, why is it necessary in Haiti for presidential elections to transfer power peacefully and not for the Palestinians?

**MR PRICE:** As we said, this is for the —

**QUESTION:** You just said – you said you didn't – you said that that's up to the Palestinian people. Well, in Haiti, you say that these are necessary. Why aren't elections for the Palestinians necessary?

**MR PRICE:** We are talking about the timing of the Palestinian elections. That is for —

**QUESTION:** We're also talking about the timing – have been talking about the timing of the Haitian elections.

**MR PRICE:** This is written into – this would be consistent with what is called for in Haiti. I —

**QUESTION:** Yeah. The Palestinians haven't had an election in 15 years.

**MR PRICE:** I don't think you can compare two countries. In some cases, we're going to have —

**QUESTION:** You made a blanket statement.

**MR PRICE:** — apples and oranges.

**QUESTION:** But you made a blanket statement that elections are up to the people.

**MR PRICE:** But there are also key differences between the contexts in Haiti and with the Palestinian Authority.

I saw one final question. Yes

**QUESTION:** Yes. On Syria, what would the U.S. Government do in order to revive the political process, in order to counter the fact that President Assad may be in the power for another seven years? And would the U.S. consider nominating special envoy to lead those efforts?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I don't have any personnel announcements to preview at this time. What I would say is that per UN Security Council Resolution 2254, steps should be taken towards convening free and fair elections, very importantly, pursuant to a new constitution administered under the supervision of the UN, in which all Syrians, including internally displaced Syrians, displaced Syrians, refugees, and the diaspora might be able to participate. We believe that stability in Syria and the greater region is best served through a political process that produces peaceful outcomes in Syria. We are committed to working with allies, partners, and the UN to ensure that a durable political solution remains within reach.

Even as we do that, we are also doing everything we can, and you heard from Secretary Blinken himself, to provide humanitarian relief to the people of Syria who have suffered so immensely under the brutal repression, the brutality of Bashar al-Assad. We've spoken to our commitments to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, not only providing that aid but also seeking to provide humanitarian access to ensure that that aid can reach those most vulnerable and those in need. We have done that in the face of resistance, including within the UN Security Council. We continue to work on this issue just knowing how vitally important it is to the wellbeing of the Syrian people.

Thank you very much, everyone.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:36 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – May 10, 2021](#)

*05/10/2021 06:19 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

1:57 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. I have a few elements at the top before we get started. I know we also have a bilateral engagement just after this, so we'll conclude before that.

Let me start by saying that the United States condemns in the strongest terms the barrage of rocket attacks fired into Israel in recent hours. This is an unacceptable escalation. While we urge de-escalation on all sides, we also recognize Israel's legitimate right to defend itself and to defend its people and its territory. It is critical for all sides to ensure calm and de-escalate tensions and avoid violent confrontations, such as the responsible decision to reroute today's parade.

More broadly, we're deeply concerned about the situation in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, including violent confrontations in Jerusalem, particularly in the Haram al-Sharif Temple Mount that has resulted in at least 180 additional injuries, as well as the rocket fire from Gaza hitting houses in Jerusalem and the threat of further rocket attacks. The United States will remain fully engaged to promote calm in Jerusalem, and we welcome the steps the Israeli Government has taken in recent days aimed at avoiding provocations, including the decision to avoid confrontations during the Jerusalem Day Commemoration and the delay in the decision regarding the Sheikh Jarrah evictions.

Next, I am pleased to announce that U.S. Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland will now serve in the capacity of Special Envoy for Libya in addition to the Chief of Mission for Libya. In his role as Special Envoy, Ambassador Norland will lead U.S. diplomatic efforts to promote international support for a Libyan-led, inclusive, and negotiated political solution to the conflict, facilitated through the UN.

Ambassador Norland, a Career Minister in the Foreign Service and a three-time ambassador, has served as Chief of Mission at the Libyan External Affairs Office in Tunis since August of 2019.

The addition of the Special Envoy role to Ambassador Norland's Chief of Mission responsibilities signifies the importance we attach to focused, high-level diplomatic outreach in support of the Libyan political process culminating in elections in December of this year. Ambassador Norland will work closely with key partners to strengthen efforts to keep the political process on track and to ensure the removal of foreign forces from Libya.

Ambassador Norland also will work closely with interagency colleagues in Washington, civil society, and humanitarian partners to further the U.S. role in actively supporting the Libyan people as they seek lasting peace, security, and prosperity in their country. The Special Envoy will also keep Congress closely informed of our efforts.

We congratulate Ambassador Norland on his new and expanded role leading U.S. efforts in Libya and internationally to support a political solution to the Libyan conflict.

Next, the United States condemns the horrifying attack in Kabul on Saturday targeting an innocent Afghan girls' school – innocent Afghan girls at their school – excuse me. The death toll in that attack is now over 80 individuals, most of them girls in their teens – killed for nothing more than pursuing an education and a brighter future. We wish a speedy recovery to the many wounded and grieve with the families of the victims. We are still looking into what or who is responsible, but I would note that ISIS has been responsible for similar attacks on Shia communities in Kabul in the past. We note the Taliban has denied involvement in the attack, and we welcome their announcement of a three-day ceasefire over the upcoming Eid holiday. We call on the Taliban and Afghan leaders to engage seriously in the ongoing peace process to ensure the Afghan people enjoy a future free of terrorism and of senseless violence.

Although the United States is withdrawing our troops, we are not disengaging from Afghanistan, and we will continue to use our diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian toolset to ensure that the gains of the past 20 years, particularly those made by women, girls, and minorities, are preserved.

So with that, I am happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Can I ask you just a very brief logistical question and then move into more substance? On the Norland announcement —

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** I'm having trouble figuring out what exactly he's going to be doing different today than he was doing, like, last week.

**MR PRICE:** Well, so obviously, last week he was not the special envoy. He is —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I know. But other than having a new title, it sounds like he's doing exactly the same thing as he was before. So why give him — why does he need this new title?

**MR PRICE:** Because the mandate he is taking on now will require him to engage on behalf of the U.S. Government with other partner nations —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but —

**MR PRICE:** — serving beyond his role of chief of mission in Libya. As special envoy, he'll have the remit to engage other governments, civil society, congress as well.

**QUESTION:** He didn't before? I mean, he lives in Tunis, which is a different country.

**MR PRICE:** Right. But this gives him an elevated profile —

**QUESTION:** So he didn't have the latitude to deal with the Italians or with the Maltese or with the Tunisians before?

**MR PRICE:** I think we wanted to make it very clear the priority we attach to this, and naming Ambassador Norland as a special envoy would give him that added remit.

**QUESTION:** All right. On Israel and your opening statement.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** When you talk about supporting Israel's right to defend itself, that includes — I'm

assuming, but correct me if I'm wrong – that includes their retaliatory strikes against Hamas targets in Gaza, right?

**MR PRICE:** We're speaking of the principle of self-defense. We certainly —

**QUESTION:** No, no. I'm asking you if you think that the principle of self-defense applies to the retaliatory – the air strikes that they're conducting in response to the —

**MR PRICE:** Matt, this is a very fluid situation. I would hesitate to comment on operations beyond the rocket fire that is clearly targeting innocent civilians in Israel. So I would hesitate to speak to specific operations that have just occurred, but the broader principle of self-defense is something we stand by on behalf of Israel and every other country.

**QUESTION:** Yes. But do you think that Israeli military response to the rockets coming in – a military response to the rockets coming in is covered by this broader rubric of self-defense, right?

**MR PRICE:** Self-defense often does authorize the use of force.

**QUESTION:** And secondly on this, there was – there is an attempt, or was an attempt earlier and maybe I've missed something since we've been in here, but at the UN Security Council for there to be a presidential statement —

**MR PRICE:** Right.

**QUESTION:** — about the situation. And it looks like you guys were holding it up. Can you explain what the issue is?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Matt, as we have commented on different contexts we don't discuss our actions during private consultations. What I will say, however, is that we want to see whatever comes out of the UN Security Council, we want to see to it that those products, be they statements or anything else, don't escalate tensions. That's our overriding priority.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. I want to ask you about East Jerusalem, but let's talk about what you said about the principle of self-defense. Does that in any way apply to the Palestinians? Do they have a right to self-defense? Do Palestinians have a right to self-defense?

**MR PRICE:** I'm – in – broadly speaking, Said, we believe in the concept of self-defense. We believe it applies to any state. I don't think that —

**QUESTION:** All right. I —

**MR PRICE:** I certainly wouldn't want my words to be construed as —

**QUESTION:** No, I understand. I want to ask on East Jerusalem. I don't want to harp on this either. But the Israelis killed 13 people just now, including maybe five or six children. Do you condemn that? Do you condemn the killing of children?

**MR PRICE:** Said —

**QUESTION:** I'm asking: Do you condemn the killing of Palestinian children?

**MR PRICE:** Obviously – and these reports are just emerging. And I understand – I was just speaking

to the team. I understand we don't have independent confirmation of facts on the ground yet, so I'm very hesitant to get into reports that are just emerging.

Obviously, the deaths of civilians, be they Israeli or Palestinians, are something we would take very seriously.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Now, you recognize that East Jerusalem is occupied Palestinian territory, and as such Israel has no legal claim whatever. The Israeli Supreme Court weighing on this is really absurd, because all the documents are there – the Jordanian document, the Ottoman document, and so on. But you are really unwilling to hold Israel responsible for what's going on in Sheikh Jarrah. I mean, you have to look at where this whole thing started, correct?

**MR PRICE:** And that's why we've spoken about what has – what was set to take place in Sheikh Jarrah. As you know, Said, we issued a statement on Friday.

**QUESTION:** That's correct.

**MR PRICE:** The White House issued a statement yesterday in conjunction with the readout of National Security Advisor Sullivan's call with his counterpart. We have been clear about where we stand in Sheikh Jarrah. We've been clear in urging the Israelis to act responsibly, to treat Palestinian residents with compassion and with humanity in this case.

I will – because I just wanted to make sure there is clear understanding about what I said before and what I didn't say before.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** The question before was in terms of occupation. What I said before was the West Bank remains occupied.

**QUESTION:** So is East Jerusalem.

**MR PRICE:** Jerusalem, of course, is a final status – is a final status issue to be determined by the parties.

**QUESTION:** Okay, but one last thing. There seems to be a great deal of – some people are upset, pro-Israeli, like the Free Beacon and so on. They're upset with Jalina, what Jalina said, although what she said really was no different than what you said. What is your reaction to that? They are saying that you have distanced yourself from what she said.

**MR PRICE:** I am aware of what you're referring to. I think if you look at the report that you're mentioning, Jalina is quoted in that report as offering additional context to the statements she made last week.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** I just want to follow up on something that isn't happening right now, that happened 48 hours ago, which was credible reports from the ground that there were rubber bullets fired into the al-Aqsa Mosque. And what responsibility does the IDF have not to violate the third holiest site in Islam and where children and elderly people are in prayer?

**MR PRICE:** Well, and that's something we were extremely concerned about. It's precisely why we took the pretty rare step of issuing a late-night Friday night statement. I think it came out after 10 p.m. just —

**QUESTION:** I just want to give you the opportunity now that you're on camera to – I mean, because this didn't just start this morning.

**MR PRICE:** No, of course. Of course not. And this has been ongoing for days. Unfortunately, we've seen tensions escalate over the course of days. On Friday, our statement was very clear that we called on both sides to de-escalate, and we continue now to call on all sides. Obviously, Hamas is now in the mix with this rocket fire. But yes, peaceful protest is something that – it's a concept that we support, whether that's in Israel or anywhere else.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** So to follow up on those, Ned, you just said that on Sheikh Jarrah you are calling Israelis to act responsibly, with compassion. So are you basically telling them to not go ahead with the evictions? Is that your – is that U.S. Government's recommendation to Israel?

**MR PRICE:** What we have said, we are concerned about the potential eviction of these families, many of whom have lived in Sheikh Jarrah for generations. As I understand it, this is now an issue before the Israeli Supreme Court. That decision was supposed to come out today. It has now been delayed by some time. I don't want to get ahead of where the supreme court might come out, but our position has been clear. We are concerned, very concerned about the potential for those evictions and that's why we spoke out.

**QUESTION:** Okay. A couple of more. I'm sure you've seen some of the videos from the city and, like, protesters and IDF. To follow up on Andrea's point, do you think Israeli forces – do you think Israeli authorities have used excessive force? And if yes, have you guys urged them not to do so, and what was their response?

**MR PRICE:** There have been a series of engagements not only in recent days, but, of course, prior to that even. Our statement on Friday night; the White House read out National Security Advisor Sullivan's call; our deputy secretary of state over the weekend had a call with her Israeli counterpart; and, of course, there have been at various levels engagement with Palestinian leaders. Our message to both Israeli and Palestinian officials has been one of de-escalation, urging de-escalation, knowing that the conditions on the ground are especially volatile, now that we're in the month of Ramadan, a confluence of events, a series of escalations.

Look, I am not – I don't want to be in the business of arbitrating, especially from up here, when it comes to those issues. What I will say is that we have urged Israelis to de-escalate, we have urged Palestinians to de-escalate, and we have condemned in the strongest possible terms the Hamas rocket fire that is – within recent minutes, has been raining down on Israel.

**QUESTION:** And then one final one on Israel, although I don't think you've clearly answered my question on whether or not you think Israeli authorities have used excessive force, so if you want to answer that now, please feel free to. But this flare-up seems to be one of the most tense in many years, and I'm seeing various commentators, experts talking about saying it might be the beginning of another intifada. Do you have any reason or intel to believe that might be the case?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, our goal in the near-term is to de-escalate. I don't want to speak to hypotheticals. I don't want to speak to what would happen in the absence of de-escalation. But, of course, the possibility of additional violence, of extended violence is something we're concerned about. It is why we have been so ardent and so proactive in our outreach to Israeli leaders and Palestinian leaders and also in our public statements. We are doing everything we can. The Quartet issued a statement over the weekend as well. The international community is weighing in. Of course, we've seen this UN Security Council session. The international community as well as the United States –

there is a collective interest in seeing a de-escalation here. That's what we're trying to achieve.

Michael.

**QUESTION:** Ned, more broadly, this administration hasn't placed at least a visibly high priority on playing some role in trying to restart the peace process. Does the current – the seriousness of these current tensions and conflicts have the administration reconsidering whether the U.S. might want to again resume some kind of a more active role in trying to restart a peace process?

**MR PRICE:** Look, I wouldn't say that it's – I wouldn't characterize it as us not prioritizing it. We continue to believe deeply in the principle of a two-state solution to this conflict. It is precisely why we have urged both sides not to take unilateral steps, because unilateral steps – whether it's incitement of violence, whether it's acts of terrorism, whether it's demolition of homes, whether it's expansion of settlements, or anything else – it moves – it has the potential to move a two-state solution further out of reach. And we all know that a two-state solution, it's in the interest of Israelis, it's in the interest of Palestinians, it secures Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state while bestowing upon Palestinians their legitimate aspirations for statehood and dignity. And so, of course, we are continuing to do everything we can to support that outcome.

I think right now as we've just been talking, our priority is on de-escalation. Our priority is on restoring calm. Our priority over the longer term may move towards playing some sort of mediating role between Israelis and Palestinians. But given circumstances on the ground right now, and even before this current flare-up, we're just not in a position, I think, to see meaningful progress, and our policy has recognized that.

**QUESTION:** But either way, they keep saying both sides, when in fact one side has F-35s that are bombing the Palestinians – in fact, that's the only place on earth where the F-35 has been used in combat. And the others have stones – I mean, what is this both sides thing? One side is occupying and the other side is being occupied. Would you care to explain what is the both side-ism here?

**MR PRICE:** Well, most recently, we have called on all sides to de-escalate. That includes Hamas. So that has been our message since late last week; it is our message now. We're calling for de-escalation.

**QUESTION:** Just a – it will be extremely brief. One, in your response to Said's earlier question about whether the Palestinians have a right to self-defense, your answer, you're going to know as soon as I read what your answer was that there's a big problem with it. You said – well, not a problem, it just doesn't answer the question. We believe that it, meaning the right to self-defense, applies to any state. Well, you see the problem, right? Yes?

**MR PRICE:** Do you want to —

**QUESTION:** Do regard Palestine as a state?

**MR PRICE:** I wasn't referring —

**QUESTION:** Do you think —

**MR PRICE:** But it —

**QUESTION:** You don't in the context of the ICC and the UN.

**MR PRICE:** I —

**QUESTION:** So are you saying that you do not – if it applies to any state, are you saying the Palestinians don't have a right to self-defense?

**MR PRICE:** I was making a broader point not attached to Israel or the Palestinians in that case.

**QUESTION:** So they do have a right to self-defense?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I'm not —

**QUESTION:** No, no, no, it's not that difficult a question.

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to debate the legalities from up here.

**QUESTION:** All right.

**MR PRICE:** What – our message is one of de-escalation.

**QUESTION:** All right. And then just – from this administration's point of view, is the previous administration's peace plan, the much vaunted Peace to Prosperity, is that just off the table? Is that – or is it something that you're willing to look at and extrapolate on if necessary?

**MR PRICE:** As we have said in any number of contexts, most recently in North Korea, we are always seeking to learn lessons not only from our immediate predecessors, but predecessors before that. I think it is safe to say there are elements in that so called peace plan that are not a constructive starting point.

Yes, Will.

**QUESTION:** I just want to ask who Secretary Blinken or others work within the Israeli government. Is it a problem right now that there's a change in power? Does that make it especially dangerous, and where are they working to try to figure that out?

**MR PRICE:** There are – I wouldn't want to weigh in on the government formation process and where we are. Our officials have appropriate counterparts, both within the Israeli Government at the moment as well as Palestinian counterparts. We have not had an issue when it comes to any element of transition.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** A follow-up. Isn't it a problem that there is, for all intents and purposes, a power vacuum in both sides?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it is a problem, as I said before, that there are a confluence of factors that are in many ways converging and have converged over the past 72 hours. It's precisely why we are engaged so concertedly, both at the moment, over the weekend, late last week, even before that to try to de-escalate the situation on the ground.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. Amr Sayed, Al Jazeera Mubasher. Two U.S. legislators have described the situation in Sheikh Jarrah as ethnic cleansing. This is Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. Do you agree with this characterization? And if not, how would you describe it? And also, the Israeli ambassador to the U.S. have described those comments by Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib as inciteful, and I quote, "terror groups such as Hamas to...carry out attacks against Jews." Do you think



that such accusation from a foreign diplomat against a U.S. legislator is acceptable? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** So in terms of the statement you mentioned, the tweet you mentioned, I'm not going to comment on that from here. I'm going to leave it to the ambassador, to the Israeli Government to make any comment they see fit on that tweet. And when it comes to the terminology used, that's nothing that we have used before. That's not something that our analysis supports.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Just want to follow up on what you said, and I just want to make sure that I got it correctly. This so-called peace plan, it might have some points that are not constructive. You said you mean the Abraham Accords?

**MR PRICE:** No, no, no, he was asking about the – at least I took it to mean the so-called – right.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Right. Okay. So then let me ask something on the Abraham Accords. Do you think it might actually be counterproductive in that they make it easier for the Israel Government not to meet the aspirations of Palestinian people for an independent state?

**MR PRICE:** The normalization agreements, and – is something that we support. It is something that we think is not only good for Israel, it is good for the region. Improved ties between Israel and its Arab neighbors is something that we will continue to support in our diplomacy and engagement, both with the Israelis and Arab states.

**QUESTION:** But could it be counterproductive because it doesn't actually give any leverage or any benefit to the Palestinians?

**MR PRICE:** The normalization agreements are one element of our engagement in the region. Of course, we continue to engage in the context of a two-state solution, and I think if you saw Jake Sullivan's readout, if you've seen our recent statements, if you were provided with call transcripts – most of which we read out – you would see our emphasis on a two-state solution. So we can do both. We can work to see improved ties between Israel and its neighbors, just as we work to forge some advance in the prospects of a two-state solution.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** And we'd be happy to look at any transcript of any call that you would like to provide.

**MR PRICE:** Noted, noted. Thank you, yes.

**QUESTION:** Switch topics?

**MR PRICE:** Anything else before we switch topics? Kylie?

**QUESTION:** I was going to Russia.

**MR PRICE:** Okay. We'll start with you and then we'll go to Kylie, yeah. Please, please.

**QUESTION:** Iran first.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Any updates on the talks in Vienna? And I have another question on Lebanon.

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Rob Malley recently returned to Vienna. This is now the fourth round of what we fully expect to be multi-round negotiations. You heard not all that long ago about our assessment of where this is. I think as you heard, it continues to be our analysis that there are significant challenges that remain, and there remains a wide gap in between where the Iranians are and where we think they need to be if they are to agree to resume compliance with the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** Have you made any progress in the last two days or three days?

**MR PRICE:** I don't want to go day by day. I think where we are is what you heard last week, that significant gaps remain.

**QUESTION:** And on Lebanon, do you have any comment on the visit that the French foreign minister has made to Beirut and his failure to push the Lebanese leaders to form a new government?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to comment on the actions of another government when it comes to Lebanon. Of course, we do cooperate closely with the French in this context, but our position is that we have long been concerned by developments in Lebanon, the apparent inaction of the country's leadership in the face of multiple ongoing crises. We continue to believe that the Lebanese people deserve a government that will urgently implement the necessary reforms to rescue their deteriorating economy, and we note that Lebanon's political leaders must work to address the country's crises and meet the urgent needs. It's important for them to focus on building a government, not blocking a government, and that remains our line.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Just on the Colonial pipeline attack, I know the administration has said they are looking for any ties to a nation-state actor, but can you just elaborate a little bit more on the State Department's role in that and the ongoing investigation, what role – if at all – State is playing at this point?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you mentioned the operative phrase right there, "ongoing investigation," so unfortunately I'm not able to weigh in from here.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then will Secretary Blinken be speaking about this at all with Foreign Minister Lavrov? Is this something that would even elevate to the level of his engagement with his Russian counterpart, or are we not there yet?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I don't – could you expand? When would they do that?

**QUESTION:** Over the phone or something.

**MR PRICE:** Oh, okay. I see.

**QUESTION:** I'm not – not a meeting, I'm just saying engagement.

**MR PRICE:** Got it, got it. So look, I don't have any calls to preview at the moment, and also I wouldn't want to get ahead of any investigative equities there, so I'll probably decline to weigh in.

Yes, in the back. Yeah.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan.

**MR PRICE:** Conor, yeah.

**QUESTION:** Just following up on your topper on Afghanistan, does an attack like this give the administration pause at all about the plans for a U.S. withdrawal and the possibility that violence like this will become more and more frequent?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you called it a withdrawal. I would contextualize that. It's a military withdrawal. As the President has said, we will be withdrawing our military forces, except those required for the protection of our embassy in Kabul. And that's the other important point: We are going to retain an embassy in Kabul precisely though – so that we can continue to partner and to provide support for not only the Government of Afghanistan, but the people of Afghanistan. The circumstances of the bombing over the weekend, they are not yet crystal clear. As I said before, there are some indications that this may have been attributable to ISIS and not the Taliban. We don't want to get ahead of information as it comes in.

But the President made very clear why he made the decision he did. We went into Afghanistan 20 years ago – just about 20 years ago – with a singular mission, and that was to go after the group that was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and to see to it that Afghanistan could not again be leveraged as a staging ground for attacks on the United States. We were able to achieve those goals. We believe that – and we will do everything we can to support those who have made the important gains over the past 20 years, including women and girls and minorities, in Afghanistan. That will not change even as our troops leave the country, and we will seek to find ways to continue to partner with the Afghan people going forward.

**QUESTION:** You say you've been able to achieve those goals, but an attack of this scale by a group that looks perhaps like ISIS – doesn't that give you any pause about the source of terror – the terror threat in Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** We have long been concerned about the growth of ISIS in Afghanistan, but these are separate issues. As you know, we have had a military presence in Afghanistan to see to it that the country could not be used as a staging ground to attack the United States, to propel force beyond – well beyond Afghanistan's borders. We have been able to accomplish that goal. We continue to have important humanitarian goals when it comes to Afghanistan. We will continue to carry out and to move forward with those objectives, even as our military withdraws from the country.

**QUESTION:** And on the – go ahead, Matt.

**QUESTION:** Well, I was just going to say, by that logic, though, you should never have gotten into Syria or gone back into Iraq to deal with ISIS, because if you remember, ISIS was responsible for a whole bunch of attacks outside of Syria, and you're there. So if now they are coming in – constituting themselves as a force in Afghanistan, I mean, does it really matter if their name isn't al-Qaida?

**MR PRICE:** No, but – and again, I don't want to go back to 2011. I don't want to go back to 2014. But I will make the broader point —

**QUESTION:** Well, how about going back to – how about going back two days to the bombing at a school that killed more than 70 people?

**MR PRICE:** But I will – I – I will make the broader point that when we went into Afghanistan in October of 2001, we went in to take on the group that was responsible for the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil at that time, and, of course, to date.

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** ISIS in the context of Iraq and Syria has posed a threat beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria. Ask the people of Paris, ask the people of Brussels. And so that is why —

**QUESTION:** Exactly. But that's my point in asking you the question.

**MR PRICE:** No, but — and that — no, I think it's my point. That's why we have —

**QUESTION:** So we have to wait until ISIS stages an attack on U.S. soil before you — before you even have pause, as Conor was asking?

**MR PRICE:** No, I was answering your question about why it was important to engage militarily in the use of force in that context, because there was a threat well beyond the region. As we have said, even as we withdraw militarily from Afghanistan, we will have adequate resources in the region and over-the-horizon capacity should threats emerge that require us to leverage the use of force.

**QUESTION:** On the Taliban, then.

**QUESTION:** Will the U.S. make I guess accommodations for interpreters and people that worked for the U.S. military and so on? There has been a great deal of anxiety and fear expressed.

**MR PRICE:** Well, and that is why we have placed such a premium on the special immigrant visa program. It is something that even as, again, we have withdrawn — beginning the process of withdrawing militarily, we have actually added resources to help process the special immigrant visa applicants, knowing that as the United States, we have a special responsibility to those who have helped us along the way, who have helped the U.S. military, who have helped the U.S. Government, oftentimes placing themselves in harm's way. Our commitment to these people, to these individuals will continue, and we are doing all we can to process them as expeditiously as we can.

Yes, please.

**QUESTION:** Can I just —

**QUESTION:** Can we move to Ethiopia?

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask that one last one on the Taliban?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** You said that you welcomed their three-day announcement of — or announcement of a three-day ceasefire. Has Ambassador Khalilzad been in touch with any of the Taliban leadership? Why — have you put any more pressure on them to announce a full, permanent ceasefire?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we do welcome this announcement and any move that allows the Afghan people a reprieve from violence. We urge the Taliban to extend the ceasefire and order a significant reduction in violence. We all know that a return to violence would be senseless as well as tragic. We remind the Taliban that engaging in violence will not afford it legitimacy or durability. That has been our point all along. Engaging in serious negotiations to determine a political roadmap for Afghanistan's future that leads to a just and durable settlement will.

A just and durable settlement has been at the center our — of our efforts. It's in no one's interest — we know this — for Afghanistan to once again devolve into civil war. It's not in the Taliban's interests, it's not in the Government of Afghanistan's interests, it's not in the interests of Afghanistan's neighbors,

and it's certainly not in the interests of the people of Afghanistan.

In terms of Ambassador Khalilzad, he has returned to the United States, but he had been in the region, as you know, for some time, engaging with the parties from there.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on the question about interpreters and translators? There are tens of thousands of Afghans who are at risk. You've got a bipartisan group of legislators, veterans' organizations, and refugees' organizations saying that there is no sense of urgency about what the administration is doing, that there should be an evacuation before our troops withdraw, and the troop withdrawal is already taking place.

Can you address the lack of urgency that is perceived by all of these groups?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would absolutely dispute that characterization. We have been acting with the utmost urgency knowing that, again, we have a special responsibility to the women and men who have, in many cases, placed themselves in harm's way to assist the U.S. Government over the years. We certainly appreciate the interest on the part of Congress. I know that discussions with Congress on this are ongoing in terms of resources or other matters.

What I will say in the interim is that additional resources, including augmenting domestic staff in Washington to process applications, has already been put in place. In addition, we approved a temporary increase in consular staffing at our embassy in Kabul in order to conduct interviews and process visa applications. And we'll continue to do that contingent on the security situation in the country. We will continue to look for ways to speed up this process, to facilitate the processing of – for these brave individuals.

**QUESTION:** Well, could you say that, at the end of the process of speeding up the applications and the bureaucratic pieces of this, there will be an evacuation?

**MR PRICE:** Look, I don't want to get ahead of things. Right now, we are focused on processing these claims knowing that, again, we have a special responsibility to those who have placed themselves in harm's way to help the United States.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, do you have more detail in Special Envoy Feltman's meetings in Ethiopia? Who is he meeting with? And can we expect any progress in ending the Tigray crisis? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, that's one of the reasons why he's there. He is there to engage on the crisis in Tigray. He's also there to engage in discussions regarding the GERD, the dam. I don't have any additional details to read out right now, but as – I expect when he returns, we'll be in a position to offer some more detail on his precise itinerary, on those engagements, and the progress that has resulted.

**QUESTION:** Is cutting off all non-humanitarian assistance programs to Ethiopia on the table to pressure the government to do more to end the crisis?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as we have said, we – the suffering of the people of Tigray is immense. It's extraordinary. And so as we consider our aid to Ethiopia, we want to make sure that in the first instance, we're not doing anything that would place a further burden on the people of Tigray who are in such humanitarian plight. So we want to make sure that, as we consider any future steps, that we

continue to do all we can to support them. As you know, we have – given the current situation in Ethiopia, we have decided not to lift the assistance pause for other programs, including most programs in the security sector.

**QUESTION:** Is the election – I'm sorry, the final question: Is Ethiopia election on the agenda when he meet with the Ethiopian Government? And does the United States have a position on the June 5 and June 12th elections?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we, of course, strongly support democratization in Ethiopia, but free, fair, and credible elections in June can happen only with a conducive electoral environment. If that is to be achieved, the Government of Ethiopia must respect the freedom of assembly, the freedom of speech, political participation, and access to internet and information. Political parties, we know, should discourage violence, and state security forces must demonstrate restraint in the use of force and partisan tactics. Ethiopian Government support for political dialogue among key stakeholders on inclusive electoral processes – we believe that to be critical. We're also working closely with international partners to promote community-based dialogue to minimize violence surrounding the elections.

Humeyra.

**QUESTION:** Just two quick things on Afghanistan again: Just wondering if United States plans to continue close air support for Afghan Government forces after the U.S. completes its withdrawal in the absence of a peace deal, which is looking much more likely?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what I would say is that we have made it very clear that if there are Taliban attacks on American forces as they withdraw, we reserve the right to respond and we certainly will. I would refer you to DOD, though, for operating posture beyond that.

**QUESTION:** And on the visa thing Andrea asked, you talked about, like, moving expeditiously and all that. When we speak with some, like, advocacy groups about this, they're talking about thousands or sometimes tens of thousands of people. Are you able to give, like, a number, how many interviews have you set up? Do you guys have, like, a target, "We're thinking about issuing this many visas until September 11th"? Or do you think that's, like, cutoff date?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would say a couple things. Number one is that we hope to be in a position to add even more resources to this. So I think as we take into account what we're – both what we're doing now, we are also cognizant that we hope to be in a position to do even more, to move even more quickly as we go forward. So this is not going to be a static picture, we hope. And certainly, as we've already added resources to this challenge, we're looking to find ways to add even more to reduce that backlog.

**QUESTION:** And you think you're going to be able to process these visas past September 11th as well?

**MR PRICE:** Again, we certainly plan to remain engaged diplomatically with the people of Afghanistan. We plan to retain an embassy on the ground of Kabul and – on the ground in Kabul, and so that is certainly our intention.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Mr. Price. Samira Gharaei for *Iran International*. My question is, of course, about Iran. There are so many unanswered questions. What I want to ask is about the Biden administration's strategy as to the arms embargo on Iran expired in October. Also, what is the

strategy for approaching expiration of the ballistic missile restriction based on the UN Resolution 2231? Are you negotiating any of this? Are you modifying any dates or any content of JCPOA?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would say a couple things. Number one, what we have talked about in the context of Vienna is the proposition that President Biden, then a candidate at the time, put on the table, and that was the proposition of compliance for compliance. So what we are testing right now in Vienna is the proposition that we can arrive at a compliance-for-compliance deal, meaning that Iran would resume its full participation in the JCPOA, meaning that Tehran would once again be subject to the most stringent verification and monitoring regime ever negotiated.

The fact is that Iran's nuclear program has accelerated in recent years as Iran has distanced itself from the nuclear deal, installing new centrifuges, new technology, shortening that breakout time. We want to ensure that Iran is once again permanently and verifiably prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and we continue to believe that the JCPOA is an appropriate tool for doing that.

But as you've heard us say before, a resumption of so-called compliance for compliance is necessary but not sufficient. We also believe that the nuclear deal should be strengthened, made longer and stronger in the parlance, but we also seek to negotiate what we call follow-on agreements, agreements that would cover precisely the issues that you've talked about: ballistic missiles, support for terrorism and proxies, other issues of regional concern. So that is a longer-term goal for us as well as we focus in these first days on restoring that nuclear deal.

**QUESTION:** Supporting proxies is a very good example nowadays with what is going on in Israel and Palestine. I want to know, regarding Gaza and all the rest that other people were talking about, how Biden administration is justifying the Iranian terrorism sanction relief with what we are seeing now. Iran – Iranian partners have manpower and money in Gaza. That's undeniable.

**MR PRICE:** I don't think you're hearing us justifying sanctions relief when it comes to terrorism sanctions. As we have said, when it comes to what we would need to do – well, let me back up. We have a clear idea of what Iran would need to do to resume its compliance with the nuclear deal. It would need to once again subject itself to the most stringent verification and monitoring regime ever negotiated. We also have a sense of what we would need to do, and put very simply, it is to remove sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA.

Now, even if we were to get to a point where both sides would resume compliance and Iran would once again subject itself and permanently and verifiably bar itself from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon, and if we were to remove sanctions that were inconsistent with the JCPOA, we would still vigorously hold to account Iran for its behavior in other areas – its terrorism, its support for proxies, its human rights abuses. And among the policy tools that we would have in doing so are sanctions. There is nothing in the JCPOA that removes sanctions as a policy tool to address those specific areas, and we would continue to hold Tehran to account.

**QUESTION:** Ned, you keep saying – and you said it twice in two answers in response to her question – that Iran is subject to the most – the, quote, “most stringent monitoring and inspection regime ever negotiated.” But that – the JCPOA, in fact, does not allow inspections of some of the most problematic sites that Iran has – military sites. Isn't that correct?

**MR PRICE:** Matt – and the IAEA can give you a chapter and verse, but if there is a site —

**QUESTION:** Precisely. But you're the one who keeps saying that this is the most stringent monitoring and inspection regime ever negotiated.

**MR PRICE:** Well, it is. It is. And —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, well, it may well be, but it also omits the most problematic areas that are —

**MR PRICE:** It does not omit anything. That is a myth that unfortunately has persisted from 2015. And unfortunately, there has been some misreporting that I think has allowed that myth to persist. The JCPOA —

**QUESTION:** You're telling me that right now the IAEA can go into any facility in Iran —

**MR PRICE:** If there are —

**QUESTION:** — that it thinks might be being used for nuclear reasons, even if it's a military site?

**MR PRICE:** If there is an area of concern, the IAEA has recourse for that. I would refer you —

**QUESTION:** Well, has that recourse ever once been used?

**MR PRICE:** But you're shifting the goal post now.

**QUESTION:** No, I'm not. Can they get in right now? Do they have free access to do their most stringent monitoring and inspection at any site that they want to?

**MR PRICE:** Well, but you raise a good point. Now that Tehran has been allowed to distance itself from the JCPOA, of course the IAEA is more limited. And of course, the director general, Mr. Grossi, has been very engaged with Tehran in seeing to it that they have an accommodation that will last a shorter period. We want to see to it that Tehran is once again subject to the stringent verification and monitoring regime that was in place when the nuclear deal was fully in effect.

**QUESTION:** What would be some of the other things that the U.S. would like to renegotiate with Iran other than the sunset clause? There was a sunset clause. It talks about 15 years, maybe moving it to 25 years. Now, in reality, are there any other issues that you would like to renegotiate?

**MR PRICE:** But before we get to how we would want to make the nuclear deal longer and stronger, I think we're focused on testing the proposition of compliance for compliance. So I wouldn't want to go beyond that at this point.

Seeing no more hands – seeing one more hand and the fact that we need to quickly go to the – a bilateral – yes, we'll conclude.

**QUESTION:** Did you have comment or any information regarding the pipeline cyberattack today?

**MR PRICE:** We don't. Given that there – it's a matter of ongoing investigation, we'll refer to law enforcement authorities and the White House.

Thank you all very much. We'll see you tomorrow.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:42 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – May 11, 2021](#)

*05/11/2021 07:39 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:07 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. A few things at the top.

First, we are deeply concerned about the escalation between Israel and those launching rockets from Gaza, and we call for restraint and for calm. Israel has the right to defend itself and to respond to rocket attacks. The Palestinian people also have the right to safety and security, just as Israelis do.

We are also deeply concerned about the reported loss of life in Gaza and Israel, including the deaths of children as well as many innocent civilians injured. Similarly, in Jerusalem, where there reportedly have been hundreds of Palestinians injured, as well as Israeli police, we call on all sides to exercise restraint and to exercise calm.

The United States will continue to remain engaged with senior Israeli officials and Palestinian leadership in the days and weeks ahead. Just today, in fact, Secretary Blinken had an opportunity to speak to his counterpart, Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi, to condemn the rocket attacks and to reiterate this important message of de-escalation.

Next, in view of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis in Brazil, the United States is partnering with the Pan American Health Organization, or PAHO, to provide access to approximately \$17 million worth of essential medications to treat critically ill COVID-19 patients who require intubation to be connected to lifesaving ventilators. Today, 164 pallets of medication arrived in Sao Paulo and are being prepared by the Brazilian ministry of health for distribution to hospitals across the country.

The United States Government-facilitated supply will enable Brazil to meet its critical hospital needs for at least 30 days. This action comes in addition to over \$16.9 million in direct U.S. Government assistance and \$75 million in private sector support to Brazilian communities and governments across the country.

As we have consistently said, as long as the virus continues to spread anywhere, it remains a threat to people everywhere, including to Americans here at home. That is why this administration has stepped up to again help lead the global effort to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and we will continue to do so going forward.

And finally, the United States Government welcomes the announcement by President Ghani that the Afghan Government will join the Taliban in observing a ceasefire over the Eid al-Fitr holiday. We urge both sides to build on the momentum of the ceasefire by engaging in serious negotiations on a political settlement, and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.

While the Eid ceasefire is a positive step, innocent Afghan civilians have borne the costs of decades of

war, and they deserve much more than just three days free of violence. The United States remains committed to the Afghan peace process, which presents the best opportunity for Afghans to reach a just and durable political settlement, and to ensure a future for Afghanistan that is free of terrorism and of senseless violence.

And with that, I'm happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Ned, on the call between the Secretary and the foreign – the Israeli foreign minister, when you said that he condemned the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel and then you also said he reiterated our important message of de-escalation, to you, or to the administration, what does that mean from the Israeli side?

**MR PRICE:** Could you repeat that? What does that mean from the Israeli side?

**QUESTION:** From the Israeli side, what specifically would you like to see them do to de-escalate? I'm going to ask the same thing about the Palestinian side.

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Matt, we have called on both sides, and in fact, given Hamas's horrific terrorist attack, its rocket fire, into Israel, we have called on all sides, of course including Hamas, to cease this activity. The loss of life – the loss of Israeli life, the loss of Palestinian life – it's something that we deeply regret. We are urging this message of de-escalation to see this loss of life come to an end.

As you know, we've been very clear that Israel does have a right to defend itself. At the same time, reports of civilian deaths are something that we regret and that we would like to see come to a stop.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. But what specifically do you want to see? Other than an end to the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, which is a specific thing which you've called for already, from the Israeli side and from the Palestinian side in terms of what's happening in East Jerusalem and on – around the holy sites, what specifically would you like to see?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what I would say is that we have seen some encouraging steps, both from Israel and from the Palestinians. The decision yesterday to reroute the Jerusalem Day parade, the decision on the part of the Israeli supreme court to delay the Sheikh Jarrah decision, was – was welcome.

**QUESTION:** Okay, but this is things that happened yesterday and the situation got worse.

**MR PRICE:** As – as was – as was the decision by prime minister Abbas to —

**QUESTION:** President Abbas.

**MR PRICE:** — President Abbas, excuse me, to call off the Eid celebration – Eid celebration. So, look, I am not going to offer specific advice to both sides for either side from the podium. I will say that our message continues to be one of prioritizing de-escalation, urging calm, urging restraint on both sides.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then my last one, and it's just – so that message that has been – and people look at that on both – from both sides look at that, and many of them – and you can see this on social media; you can see it in their own words, interviews that they've done – don't think that this administration is doing enough or that it is pursuing somewhat of a halfhearted or trying to do an all-size – an all-size-fits – one-size-fits-all kind of policy that has resulted in both the Israelis and the Palestinians being upset at what they perceive to be a lack of U.S. leadership on that. How do you respond to that criticism?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would respond to that criticism, Matt, by noting that the United States is doing what we can, knowing that we don't – our ability in certain situations is going to be in some cases limited. But we are speaking to our partners, we are speaking to our Israeli partners, we are speaking to Palestinian officials, again, to do what we can in conjunction with the international community. Yesterday again we spoke to this statement on the part of the Quartet that was issued. Other countries, other international bodies, multilateral fora, have issued similar statements. I think the international community by and large is calling for precisely what we are calling for, doing precisely what we have attempted to do and to urge calm, de-escalation, and restraint on both sides.

**QUESTION:** Maybe I missed it. Does that mean that you dropped your opposition, your objection to the UN Security Council statement?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, as we – as I said yesterday, we want to see to it that steps, whether they emanate from the Israeli Government, the Palestinian Authority, or the UN Security Council, serve not to escalate or provoke but to de-escalate.

**QUESTION:** So the short, one-word answer is no, you haven't dropped your opposition to it?

**MR PRICE:** We have —

**QUESTION:** Has the Council come out with a statement? I'm sorry, I may have missed it.

**MR PRICE:** We have – we have continued to call in multiple fora for de-escalation and to see to it to do what we can to ensure that no actor takes provocative actions.

**QUESTION:** I get it. You don't —

**MR PRICE:** We don't – we don't want to see provocations. The provocations that we have seen have resulted in a lamentable, deeply lamentable, loss of life —

**QUESTION:** Got it.

**MR PRICE:** – of Israeli life and of Palestinian life.

**QUESTION:** But to give me a one-word answer, yes or no: Have you dropped your objection to the Security Council presidential statement on the situation?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, as you know as well as anyone does, private sessions of the UN Security Council —

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** — are not – are not sessions that we read out. But again, our message continues to be one of de-escalation. We do not want to see any actor, be it a government or be it an intergovernmental body, take an action that could serve to escalate rather than de-escalate.

Francesco.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I'm sure you'll agree that there has been no de-escalation in the last 24 hours, despite your calls, rather on fresh escalation. Would you say that Israeli response is consistent with the right to self-defense, or is it an escalation that you ask them to stop or moderate? And also, has the foreign – the Secretary of State asked to his counterpart precisely to stop or halt the demolitions and evictions of Palestinians' family?

**MR PRICE:** Well, in terms of Sheikh Jarrah, as we have learned, that is a matter that the supreme

court will issue a ruling on in the coming days. Obviously, we have made our views clear on this, noting that the Palestinian families, who in many cases have lived there for generations, should be treated with compassion and humanity. And that continues to be where we stand on this as the matter is adjudicated within the Israeli legal system.

In terms of Israel's response, again, Israel has a right to self-defense. We also recognize that the Palestinian people need to be able to live in safety and security, just as Israelis do.

**QUESTION:** Do you consider that they are within their right to self-defense, or that the current strikes and the pledge by Prime Minister Netanyahu to even intensify them is an escalation that you condemn?

**MR PRICE:** We stand by Israel's right to defend itself. We also stand by the principle that Palestinians deserve the right to live in safety and security. I'm not here to adjudicate military operations, to say what is proportional precisely, what is not. But the United States certainly stands by the principle that civilians should not – that any loss of civilian life is deeply lamentable, whether that is a Palestinian life or an Israeli life. That is why we've continued to call on calm – continued to call for calm, continued to call on all sides to de-escalate and to exercise restraint in their actions.

Yes, Barbara.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. The Palestinian News Agency is saying that President Abbas received a letter today from President Biden dealing with the current situation and bilateral relations. Can you confirm that?

Secondly, when it comes to East Jerusalem, my understanding from what you said yesterday is that the State Department regards it as disputed rather than occupied territory. Is that correct?

And thirdly, following on these questions about de-escalation, as you probably know, Israeli politics have shifted even further to the right over the past four years. The Israeli Government has shifted further to the right. There is the influence of the hard right has grown. What makes you think you're on the same page when you call for de-escalation?

**MR PRICE:** So on your first question, I don't have anything to offer when it comes to any reported presidential correspondence. I would need to refer you to the White House for that. What I will say, however, is that American officials, including those in the State Department, have been in touch with Palestinian officials both in this period of increased tensions and throughout this administration as we work to build ties with the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority.

What I said yesterday was just a slight modification on a question that was proposed because the question, I thought, put words in my mouth. I made the statements several weeks ago now that it continues to be the policy of the United States Government that the West Bank is occupied. Jerusalem, as we know, is a final status issue, which is – the status of which is to be determined by the parties in the conduct of diplomacy.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** So do you mean that that's – is it disputed, then? Is that how you see it?

**MR PRICE:** It is an —

**QUESTION:** Rather than occupied? You don't classify it as occupied?

**MR PRICE:** It is an issue that – whose final status needs to be determined by the parties in the conduct of diplomacy.

**QUESTION:** And then my last question?

**MR PRICE:** Your last question was?

**QUESTION:** Was that the Israeli Government has shifted —

**MR PRICE:** Ah, yes.

**QUESTION:** — to the right considerably. What makes you think you're on the same page when it comes to de-escalation, especially given the influence of the hard right, as we've seen with these provocations in Jerusalem?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, we are speaking to — we will always have a partner in the Israeli Government. We are speaking to our partners in Israel, just as we are speaking to the Palestinian Authority, reiterating this same message, a message that prizes de-escalation and calm in an effort to put an end to the loss of civilian life on both sides.

**QUESTION:** Ned.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** What is the U.S. doing to restore calm, other than calling the two parties to restore the calm? And other than the Israeli foreign minister, did the Secretary call someone else from the region?

**MR PRICE:** So on your — well, to take both questions, what I would say is that senior American officials and American officials at various levels, in fact, have been in touch with their Israeli and Palestinian counterparts in recent days. We have, of course, mentioned National Security Advisor Sullivan's call to his counterpart. Deputy Secretary Sherman has spoken to her counterpart. Secretary Blinken has spoken to his Israeli counterpart as of just a couple hours ago. Now, the same is true with — when it comes to Palestinian counterparts. That interaction has taken place with both Israeli and Palestinian counterparts from this building, from our embassy in Israel, and it will continue going forward as well.

Look, the United States is doing what we can. We are doing what we can in close coordination with the international community. We know, whether it is this issue or just about any other issue under the sun, that when we demonstrate engagement, when we step up and use our voice, as we have done both in public and in private, that it tends to have a catalytic effect. And we have been gratified by the international community largely speaking in unison, calling for restraint, calling for calm, calling for de-escalation. We know that it is going to be an important ingredient if we are to fulfill our desire to see a diminution of this violence and of this bloodshed, which of course, remains our ultimate goal.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. So you started off yesterday by saying that we are condemning the rocket attacks into Israel, and today was no different. You again condemned the attacks against Israel by the Palestinian side. But yesterday, you fall short of condemning the pictures of Palestinian children killed as a result of Israeli airstrikes. Have you seen those pictures, first of all? And does the State Department have anything to say against that?

**MR PRICE:** I have seen those pictures, and those pictures — it's hard not to look at those pictures and feel — sense the suffering. It is precisely why today we have called for restraint and de-escalation in an effort to preserve civilian life. And we recognize that Israelis have been killed, Palestinians have been killed.

And you raised yesterday. I – what I said yesterday I think bears repeating, because I don't want it to be glossed over. When I came out here yesterday, reports had just emerged. We didn't have independent verification of what had transpired. And so we think it's important that before we speak publicly, whether it's the State Department or the U.S. Government, that we have a solid understanding of the facts on the ground. Today, some 24 hours later, we have a solid understanding of the facts on the ground. We have developed that understanding over the course of yesterday, and today, of course, we've seen more deeply disturbing developments. The loss of life of Palestinian – innocent Palestinians, of innocent Israelis, is something we deeply regret, and is precisely why we are doing everything we can. We are doing everything we can in coordination with our international partners to put an end to a cycle of escalation and a cycle of violence.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Having seen those pictures quite clearly, do you think those pictures, those scenes, are something to condemn right now?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry. I didn't —

**QUESTION:** Do you think – having seen those pictures, do you think those pictures, those scenes of Palestinian children having been killed by Israeli airstrikes, do you think that's something to condemn today?

**MR PRICE:** Well – and I said this yesterday, that the loss of innocent life is something that we would – that is deeply regrettable. It is – of course, Israel has the right to defend itself against those attacking Israel, against Hamas and terrorists responsible, including for the loss of life in Israel, but the loss of civilian life in these operations is something that we deeply regret. It is precisely why we have said that, just as the Israelis do, the Palestinians have every right to live in safety and security.

Yes, Simon.

**QUESTION:** Does the administration regret not appointing a special envoy for the Israel-Palestine conflict, and is that something you're considering doing now? And you mentioned these discussions you're having and hoping to play a de-escalatory role. Does that involve contact directly with Hamas?

**MR PRICE:** Our policy vis-a-vis Hamas is very clear. Hamas is a foreign terrorist organization and it will be treated as such. When it comes to our approach to this, look, I don't want to get ahead of where we are. We spoke to this yesterday in some detail, and I made the point that it is not that we have failed to prioritize this; that is not the case. What we have recognized is precisely what other governments have recognized and what is plain as day, is that the two sides are not at the present moment in a position to undertake meaningful negotiations to advance a two-state solution. If there – if that becomes – if that opportunity becomes riper, if there is an opportunity to advance that ball in a meaningful way towards a two-state solution, the United States will continue to be deeply engaged towards that end.

And we will continue to be deeply engaged towards that end because we recognize that only a two-state solution will serve the interests of Israelis, of Palestinians, and would be consistent with our interests and our values. It would preserve Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state. It would fulfill the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for sovereignty and dignity in a state of their own. That's what we would like to see happen. That has been the longstanding position of successive American administrations. Now, of course, a negotiated two-state solution has eluded any number of American administrations over time. We are doing what we can now to, I would say, lay the groundwork to be in a better position going forward to potentially make progress.

Of course, we have a stalwart relationship with Israel. Those ties continue to be close, of course. When it comes to the Palestinians, this administration has made an effort to re-establish ties with the

Palestinian people, with the Palestinian Authority in any number of ways, whether that is our humanitarian assistance, whether it is our engagement as well, and that will continue. So it is not that we have not been paying attention. We have been very much engaged, deeply engaged, and that predates this cycle of escalation that we've seen over the past several days and it, in fact, started in the earliest days of this administration.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Is the administration any closer to naming an ambassador to Israel, and is that something that's going to be expedited in light of the current tensions?

**MR PRICE:** Well, so as you know, there have been, I believe, 11 ambassadorial nominations put forward by this administration – nine of career officials, two of non-career officials, both of whom – of course, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, who is now confirmed as our U.S. ambassador, and Chris Lu, who is now nominated to also serve at the USUN.

When it comes to forthcoming nominations, I know that all of these are a priority, but it's especially a priority when it comes to our closest partners. And Israel, of course, is among them, but I just don't have a timeframe for you on that.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Claudia Uceda with Univision Network. Talking about the situation in Colombia —

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Is there anything more on —

**QUESTION:** Yeah. I just have a really brief —

**MR PRICE:** Before – let me just make sure we get questions before we go back.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks. Just a bureaucratic – in line with what Jenny was asking, Barbara Leaf has been nominated but hasn't had a hearing yet; is that correct?

**MR PRICE:** That is my understanding, yes.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Yesterday, there was stark contrast between the statements that Secretary Blinken made and Jordanian Foreign Minister Safadi in which Blinken emphasized the two sides and Israel's right to self-defense, whereas Safadi was very firm about all of the Palestinian grievances; that's what he emphasized. How do you bridge that gap, as you try to find international partners like Jordan, like Egypt, to deal with this crisis?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think if you look at the statement, both from Secretary Blinken and the foreign minister, what you saw yesterday was agreement that the status quo of Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif needed to be preserved. Both sides were very much in agreement there. Both sides were very much in agreement in calling for de-escalation, calling for calm. So I think I would take issue with the idea that there was much daylight there. Now, of course, we only speak for ourselves, but the preservation of the status quo and prioritizing call for restraint, call for calm, call for de-escalation is something you certainly heard from both individuals yesterday.

Matt.



**QUESTION:** One last one —

**QUESTION:** So you said Wendy Sherman talked to her counterpart?

**MR PRICE:** She did.

**QUESTION:** To his – her Israeli counterpart?

**MR PRICE:** Her Israeli counterpart.

**QUESTION:** The deputy Israeli foreign minister.

**MR PRICE:** That's correct.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So you have these three calls then. And when was that?

**MR PRICE:** Sorry, what was what?

**QUESTION:** When was that?

**MR PRICE:** That was over the weekend.

**QUESTION:** So around the same – roughly the same time that Jake Sullivan spoke to his – okay. So you have these three calls, then – Sullivan, Blinken, Sherman.

**MR PRICE:** I don't want to say that's the entirety. Those are the —

**QUESTION:** Well, no, I – okay, but that's what the Israeli side —

**MR PRICE:** Those are the principal-level calls that we have read out.

**QUESTION:** So – okay. Well, have any of those people spoken to anyone on the Palestinian – from the Palestinian Authority, or do you believe that they don't have any influence or they're not able to —

**MR PRICE:** No, I didn't say that at all. I didn't say that at all. In fact, I said that there has been engagement with the Palestinian Authority.

**QUESTION:** At what level? Not these levels?

**MR PRICE:** At the appropriate level.

**QUESTION:** Well, what does that mean?

**MR PRICE:** At the appropriate level. We —

**QUESTION:** Has the Secretary or the deputy secretary made any effort or – called or made any effort to call to Palestinian leaders?

**MR PRICE:** We have engaged our Palestinian counterparts both in the context of this but well before this too on a regular basis to discuss issues of mutual concern.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Well, who? If you're happy to talk about the Israeli foreign minister and the Israeli deputy foreign minister and the Israeli national security advisor, who on the Palestinian side have these people been in touch with?

**MR PRICE:** We have engaged with various Palestinian officials —

**QUESTION:** Do you even know their names?

**MR PRICE:** — at different levels, but I will leave it at that.

**QUESTION:** All right. And then just the other thing —

**QUESTION:** And why don't you want to tell us?

**QUESTION:** Just — I mean, that's a good question that Francesco is — why?

**QUESTION:** Why?

**QUESTION:** Do they not have names? Do you think that they don't have any influence and that's why you —

**MR PRICE:** No, that's not it at all, Matt. We have engaged with them.

**QUESTION:** But why is it a secret? If you're happy to talk about going — calling up the Israelis and telling them in person, personally — voice to voice, if not face to face — to exercise restraint, who on the Palestinian side are you calling? You can't talk to Hamas, so presumably you've got to talk to someone in the PA. Who is it you're talking to?

**MR PRICE:** If we have any more details to read out of those calls, we'll let you know, but we have engaged regularly in an effort to discuss these areas of mutual concern.

**QUESTION:** And then just on the other question about Jerusalem and you saying the final status needs to be adjudicated, that's fine, that's well and good; the question, though, is what is the — what does the U.S. regard the status of East Jerusalem right now?

**MR PRICE:** Jerusalem is a final status issue that needs to be —

**QUESTION:** What is the status of it right now? Because yesterday we heard the Jordanian foreign minister, as was mentioned, calling for continuation of the status quo.

**MR PRICE:** And absolutely.

**QUESTION:** So if that's something you agree with, what is the current status quo?

**MR PRICE:** We have also called for a preservation of the status quo, especially on these holy —

**QUESTION:** What is it?

**MR PRICE:** — pertaining to these holy sites.

**QUESTION:** But what is the current status quo?

**MR PRICE:** Temple — the Temple Mount. Obviously, Jordan has an important custodial role there as well. But Jerusalem is a final status issue that it has been the position of successive American administrations that Jerusalem and its final status needs to be determined by the two sides.

Lalit.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I want to ask you —

**QUESTION:** One more, please.

**MR PRICE:** One more on Israel? Sure.

**QUESTION:** Is the U.S. ready to call for an international conference or regional conference to push the two-state solution?

**MR PRICE:** I think this goes back to what we were saying before. What we have been focused on, one, is when it comes to the Palestinians, re-engaging with the Palestinian leadership, with the Palestinian people. Obviously, we've been in close contact and coordination with our Israeli partners as well. I think if we get to a point where a – some sort of personnel announcement or some sort of gathering, international gathering would be potentially conducive to advancing the two-state solution, that is something we would approach in turn. But I think the reality at the present moment, as we all have seen in recent hours, in fact, is that we're not at that point. The time is not yet ripe to do something like that. It is our goal to lay the steps and to make incremental progress in the hopes that we can be in a position to move the ball forward towards a two-state solution over time.

Okay, Lalit.

**QUESTION:** I want to ask you about the India situation. What is your assessment about it and how is the COVID-19 assistance to India from the U.S. going on? How long this will continue? Can you give us an update?

**MR PRICE:** Sure, happy to do that. As you know, Lalit, the USAID issued a pretty comprehensive fact sheet when it comes to our aid to India in recent days. Taken together, our assistance to combat COVID-19 in India has totaled about \$100 million in all. We're continuing to work closely with Indian officials and health experts to identify continued needs and emerging needs in this ongoing crisis. As you know, there have been now six airlifts to India deployed in the course of six days. Among the supplies included in those airlifts: 20,000 courses of remdesivir, nearly 1,500 oxygen cylinders, 550 mobile oxygen concentrators, 1 million rapid diagnostic tests, nearly 2.5 million N-95 masks, a large-scale deployable oxygen concentration system, pulse oximeters, and I could go on and on. In addition, USAID immediately allocated funding to purchase locally an additional 1,000 mobile oxygen concentrators.

I would add that even as the United States Government has delivered these supplies totaling some \$100 million, other elements have also stepped up – NGOs as well as the private sector – and we understand that the private sector to date has donated an additional \$400 million, totaling a half-billion dollars, in assistance to India. Just as I was talking about our catalytic effect in another context earlier, as you know, Secretary Blinken, Special Coordinator Gayle Smith participated in calls the other week with the U.S.-India Business Council and the Chamber of Commerce in an effort to elicit – and to elicit additional supplies from the private sector, which we've been terrifically gratified to see.

**QUESTION:** And secondly, you must have seen the news reports that China has warned Bangladesh against joining Quad. So two question: Either in move to expand the Quad, and secondly, how do you see this statement coming out of China?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have taken note of that statement from the PRC ambassador to Bangladesh. What we would say is that we respect Bangladesh's sovereignty, and we respect Bangladesh's right to make foreign policy decisions for itself. We have an incredibly strong relationship with Bangladesh. We work closely with our partners there on a range of issues, from economic growth to climate change to humanitarian issues. And when it comes to the Quad, we've said this before, but the Quad,

it's an informal, essential, multilateral mechanism that right now conveys – convenes likeminded democracies – the United States, India, Australia, and Japan – to coordinate in the Indo-Pacific, and fundamentally, to push forward our goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** One more, if I can. India has started 5G trial, and Chinese companies have not are not being allowed to be part of it. U.S. have been insisting on its friends and allies that they shouldn't let the Chinese companies be part of the five – 5G trials. How do you see the developments by them?

**MR PRICE:** Well, this was a sovereign decision on the part of the Indian Government, so we refer you to the Government of India for any comments on that decision. But I would say more broadly, and we've talked about this before, but it is true that we are deeply concerned about the dangers of installing networks with equipment that can be manipulated, disrupted, or potentially controlled by the PRC. And allowing untested communications, untrusted telecommunications suppliers like Huawei or ZTE, to participate in or to have any control over any part of a 5G network creates, we think, unacceptable risk to national security, to critical infrastructure, to privacy, and to human rights as well.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Australia's foreign minister will be here in a couple of days, Marise Payne. I was wondering what will be top of the agenda for the administration? And specifically, will you have a message on climate, given Australia didn't make any new commitments on emissions reduction at the latest summit a couple of weeks ago?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we're very fortunate to have a strong and broad relationship with our Australian ally. It will be an opportunity for the Secretary and his counterpart to discuss a range of issues, including this idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific that we've discussed both bilaterally and multilaterally, in the context of the Quad. But I don't want to get ahead of the bilateral meeting.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** About the situation in Colombia, how does the U.S. Government receive these allegations of human rights violations and also police abuses in the Colombian protests? And also, my second question is: The U.S. is Colombia's largest trading and investment partner. Shouldn't the U.S. use this as an opportunity to promote peace and justice in Colombia? And my third question is: What are the steps that the U.S. is taking to help Colombia with these protests, with this crisis?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we've made this point before, but it bears repeating, that we're deeply saddened by the loss of life during the protests that have taken place throughout Colombia in recent days. And we send our condolences to the victims as well as to their families and other loved ones. All over the world, and of course this includes in Colombia, citizens in democratic countries have every right to protest peacefully. But we also know that violence, that vandalism, is an abuse of that right.

We call on – just as we condemn violence and vandalism, we do call upon the police to respect the rights of peaceful protesters. We continue to urge the utmost restraint by Colombian police in maintaining public order. We also call on Colombian authorities to continue to investigate reports that have emerged of police excess. We welcome the Colombian Government's proposal to bring together stakeholders in political dialogue and to – and we encourage full participation in those talks. And we'll continue to address these issues through peace and political dialogue in a way that puts human rights at the core of that policy going forward.

**QUESTION:** Do you think the U.S. should do more to help Colombia with the situation? I mean, it's escalating. It's been already two weeks. There are hundreds of deaths, missing people.

**MR PRICE:** We have continued to engage with our Colombian partners on this. We have done this from the State Department here, from our embassy in Bogota, and that won't change. We'll continue to be engaged.

I think we've called on – yes?

**QUESTION:** I have an Open Skies question. Since Russia is going forward with the withdrawal, which of course was decided after the U.S. one by the previous administration. Can you – do you have any comments on that and do – can you take the opportunity to precise what this administration's stance towards Open Skies is?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we haven't made a decision on the future of American participation in the Open Skies Treaty. We are at the moment actively reviewing matters related to the treaty. Importantly, we are consulting with our allies and partners as we always do on these matters. Russia's own continuing noncompliance with the treaty is one of several pertinent factors as we take stock of things. As this process continues, we encourage Russia to take steps to come back into compliance with the treaty.

Saw one more hand. Okay, seeing – well, sure.

**QUESTION:** Afghanistan – I don't know if anyone else has anything on Russia.

**MR PRICE:** Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Are you any closer to assessing who's to blame for the deadly explosion over the weekend? Yesterday, you said it bore resemblance to attacks by ISIS-K, but have you determined that they are in fact behind that attack?

**MR PRICE:** We haven't yet determined attribution for the attack. What I said yesterday about the attack bearing some of the hallmarks of previous ISIS-K attacks, including the location of this attack, continues to be the case, but we don't yet have conclusive attribution.

**QUESTION:** And then on Mark Frerichs, the hostage being held by the Taliban, are you closer to getting him out as we are moving further along in the withdrawal process?

**MR PRICE:** We have no higher priority than the safe release and the return of detained Americans held all over the world. That includes Mr. Frerichs in Afghanistan. The Secretary in one of his earliest engagements had an opportunity to meet with many of the families of detained Americans so that he could personally and sincerely relay the priority we attached and we do attach to all of these cases. You've heard us say in the case of Mr. Frerichs, he has been – we have repeatedly raised his case, including in Doha, and we will continue to do everything we can to effect his safe return to his family.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Quick one on Russia and Ukraine. Couple of Ukrainian officials have spoken about the supposed withdrawal of Russian troops from around the border and – saying that only about 3,500 troops actually withdrew and there's about 100,000 troops remaining on the border. Do you – does your assessment kind of concur with those numbers? And are you still concerned about that situation?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'm not in a position to give you precise numbers on – of Russian troops that remain on or near the border. What I can say, however – and you heard this from Secretary Blinken when we

were in Kyiv last week – he made the point that even as we have seen reports of Russian withdrawal and we’ve been able to confirm that some Russian forces have been relocated, tensions remain high because Russia does maintain a large number of forces along the border. The number of forces that Moscow continues to maintain in the region still is – has not been matched since the 2014 invasion. And so it is still a cause for concern. It was a topic of discussion when we were in NATO several weeks ago now, it was a topic of discussion at the G7 last week, and, of course, it was a topic of discussion in our meetings with our partners in Kyiv. And we went there precisely to signal that the United States stands with Ukraine, the international – I should say the – we and our likeminded partners stand with Kyiv in the face of this intimidation, and we’ll continue to do so as long as these acts of aggression and intimidation persist.

Thank you all very much.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:48 p.m.)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken On Release of the 2020 International Religious Freedom Report](#)

05/12/2021 02:06 PM EDT

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Washington, D.C.

Press Briefing Room

**MR PRICE:** Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to introduce Secretary Blinken, who will speak to the Department's International Religious Freedom Report. We will then hear from Office of International Religious Freedom senior official Dan Nadel, who will be happy to take your questions on this year's report.

Without further ado, I will turn it over to Secretary Blinken.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Ned, thank you very much. Good morning, everyone. So let me start, first of all, by wishing everyone a good morning, and *Eid Mubarak* to all who are celebrating.

Before talking about the report, I want to just take a minute to discuss what is happening in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. We're deeply concerned about what we're seeing there. Images that came out overnight are harrowing and the loss of any civilian life is a tragedy. I've asked Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Hady Amr to go to the region immediately to meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. He will bring to bear his decades of experience and, in particular, he will urge on my behalf and on behalf of President Biden a de-escalation of violence. We are very focused on this.

The United States remains committed to a two-state solution. This violence takes us further away from that goal. We fully support Israel's legitimate right to defend itself. We've condemned and I condemn again the rocket attacks in the strongest possible terms. We believe Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live with safety and security and we'll continue to engage with Israelis, Palestinians, and other regional partners to urge de-escalation and to bring calm.

Now, let me turn back to what brings us together this morning, and that is the report. Today, the State Department is releasing the 2020 International Religious Freedom Report. We've produced this document every year for 23 years. It offers a comprehensive review of the state of religious freedom in nearly 200 countries and territories around the world, and it reflects the collective effort of literally hundreds of American diplomats around the world and our Office of International Religious Freedom here in Washington, led by Dan Nadel, and he'll be taking some questions from you today on the report.

Let me just say a few words about why this report matters. Religious freedom is a human right; in fact, it goes to the heart of what it means to be human – to think freely, to follow our conscience, to change our beliefs if our hearts and minds lead us to do so, to express those beliefs in public and in

private. This freedom is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It's also part of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Our country's commitment to defending freedom of religion and belief goes back centuries. It continues today.

Religious freedom, like every human right, is universal. All people, everywhere, are entitled to it no matter where they live, what they believe, or what they don't believe. Religious freedom is co-equal with other human rights because human rights are indivisible. Religious freedom is not more or less important than the freedom to speak and assemble, to participate in the political life of one's country, to live free from torture or slavery, or any other human right. Indeed, they're all interdependent. Religious freedom can't be fully realized unless other human rights are respected, and when governments violate their people's right to believe and worship freely, it jeopardizes all the others. And religious freedom is a key element of an open and stable society. Without it, people aren't able to make their fullest contribution to their country's success. And whenever human rights are denied, it ignites tension, it breeds division.

As this year's International Religious Freedom Report indicates, for many people around the world this right is still out of reach. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, 56 countries, encompassing a significant majority of the world's people, have high or severe restrictions on religious freedom.

To name just a few examples from this year's report, Iran continues to intimidate, harass, and arrest members of minority faith groups, including Baha'i, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sunni and Sufi Muslims.

In Burma, the military coup leaders are among those responsible for ethnic cleansing and other atrocities against Rohingya, most of whom are Muslim, and other religious and ethnic minorities around the world.

In Russia, authorities continue to harass, detain, and seize property of Jehovah's Witnesses as well as members of Muslim minority groups on the pretense of alleged extremism.

In Nigeria, courts continue to convict people of blasphemy, sentencing them to long-term imprisonment or even death. Yet the government has still not brought anyone to justice for the military's massacre of hundreds of Shia Muslims in 2015.

Saudi Arabia remains the only country in the world without a Christian church, though there are more than a million Christians living in Saudi Arabia. And authorities continue to jail human rights activists like Raif Badawi, who was sentenced in 2014 to a decade in prison and a thousand lashes for speaking about his beliefs.

And China broadly criminalizes religious expression and continues to commit crimes against humanity and genocide against Muslim Uyghurs and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups.

Today, I'm announcing the designation of Yu Hui, former office director of the so-called Central Leading Group Preventing and Dealing with Heretical Religions, of Chengdu, for his involvement in gross violations of human rights, namely, the arbitrary detention of Falun Gong practitioners. Yu Hui and his family are now ineligible for entry into the United States.

I could go on; the examples are far too numerous.

More broadly, we're seeing anti-Semitism on the rise worldwide, including here in the United States as well as across Europe. It's a dangerous ideology that history has shown is often linked with violence. We must vigorously oppose it wherever it occurs.

Anti-Muslim hatred is still widespread in many countries, and this, too, is a serious problem for the



United States as well as in Europe.

We have work to do to ensure that people of all faiths and backgrounds are treated with equal dignity and respect.

As this report notes, some countries have taken positive steps forward, and that, too, deserves comment. Last year, the civilian-led transitional government in Sudan repealed apostasy laws and public order laws that had been used to harass members of religious minority groups. Uzbekistan's government has released hundreds of people who have been imprisoned because of their beliefs. Just this past Saturday, Turkmenistan released 16 Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors and refused to serve in the military. We understand the authorities will now offer conscientious objectors alternative ways to meet national service requirements.

We want to see more progress like that, and so our promise to the world is that the Biden-Harris administration will protect and defend religious freedom around the world. We will maintain America's longstanding leadership on this issue. We're grateful for our partners, including likeminded governments, the UN Human Rights Council, and networks like the International Religious Freedom of Belief Alliance and the International Contact Group of Freedom of Religion or Belief. We'll continue to work closely with civil society organizations, including human rights advocates and religious communities, to combat all forms of religiously motivated hatred and discrimination around the world.

Thank you very, very much and we look forward to being able to get into the report in more detail. I'll take a couple of questions before I take off.

**MR PRICE:** Wonderful. Francesco?

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Secretary Blinken. It's now clear that your calls for de-escalation haven't been heard or at least haven't been enough to stop it until now. We're now beyond an escalation. Why are you just sticking to these calls to de-escalation and restraint? What can you do further and to prevent a full-out, full-scale war? And also, have you personally talked or tried to talk to the Palestinian leadership, to President Abbas or others? And if not, why? And who on the U.S. side has been in touch with whom on the Palestinian side? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Yeah, thank you. A few things that are I think very important here. We are deeply engaged across the board – the State Department, the White House, senior officials – with the Israelis, with Palestinians, with other countries and partners in the region to call for and push for de-escalation. To be very clear, again, we strongly condemn the rocket attacks coming out of Gaza that are targeting innocent Israeli civilians, and Israel has a right to defend itself. Palestinians have a right to live in safety and security, and the most important thing going forward now is to take down the violence, to de-escalate, and that's exactly what we're working toward.

Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, has been engaged with his counterpart; I've talked to Foreign Minister Ashkenazi; Wendy Sherman, the deputy secretary of state, has been engaged as well; and as I mentioned just a short while ago, we are sending our senior official responsible for Israeli and Palestinian affairs to the region. We've been engaged with all parties, including the Palestinians, and that will continue. But the most important thing now is for all sides to cease the violence, to de-escalate, and to try to move to calm.

**MR PRICE:** Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for doing this, Secretary. Beyond engagement and calls for de-escalation, I just want to reiterate: Is there anything more that the U.S. can do at this point?

And my second question is: More than 50 people have been killed in Gaza, including more than a dozen children. So given those casualties, do you think the Israeli response has been proportional?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** So first, in terms of what we're doing, the most important thing that we can do right now is exactly what we're doing, which is to be engaged across the board and pushing on de-escalation not only with Israelis and Palestinians but also with other partners who are amplifying our voice. And as I said, we're sending a senior diplomat to the region to work on this, so that – I think that piece is very important and our voice, our diplomacy from senior officials across the administration, I hope will help have an impact.

There is first a very clear and absolute distinction between a terrorist organization, Hamas, that is indiscriminately raining down rockets – in fact, targeting civilians – and Israel's response defending itself that is targeting the terrorists who are raining down rockets on Israel. But whenever we see civilian casualties, and particularly when we see children caught in the crossfire losing their lives, that has a powerful impact. And I think Israel has an extra burden in trying to do everything it possibly can to avoid civilian casualties, even as it is rightfully responding in defense of its people. And as I said, the Palestinian people have the right to safety and security, and we have to I think all work in that direction.

So the single most important thing right now is de-escalation. We will continue to carry that message to our partners and to – in Israel, to the Palestinians, and to partners in the region. Thanks very much.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you.

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Australian Foreign Minister and Minister for Women Marise Payne At a Joint Press Availability](#)

05/13/2021 06:25 PM EDT

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Marise Payne, Australian Foreign Minister and Minister for Women

Washington, D.C.

Ben Franklin Room

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Good afternoon, everyone. Before talking about our meeting, I'd like to just touch on what's happening in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. I spoke yesterday with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu as well as with Palestinian President Abbas, and as you know, President Biden spoke with Prime Minister Netanyahu as well. This is part of a comprehensive, ongoing outreach and dialogue at all levels of the U.S. Government to our respective counterparts, with the objective of achieving an end to the violence, which continues to claim the lives of innocent children, women, and men. We've been very clear that rocket attacks must cease. We've been very clear about Israel's right to defend itself. We're also engaging our regional partners with urgency to see to it that calm prevails, and our heartfelt condolences go out to the loved ones of those lost.

We're also deeply concerned about the violence in the streets of Israel. As Muslims celebrate Eid and Jews prepare to mark Shavuot, Israelis and Palestinians deserve to take part in these celebrations without fear of violence. We believe that Israelis and Palestinians deserve equal measures of freedom, security, dignity, and prosperity. That recognition will continue to drive our approach.

Having said that, let me turn to what brings us together here. I am delighted that Foreign Minister Payne is here. I'm delighted to be able to host her on her first visit to the United States during the Biden-Harris administration. We had the opportunity to spend some time together in London at the recent G7 meeting, and we've been on the phone multiple times, but nothing really replaces having the chance to talk about an incredibly broad array and range of issues and interests that bring our countries together.

We had a chance today to reaffirm our unshakeable commitment to the U.S.-Australia alliance, which has been an anchor for peace, security, and stability in the Indo-Pacific for decades. As President Biden made clear, reaffirming and revitalizing America's alliances and partnerships around the world is going to help us ensure that we have a foreign policy that actually delivers for the American people. As we mark the 70th anniversary of our alliance with Australia, we find strength not only in how vital and dependable the relationship has been, but also in how it has continued to evolve to meet the challenges we face and that our citizens face.

We work together across virtually all facets of foreign policy – national security, health security,

countering disinformation – the list goes on. And we covered a lot of that today in our meeting. It's evident in the range, as well, of senior officials whom the foreign minister has met with during her visit, including National Security Advisor Sullivan; Secretary Kerry, the President's Special Envoy for Climate; Ambassador Power, our new administrator for USAID; as well as leaders in both parties on Capitol Hill, which I think is further evidence of the deep, bipartisan commitment in the United States to the relationship and partnership between our countries.

We also do quite a bit of multilateral collaboration, for example, through the Quad. Our countries are working with India and Japan to advance a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. We're tackling big, complex challenges, like ensuring international law is respected in the East and South China Seas, and increasing global access to safe, effective vaccines for COVID-19. President Biden was very proud to host the first-ever leaders' summit of the Quad back in March; we look forward to doing a great deal more through the collaboration among our countries in the months and years ahead.

In our conversations today, the foreign minister and I touched on a number of key challenges that we face together and where the United States and Australia are very closely linked, including our shared condemnation of the Burmese military's violent attacks against peaceful protesters and members of civil society, which continue to go forward with impunity, and our joint calls for the regime to allow for the democratically elected government to return to power.

I reiterated that the United States will not leave Australia alone on the field, or maybe I should say alone on the pitch, in the face of economic coercion by China. That's what allies do. We have each other's backs so we can face threats and challenges from a position of collective strength.

And we understand as well our shared commitment to UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea.

It's important to note that the friendship between Australia and the United States goes beyond diplomacy. Our troops have fought side by side in virtually every conflict of modern times, from World War I to current operations to combat violent extremism. Our business ties are vast. The United States is the top destination for Australian investment that's created nearly 100,000 American jobs. And I'm proud to say we're the biggest investor by far in Australia, which in turn has created more than 320,000 Australian jobs. Our countries collaborate on cutting-edge technologies, from quantum information sciences to artificial intelligence, cancer research, working to address critical vulnerabilities in our supply chains, and we're linked by vast people-to-people ties as well – unless, of course, we're competing in an Olympic pool, in which case there may be just a little bit of friction.

This relationship continues to thrive, ultimately, because it's rooted in shared values. We believe in democracy. We've seen how it makes our own countries stronger, and we see that democracies are more likely to be stable, open, secure, and committed to fundamental freedoms.

We're committed to reaffirming and strengthening the rules-based international order. It's provided a foundation for stability and prosperity not only for the United States and Australia, but for people around the world. And we both recognize that human rights and dignity must remain at the core of that order.

At the very first meeting of the ANZUS Council nearly seven decades ago – we're celebrating the 70th anniversary soon – our then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson compared building the alliance and the newly established international order to the building of a great cathedral. He said, and I quote, "Each step is but one building block in the total structure of peace. We know this labor is hard and complex and long, but like a cathedral which is built by many hands over many years, this structure has a unity of spirit which flows from the common inspiration of these labors."

Today it's in our hands, the building of these blocks. And we're fortunate, I think, to have inherited a

great project between our countries, built through generations of cooperation, creativity, and also sacrifice. And so it's our responsibility, I think, not only to maintain it, but to strengthen and improve upon it so that we can continue to meet the great challenges of our time together, so that we continue to address the needs and aspirations of our citizens. I have no doubt that the unity of spirit between our nations and our people is as strong as ever and, I think, growing even stronger.

So I look forward, Marise, to working with you, with working with all of our colleagues and our teams in this vital effort, and it's wonderful to have you here. Welcome.

**FOREIGN MINISTER PAYNE:** Thank you very much, Secretary. Thank you very much, Tony, for your very warm introduction and for hosting us here today. Let me also thank the very many members of the Biden-Harris administration who have made us feel so very welcome this week, have made the time to meet with me and with my team here in Washington for what have been very productive discussions all around.

I'd like to also acknowledge the Secretary's words in relation to the current violence in Israel and in Gaza and the West Bank. We share those concerns and have made statements in relation to that, and I'm sure we will have more discussions in coming times on those.

I want to start with an important acknowledgment. In Australia just a very short time ago, Australia's governor-general, His Excellency General David Hurley, posthumously awarded to Captain Ian McBeth, to First Officer Paul Hudson, and to Flight Engineer Rick DeMorgan, Jr., the Australian National Emergency Medal for extraordinary service. These three men were amongst the American firefighters who answered Australia's call and traveled a very long way from their own homes and families to help us during the very – the catastrophic bushfires of 2020. They died while extinguishing a fire front with a heavy airtanker in the direct defense of Australian lives and Australian property. And on behalf of my government and on behalf of the people of Australia, I assure you that we will continue to honor them and to remember their bravery and sacrifice.

As the Secretary said, the Australia-United States alliance is marking its 70th year. I think the selfless service and sacrifice of those Americans profoundly exemplifies the spirit of that alliance.

We are, indeed, two nations who are bound by deeply shared values and experiences, and we each believe – as any sovereign nation and democratic nation should – that our foreign policies must serve the interests of our respective peoples. Yet we are so frequently in alignment, because our foreign policies are rooted in the hearts of our nations that are, in many ways, so fundamentally similar.

We have some different views; of course we do. We have some different laws. We certainly have some different sports and perhaps a few of our own cultural idiosyncrasies. But our values and our expectations are much alike. We expect to live freely under the rule of law; we expect to be able to work, to trade, to prosper under a fair and predictable system of rules. We expect safety and security for ourselves and our families, so that we can go about our lives without fear. We believe that governments should be accountable to the people. Those very basic values are reflected in our respective foreign policies, which in turn means that serving our own people is not mutually exclusive to seeking improvement for people elsewhere.

Today, in our discussions, we've addressed many of the most pressing challenges of our region and more broadly and how we can further our cooperation in tackling them. Australia particularly welcomes continuing United States engagement and leadership in the Indo Pacific region and we appreciate the emphasis that the Secretary and the Biden-Harris administration have placed on partnerships and alliances.

Australia is sharing that considerable workload of upholding the rules and norms and of maintaining a

secure and prosperous region. This week, for example, we've announced in our federal budget nearly \$200 million in additional spending to strengthen our diplomatic efforts in promoting free and fair trade, in supporting our exporters, in delivering our Indo Pacific priorities, and expanding our advocacy and our cooperation with partners internationally.

We are and will continue to work with partners to advance the region's health and prosperity particularly in response to COVID-19, to protect the region's security and stability, including by countering disinformation and malicious cyber activity. We have discussed our practical areas of cooperation, including as Tony said, on the supply and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines in the Indo Pacific, on cyber and critical technology, on counterterrorism, on arbitrary detention, on human rights, and on climate change.

Together with our partners, including through groups such as the Quad, Australia and the United States can demonstrate that democracy delivers. Transparency and accountability matter. Indeed, lives and livelihoods depend on it, whether through rigorous approval of new COVID-19 vaccines and the report this week from the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response or an empowered and reformed World Trade Organization that can distinguish between legitimate quarantine and customs concerns and thinly veiled economic coercion and take swift action accordingly.

In our meeting today, we have, of course, discussed our relationships with China. And Australia seeks a constructive relationship with China. We stand ready at any time, amongst all of my counterparts and colleagues, to resume dialogue. But we have also been open and clear and consistent about the fact that we are dealing with a number of challenges. We welcome the clear expressions of support from Washington as Australia works through those differences. It is hard to think of a truer expression of friendship.

I hope that the support Australia has received from the United States gives confidence to others. It doesn't matter where challenges to your sovereignty come from. All countries should know that there is a global community that can support one another in this most basic expectation of nationhood. As with the freedom of individuals, so with the sovereignty of states. Australia and the United States and the alliance that binds us are a bedrock for these shared values.

Thank you again, Secretary Blinken, for these talks that will take our alliance forward at this critical time for our region and for the world. You are right – in-person talks make a significant difference. They are a real value-add in the times of COVID-19 as well. I look forward to comparing pool notes with you over Tokyo 2021 and perhaps a bit of a discussion about how some of our football teams go on the field as well. Thank you very much.

**MR PRICE:** We'll now turn to questions. We'll take two from each side. We'll start with Barbara Usher of the BBC.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. There's a lot going on in the Middle East, so I hope you'll bear with me. Mr. Blinken, rockets have been fired from Lebanon towards Israel. Do you see this as an escalation, and does it change U.S. calculations in terms of your approach in any way? Secondly, do you accept the Israeli view that now is not the time for a ceasefire? President Biden has said he doesn't see a significant Israeli overreaction, which it would seem Israel could see as a green light. Thirdly, what evidence, if any, does the U.S. see of Iranian involvement in the attacks on Israel, given that Hamas has been using drones and long-range missiles? And if so, how do you respond to Republican calls for the administration to stop negotiations in Vienna because of that? Finally, according to diplomats, the U.S. stopped the Security Council meeting due tomorrow on the Middle East. Why does the United States not see this as useful if, indeed, this is the case?

And Foreign Minister Payne, do you think a Security Council statement calling for the cessation of hostilities in the Middle East and urging respect for international law from both sides could be useful? And if not, why not? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you. That is a masterful demonstration of the art of packing in a few questions to one. And I'm happy to start.

A few things. As I noted earlier, we have been deeply and actively engaged across the board with Israeli counterparts, Palestinian counterparts, partners throughout the region in an effort to advance de-escalation and an end to the violence.

I was on the phone yesterday with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas. As you noted, President Biden spoke to Prime Minister Netanyahu. We've sent our senior official for Israel and Palestinian matters Hady Amr to the region. He's en route there to right now. And we are in very deep and regular contact.

Look, we've been very clear about the basic principles involved here, starting with the proposition that Israel has a right to defend itself from these rocket attacks and the fundamental difference between a terrorist organization in Hamas that is indiscriminately targeting civilians and Israel, which is defending itself and going after those that are attacking it.

But we are deeply concerned with the loss of life among civilians, especially among children. Palestinians have a right to live in security and to live in peace, just as Israelis do, and so we are working hard to encourage all sides to stand down, to de-escalate, to return to calm.

As to the United Nations, we are open to and supportive of a discussion, an open discussion at the United Nations. I think we're looking at early next week. This, I hope, will give some time for the diplomacy to have some effect and to see if, indeed, we get a real de-escalation and can then pursue this at the United Nations in that context.

I don't have anything to offer on whether there is Iranian involvement or not in what's taking place, but I would only say that when it comes to any of the malign activities that Iran may or may not be engaged in, whether it is support for terrorism, whether it's efforts to destabilize other countries, whether it is other actions that we find objectionable, that only underscores the importance of doing everything we can to make sure that Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon. An Iran with a nuclear weapon or with the capacity to have one on very short order is an Iran that's likely to act with even greater impunity when it comes to these other actions. So the talks go on in Vienna in an effort to see if we can return to mutual compliance with the JCPOA, and those will continue.

**FOREIGN MINISTER PAYNE:** Thank you very much, Tony. And I would agree, we would – certainly would welcome a discussion of these issues at the UN. Whether there is Security Council statement that flows from that discussion is ultimately a matter for the Security Council and its members. But to reiterate my remarks at the beginning of our statements today, the Australian Government has issued a clear statement about our deep concerns at the escalating violence in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. We have unequivocally called on all leaders to take immediate steps to halt violence, to maintain restraint, and to restore calm.

Our strong view is that violence is no solution – no solution. Whether they are rocket attacks, or indiscriminate acts that fuel the cycle of violence and bloodshed, they are also never justified. We have urged all parties to refrain from violent or provocative acts, calling for a halt to any actions that increase tensions. And if there is a discussion to be held at the United Nations, then Australia will be an active participant.

**MR PRICE:** We'll turn to Greg Jennett of ABC News.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I may not master the multi-pronged question, but I will settle for a dual-pronged, if that's okay, directed mainly to Secretary Blinken. But no doubt, Minister Payne may choose to respond, as well. And both concern relations with China.

Firstly, on economic coercion, you made the point up in Anchorage, Mr. Secretary, as you have today, talking about not leaving Australia alone on the pitch. Minister Payne has spoken of a clear expression of support conveyed by you today.

The question is, can you explain how that finds practical expression across the breadth of this Administration? Not just through diplomacy. What might that support look like: third-party tariffs, sanctions on officials, perhaps departments, or Chinese companies, boycotts, supporting cultural, scientific, or otherwise? I wonder if you could flesh that out a little.

And the second is about the strategically significant port of Darwin. It is a matter of public record that President Obama had major concerns about this facility being leased to Chinese interests for 99 years, so much so that he complained directly to Prime Minister Turnbull about it. Do you maintain that objection today? And if so, could you tell us the reasons why?

Is it a done decision, in and of itself, or is it for potential conflicts with U.S. interests, which would include U.S. marine rotations in the north, and other U.S. interests in that part of the world?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you very much. A couple of things.

First, with regard to China and economic coercion, we've been very clear, both publicly and privately, about the concerns that we have when we see China exerting economic coercion generally, and also specifically with regard to our ally. We've raised these concerns across the government with Beijing. We've done so publicly; we've done so privately. And we've made clear to the PRC how such actions targeting our closest partners and allies will hinder improvements in our own relationship with China.

We are also working together to find new approaches to economic diversification, supply chain security – reliable and secure supply chains, in particular – and other means of being resilient to and being able to overcome efforts at economic coercion, something we talked about today, and I'm sure we will have more on in the future.

And when it comes to Darwin and issues related to Darwin, these are sovereign decisions for Australia, and we leave it to our partners to make those decisions.

**FOREIGN MINISTER PAYNE:** Greg, I would say good to see you, and just broadly, in relation to the issues of economic coercion, to be very clear in terms of our relationship with China, we want a constructive relationship, where we can discuss our differences, where we can work together for mutual benefit. But we won't compromise on our national security or our sovereignty, and we'll continue to act to protect that.

As I think I said, or acknowledged in my opening statement, we have a range of issues to work through with China at present, and we'll continue to engage China to resolve those outstanding issues, those outstanding trade issues, and use appropriate mechanisms that are available to us if we need to. And you will, of course, note that we have taken action in relation to the Bali issue in the WTO. We expect to be dealt with in a fair and timely manner on those. And most importantly, to – we will continue to offer the opportunity to talk together to resolve these issues with constructive dialogue. We stand ready and willing to do that.



**MR PRICE:** Rich Edson, Fox News.

**QUESTION:** Good afternoon, Secretary Blinken and Minister Payne. Thank you. Building off a bit on our Australian colleague, yesterday the climate envoy testified that the administration is assessing whether to sanction China's solar industry. Will there soon be a determination, Mr. Secretary? And can the United States realize President Biden's 2035 power generation targets while also ensuring that it's not financing solar panels made with forced labor in China? There was also some discussion of this last month, but since that talk and with these discussions today with the minister, has there been any consideration of an Olympic boycott or any gesture short of a boycott to highlight human rights abuses in China?

And then to Minister Payne, the question to you is: Beyond the Olympics, is the Australian Government pursuing new coordinated sanctions with the United States to address human rights abuses in China? Thank you very much.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you. Thanks very much. I don't have anything to offer on the solar panels question. I defer to colleagues who are focused on that. What I can say is this just as a general proposition, and it goes to what the foreign minister was saying a few moments ago. When it comes to the way we're approaching the relationship with China – and I've said this before, but it's important to emphasize it – we're not seeking to contain China; we're not seeking to hold China back. We are seeking, resolutely so, to uphold the rules-based international order. And in a practical way, that means insisting that countries make good on their commitments and play by the rules that we've all agreed to.

And whether it's in the trade or commercial space, whether it's in the maritime domain, whether it's in many other areas that we can talk about, that's what we're focused on. And so particularly when it comes to trade, we want to make sure that everyone is playing by the rules, and that includes China. And when it's not, we will work together through the legal mechanisms that we have, through the rules that we've agreed upon, through the organizations that are there to help enforce those rules, to make sure that China abides by them.

With regard to the Olympics, that's not something that we talked about today. We're still some many months away from the Winter Games. We've – we certainly hear concerns around the world, and we'll be, I'm sure in the months ahead, talking to allies and partners about their views on the Olympics.

**FOREIGN MINISTER PAYNE:** Thank you. And in relation to Xinjiang in particular and to those human rights issues, Australia has been very clear and very consistent in terms of the deep concerns that we hold about the credible reports that have been received in the international community that include restrictions on freedom of religion, mass surveillance and detention, forced labor, forced birth control, including sterilization, the systematic abuse and torture of women in particular. We don't have the same sanctions regimes, and that is a matter which is under consideration in Australia following a reference that I sent to one of our parliamentary committees to explore options for a Magnitsky-style system of sanctions in Australia, and government will respond to that in due course.

But whether it is through the United Nations or in fact in directly in our engagement with China, we have consistently called on China in relation to Xinjiang to respect the human rights of the Uyghur people and other minorities, religious and ethnic minorities in the region. We have firmly underscored the importance of transparency and accountability and reiterated our strong call for China to grant meaningful and unfettered access to appropriate international observers in Xinjiang. I was in Geneva on Friday last week and met with United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, and that is a matter that we discussed in Geneva last week. Australia continues to make that call, and we have strongly supported and welcomed measures announced by Canada, by the United States, by the European Union and the United Kingdom where they do have those sanctions

mechanisms in relation to Xinjiang as well.

**MR PRICE:** We'll conclude with Annelise Nielsen of Sky News.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. We just wanted to ask about the investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secretary Blinken, were you satisfied with the results of the Clark report, and would you support further investigation?

And to Minister Payne, the same, but would you also consider further investigation, given the economic ramifications Australia has faced?

And on that point of human rights abuses in China, we have still got two Australians detained in China, Yang Hengjun and Cheng Lei. There are serious ramifications for this. In light of that, do you still continue to support investigations of the origin, given we were so early to call for it?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** No and yes. No, not satisfied with the original investigation; yes, support an ongoing investigation to get to the bottom of what happened with COVID-19.

And look, this is so important, because we need to understand what happened if we are going to have the best possible opportunity to prevent it from happening again, and to make sure we can put in place an even stronger global health security system, to make sure that we can prevent, detect, mitigate future pandemics. And that has to start with understanding exactly what happened.

And, look, the issue is less about assigning blame, and more about understanding what happened so that we can take effective action for the future. There needs to be accountability, but there needs, especially, to be understanding.

And we do know that, in the early days of the pandemic, there was a failure on the part of the PRC to allow timely access to international experts, timely sharing of information, real transparency when it mattered most. And those have to be features of this system going forward. And all countries have a responsibility to sign on to them.

So we need to see more to get to a real understanding of what happened. And then, together, including with China, we need to take actions to strengthen the international system, to make sure that all of our people are better protected so that, if there is a next time, it's not like this time.

**FOREIGN MINISTER PAYNE:** Thanks. And I think there are two points that are part of your question.

First of all, there is the WHO-convened global study into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, as it was entitled, which was the report that was released on the 31st of March. And I think that our response then was to say we certainly appreciated the efforts of the scientific experts who participated in leading that work in very difficult circumstances, including an Australian expert, Professor Dominic Dwyer, but we are concerned that that mission itself was significantly delayed, and lacked access to both complete and original data and samples.

And we, at the time, joined a statement with a number of other concerned countries, including the United States, in expressing those concerns about those delays. That is unchanged. And, in fact, it reinforces the importance of Australia's suggestion in April last year that there should be an independent, international, objective review into COVID-19, its origins, and its impact.

Secondly, though, the release of the Independent Panel on Pandemic Preparedness and Response report, which was led by former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark and former President of

Liberia Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, we welcome that very comprehensive report.

I met with Helen Clark in New Zealand just three or so weeks ago – perhaps a month ago now – and again, its frank assessment of the global community’s preparedness, the management of the pandemic, as well as the recommendations that it contains for action, we absolutely support those being taken very seriously. There is a number of recommendations, including in relation to the international health regulatory structure, as Tony referred to, recommendations around strengthening the independence and the authority of the WHO.

Interestingly, also observations about the fact that the WHO was underpowered in terms of its ability to do the job expected of it, including the recommendations about increasing the independence and authority of the WHO so that they have explicit powers to investigate pathogens with pandemic potential, and to publish information about those potential outbreaks with immediate action, without prior approval of national governments. There was some discussion at some stage last year about what inspection and report powers WHO should have. And I think that finding by the independent panel is a very important one, in terms of the way forward, for ensuring that we avoid the experience that the world, this country, our country, so many countries have had to deal with in recent times, and the extraordinary loss of life that it has caused.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you very much.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you very much. That concludes our program.

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod At a Joint Press Availability](#)

05/17/2021 12:42 PM EDT

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Copenhagen, Denmark

Eigtveds Pakhus

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** Welcome, everybody. It is a true pleasure to have Secretary Blinken here today. The U.S. is Denmark's friend, close ally, and strategic partner. Today is a good day for Denmark and for transatlantic cooperation, because today, America is back. Secretary Blinken has kindly taken me up on my suggestion to visit Denmark, not even a year after we had your predecessor in town. So today, America is back, and in more ways than one.

The U.S. is back in the Paris Climate accord, of which Denmark is a strong defender. The U.S. is back in the UN Human Rights Council, of which Denmark is currently a member. You are back in the World Trade Organization with Denmark, also aims to reform. And let me tell you, Secretary Blinken: America has been missed.

Denmark appreciates the Biden administration's return to the negotiating table in the world in the decision making forums, not to defend the status quo but to build alliances for reform. Denmark is more than ready to join you in that crucial work. We appreciate that you stand up for global human rights and democracy, and we appreciate that you, on every single foreign policy issue, stress the need for closer transatlantic cooperation.

Today, we covered a range of issues, from international security to trade policy, from Afghanistan and our 20-years long military presence, which we now are winding down, the Danish leadership in the NATO mission in Iraq, from the Arctic and the North Atlantic, to the situation in Israel and Palestine, and how to defend our common democratic values and global human rights.

We focused also on global climate challenges and cooperation on the green transition, where Denmark has a lot to offer globally as well as in the U.S. And we have reaffirmed our close partnership and cooperation between the United States and Denmark on the full range of diplomatic and security policy issues.

So with these words, once again, a heartfelt welcome to Denmark, Secretary Blinken, Tony, you are among friends. I will leave the floor to you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Jeppe, thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure working with you, getting to know you starting almost from day one when we first spoke – spoke on the phone, and in our work ever since, including at NATO and now here in Copenhagen. And it's a real pleasure to be here, to be with you for my first time as Secretary of State. And I'm grateful to you for very warm but

also very productive meetings and for the meeting that we had earlier with Minister Broberg from Greenland and Minister av Rana from the Faroe Islands.

I also very much want to thank Prime Minister Frederiksen for our time together this morning, which was extremely productive. And I was honored to visit with Her Majesty the Queen and his Royal Highness the Crown Prince as well.

I feel a special debt to Denmark for helping me get through COVID-19, because as I told Jeppe in the early days of COVID-19 when many of us were housebound, my wife and I binge watched Borgen, which for those of you who haven't seen it, is an absolutely wonderful television series. It helped me perfect my Danish. I learned some words like spin doctor – (laughter) – so —

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** I don't know what that is. (Laughter.)

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** It's – but it's just particularly good to be here and to just get across the board such a warm welcome from everyone.

Before speaking in greater depth about the partnership with Denmark, I do want to talk briefly about the ongoing situation in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. The United States remains greatly concerned by the violence, by the escalating violence – hundreds of people killed or injured, including children being pulled from the rubble. We're also alarmed by how journalists and medical personnel have been put at risk. Palestinians and Israelis, like people everywhere, have the right to live in safety and security. This is not an Israeli privilege or a Palestinian privilege; it's a human right. And the current violence has ripped it away.

So we've been working intensively behind the scenes to try to bring an end to the conflict. President Biden's been in touch with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas. I spent my own flight on – yesterday to Copenhagen on the phone with regional leaders, including from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, as well as with my counterpart in France, discussing the urgent need to end the violence. And we'll continue to do that later this afternoon.

As we've said before, Israel has the right to defend itself. There is no equivalence between a terrorist group indiscriminately firing rockets at civilians and a country defending its people from those attacks. So we call on Hamas and other groups in Gaza to end the rocket attacks immediately.

I've also said that I believe Israel, as a democracy, has an extra burden to do everything possible to avoid civilian casualties, even as it defends itself and its people. We call for an end to the ongoing violence within mixed communities in Israel, and we urge all parties to avoid any actions that undermine the chance for future peace. Further, we call on all parties to ensure the protection of civilians – especially children – to respect international humanitarian law, to protect medical facilities, protect media organizations, and protect UN facilities where civilians are desperately seeking shelter. And we are ready to lend support if the parties seek a ceasefire.

We'll continue to conduct intensive diplomacy to bring this current cycle of violence to an end. Then we will immediately resume the work, the vital work of making real the vision of Israel and a Palestinian state existing peacefully, side by side, with people from all communities able to live in dignity.

This was a topic of conversation with the foreign minister today, because Denmark and the United States are allies and partners on virtually every major issue facing our countries, facing the world, facing our citizens. And I think you can see the strength of that partnership in our shared commitment to democracy and human rights. And I commend Denmark for last week's successful democracy summit, which illustrated how deeply the Danish people feel, like the American people, about free and

open societies that empower all of our citizens, and we look forward as well to working together in the months ahead as we work on our own democracy summit in the United States.

I think the partnership is evident also in the very close economic ties, including our robust trade relationship and, of course, our cooperation on climate. Denmark is a world leader in both its green ambitions and its green technology, especially wind energy, as Prime Minister Frederiksen highlighted at the Leaders Summit just a couple weeks ago, which she participated in. We're proud of our new partnership with Denmark on decarbonizing the shipping sector. And we look forward to working together to set even higher climate ambitions, drive innovation, invest in renewable energy, and help vulnerable communities adapt and build their resilience.

More broadly, we work together across an incredibly broad range of diplomatic and security priorities, several of which the foreign minister touched upon. We're coordinating closely to end the global COVID-19 pandemic, and to build back better so that we have in place a better, stronger global health security system to prevent, and if necessary, mitigate the next pandemic.

And together, we're committed deeply to the NATO Alliance, which we agree is the bedrock of transatlantic security. We've had American and Danish troops serving shoulder to shoulder in virtually every NATO mission. Denmark now leads the effort in Iraq. We've worked closely together on the coalition to counter Daesh, and, of course, in Afghanistan with a long and strong partnership on security as well as economic and humanitarian support.

We also share concerns about the threat that Russia poses to Europe in light of the recent military buildup on the border with Ukraine, and the threat to European energy security posed by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. We share concerns about the challenges that China poses to our interests and values, including the rules-based order that makes our shared security and prosperity possible.

And we share a commitment to Arctic security. We very much welcome Denmark's recent decision to invest more than \$240 million in North Atlantic and Arctic defense in coordination with the governments of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. And we'll continue our close cooperation in the Arctic Council, where we're headed soon, to ensure that the Arctic region is one that is free of conflict, where nations act responsibly and act together to advance economic development, sustainable economic development, to care for the environment, to respect as well the interests and well-being and development of indigenous communities.

All of these matters will be on the agenda that we'll join together in Reykjavik. On these issues and so many more, our countries stand together and work together. As the only country that belongs to NATO, the European Union, and the Arctic Council, Denmark consistently plays a leadership role in regional and global affairs. And we're grateful for that.

There's a Danish proverb that feels quite fitting today, and I quote: "The road to a friend's house is never long." So I'm thrilled to be able to visit our friend Denmark today. It is great to be back. And I'm looking forward to our countries continuing a close partnership for many years to come. Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** We'll open for questions.

**MODERATOR:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, you and President Biden have sort of signaled America is back, multilateralism is back, I guess saying this is no longer Donald Trump's America. But if people are skeptical – I mean, I wonder what you have to say to them. There were 74 million people, Americans voting for Donald Trump. He still seems to be popular to control the Republican Party. He may come

back, or Trumpism may come back. What do you have to say to those people who may not be willing to go all-in on the Biden-Blinken line, “America is back”?

And to the foreign minister, you just said America is back and America has been missed. How was it different meeting Secretary Blinken today from meeting Secretary Pompeo less than a year ago?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** So happily, I don’t do politics; I just do foreign policy. And I’m also resolutely focused on today and tomorrow, not yesterday. And I would just say judge us not by what we say, but by what we do. Jeppe alluded to some of the steps that we took immediately upon taking office in January, of rejoining the Paris climate accord, re-engaging with the World Health Organization, posing our candidacy for the Human Rights Council at the United Nations, holding the global climate Leaders Summit in Washington. And I could go down the list.

Across the board, I think you’ve seen in a few short months a determination by the United States to reinvigorate its alliances and partnerships – witness this visit today – and also our engagement in multilateral institutions. And there is a strong reason for that that’s animating our thinking, and I’m finding that it has real resonance as I’m talking to counterparts around the world.

Two things. First, we believe that American engagement is important, that it makes a difference. Because in its absence, one of two things is likely. Either someone else will try to come and fill that role – and it may not be a way that advances the interests and values that we share – or maybe just as bad, no one does, and then you have big forces of change that may be disruptive and cause chaos before the challenges are resolved.

But the other side of the coin is this: As President Biden looks at it, when we look at the problems that are confronting our citizens – whether it’s in Denmark or the United States, every single day, that are going to have an impact on their lives, like COVID, like climate change, like the disruptive impact of new technologies – not a single one can be effectively addressed by any one country acting alone, even if it’s the United States. We have more of a premium than at any time since I’ve been involved in finding ways to cooperate and coordinate with other countries. That’s what’s animating us.

And so I would say to those who are looking at the United States with a question mark: Judge us by what we do, and whether we make good on that perspective, on that worldview.

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** Well, Poul Erik, I had a excellent also working relationship with the predecessor to Tony. And U.S. is Denmark – our most important ally. It is the foundation for our security, prosperity, and also for freedom of values that we hold so dear, and we must never take it for granted. Therefore, I am very pleased with also Secretary Blinken, Tony, your leadership and Biden’s leadership in the world for these values – democracy, rule of law, international cooperation based on rules where small and big countries can work together in solving global problems like the climate problems and other problems. And there I see U.S. is back, as also Tony alluded to. And we need U.S. leadership in the world today, and that’s something Denmark commend a lot.

So we strengthen today our bilateral relationship, the Kingdom of Denmark and the U.S., but also we welcome very much that U.S. is back in international foras fighting for the values that we maybe too long have taken for granted.

**MR PRICE:** Christina Ruffini.

**QUESTION:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. Mr. Secretary, if it’s okay, I’ll start with you. The prime minister of Israel and officials from the IDF said over the weekend that they’ve transmitted intelligence to the United States that shows Hamas was using that tower they struck in Gaza to house military assets. As you know, it also has several media organizations who lost their offices and equipment

and archives. Have you seen that intelligence? Has it been transmitted? And did you find it credible?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** So let me start by saying, I think as you know, I had the opportunity over the weekend before leaving to speak to the president and CEO of the AP, Gary Pruitt. We had what I thought was a good – very good conversation. And I wanted to speak to him and as well as to all of you to reaffirm the strong commitment of the United States, the unwavering support of the United States for independent journalists and media organizations around the world, including for their safety and security.

I think independent journalism is especially important in conflict zones. I made a similar point earlier this month when we marked World Press Freedom Day, and I had the opportunity then to speak to journalists from around the world who, like so many of you, are pursuing the truth at – sometimes at great risk, and that’s something I take very much to heart.

So when it comes to the strike in Gaza, first, I was relieved that no one from the journalism community in that strike was hurt and people were able to leave the building safely. As you know, I think, President Biden and other members of the administration have raised directly our concerns with our Israeli counterparts about the safety and security of journalists operating in Gaza. And we have stressed the need for their protection.

Shortly after the strike, we did request additional details regarding the justification for it. I wouldn’t want to weigh in on intelligence matters in – in this forum. It’s not my place. I will leave it to others to characterize if any information has been shared and our assessment of that information.

The broader point, though, remains, and this is really critical: Israel has a special responsibility to protect civilians in the course of its self-defense, and that most certainly includes journalists.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, a follow up: You said that you’ve requested additional information. Have you received it? Have you seen it? And did you find it credible?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** I have not seen any information provided. And again, to the extent that it is based on intelligence, that would have been shared with other colleagues and I’ll leave that to them to assess.

**MODERATOR:** (Off-mike.)

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** Yeah, I would also like to emphasize we also talked on the issue in the Middle East, Blinken and I. We are deeply, deeply concerned about the escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine, and we have called from the Danish side for immediate de.escalation. It is needed to avoid further loss of civilian life. I have myself been in contact with the Israeli foreign minister and also the Palestinian foreign minister. The indiscriminate firing of rockets into Israel by Hamas and militant groups in the Gaza Strip is completely unacceptable. So I recognize Israel’s legitimate right to self-defense, but the Israeli military operations must be proportionate and in line with international humanitarian law. U.S. and EU are already deeply engaged in ensuring de-escalation, and it’s something that we work hard for. And I echo the words of Tony, that we need to protect civilian life as much as we possibly can.

**MODERATOR:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, it’s from the Danish Broadcast Cooperation. Is it an American priority that Denmark steps up its efforts to secure the Arctic? And what do you – if so, what do you specifically want the Kingdom of Denmark to do? Are we talking military presence? Are we talking more surveillance?



**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** I think, in fact, Denmark is stepping up. The investment we talked about, about \$240 million in what is called – in the terminology domain awareness, basically having the – a capacity in place through – people through technology to know who’s doing what, where, at any given time, is usually important to maintaining security. And we very much appreciate the role that Denmark is playing in helping to do that. And so I think as well, one of the things that we’re working on together is heading toward the NATO leaders’ summit in just about a month’s time, where among other things, NATO is going to be hopefully adapting a program for NATO between now and 2030, revising some of its strategic concepts. And that has to include making sure that we have in place the appropriate resources and assets to sustain security in the North Atlantic. And the two of us are helping to lead those efforts, and Denmark is a critical partner in all of that.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, did you guys discuss that Denmark still don’t pay the two percent of its GDP to NATO?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** So I think we’re all tracking the need for allies and partners to achieve, as was agreed back in the Wales summit, these goals. And I think again this is an important step in dedicating resources to situational awareness in the North Atlantic, and we continue to look to our partners to continue to make progress in dedicating the appropriate percentage of their budget to defense.

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** And also at our meeting – a meeting with my colleague, our colleague from Greenland and the Faroe Islands on Arctic and North Atlantic issues together, and it was a very productive meeting in the spirit of good cooperation, close friendship, and I look forward to continuing that. On NATO, it is the fundamental alliance for all of us for our security, and Denmark is contributing, of course – of course with cash, but also with capabilities and also contributions to missions. We are leading the NATO mission in Iraq, a very important mission, and are taking a huge responsibility also with enhanced forward presence with soldiers in Estonia and the Baltic states to ensure the integrity of NATO. And when it comes to Arctic issues, we have the capability package, the \$240 million where we want to raise situational awareness and ensure that we have the capacity to look at what is going on in the region to also protect our sovereignty in the region.

**MR PRICE:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thank you so much. And for the foreign minister, I just wanted to sort of ask a little bit more about the question from Danish Public Broadcasting about whether you’re specifically worried about Russia’s activities in the Arctic region and Greenland, and what you intend to do about it.

For Secretary Blinken, you and President Biden have called for de-escalation in the conflict in Israel and Gaza, and it seems like quite the opposite has happened. What do you think about that? Would you support a United Nations Security Council statement immediately to call for a ceasefire, given that many U.S. senators and others are calling for an immediate ceasefire? And if not, what other concrete steps – or in general, what other concrete steps can you do at this point to influence what’s happening there on the ground? Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** Yeah, on the Arctic, it is North Atlantic – it is important with the close partnership with Greenland and Faroe Islands, United States, and then, of course, Kingdom of Denmark. We have a unique cooperation. We are both – we will move after this meeting to Arctic Council, which is an architecture that has also ensured that we have a situation of non-conflict – of constructive cooperation around Arctic issues and an aim of also low tension in the Arctic region.

That said, we have seen Russian – some of the military bases in the northeastern flank that was closed off at the end of the Cold War has been re-opened. They have mainly defensive capabilities but also some offensive capabilities. And we see increased activities in the Arctic region. And I think

it's – it has to be done with a due diligence that we are ready to ensure to see what is going on in the Arctic region, and therefore we have this package where we have surveillance, we have other capacities to see what is going on to protect our sovereignty and our interest. But we have a unique cooperation and we want to safeguard it as that, so when we go to Reykjavik in a few days, this is a aim that we share.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** With regard to the second part of the question, we have been working around the clock through diplomatic channels to try to bring an end to the conflict. As you know, President Biden was on the phone with Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Abbas 24 hours ago and on Saturday. I've spoken to both of them. As I mentioned coming over here, I spent most of the time on the plane actually calling various counterparts: Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, as well as my French counterpart. And there'll be more such conversations later today. We've had a whole series of senior officials, starting as well with our Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, working with her counterparts, Deputy Secretary of State Sherman as well, Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, and of course we have our Senior Official for Israel-Palestine Affairs Hady Amr on the ground in Israel now.

In all of these engagements, we've made clear that we are prepared to lend our support and good offices to the parties should they seek a ceasefire. And that's precisely the message I think you heard from Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield during the UN session yesterday. Any diplomatic initiative that advances that prospect is something that we'll support. And we are, again, willing and ready to do that, but ultimately it is up to the parties to make clear that they want to pursue a ceasefire. Any ceasefire would be, by definition, between them but we are ready to engage in support of. Meanwhile, we are working tirelessly across every diplomatic channel we have to advance the prospect of getting to a – getting to calm and ending the violence.

**QUESTION:** Does that mean the United Nations Security Council does not help that process of de-escalation, and that's why the U.S. isn't supporting it or – correct me if I'm misunderstanding.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** No, no that's – it's – we're not standing in the way of diplomacy. To the contrary, we're exercising it virtually nonstop. The question is: Will any given action, will any given statement actually, as a practical matter, advance the prospects for ending the violence or not? And that's the judgement we have to make each time. If we think that there's something, including at the United Nations, that would effectively advance that, we would be for it. We thought it was very important the other day to have this open discussion where the parties could put forward their views, their concerns, and be heard. And we'll continue to look for ways to advance the goal that we have, which is ending the violence.

**QUESTION:** Thank you guys.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER KOFOD:** Thank you so much. Thank you.

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## **DEPARTMENT PRESS BRIEFING – June 17, 2021**

*06/17/2021 05:38 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:15 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Thanks, everyone, for joining us. And I'm sorry we're starting a couple minutes late here. I'm also sorry we're not able to do this in the briefing room. The briefing room is undergoing some AV upgrades that will be concluded, and we'll be back online, we expect, next week.

Just a couple things at the top. First, representing the United States at the virtual International Donors' Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced nearly \$407 million in new lifesaving humanitarian assistance to Venezuelan refugees and migrants and the communities that so generously host them across the region. This announcement demonstrates longstanding U.S. leadership in alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people, in line with both our national interests and our values as a nation. It brings total U.S. humanitarian assistance to more than 1.4 billion for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in 17 countries throughout the region, as well as vulnerable Venezuelans inside Venezuela, since Fiscal Year 2017 alone.

We know that humanitarian assistance is only a means for meeting immediate lifesaving needs. Only through the full restoration of democracy in Venezuela through free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections can the Venezuelan people begin to address their long-term needs. We applaud the international participation at the conference, which was co-hosted by the Government of Canada, the UN Refugee Agency, and the International Organization for Migration. We express our sincere appreciation to the governments, communities, and citizens of the countries who have shown such extraordinary solidarity and provided refuge to the Venezuelan people during this difficult time. We're encouraged by the international response and we urge other donors to help support the Venezuelan people.

Next, I'm pleased to announce that 1 million doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine will arrive in Toronto this evening. This donation is part of the 80 million doses that President Biden announced on May 17th and it reflects our close partnership with our Canadian neighbors to defeat COVID-19. This also, of course, follows our donation of 1.35 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to Mexico, which we announced on Tuesday of this week, June 15th. As President Biden has said, the United States is committed to bringing the same urgency to international vaccination efforts that we've demonstrated here at home. We're working to get as many safe and effective vaccine doses to as many people around the world as fast as possible. Thanks to the innovation of U.S. companies and the resilience and commitment of the American people, we're in a position to help others around the world. That's precisely what we're doing and what we'll continue to do going forward.

So with that, we'll turn to your questions. Just give us a moment here.

We'll go to the line of Shaun Tandon, please.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Welcome back. Thanks. Hi, Ned. Welcome back.

**MR PRICE:** Hey, Shaun.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to – hi. I wanted to ask you about a couple of things in Asia that are not related but (inaudible) press freedom. There was a raid by the Hong Kong police on the *Apple Daily* and arrest of executives. If you have any reaction to that.

And in Burma/Myanmar, we understand that American citizen journalist appeared before court today – Danny Fenster. What is the (inaudible) on that? There are also reports that the U.S. embassy had not been informed about his appearance. If you could attest to that. Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** Well, on your first question, Shaun, on the arrest of the *Apple Daily* employees, I'll say that we strongly condemn the arrests of five senior executives from *Apple Daily* and their parent company, Next Digital, and we call for their immediate release. We are deeply concerned by Hong Kong authorities' selective use of the national security law to arbitrarily target independent media organizations. The charges of, quote, "collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security" appear to be entirely politically motivated. We deplore the reported assertion by a Hong Kong police official that articles published in *Apple Daily* are evidence of what they call the, quote, "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces." As we all know, exchanging views with foreigners in journalism should never be a crime.

We are concerned by increased efforts by authorities to wield the national security law as a tool to suppress independent media, to silence dissenting views, and to stifle freedom of expression. These actions undermine Beijing's obligations, their own obligations under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which is a binding international agreement, to uphold Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and protected rights and freedoms. We call on authorities to stop targeting the independent and free media. Efforts to stifle media freedom and to restrict the free flow of information not only undermine Hong Kong's democratic institutions but they also hurt Hong Kong's credibility and viability as an international hub.

When it comes to Danny Fenster, as you know, the welfare and safety of U.S. citizens is one of the highest priorities of the United States Government around the world. We have – our consular officers in Burma have sought to visit Daniel, but we have not been afforded access to him by regime officials. We urge the Burmese to grant consular access, as required by the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, without delay and to ensure proper treatment of Danny while he remains detained. We are doing everything we can to see to it that Danny Fenster is reunited with his family. We are, of course, very gratified by the release and the safe return of Nathan Maung, who recently arrived back in the United States and has had an opportunity to meet and to speak with senior Department of State officials.

We'll go to the line of Jenny Hansler.

**OPERATOR:** One moment, please, while we open your line.

**MR PRICE:** Do we have Jennifer Hansler?

**OPERATOR:** Pardon me. Jennifer Hansler we're looking for?

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**OPERATOR:** Yes, we do have that line. And this is AT&T. Just as a reminder, please allow me to let you know when your line is open to make certain that we hear your entire question. And Ms. Hansler, your line is open. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks for doing this, Ned. On these ships from Iran that were initially bound for the Western Hemisphere, there's reports that they have now changed course. I was wondering what the State Department makes of this change? Have you gotten commitments from the government in Venezuela, for example, that they had denied them a right to dock there? Any information on this?

**MR PRICE:** Thanks, Jenny. We have, of course, seen the media reports regarding the Iranian naval ships, the reports about their location and their whereabouts. Not in a position to offer any sort of update or assessment for you. But what we have said previously continues to hold. We are prepared to leverage applicable authorities, including sanctions, against any actor that enables Iran's ongoing provision of weapons to violent partners and proxies around the world. Again, we're not going to comment on potential destinations, but we'll continue monitoring developments on this.

Why don't we go to the line of Deirdre Shesgreen of *USA Today*?

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ned. Thanks so much for taking my question. There's been an alarming spike in COVID cases at the embassy in Kabul, and I – it sounds like people have been medevaced out and they're having to set up temporary onsite wards to take care of people who need oxygen. Can you say what the State Department is doing to help address this situation? Are you providing additional resources? And then more broadly, what's the status of the State Department's efforts to get COVID vaccines to diplomatic staff around the world?

**MR PRICE:** Thanks for that question, Deirdre. Let me give you some background. Afghanistan, as we know, is experiencing an intense third wave of COVID-19 cases throughout the country. In response to an outbreak on the compound, the embassy has adjusted its operations to do all we can to ensure the continued safety, security, and health of our staff as they continue to advance U.S. interests and our relationship with the Government and the people of Afghanistan. This includes requiring all staff to telework and to adhere to physical distancing and masking requirements and other applicable regulations.

The Department of State, of course, has no higher responsibility than the safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas, and that – as well as our local staff. We are saddened by the deaths of many valiant Afghans who've been sickened by this pandemic, and we, in fact, grieve the passing of a local embassy staff member. We do expect that normal embassy operations will resume once embassy leadership is confident the chain of transmission has been broken.

When it comes to the provision of vaccines, through really remarkable work on the part of our counterparts and our operational MED unit, we were able to deploy vaccines around the world. Posts around the world were afforded access to – have been afforded access to the vaccines for the past couple months now. That includes Kabul. We understand that 95 percent of the COVID-19 cases at Embassy Kabul are individuals who are unvaccinated or who are not fully vaccinated. But again, the vaccine is available to members of our embassy team in Kabul, just as it is to our employees around the world.

Let's go to the line of Michele Kelemen.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I wanted to follow up on that issue. Can you say – are these 114 cases mostly among Afghan nationals or Nepalese guards. You seem to suggest that the person who died was an Afghan national. Is that accurate? And why does the vaccination rate appear to be so low there at the embassy? Are you considering requiring Americans serving or anyone who works for the U.S. Government abroad to get vaccinated?

**MR PRICE:** Thanks very much. We're not able to confirm the number of cases. What we will say is that there is a significant outbreak of COVID-19 at the embassy and one local staff, as you indicated, has unfortunately passed away, and our thoughts are with that individual's family and other loved ones. Again, most of these cases, 95 percent of them, are – emanate from individuals who are unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated. We continue to encourage our employees, both here at the Department of State in Washington and our employees around the world, to avail themselves of and to the vaccine. We'll continue to do that. But as you know, there is no requirement for our employees to do that.

We will go to the line of Simon Lewis.

**OPERATOR:** One moment, please. Go ahead.

**MR PRICE:** Actually, it looks like – it looks like we may not have Simon. We'll go to the line of Said Arikat.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned, and welcome back. A very quick question, Ned. There has been reports that the PA is negotiating – is forming a new negotiating team, and that they are probably getting some advice from you guys. Can you tell us whether Mr. Hady Amr is in any way involved in such a process? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, Said, what I would say is that we have been clear that we are going to do everything we can to significantly improve the quality of life for the Palestinian people and to improve Israeli-Palestinian relations. We seek to do that in ways that are tangible, in ways that are achievable in the near term and beyond. And so in that regard, we're working closely with both Israelis and Palestinians as well as the United Nations and other international partners to advance that vision.

When it comes to any sort of Palestinian Authority negotiating team, however, those decisions and those choices would be exclusively the purview of the Palestinian Authority.

We will go to the line of Laura Rozen.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for doing this. Ned, do you have any update from Vienna, and how long do you anticipate that this round of talks may go? And we're already bumping up against the, I think, June 24th expiration of the IAEA-Iran deal, so yeah, how do you hear it's going?

**MR PRICE:** Thanks, Laura. As you know, Special Envoy Rob Malley and his team are in Vienna, and they are now engaged in a sixth round of talks with our P5+1 counterparts. These are indirect talks through them with the Iranian Government officials.

Look, we've always been consistent on this point. We're neither delaying, we're neither slow-walking this, nor are we accelerating beyond what is appropriate. We'll – our Iran policy is predicated on a

clear-eyed sense of purpose, and one that we share with our P5+1 partners. That is a recognition that diplomacy remains the most durable means to ensure that Iran cannot obtain, can never obtain, a nuclear weapon.

We are in full agreement there with our allies and partners in the context of the P5+1, recognizing – who also recognize that a compliance-for-compliance outcome – that is to say, where Iran is once again subject to the most intrusive inspection and monitoring regime ever negotiated, and the United States once again complies with our commitments under the 2015 JCPOA – we continue to believe that is an effective way to ensure that Iran can never acquire a nuclear weapon.

Look, we have previously expressed our concern over Iran's ongoing failure to comply with nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA. That includes its production of uranium enriched up to 60 percent. That is of continuing serious concern. If Iran wants the diplomatic solution it says it seeks, it must set aside such provocative steps.

Talks will continue on the nuclear steps that Iran will be required to take as well as the sanctions relief that we would be prepared to undertake if we are able to negotiate a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. We would like to build and be in a position to build on the meaningful progress that has been achieved during the last round of talks. As you've heard both from our team, as you've heard from our international partners, we have been able to achieve some progress, but challenges remain. And I will just say that we will continue to work on this. Don't have a time frame for this sixth round of talks, but we will keep you updated as that – as updates are available.

Let's go to the line of Arshad Mohammed, please.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ned. Just a quick follow-up on that. Iran's lead negotiator, Abbas Araghchi, is quoted as saying that, "We achieved good, tangible progress on the different issues... we are closer than ever to an agreement, but there are still essential issues under negotiation." And the Russian representative to the talks offered a slightly more negative assessment, saying that there are still very challenging issues left.

Can you give us any sense of whether you are – you feel you're actually making tangible progress, and – or whether the issues that remain are of such an order – are of such complexity and difficulty that suggestions that you're closer than ever are perhaps misleading?

**MR PRICE:** Thanks, Arshad. So I wouldn't want to give a play-by-play when it comes to the days or even the rounds. What I will say is that the longer-term trajectory over these six rounds of talks – it's been a couple months now – is that we have been able to achieve progress. These discussions, as we have said, have been constructive. They have been businesslike. They have been conducive to discussing the key issues that are at play, and those are really twofold. It's, number one, the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take were it to affirmatively decide to once again abide by its full commitments under the 2015 JCPOA as well as the sanctions relief that the United States would need to undertake should we able – be able to arrive at a mutual return to compliance and the sanctions relief – and the relief of sanctions, I should say, that are inconsistent with the JCPOA.

So it is certainly true that we have made progress between rounds one and six, but again, I don't want to be definitive in embracing one assessment over another. What is true is that despite the progress that some challenges still do remain, and that's why the team remains on the ground in Vienna as we speak in an effort to make progress and knowing that, again, we are acting with some urgency given the advancements in Iran's nuclear program since it has distanced itself from the deal. We will keep at this as long as we deem the forum to be a constructive one because we recognize, again, that



diplomacy and specifically a mutual return to compliance provides a durable, long-term means to ensure that Iran is verifiably and permanently prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Let's take a couple final questions here. Let's go to the line of Robert Delaney.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for taking my question, Ned. I just wanted to see if I could get a little more clarity on comments by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that a meeting between President Biden and President Xi Jinping of China is under consideration; that is, he said, "Soon enough we will sit down to work out the right modality for the two presidents to engage."

I just wanted to get an idea or if you could give us a little bit more on the thinking behind the timing for a meeting between the two presidents, especially in light of the remarks we've heard recently from the administration about still uncertainty about access to information about the origins of the coronavirus and the comments about the – China's policies towards Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and also what you were saying earlier in this call about the actions taken against journalists and the editor-in-chief at *Apple Daily* in Hong Kong. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thanks very much for the question. So the National Security Advisor was speaking to the proposition that the President has put forward that there is no substitute for personal diplomacy. And he was making the point that that is not unique to the relationship and to the meeting between President Biden and President Putin and, in fact, applies across the board when it comes to our principled diplomacy.

He went on to say that we certainly don't have any meeting planned between President Xi, President Biden, nothing set to preview at this time, but it's something that we would remain open to if the conditions are right and the circumstances are warranted.

I would make a couple other points. We have continued to engage – again, strategically and guided by our principles, our interests, and our values – with the PRC Government. In fact, Secretary Blinken had a follow-on call with Director Yang not all that long ago where, as you saw from the readout, they discussed potential areas for cooperation between the PRC and the United States – and that includes issues like climate, it includes issues like Iran, it includes issues like Afghanistan and a number of other issues – while we, as you pointed out in your question, continue to have serious disagreements and continue to be – to shine a spotlight on China's wanton abuses of human rights in places like Xinjiang, its crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, its attempted intimidation of Taiwan – Taiwan, among other areas where we have profound concerns.

So we will continue that principled engagement. In the meantime, as you know, our priority – and this applies not only to China but to competitors across the board – has been to focus on shoring up our partnerships and alliances. And that is precisely why before President Biden met with President Putin yesterday in Geneva the administration demonstrated once again through meetings with our closest – some of our closest partners and allies around the world that America's back, that we are engaging, that we are doing so in a good-faith, constructive way, knowing that we have these shared interests and values; and two, to demonstrate that democracies can in fact deliver for their people, and that acting collectively and together we can deliver for the common interest while standing up for our shared values and our shared interests. We've always said that we're best able to take advantage of opportunities and to take on challenges when we leverage our core sources of strength, and certainly one of those core sources of strength is our unprecedented system of alliances and partnership.

So again, in the context of the President's meeting with President Putin, that's why you saw him meet with the G7, where we launched an ambitious effort to support resilience and development around the

world by investing in high-quality, high-standard, physical, digital health infrastructures, including B3W, or Build Back Better World, that the G7 allies announced at the conclusion of the summit. He then went to NATO, made clear that the United States commitment to our NATO Allies and to Article 5 is rock solid, and concluded with a U.S.-EU summit, where the President discussed how the United States can work with Europe to address the range of issues that require the full strength of our transatlantic partnership. And that includes working together to shape the new rules for the 21st century economies, and as part of that, you saw the launch of the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council. That is a very tangible demonstration of that work.

I cite all of that not because it is entirely relevant to our relationship with the PRC, but the principle remains that in the first instance, we have focused on shoring up and reassuring our partners and allies around the world in the context of China and the Indo-Pacific – of course, Secretary Blinken's first physical travel, first travel was to visit our counterparts, our treaty allies in Tokyo, in Seoul. Of course, the leaders of those two countries have been to the White House as well. Whether it is Russia, whether it's China, whether it's any other competitor, we know that we will be in a position of strength in the relationship when we have those allies and those partners working very closely with us.

All right, I think we will call that a day. Very much appreciate everyone's participation, and tomorrow is a federal holiday now, so we will not have a briefing then. But we look forward to speaking with you all on Monday. Have a good weekend.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:42 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – June 17, 2021](#)

*06/17/2021 07:47 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:15 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Thanks, everyone, for joining us. And I'm sorry we're starting a couple minutes late here. I'm also sorry we're not able to do this in the briefing room. The briefing room is undergoing some AV upgrades that will be concluded, and we'll be back online, we expect, next week.

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So with that, we'll turn to your questions. Just give us a moment here.

We'll go to the line of Shaun Tandon, please.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Welcome back. Thanks. Hi, Ned. Welcome back.

**MR PRICE:** Hey, Shaun.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to – hi. I wanted to ask you about a couple of things in Asia that are not related but (inaudible) press freedom. There was a raid by the Hong Kong police on the *Apple Daily* and arrest of executives. If you have any reaction to that.

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**MR PRICE:** Well, on your first question, Shaun, on the arrest of the *Apple Daily* employees, I'll say that we strongly condemn the arrests of five senior executives from *Apple Daily* and their parent company, Next Digital, and we call for their immediate release. We are deeply concerned by Hong Kong authorities' selective use of the national security law to arbitrarily target independent media organizations. The charges of, quote, "collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security" appear to be entirely politically motivated. We deplore the reported assertion by a Hong Kong police official that articles published in *Apple Daily* are evidence of what they call the, quote, "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces." As we all know, exchanging views with foreigners in journalism should never be a crime.

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Look, we've always been consistent on this point. We're neither delaying, we're neither slow-walking this, nor are we accelerating beyond what is appropriate. We'll – our Iran policy is predicated on a clear-eyed sense of purpose, and one that we share with our P5+1 partners. That is a recognition that

diplomacy remains the most durable means to ensure that Iran cannot obtain, can never obtain, a nuclear weapon.

We are in full agreement there with our allies and partners in the context of the P5+1, recognizing – who also recognize that a compliance-for-compliance outcome – that is to say, where Iran is once again subject to the most intrusive inspection and monitoring regime ever negotiated, and the United States once again complies with our commitments under the 2015 JCPOA – we continue to believe that is an effective way to ensure that Iran can never acquire a nuclear weapon.

Look, we have previously expressed our concern over Iran's ongoing failure to comply with nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA. That includes its production of uranium enriched up to 60 percent. That is of continuing serious concern. If Iran wants the diplomatic solution it says it seeks, it must set aside such provocative steps.

Talks will continue on the nuclear steps that Iran will be required to take as well as the sanctions relief that we would be prepared to undertake if we are able to negotiate a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. We would like to build and be in a position to build on the meaningful progress that has been achieved during the last round of talks. As you've heard both from our team, as you've heard from our international partners, we have been able to achieve some progress, but challenges remain. And I will just say that we will continue to work on this. Don't have a time frame for this sixth round of talks, but we will keep you updated as that – as updates are available.

Let's go to the line of Arshad Mohammed, please.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Ned. Just a quick follow-up on that. Iran's lead negotiator, Abbas Araghchi, is quoted as saying that, "We achieved good, tangible progress on the different issues... we are closer than ever to an agreement, but there are still essential issues under negotiation." And the Russian representative to the talks offered a slightly more negative assessment, saying that there are still very challenging issues left.

Can you give us any sense of whether you are – you feel you're actually making tangible progress, and – or whether the issues that remain are of such an order – are of such complexity and difficulty that suggestions that you're closer than ever are perhaps misleading?

**MR PRICE:** Thanks, Arshad. So I wouldn't want to give a play-by-play when it comes to the days or even the rounds. What I will say is that the longer-term trajectory over these six rounds of talks – it's been a couple months now – is that we have been able to achieve progress. These discussions, as we have said, have been constructive. They have been businesslike. They have been conducive to discussing the key issues that are at play, and those are really twofold. It's, number one, the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take were it to affirmatively decide to once again abide by its full commitments under the 2015 JCPOA as well as the sanctions relief that the United States would need to undertake should we able – be able to arrive at a mutual return to compliance and the sanctions relief – and the relief of sanctions, I should say, that are inconsistent with the JCPOA.

So it is certainly true that we have made progress between rounds one and six, but again, I don't want to be definitive in embracing one assessment over another. What is true is that despite the progress that some challenges still do remain, and that's why the team remains on the ground in Vienna as we speak in an effort to make progress and knowing that, again, we are acting with some urgency given the advancements in Iran's nuclear program since it has distanced itself from the deal. We will keep at this as long as we deem the forum to be a constructive one because we recognize, again, that diplomacy and specifically a mutual return to compliance provides a durable, long-term means to

ensure that Iran is verifiably and permanently prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Let's take a couple final questions here. Let's go to the line of Robert Delaney.

**OPERATOR:** Your line is open. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for taking my question, Ned. I just wanted to see if I could get a little more clarity on comments by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that a meeting between President Biden and President Xi Jinping of China is under consideration; that is, he said, "Soon enough we will sit down to work out the right modality for the two presidents to engage."

I just wanted to get an idea or if you could give us a little bit more on the thinking behind the timing for a meeting between the two presidents, especially in light of the remarks we've heard recently from the administration about still uncertainty about access to information about the origins of the coronavirus and the comments about the – China's policies towards Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and also what you were saying earlier in this call about the actions taken against journalists and the editor-in-chief at *Apple Daily* in Hong Kong. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thanks very much for the question. So the National Security Advisor was speaking to the proposition that the President has put forward that there is no substitute for personal diplomacy. And he was making the point that that is not unique to the relationship and to the meeting between President Biden and President Putin and, in fact, applies across the board when it comes to our principled diplomacy.

He went on to say that we certainly don't have any meeting planned between President Xi, President Biden, nothing set to preview at this time, but it's something that we would remain open to if the conditions are right and the circumstances are warranted.

I would make a couple other points. We have continued to engage – again, strategically and guided by our principles, our interests, and our values – with the PRC Government. In fact, Secretary Blinken had a follow-on call with Director Yang not all that long ago where, as you saw from the readout, they discussed potential areas for cooperation between the PRC and the United States – and that includes issues like climate, it includes issues like Iran, it includes issues like Afghanistan and a number of other issues – while we, as you pointed out in your question, continue to have serious disagreements and continue to be – to shine a spotlight on China's wanton abuses of human rights in places like Xinjiang, its crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, its attempted intimidation of Taiwan – Taiwan, among other areas where we have profound concerns.

So we will continue that principled engagement. In the meantime, as you know, our priority – and this applies not only to China but to competitors across the board – has been to focus on shoring up our partnerships and alliances. And that is precisely why before President Biden met with President Putin yesterday in Geneva the administration demonstrated once again through meetings with our closest – some of our closest partners and allies around the world that America's back, that we are engaging, that we are doing so in a good-faith, constructive way, knowing that we have these shared interests and values; and two, to demonstrate that democracies can in fact deliver for their people, and that acting collectively and together we can deliver for the common interest while standing up for our shared values and our shared interests. We've always said that we're best able to take advantage of opportunities and to take on challenges when we leverage our core sources of strength, and certainly one of those core sources of strength is our unprecedented system of alliances and partnership.

So again, in the context of the President's meeting with President Putin, that's why you saw him meet with the G7, where we launched an ambitious effort to support resilience and development around the world by investing in high-quality, high-standard, physical, digital health infrastructures, including B3W,



or Build Back Better World, that the G7 allies announced at the conclusion of the summit. He then went to NATO, made clear that the United States commitment to our NATO Allies and to Article 5 is rock solid, and concluded with a U.S.-EU summit, where the President discussed how the United States can work with Europe to address the range of issues that require the full strength of our transatlantic partnership. And that includes working together to shape the new rules for the 21st century economies, and as part of that, you saw the launch of the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council. That is a very tangible demonstration of that work.

I cite all of that not because it is entirely relevant to our relationship with the PRC, but the principle remains that in the first instance, we have focused on shoring up and reassuring our partners and allies around the world in the context of China and the Indo-Pacific – of course, Secretary Blinken's first physical travel, first travel was to visit our counterparts, our treaty allies in Tokyo, in Seoul. Of course, the leaders of those two countries have been to the White House as well. Whether it is Russia, whether it's China, whether it's any other competitor, we know that we will be in a position of strength in the relationship when we have those allies and those partners working very closely with us.

All right, I think we will call that a day. Very much appreciate everyone's participation, and tomorrow is a federal holiday now, so we will not have a briefing then. But we look forward to speaking with you all on Monday. Have a good weekend.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:42 p.m.)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken And German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas At a Joint Press Availability](#)

06/23/2021 03:36 PM EDT

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Berlin, Germany

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**FOREIGN MINISTER MAAS:** (Via interpreter) Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the federal foreign office. A very warm welcome to Berlin, dear Tony, or rather, welcome back. After all, weren't you in Europe only last week? And during that visit, President Biden and your delegation underlined impressively that America is back, back on the international and multilateral scene, and we're extremely pleased about this.

The world has not stopped turning over the last few years. What we need these days is, above all, transatlantic collaboration and solidarity and a division of labor, and we need that more than ever before. I am delighted that your first bilateral visit, working visit to Europe has brought you to Berlin today and tomorrow.

Today, we are hosting the second Libya conference. We want to ensure that Libya can once again enjoy sustainable peace and a stable situation, and we want to prepare the ground for that and make sure that we get international support. We are focusing on three points: holding (inaudible) elections, withdrawal of foreign fighters and mercenaries, and unifying the security forces of the country. And we will also use the opportunity to also focus on the economic development in Europe and providing support, to the extent possible, to us.

Of course, we also talked about a number of other issues today. The sixth round of negotiations on restoring the Iran nuclear deal ended last Sunday. Again, the talks in Vienna were very intensive. We are making progress, but there's still a few hard nuts to crack, as we all know only too well, and we also know that the environment of the negotiations continues to be very complex now that elections have taken place in Iran.

We also talked about Ukraine and the talks in the N4 format with the objective of putting an end to the conflict in the east of the country. What is obvious is that no one can be satisfied about the present state of affairs, the status quo. We insist that the Minsk agreements need to be implemented, and we need to inject new dynamic into the process. And right now, we are preparing the substance for another meeting of the foreign ministers of the N4, and it is extremely good and extremely helpful to have the United States supporting us in this.

Of course, we also talked about the outcome of the bilateral talks between President Biden and President Putin. We stand ready to support the strategic dialogue on arms control and armament agreed by both sides as best as we can, and we believe that this has been an extraordinary success

achieved through these talks, and we are very grateful to President Biden for having taken the initiative.

The mere fact of affirming the so-called Reagan-Gorbachev formula that goes “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” has been an extremely important signal by these two presidents.

Now as we talk about all these subjects, we’re quite aware of the fact that even if we are linking arms across the Atlantic with likeminded countries, this does not mean that conflicts or missiles are going to vanish overnight. But if we all act in concert, I believe we can produce a much greater impact. The day before yesterday, such an impact was quite visible because on the very same day, the United States, Canada, and the European Union and Great Britain agreed on sanctions – determined sanctions against the regime in Belarus. And that is an indication of the fact that if we stand together in assuming responsibility, we stand a chance of making our values future-proof and make them – make and ensure them being respected.

Tomorrow, we will also be acting in the spirit of our shared future. We will meet at the Holocaust Memorial and use that opportunity to discuss our cooperation and to enhance our cooperation to advance something that has been in both our interests, and that is the fight against anti-Semitism wherever it occurs, and it occurs still far too often. In the afternoon, we will have the opportunity to talk to young adults about the future of transatlantic relations. I very much look forward to these exchanges, and I’m grateful for the fact that Tony Blinken has come here today. Thank you very much indeed.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, Heiko, thank you for a very productive meeting, but thank you, even more importantly, for your friendship and close collaboration these past few months. It’s been terrifically important to me, important to the United States. We’re grateful for your partnership, we’re grateful for the partnership with Germany across the board, and it’s a particular pleasure for me to be back in Berlin for the first time as Secretary of State, although many, many visits in different capacities before then. I very much look forward to having a chance to see the chancellor later this afternoon following the very good meeting that we had and to be here, as Heiko said, so soon after the G7 meeting, the NATO meeting, the U.S.-EU Leaders Summit.

As President Biden said last week at the European Council, at a time when we have such vast changes taking place around the world – many good, some not so good – the best way for countries to deal with these changes is by working together. And I think Heiko and I both strongly agree that there is probably not a single challenge that is having an impact on the lives of our citizens – whether it’s climate change, whether it’s this pandemic, whether it is the destructive impact of emerging technologies – that can be addressed by any one country acting alone. We have an imperative, maybe more than ever before, to find ways to cooperate, work together, coordinate, and that’s exactly what the United States and Germany are doing.

That’s how we’ll ultimately end the COVID-19 pandemic, which is becoming, unfortunately, more dangerous in some parts of the world even as it’s increasingly under control in others. It’s how we’ll tackle the climate crisis and protect our planet, our security, our health, while building a greener global economy. It’s how we’ll maintain our security in the face of old and new threats. And ultimately, it’s how we’ll protect our shared values and defend human rights and democracy both at home and around the world. And in all of this, I think our common challenge, which we very much agree on, is the need to demonstrate together that democracies can deliver effectively for our citizens and indeed deliver for the world.

Germany and the United States have demonstrated time and again that we believe in cooperation bilaterally, multilaterally. We’re both committed to multilateralism. And that’s one reason why I’m visiting France and Italy after my time here in Berlin. In addition to being three of our closest and most

capable partners, Germany, France, and Italy are the only three countries that are members of the EU, NATO, and the G7, and that underscores the importance that all of us attach to working cooperatively in multilateral institutions.

We've worked closely together over the past several months in the lead-up to the summits that President Biden took part in, then at the summits themselves, to take on some of the most urgent challenges of our time and to help ensure that these institutions are as effective, adaptive, and innovative as possible.

But that work doesn't end with the summits. In a sense, it starts there. It continues this week and beyond as we follow up on the steps that leaders took at NATO with the 2030 reform agenda and making sure the Alliance has the capability it needs; at the G7, where we committed to supply one billion COVID-19 vaccines to the world, end support for coal-fired power plants, partner with developing countries on infrastructure projects through Build Back Better, and at the U.S.-EU summit, where we pledged greater cooperation, deeper cooperation on trade and technology in particular.

We're also working closely together to address regional challenges. We'll see that this afternoon when we gather with leaders from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, as well as the United Nations, at the Berlin II Conference on Libya. And I want to thank Germany for its very important leadership on this issue. As I'll share at the meeting and as you heard from Heiko, we share the goal of a sovereign, stable, unified, secure Libya free from foreign interference. It's what the people of Libya deserve. It's critical to regional security as well.

For that to happen, national elections need to go forward in December, and that means urgent agreement is needed on constitutional and legal issues that would undergird those elections. And the October 23rd ceasefire agreement has to be fully implemented, including by withdrawing all foreign forces from Libya. We're grateful, again, to Germany for hosting this meeting and for the longstanding leadership that it's shown on this topic and so many others. We're very proud to be your partner, Heiko, in this endeavor.

And that brings me to a final point that I want to make today. In addition to the work that we do together through regional and global conferences and institutions, we're deeply committed to the bilateral relationship between Germany and the United States. Simply put, Germany is among our closest friends and closest partners in the entire world.

It's true, of course, on a governmental level, and I know President Biden is very much looking forward to welcoming Chancellor Merkel to Washington next month.

It's true on an economic level. As we see and know every single day, Germany is our largest trading partner in Europe. We're your largest export market, and hundreds of thousands of Germans work for American companies and vice versa.

It's true on a person-to-person level. The people of Germany and the people of the United States are connected in so many ways – family ties that stretch back for generations, young people studying in each other's universities. And like Heiko, I'm looking forward tomorrow to meeting with some of the alumni of our transatlantic youth exchange programs and talking to another generation of young Germans and Americans.

Our troops have stood shoulder to shoulder around the world. We're grateful to Germany for hosting U.S. troops, which serves our joint security.

And we're connected, finally, by a shared commitment to democratic values, values that we'll honor tomorrow when, as the foreign minister said, we will visit the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of

Europe together to reaffirm our commitment to human rights and dignity, to discuss how we can ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust are never forgotten.

I am reminded of something President Biden said recently at the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa race massacre in the United States. He talked about how great nations face the lessons of their history no matter how painful they are. And they do all that they can to repair whatever injustice can be repaired and build a better, fairer future. Germany is a model to the world for how to do that.

So we're grateful for the friendship. We want it to be even stronger. We don't always agree. The foreign minister and I spoke today about one of those areas of disagreement, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which we continue to believe is a threat to Europe's energy security. Germany has a different perspective, and that happens from time to time among friends, and we'll handle our disagreements while pressing ahead on the many areas where we are working very closely together and are very much in agreement.

In this case, that means that Germany and the United States will keep standing together against any dangerous or provocative actions by Russia, whether that's encroaching on Ukraine's territory or imprisoning Aleksey Navalny or spreading disinformation in our democracies. That's what effective cooperation between countries looks like. That's what Germany and the United States are delivering together.

So thank you again, Mr. Foreign Minister, Heiko, for this partnership, for this very good work that we're doing together, and my thanks to everyone here for the very warm reception we've already had. Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Unfortunately, we have very limited time left due to following schedules, but the first question goes to Reuters, and please, a short question would be much appreciated.

**QUESTION:** (Via interpreter) Andreas Rinke from Reuters. A question addressed to the foreign – Secretary of State: As far as Libya is concerned, what do you expect from the Americans? What should they deliver?

(In English) And Foreign Secretary, question to you, on the same question: What is the U.S. willing to do? Boots on the ground in anti-terror fight in the Sahel region, or what else?

**FOREIGN MINISTER MAAS:** (Via interpreter) Well, today – today, it is first and foremost about Libya, and I'm extremely grateful to Tony Blinken for making sure that the United States are very engaged on this dossier, much more active than we have come to expect over the past few years. Today is about reaffirming that elections take place on the 24th of September, that all foreign fighters are withdrawn, and that that is affirmed at this conference, and that then adds a step-by-step process – that this is then to take place as a step-by-step process. In Libya too, it is important that the security forces on the ground are being unified – the security forces of the country.

In order to achieve this, it is very important that the international community and those parties that played a part in the conflict play their part and do their bit. And this is why I am very grateful to Tony Blinken and the American administration in Washington for being here today and for actively helping us develop that process.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** And I really wouldn't and couldn't say anything differently. We have exactly the same objectives both for this meeting and for moving forward in terms of the steps that need to be taken to make sure that elections go forward in December, that the ceasefire continues to be fully implemented, and that all foreign forces leave Libya. I think we have an opportunity that we have not had in recent years to really help Libya move forward as a safe, secure, sovereign country, and we're

determined together to seize that opportunity.

I think, again, Germany's leadership in a very sustained way in bringing the international community together in support of Libya, in support of its progress is vitally, vitally important, and I hope that we'll continue to move in the right direction today and the days that follow.

**MR PRICE:** Our first question goes to the VOA, Cindy Saine.

**QUESTION:** Yes, (inaudible). Secretary Blinken mentioned the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

And for Foreign Minister Maas, what is Germany prepared to do to reassure the United States and Ukraine that Russia will not use the pipeline to pressure Ukraine or to harm them?

And for Secretary Blinken, in your discussions with the foreign minister, what measures are you considering implementing that could automatically trigger if Russia does pressure?

And for both of you, are you worried about threatening statements that Russian President Putin has made that he would exclude Ukraine from energy? Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER MAAS:** (Via interpreter) During our conversation today, Tony was very clear in impressing upon me that as far as Nord Stream 2 is concerned, Washington has expectations of Germany and that expectations are that we make sure that President Putin cannot misuse the pipeline to exert pressure on Ukraine. We are quite aware of this, and we want to make our contribution in that regard.

In the past, already we started to work in that direction by making sure that there is an alternative gas transit agreement via the Ukraine and that we'll continue to stand – and that we'll continue to stand once Nord Stream 2 goes operational. We are right now in the midst of talks about how we can fulfill these expectations that Washington has of us.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** And thank you. And we appreciate the important conversations that we're having with Germany on this issue. Right now, as I said earlier, this is one place where we disagree. We believe, we continue to believe, that the pipeline is ultimately a Russian geopolitical project that threatens European energy security and potentially undermines the security of Ukraine and other countries in the region.

We recently imposed sanctions, more sanctions than have ever been imposed under the law, against a number of Russian entities involved in the pipeline. And at the same time, we waived certain sanctions with regard to Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO. And the context is this: By the time we took office, the pipeline as a matter of its physical construction was more than 90 percent complete. That was the reality. That's something we inherited.

And we're determined to see if we can make something positive out of a difficult situation that we inherited and to do what we can to make sure that the end result is that Europe's energy security is not undermined – in fact, it's strengthened; that Ukraine's position is not weakened, that it's actually reinforced. And that is the nature of the conversations that we're having with our German partners.

Our goal remains to ensure that Russia cannot use energy as a coercive tool, as a weapon, against Ukraine or anyone else in Europe, and I appreciate the work that we're doing with Germany to move in that direction.

**MODERATOR:** The next question from Süddeutsche Zeitung, Herr Broessler.

**QUESTION:** (Via interpreter) Minister Maas, if I may, I would like to come back to Nord Stream 2.

With respect to the talks you mentioned, is there a timeframe for these talks? Do both sides have the wish to solve this problem before the federal chancellor, Ms. Merkel, will visit Washington? And more specifically, the Ukraine has asked Germany to provide guarantees. Would Germany, for example, be willing to make good or compensate for the loss of transit fees?

(In English) And Secretary Blinken, from what you said, can we understand that you have given up on the goal to not have Nord Stream Zwei completed or at least go operational? And in case it is completed, is it your wish to have tools to stop gas transit via Nord Stream Zwei if need be?

Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER MAAS:** (Via interpreter) Probably we are able to save the world at large, but people would still ask us about Nord Stream 2. Well, we'll have to accept it and live with it.

We are engaging in these talks. We are aware of the expectations from Washington, and it is of the utmost importance to us to reach results here that can also be supported by Washington. As I said, we are engaging in these talks with our colleagues from the American administration in Washington, but we are also engaging with the Ukraine. The Ukrainian foreign minister came to Berlin the week before last, and of course, we talked about this issue.

But as I said, we are engaging in these negotiations also with an eye to Eastern Europe and the – with an eye to the energy situation in more general terms. There is a whole host of ways and means and approaches which we are discussing right now, but we are not discussing them in public. And of course, I would wish us to make headway and achieve a result as quickly as possible.

As I said – as was said, the visit of the federal chancellor in Washington would be a suitable timeline, but of course, we cannot make it contingent only on this particular matter. In August, legislative decisions are coming in Washington, so we have the ambition to have made headway on these issues and to have reached results that are acceptable to all parties involved.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** I share the views that the foreign minister just expressed. I'm not going to address what might happen hypothetically in the future. I think what's important and what we agree on is that in the conversations that we're having, in the talks that we're having together, we need to produce very credible, concrete results to, again, ensure that Russia cannot use energy as a coercive tool directed at Ukraine or anyone else.

**MR PRICE:** We'll go to Humeyra Pamuk of Reuters.

**QUESTION:** Hello, thank you. I would like to ask about Iran first.

Foreign Minister Maas, you just said, like, there are some nuts to be cracked still, and Jake Sullivan also over the weekend said there are still issues. What is your sense on how close the two sides are on a deal, and until when are you willing to keep negotiating?

And then if I can move on to China quickly. The United States says America is back, and you two talked a lot about multilateralism, but – and while – and Europe appears to be genuinely pleased to see that America is back. But you have deep disagreements on a number of important topics, and China is one.

Foreign Minister Maas, isn't that weighing on the bilateral relationship?

And Secretary Blinken, you've said China's treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang amount to genocide. Are you urging the German Government to call on German companies to perhaps cease operations in Xinjiang?

Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER MAAS:** (Via interpreter) As regards China, of course, this is a topic that we are engaging on. We always touch upon China. China is important for us, for the German Government but also for the European Union, and thus it is important that the European Union has a joint strategy regarding China.

I think we have made it clear in the last few weeks that we are capable of acting together. Because of the human rights violations in Xinjiang, the human rights violations of the rights of the Uyghurs, we have made it clear that we have been able to agree on sanctions, and we have harmonized our actions with the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, with the European Union regarding, for example, Belarus.

We want to cooperate closely with the United States apart from the historic friendship existing between both our countries and peoples, also with respect to an eye what we owe to the United States, with an eye to the Second World War and the period that followed. We are much better and have a greater impact if we act together and coordinate our actions, and thus we have a great interest in making sure that our China strategy is coordinated closely across the Atlantic between Germany and the United States and the European Union and the United States.

And as far as the negotiations in Vienna are concerned, they are not easy. In the past few weeks, that has become quite obvious. There are a whole host of technical issues that need solving still. We are making headway step by step, one round of negotiations after the other, and we expect that now that a new government has been elected there are good opportunities for negotiations to continue and be concluded.

We, for one, are convinced that it is worthwhile to engaging with the other parties even over such a longer period of time and to ensuring that the JCPOA is being revitalized and revived.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** And coming back to China, I think what you're seeing and what you saw particularly in the last week is a growing convergence of views in terms of how to deal with China. We recognize that all of our countries have complex and consequential relationships with China that can't be summed up in a bumper sticker. And whether it's the United States, whether it's Europe, we're seeing, as we've said before, adversarial aspects of the relationship, competitive ones, and also cooperative ones.

But the common denominator is we're all going to be more effective in engaging China in any of those areas when we're working and acting together. And increasingly, we're demonstrating that we can do that. I think it was evident in the work that was done at the G7, at NATO, at the U.S.-EU Summit. I'd remind you that with regard to the G7, the last time previous to this G7 meeting that there was a meeting, China didn't even factor into the equation, into the communique. And at NATO we've agreed to renew and revitalize our strategic concept. The last time that was done in 2010, again, China was not – was not even mentioned.

But I think what's very important here to recognize – and this is what brings us together – is we are not about containing China or holding China back. What we are about is upholding the free and open rules-based international order that we have spent so many decades building, investing in, working on together. And if that order is challenged in any way by anyone, we will stand up and defend it. And that's not directed at China. It's about defending the order.

But more – as important, I think what you saw from the United States and Europe across so many different areas was an affirmative vision for what the future can and should be. For example, the work that we did together at the G7 with Build Back Better for the World, where we will come together as



countries pooling some of our development resources to help other countries develop their infrastructure and to do it to the highest standards and the most positive way. The work that we're doing together on vaccines – a billion vaccines for the world with no political strings attached. All of this shows that we can come together and deliver effectively.

Last word. When it comes to Xinjiang, when it comes to genocide, human rights abuses, I think what's incumbent upon all of us to do whatever we can to make sure that products that may be the result of forced labor are not coming into our countries, and similarly that we're not exporting to any country, China or otherwise, technologies or products that can be used to repress people and deny them their human rights. We've done work on that. That was clear last week as well on forced labor. And as the foreign minister said, we've come together to sanction China for the actions that it's taken against Uyghurs and others in Xinjiang.

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**Subject:** Senior State Department Official On Ongoing U.S. Engagement Regarding the JCPOA  
**To:** Good ander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
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## [Senior State Department Official On Ongoing U.S. Engagement Regarding the JCPOA](#)

06/24/2021 04:39 PM EDT

Office of the Spokesperson

Via Teleconference

**MODERATOR:** Thank you. Good afternoon everyone and thanks for joining our call. We have with us today . is going to address the current status of the situation following conclusion of the sixth round of talks. Just as a reminder, will be speaking today on background. And you may refer to him as a Senior State Department Official for the purposes of your reporting.

Also as another reminder, this call is embargoed until the conclusion of the call. And the audio from this session is not for broadcast or replay. So just one more time, this on background to a Senior State Department Official. And with that, I'm going to go ahead and turn it over to for 's remarks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you. And thanks for doing this again. I know that in the last few weeks there's been some confusion, some reporting that may have been – that have added to that confusion. And part of it could be because we haven't done one of these some time, so I'm glad to do it again and try to clear up any confusion that may exist. So I'll be brief in what I'll say at the top, just to try to address two issues that I think have caused some of that imprecision.

First, where we are on the talks – and there has been some reporting that we basically have a deal already with Iran, that it's just a matter of deciding when we're going to put it out. Let me make it absolutely clear: We just concluded round six. We will be resuming – or coming back for round seven sometime in the not-too-distant future, and we wouldn't be doing that if the deal were already done. We still have serious differences that have not been bridged, serious differences with Iran over the host of issues, whether it's the nuclear steps that Iran needs to take to come back into compliance, the sanctions relief that the U.S. will be offering, or the sequence of steps that both sides would be taking. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. And since everything is not agreed, we still don't have anything nailed down. And there's still some very important issues that need to be resolved. By the same token, we wouldn't be going back for a seventh round if we didn't think that a deal was possible. It remains possible. It remains our objective, but we're not there yet, and I'm not going to speculate as to if or when we will get there.

Second point, as to the issue of timing and in particular the impact of the elections (inaudible), first I think we've said already what we thought of the elections and of the new president, the fact that this was a pre-manufactured process that did not reflect the will of the Iranian people. And we also have said what we thought about the background of the president-elect. That said, from our point of view, it does not affect our determination to try to reach a deal or the pace at which we will go about pursuing it. We're not going to second guess any effect that it might have on Iranian decision making, but our goal is to pursue the objective that President Biden laid out both during the campaign and since, which is to try to address – diplomatically by – is our preference – our goal of preventing Iran

from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

And we believe that diplomacy, by returning to the JCPOA, is the best way to achieve that goal, and we'll do it with whoever is in power with Iran precisely because we have serious – very serious – differences with their leadership. And we believe that preventing them from acquiring a nuclear weapon is an important step in then trying to address the other issues that we have with Iran. Because again, as President Biden and the Secretary of State have made clear, we see the return to the JCPOA as a beginning of a diplomatic process, not at the end, because we have many other issues of concern that we need to raise from Iran's (inaudible) groups in the region, to its ballistic missile program, to its many other destabilizing activities.

Finally, I want to say a word about an issue which is as important as anything I've said already, which is the issue of American citizens who are wrongfully detained in Iran. That I still need to raise this, that they're still not home, is a scandal and one that we are fighting every day to address. And for Ahmad, for Siamak, for Baquer, for Morad, this is our priority. We will not rest until they're home and we'll do everything in our power to make sure that that the day comes very, very soon.

So with that, I'm happy to take your questions.

**MODERATOR:** Great. Thank you. Let's please go to the line of Nick Wadhams.

**OPERATOR:** One moment, please. Wait until I announce your line is open before speaking. And Nick, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thanks very much. , understanding that you have differences on sequencing, do you – can you give us a sense for how the oil waivers would fit into this, whether you would grant waivers on day one or hold out to issue waivers until later on, maybe two to three months after the IAEA confirms compliance? And would you be willing to give waivers without an IAEA confirmation of compliance? And then second, can you just comment on the idea that the clock is ticking here because if too much time goes on, Iran will advance so far technologically that the original terms of the JCPOA essentially become moot, and you would have to negotiate an entirely new deal? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So thanks, Nick. So as to the first question, this may apply to a number of questions we're going to get. However much we'd prefer to be negotiating with the press corps than with Iran, it's not what we're going to do, so I'd rather – I won't get into the details of what our position is on various issues, so I'll skip the first question.

The second one about the clock, listen, there's no – it's not like there's a scientific time at which point that threshold that you mentioned will be crossed, but certainly time is not a positive factor. And this process won't be open indefinitely, so we're trying to get back into the deal. We understand Iran is continuing to make progress, which is precisely why we believe withdrawing from the deal was a mistake and why we're faced with this situation. We're going to try to get them back as soon as possible under the terms of the deal. If it's not done quickly and if Iran continues to make progress, of course it's something that we're going to have to consider in terms of the provisions of the deal that we'd be prepared to accept.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to the line of Lara Jakes.

**OPERATOR:** One moment. And Lara, your line is open. Please, go ahead. And Lara, please check your mute button.

**QUESTION:** Yes. I'm sorry. I was, in fact, on mute. Apologies. Thanks. And a minute ago you said that we see the return to the JCPOA as the beginning of the process and not the end. Iran's new

president has very clearly said that he will not consider a longer and stronger deal for reining in the missile's programs and the proxies. So I'm wondering why you think that delta can be resolved. And I'm also wondering if you'd speak a little bit about the IAEA inspections agreement that is, I think, expiring today. I believe there's a tentative agreement for it to be extended again. Is that a reason for optimism?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thanks, Lara. So on the first point, yeah, we've heard what President-Elect Raisi said. Frankly, that's not very different from what other Iranian leaders have been saying for some time. But we've been equally clear, crystal-clear, and President Biden was crystal-clear on this, from the campaign and from his first day in office, which is that we believe that we can – are going to need to discuss other issues after we – assuming we get back into the JCPOA. There are many issues of concern that we have, but also there's issues that Iran wants to address, and they've made that very clear to us, including during this talks, that they – there are some elements that they are asking for, which go beyond the terms of the JCPOA. So our position remains the same, that we see the return to the JCPOA as a beginning of a diplomatic process, and we believe that we're going to need to engage in discussions with Iran, various things to address those other issues. So we'll have to find a way to resolve that difference.

On the IAEA, it's good that you mention it. Obviously we are concerned that at – from the time that I'm speaking – maybe there's been news since – in the last hour or so, but we have not heard that there's been an understanding. If one is reached, that would be positive. Although, we shouldn't be playing – Iran should not be playing brinkmanship each time these agreements get extended. I'd simply say that in the absence of such an understanding, in the absence of the IAEA being able to monitor what Iran is doing, it will be that much more complicated to get back into the JCPOA, because we're going to have to know what the baseline of their nuclear program is. And if the IAEA is blind for a certain amount of time and we don't know what that baseline is, it's going to be much more difficult to find a way back into the deal.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to the line of Jennifer Hansler.

**OPERATOR:** And Jennifer, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, . Thanks so much for doing this. What are you telling the Iranians about guarantees that the U.S. won't quit the deal in four years? How are you assuaging their concerns on that? And on the issue of the hostages, has there been any progress towards their release? Is it still the case that their release is not a precondition for the U.S. re-entering the JCPOA? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thanks. So, I mean, there is no such thing as a guarantee, and I think Iran knows it and we know it. We have no guarantee; they have no guarantee. That's the way the JCPOA is built, that if one side violated, the other side would – its remedy would be to take countermanding steps. But what we do think is that the best guarantee is to get back into the deal and to implement it faithfully, and that's – and we think that there's a – that's the best answer, because there is no such thing as a guarantee.

Secondly, on the question of the detainees, it's the same thing as I said about the deal. Because nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, because we don't have a deal yet, I'm not going to speak about how close we are. Yet, we've made progress. We were engaged in indirect discussions with Iran about their release, but we're not there yet, and until we're there I don't want to give false hopes to the families who've suffered too much already. And as I've said in the past, it is a priority, and we are absolutely insistent that the four American citizens who are wrongfully detained be released.

**MODERATOR:** And let's go the line of Arshad Mohammed.

**OPERATOR:** And Arshad, your line is open. Please, go ahead. And Arshad, please check your mute button.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, and sorry about mute. Two things. One, would you continue the negotiations if Iran fails to extend its agreement with the IAEA? And secondly, you said this process will not be open indefinitely. What happens if you cannot reach an agreement by August 3rd, the date on which the Raisi administration takes office? Is that when the door closes? Or is the door open? It may be indefinite, but it could be open for months or even years? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thanks. And I know that both two good but difficult questions. We still hope that Iran will extend its technical understanding with the IAEA or find – not prolong the understandings that currently exist. As I said, it would be an issue of real concern if they didn't. I'm not going to speculate as to what impact it would have on the talks, but I think it is – we've already indicated clearly to Iran that it would be extremely complicated if they – a complicating factor if they did not find a way to continue the understandings with the IAEA.

On your second question, again, I'm not going to sit here and say there's a deadline. Obviously this will be a decision for the President and his national security team to take. But when we've said – and others have said it – that this process is not going to be open forever, we mean it. We – this is not something that we could go on indefinitely. There's – we've had serious discussions, and I don't – as I've said, we've made progress, and the Iranians have been serious in the talks so far, but we do have differences. And if we can't bridge them in the foreseeable future, I think we're going to have to regroup and figure out how we move ahead.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to the line of Courtney McBride.

**OPERATOR:** And Courtney, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. So assuming – I understand that you are loathe to talk about timelines, but how does the administration hope to get follow-on talks with President-elect Raisi? And how do you – do you acknowledge that he would need to be removed from the sanctions list as part of a broader discussion in hope of a broader agreement with Iran? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So, I mean, I'll repeat what I said about the follow-on talks. I think we couldn't have been clearer about what our position is on that, that we think – we believe that it has to be a part of what – of the process that we're discussing right now, and we're in the middle of discussing the nature of what those talks could be. We know what Iran's position is, but that's why one of their – these are one of many reasons that we are still engaged in the talks and why we haven't concluded them yet.

And I'll also add again that there are issues that Iran feels that need to be addressed which go beyond the four corners of the JCPOA, and the only way to address those is going to be by continuing conversations in some format with us, and so we believe that this is something that's not just a U.S. interest. It happens to also be an Iranian interest, although they'll be a better judge of that.

And on the question of sanctions, I think National Security Advisor Sullivan addressed it the other day. We're not going to get into details of what we might do. We're going to look at what we – what sanctions relief we believe we need to take in order to be back in compliance with the JCPOA, and that's what we're going to be judging in terms of the steps that we'll be prepared to take if – and I emphasize if we're back in a deal.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Let's go to the line of Michel Ghandour.

**OPERATOR:** And Michel, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thank you for doing this. There are calls from the Congress to the administration to take the election of President Raisi as an opportunity for not joining or rejoining the JCPOA. What's your answer to that?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** My answer to that: We're not involved in negotiations because we trust, like, or have anything or share any values in common with our Iranian counterparts. We're doing it precisely because we have very deep concerns, very serious issues. And so the fact that there is now a new president – or there will soon be a new president of Iran does not detract our core national security interest, which is to reach a deal that puts their nuclear program in a box and makes sure that we prevent them from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The identity of the Iranian president doesn't have an impact on that, core national security interests. And I would add, again, as the National Security Advisor said, that we know that the president in the Iranian system is not the sole and not even the chief decision-maker. It's a leadership in which the supreme leader has the ultimate word, and that position, that person has not changed as a result of the Iranian elections.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to the line of Laura Rosen.

**OPERATOR:** And Laura, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. , as I understand, not all the other countries in the P4+1 agree there should be a follow-on deal. Can you speak to that? I mean, I think Russia especially has said they think the JCPOA is sufficient. So does that affect something being in a document with Iran that would call for follow-on talks?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Our position is our position. We've had many conversations with Russia, and I wouldn't characterize —

(Break.)

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** I think somebody's on this call. I think I recognize their voice, but yeah, okay. So I'm saying we know – we had many discussions with our Russian colleagues about this. I'm not going to characterize their position. I think many countries have agreed that they want more diplomacy with Iran to address a range of issues, including regional issues, and Russia has been at the – one of the parties that has put forward ideas for what that diplomacy could look like. So I'm not sure that I would fully agree with how you put it, but there are differences of views, but our position is very clear – is that we're going to need follow-on talks, discussions to strengthen the deal.

And again, we would make the point that this is not only something that we think would help us. We do think that it would help – it would – it should be in Iran's interest because they have issues that they're going to want to bring to the table. Of course, that – as I said, that's going to be – they will have to make that assessment, but our position has been clear from the day we started these talks and very familiar to all the parties who are there, and they know that's America's position.

**MODERATOR:** We have time for just a couple more questions. Let's go to the line of Nadia Bilbassy.

**OPERATOR:** And one moment. Nadia, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much. Thank you, and , for doing this.

, you just said that nothing agreed until all agreed. You have been – it's been six sessions so far and you're entering the seventh. Can you just outline for us what exactly you agreed upon? Is it just a framework, is it technical issues, is it more than that?

And second, I'm sure you have seen the statements coming from the (inaudible) office saying that you're going to lift sanction on the supreme leader. Do you see this as, like, a (inaudible)? Is it a lie from the Iranian? Is it propaganda trying to get you to where they want? How do you see it? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thanks, Nadia. So if I understood your question, I mean, when I say nothing's agreed until everything is agreed, that's precisely what I meant. So there's nothing. It's not like there's a framework or – we are still negotiating every issue, whether it's the scope of sanctions relief, the scope of the steps that Iran will take to come back into compliance with its nuclear obligations, the sequence – all of those are still being discussed, and so we don't have like a provisional deal on anything. We are still working through all the issues, and that includes the issues of sanctions that you mentioned. We will have to see.

And again, I don't want – I'm not going to negotiate in public, but at this point we need to continue negotiating to see whether we could reach a comprehensive package that will be satisfactory, and at this point we're not there yet.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to the line of Farhad Pouladi.

**OPERATOR:** And Farhad, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Do you hear me?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Yes, we hear you.

**OPERATOR:** Yes, we can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Perfect. So my question is in regard to the Israeli Government's comments on the JCPOA, or the JCPOA resurrection talks in Vienna. Prime Minister Netanyahu was staunchly against the deal, but the position has been actually transferred to the new government and they are still against the JCPOA. I covered what comments came out of General Kochavi's visit yesterday and today. And also today, Prime Minister Bennett says that this regime – the one that no one should do business with. How concerned are you that they may take any unilateral action, and what has the Biden administration been doing to persuade them not to do anything to jeopardize the talks? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you, Farhad. That's an important question. I want to start by saying we – under the government of Prime Minister Netanyahu, we were having close consultations. We know – we knew that they have and we know they had a different view about the JCPOA, but we are trying to talk to them to make sure that we were as aligned as possible given our common objective, which is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. We had differences about the JCPOA. We knew that, we recognized it, but we nonetheless were working closely with them.

And the same holds for the government of Prime Minister Bennett. We already had some high-level contacts. I think you all know that Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Lapid will be meeting in Rome on Sunday. I don't know the agenda, but I would be surprised if Iran did not figure in those conversations. And again, we respect that they have a different point of view. I think they respect ours and we are going to try to talk and be as transparent and as coordinated as possible so that the

ultimate goal, which we share, is one that is pursued as effectively as possible. And we expect to have extremely positive and productive discussions with the new Israeli Government and we look forward to as close coordination as possible.

**MODERATOR:** Okay, thanks. Just a couple more questions. Let's go to the line of Halley Toosi.

**OPERATOR:** One moment. And Halley, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks for doing this. A couple questions. When it comes to the follow-on agreements, does the United States want to include human rights as one of the issues that is negotiated along with ballistic missiles and support for terrorism and all that?

Secondly, you said that there are indirect talks on the hostages. Can you tell us a little bit more about those discussions? Like are you talking about a potential prisoner exchange, and is it totally on a separate track from the nuclear discussion? Any information you can give on that.

And also lastly, what is the most surprising thing that's happened in this process for you? What's something you just didn't expect, but that's come up? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thanks. So on the follow-on talks, listen, we know that there are a number of issues that – concerns that we have above and beyond the nuclear issue which is central. There are lots of concerns. Some of them will be negotiated in some formal way, others will be dealt with through other means. So I'm not going to get into the details of what they will cover, but we – all of the issues you mentioned and that I mentioned are issues of real concern to this administration, but the format, the shape that those discussions or other diplomatic tools will take to address them I won't get into. But again, it doesn't mean that we're going to ignore any issue. All of them will be pursued in one fashion or another.

On the detainee issue, they are separate. These are separate conversations that are being held. Obviously, we – we're doing them more intensely when we are in Vienna because we could get communication to a third party more quickly, but they're separate from the nuclear talks and, as I said, they are absolute priority. Regardless of what happens with the JCPOA, we want our detainees, our citizens, wrongfully-held citizens back home as soon as possible.

Out of what's been most surprising, I'm at a loss to say. I mean, it is unusual to have these discussions in an indirect fashion. I've said that many times before. It is ripe for misunderstanding. It's ripe for prolonging the talks. It's not the most effective way to do it. It means that we spend a lot of time in hotel rooms with our European and other colleagues and not with the party that we're supposed to be negotiating with. But by this point, we've gotten used to it, so we'll make do.

**MODERATOR:** And I think we have time for one more question. Let's go to Arshad Mohammed.

**OPERATOR:** And Arshad, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thanks for coming back to me. Just to ask one specific question, do you have any idea now when the seventh round of talks will begin in Vienna?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** No. I mean, we assume that there is obviously consultations going on in Iran given – in Tehran given the election. And when those consultations will have concluded, we will be notified, and then we'll figure out when we meet again. But at this point, I don't have – I don't have any plane reservations.

**MODERATOR:** Okay, I think that's our last question. I just want to quickly thank our senior State



Department official, . Just as a reminder to everyone, this call today is on background, and so you can refer to our briefer as a senior State Department official. With that, this briefing is ended and the embargo is lifted. Have a good day.

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**Subject:** Department Press Briefing – July 14, 2021  
**To:** Good ander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
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## [Department Press Briefing – July 14, 2021](#)

*07/14/2021 07:39 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, DC

2:14 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon.

**QUESTION:** Happy Bastille Day.

**MR PRICE:** Happy Bastille Day. We can always count on you, Matt, to respond to the greeting. Just one element at the top.

The United States is concerned by continued detentions, indictments, and harassment of Egyptian civil society leaders, academics, and journalists, including the indictment of Director General of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), Hossam Bahgat.

Mr. Bahgat is a highly respected advocate for human rights, and EIPR works to strengthen and protect rights in Egypt. The targeting and prosecution of the staff of EIPR and other NGOs, including those charged in Case 173, degrades the rights of all Egyptians to freedom of expression and association, and it threatens the stability and prosperity of Egypt. We have communicated to the Egyptian Government our strong belief that individuals such as Hossam Bahgat should not be targeted for expressing their views peacefully.

As Secretary Blinken said in April, the United States will stand with brave human rights defenders, journalists, and advocates around the world. We believe all people should be allowed to express their political views freely, to assemble and associate peacefully. As a strategic partner, we have raised these concerns with the Egyptian Government, and we will continue to do so going forward.

Matt.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Two extremely brief logistical things before I get into – one, the International Religious Freedom summit was – is yesterday, today, and tomorrow. This is something that the previous administration had made a big deal out of, and I noticed that the Secretary was invited to speak. But he was not – Samantha Power did address it this morning, but the Secretary was invited. It's not on his schedule. Did he decide that this is not something that merits his time?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Matt, the Secretary believes deeply in international religious freedom. You've actually heard him speak on the topic in this very room.

**QUESTION:** I'm talking about the —

**MR PRICE:** So when it comes to logistics of the conference, we'll have more for you on that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And so you're suggesting that he might, in fact, accept the invitation?

**MR PRICE:** We will have more for you on it.

**QUESTION:** All right. And then secondly, there was a call this – or a meeting this morning between Jake Sullivan and the French foreign minister. And I don't expect you to talk about that, but there was also a call that the Secretary had with the Canadian foreign minister today, and the Secretary will be meeting with Foreign Minister Le Drian later today. But in the readouts of both Jake's meeting and the Secretary's call with the Canadian, the word "Haiti" is not mentioned at all. And I am just wondering, did they discuss Haiti, at least from the Secretary's – in the Secretary's call?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, if I recall the readout, it did make a reference to the Western Hemisphere and I think specifically a reference to —

**QUESTION:** It's a big hemisphere.

**MR PRICE:** There is a lot going on in the hemisphere, too. But of course, Haiti is top of mind for the Secretary in this hemisphere. There are other countries as well that are top of mind, Cuba and Venezuela among them, that we talked about here yesterday alone. So I can assure you that issues —

**QUESTION:** So they did talk about Haiti and Cuba?

**MR PRICE:** I can assure you —

**QUESTION:** Not just the Western Hemisphere?

**MR PRICE:** — that issues of —

**QUESTION:** And the Monroe Doctrine and —

**MR PRICE:** — democracy and human rights and working together with our closest allies and partners in the world – and France would certainly qualify as one of our closest allies – that issue did come up.

**QUESTION:** On a more substantive matter, on Iran and this plot that was – came to light yesterday and the fact that you guys are continuing, according to what Rob Malley has said, I guess on the record and TV – I'm just curious as to – this is at least the second time that the Iranian Government has, quote/unquote, been "caught" – these are allegations obviously – trying to commit nefarious acts on U.S. soil while the administration at the time – this one and then the Obama administration – were pursuing negotiations on nuclear negotiations.

And I'm just wondering why are you continuing to do this if this government has shown no inclination that it's willing to stop this kind of malign behavior that you and the previous administration and the administration prior to that and before that too have all called out?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Matt, as you know, we are careful not to weigh in on the specifics of law enforcement investigations and law enforcement matters, but obviously, as you know, the Department of Justice did release quite a detailed charging document yesterday. And let me be very clear: We categorically condemn this reported plot to kidnap a U.S. citizen on U.S. soil. There should be no doubt about where this administration, including the State Department, stands.

We will, as we have, forcefully defend U.S. citizens and U.S. interests, and that includes in the context

of law enforcement actions like the one that the Department of Justice announced yesterday, as well as the actions the President has taken to defend our interests in the region from Iranian-backed militant groups. It also includes – and this is important – our ongoing diplomatic efforts to constrain Iran’s nuclear program.

We’ve made this point before, but it is an urgent concern: Every challenge we face with Iran is made more difficult, made more intractable, when Iran’s nuclear program is uncontrolled, when it is unconstrained. The JCPOA, to be clear, when it was in full effect, was successful in permanently and verifiably preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and that’s why we’re seeking that return to mutual compliance.

As the Justice Department’s actions prove, we will continue to address the other challenges that we have in our relationship with Iran or in the context of the challenges and threats that Iran poses to the region and beyond. As I said before, every single one of those is made more difficult, is more complex for us to confront, when we have the potential threat of an uncontrolled Iranian nuclear program on the horizon.

Let me put that a slightly different way. Constraining Iran’s nuclear program by returning to the JCPOA, by seeing to it once again that Iran’s nuclear program is permanently and verifiably in a box, that will put us in a better position to address all of the other challenges that we have.

The simple fact of the matter – and you referred to the previous administration and the one before that. But ever since the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA, none of the challenges we have with Iran – and again, they are many – have gotten better. And in fact, most of them have gotten worse. That starts with the unconstrained activities in the nuclear program. We’ve talked a great deal about the attacks by these Iran-backed militias. DOJ has spoken to this alleged plot.

So yes, to be clear, we intend to continue our effort to limit Iran’s nuclear program through a mutual return to compliance, just as we continue to go about actively confronting the range of threats we see from Iran, to include those that maybe targeting or in some ways implicating American citizens and American interests. We demonstrated that yesterday. The President has demonstrated it in the past. And this department will continue to demonstrate that through our principled, clear-eyed diplomacy to seek to effect a mutual return to the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** But literally, like less than an hour or less than two hours before the DOJ announced this indictment, you were up there right where you’re standing right now saying that you’re in indirect but active discussions with the Iranians on prisoners while, in fact, someone should have known in this building that DOJ was about to unveil, unseal an indictment saying that the Iranians were plotting to do the same thing again.

**MR PRICE:** So is the implication that we should —

**QUESTION:** No. The – there’s no implication. I’m just, I mean, this part of it, quite apart from the nuclear issue, is continuing and getting worse, and yet there doesn’t seem to be any impact – it doesn’t seem to have any impact —

**MR PRICE:** No, well, in —

**QUESTION:** — or make any – or make any difference —

**MR PRICE:** In some ways you’re not wrong, and I think we’re making the same point that many of the challenges we face with Iran have become more pointed, more complex, more intractable since the previous administration left the nuclear deal. But if the implication is that because we face a range of

threats from Iran, that we shouldn't seek to effect the return of Americans who are unjustly held overseas or that we shouldn't seek to verifiably and permanently prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, that's not a logic that this administration buys into at least.

**QUESTION:** No, I'm not implying anything of the sort. But I'm just asking you how it makes sense, because if you look at it from the outside it seems a bit ridiculous that you guys are talking, continuing to talk to them, apart from the nuclear issue, about prisoners when they're plotting to kidnap – they're plotting to take more.

**MR PRICE:** This – Matt, you've heard this any number of occasions, but we don't negotiate with our closest friends. We negotiate to solve the most difficult challenges we face and Iran's nuclear program is certainly one of them.

**QUESTION:** The last one – last one on —

**QUESTION:** Stay on Iran?

**QUESTION:** The – yeah, it's on this. You said that it's gotten worse, the situation has gotten worse since the previous administration pulled out. And yet, since this administration took office, while it's been getting worse and while the Iranian violations of the JCPOA are becoming more profound, you guys have not imposed any additional penalties on Iran. In fact, you've removed some, and I'm not talking about yesterday and the money the South Korean – I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about Treasury removing specific people that you called good sanctions hygiene – remember – so in fact, the amount of pressure that this administration is putting on is less than what it was before. How does that – how do you square that?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I think you are overlooking some of the activity that we have taken, including taken action against Iran with sanctions for some of the egregious human rights abuses that we've seen in Iran. In the course of this administration, we have enacted additional sanctions on Iran for human rights abuses. Of course, recently we sanctioned a network of Qods Force operatives who were funding the Houthis in Yemen. We have continued to pursue through sanctions and other tools Iran's proxies in the region, militant groups. So —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but none of those are nuclear-related, and what you're talking about and what you just —

**MR PRICE:** Oh, I'm sorry. I —

**QUESTION:** What you just acknowledged at the top is that it's gotten worse.

**MR PRICE:** Oh, I'm sorry. I thought – I thought you were talking about – no, we are in – ~~we~~ we are in complete agreement that ever since the United States left the nuclear deal that – the JCPOA, that the challenge posed by Iran's nuclear program has grown more pronounced.

**QUESTION:** Right. Okay.

**MR PRICE:** Iran has continued to distance itself —

**QUESTION:** So what have you – and what have you done about it?

**MR PRICE:** I'll tell you what we've done about it. We have engaged now in six rounds of principled, clear-eyed negotiations, indirect, in an effort to return to a state where Iran is permanently and verifiably prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon. We continue to believe, and successive

administrations had believed, that through diplomacy – diplomacy presents the best means to control verifiably and permanently Iran’s nuclear program. We still —

**QUESTION:** Okay, but having six rounds of talks is not actually doing anything other than talking. So is that – that’s your response to Iran’s increasingly – increasing violations of its own commitments to the JCPOA? The administration thinks that going to Vienna and talking with them is —

**MR PRICE:** We continue to think —

**QUESTION:** — is the – is the appropriate response?

**MR PRICE:** We continue to think that the best outcome —

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** — would be an Iran that is verifiably and permanently barred from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon. That’s correct.

Nick. Yep.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on that question? Does there come to be a point at which the administration decides that Iran’s behavior or malign behavior or this attempted kidnapping, whatever it may be, in other areas are so egregious that it means you can no longer negotiate in good faith with them in Vienna on the nuclear issue?

**MR PRICE:** Well, there are two separate issues here, and one of which we’ve spoken to in recent days. As I’ve made very clear, the United States is prepared to resume indirect talks with Iran, to resume that seventh round of negotiations. We are ready to go if and when the Iranians signal they are as well. And that’s precisely because we want to see Iran’s nuclear program once again verifiably and permanently constrained and Iran permanently barred from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Now, on the question of – on that front, this process is not indefinite, as the Secretary has said, as you’ve heard me reiterate. There will come a point where our calculus will change, where the gains that Iran is able to make in its nuclear program, the benefits it accrues might one day outweigh the benefit that the international community would accrue from a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. We’re not there yet, but that is why we believe we should – the international community, the United States together with our closest allies and some of our partners in the form of the P5+1, should return to Vienna for these talks just as soon as we can.

Now, there’s a broader issue that you raise that suggests that because Iran is engaging in this behavior in other realms, does that implicate our view of nuclear negotiations. Our view continues to be that every single challenge that Iran poses in the non-nuclear realm is made more difficult when Iran’s nuclear program is unconstrained, when it is potentially uncontrolled. So to us, if we are able to control and see Iran’s nuclear program once again permanently and verifiably constrained, that will enable us to better in some cases diplomatically take on, in other cases confront in other ways, the challenges that – the broader set of challenges that Iran poses. It may not be a coincidence that, as I said before to Matt, the challenges that Iran has posed to us in the non-nuclear realm have not gotten better since the United States left the JCPOA. In fact, in most cases, they’ve gotten far worse.

Yes. Will.

**QUESTION:** Just staying on this, on the plot, the four that – the four Iranian officials that were indicted are never likely to see the inside of a U.S. courtroom. So I know you’ll say that that’s a law

enforcement matter, but what more is the administration willing to do to respond to the Iranian Government because of this plot, for this plot?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you saw DOJ make light of this. You have seen them unveil these charges. You've also seen this administration make very clear that we will always take action when it's in our interests and when it's appropriate to do so. We have used the tools available to us, from sanctions to, in a couple cases, military force. So again, we don't preview any steps that we may take, but we do have a pretty expansive toolkit and we have made no secret of the fact that we're prepared to use it.

**QUESTION:** This administration launched a policy specifically for this kind of activity. The Khashoggi Ban is for —

**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** — counter-dissident, extraterritorial – why wouldn't this warrant sanctions, then?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not ruling anything in, I'm not ruling anything out, but you're exactly right that we do have a number of tools at our disposal, including the Khashoggi Ban. We have just announced the Khashoggi Ban in February, I believe it was. It's already been used in – applied in dozens of cases. But we are always reviewing cases that may implicate the Khashoggi Ban and may be appropriate to use it.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Are we done with the Iran portion?

**MR PRICE:** Anything else on Iran? Yeah. Sure, please.

**QUESTION:** One real quick on Iran. The president today – Rouhani – more or less acknowledged that negotiations will go to his successor, that they won't be able to finalize a deal on the JCPOA in the next few weeks. Is that the U.S. assessment as well?

**MR PRICE:** These questions are best addressed towards Iran. As we've made very clear, we are prepared to return to Vienna for a seventh round of talks. We understand that the Iranians are still undergoing consultations. As we've always said, Iran will have to make tough political decisions, including the strategic decision of whether it's willing to entertain a mutual return to compliance. Only Iran can tell us that. I understand Rouhani also said that the collective approach to negotiations has been serious and businesslike. We wouldn't take issue with that, but again, if and when there's a seventh round – and we certainly hope there is one – that is a question that is best addressed to Tehran.

**QUESTION:** Could I just follow up on your remarks at the beginning?

**MR PRICE:** Was this Iran? No, one more question on Iran. Yeah.

**QUESTION:** I just – thank you, I just had one more quick follow-up on your exchange with Matt about the kidnapping plot specifically. Do you think that this is a matter – there was – you made a comment about how we don't negotiate with our friends as a rule. Is this a – is this kidnapping issue a matter where you think some kind of negotiation needs to take place to put the Iranian habit of – penchant for kidnapping in a box? Or is that something where more punitive action would have to take place to change their calculus on that file?

**MR PRICE:** As we've said, we're engaged in indirect discussions with the Iranians on an urgent basis

to try to secure the release of the Americans who are unjustly and outrageously held against their will in Tehran. But look, we don't think, as – taking a step back, that this is something as a broader issue or tactic that we should be negotiating over. This is a practice that is abhorrent. It is a practice that the United States, together with many of our closest allies, have condemned in the strongest possible terms.

The Canadians, our Canadian partners – our friends and neighbors – have put together an effective campaign to put attention on the practice of some nation-states for hostage taking, kidnapping, abductions, whatever you want to call it for political leverage. We are working concertedly with the international community to do all we can to see to it that this is a practice that is relegated to the dustbin of history and that doesn't continue to occur. The fact that Iran has done this is something that is deeply abhorrent and outrageous, and as we work on the broader challenge, we are working on what we hope is the nearer-term challenge of seeking to effect the return, the release of these Americans who are unjustly detained in Iran.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on your comments at the beginning on Egypt? You voiced the concern about detentions of civil society leaders. What effect will that have on U.S. policy? It's been widely reported the administration is considering further arms sales to Egypt. Are those – do you see a linkage with that? Is that – are those in jeopardy if there isn't action on human rights?

**MR PRICE:** Well, human rights is an issue that we have consistently and very clearly raised repeatedly with our Egyptian partners. In his first phone call with Egyptian President Sisi, President Biden raised the issue of human rights. As you know, Secretary Blinken has spoken with his Egyptian counterpart on a number of occasions; human rights have featured in those discussions. Secretary Blinken met with President Sisi in Cairo; human rights were on the agenda in that discussion as well. The United States signed on to a statement at HRC 46 calling for Egypt to improve its human rights record. And President Biden even before he assumed office was very clear as a candidate that even when it comes to our closest security partners, we wouldn't overlook human rights in the name of security, stability, any other interests that we might have. Our values and our interests are both of tremendous importance to us, and this administration is not prepared to sacrifice one for the other.

So, of course, I'm not going to get ahead of where we are in terms of any bilateral relationship or any funding or assistance announcements, but human rights across the board is something we look at very closely in making those decisions.

**QUESTION:** Sure. Could I switch to Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** Anything? Sure, Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** The operation that's been announced today – I realize it's probably more of a Pentagon issue in terms of logistics. But first of all, in terms of Ambassador Khalilzad, he said in May when he was testifying on the Hill that – he didn't oppose this, but he said one of the – one of the – I'm paraphrasing him – says one of the concerns was that this would set off potentially a panic, that people will be flooding out, et cetera. What has changed since then? Is there a sense that the situation has deteriorated to the point that this became necessary? Why – is there a concern that this will affect the stability of Afghanistan in terms of people coming out?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think what you heard today from the White House is reflective of the priority that the entire administration places on fulfilling what we've called a special responsibility. It's a special responsibility that we have and that we owe to the many brave Afghans who, oftentimes at great personal risk and sometimes at great risk to their families, have assisted the United States in different



ways over the course of some two decades.

So in announcing some of the details behind Operation Allies Refuge, today you heard from the White House how we are organized to tackle this effort, and it is something that the State Department has long been working urgently on, and the SIV program, of course, well predates the President's announcement of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan. In recent months, the State Department – and we've talked about this in recent days – has added additional resources to that effort, again, to move as urgently as we can to process as many of those who are eligible for this program as we can.

Even when we announced a change in staffing at our embassy in Kabul earlier this year, we made the point that we would be in a position to send additional individuals to help with the SIV processing, and that's precisely what we did. And even in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in Kabul that affected our post there, in-person interviews were suspended for a time, as we said, but the processing continued. And I can say that because of those increased resources, we managed to increase the pace of that processing over time.

As you may know, we issue quarterly reports that detail our ability to process SIV applicants. And just to give you a snapshot of that, the embassy in Kabul issued 299 special immigrant visas in March, 299. Three hundred and fifty-six were issued in April, and 619 in May, the most recent month for which data is available. And now I know relationships are not always causal, but in this case we are confident that it is. We are confident that the additional resources that we have put towards this issue has resulted in the increased pace of this processing. We will continue to do all we can consistent with this program that is enshrined in legislation and that involves more than a dozen steps to continue to accelerate the processing time. And as you heard, the White House again today reiterated that flights from Afghanistan will begin later this month for a group of these SIV applicants if they so choose to be relocated outside of Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** And just briefly, the – do you have numbers on how many people will be potentially affected by this, how many people will be taken out, and on where they would be temporarily living, housed, until – as their applications are being processed?

**MR PRICE:** So as we've said, we have identified a group of SIV applicants who have served in any number of roles – translators, interpreters, as well as other individuals who have assisted us who may be at some risk. These are individuals who at the moment have the option to be relocated outside of Afghanistan before we complete that military drawdown in order to complete their special immigrant visa processing. Importantly, these are individuals who are already in that SIV processing pipeline. You've heard us say that our top priority in all of this is the safety and security of these SIV applicants. They have already – in many cases at great risk to themselves – assisted the United States over the years. And so we don't want to do anything that might potentially jeopardize their safety and security going forward. And so there are going to be some details that we may not be able to provide.

And so right now we don't have anything to offer in terms of the size of that group, areas to where they may be relocated, but it is safe to say that we are planning for a range of contingencies. We are moving as swiftly as we can in the processing, and you heard from the White House again today that those flights will begin later this month.

Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you a kind of logistical question? That quarterly report that you were referencing, my understanding was that that was months late giving it to Congress. So when is the last time that you provided that report to Congress, and when can we expect the next report?

**MR PRICE:** These – the numbers that I cited are available online. So they're available publicly. When

the next report may come out, we'll see if we can get that information for you.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then just following up on CNN's reporting and video of the Taliban fighters executing 22 unarmed Afghan commandos as they tried to surrender – what is your response to that, and has the State Department directly been in contact with the Taliban about this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the video – which I should say we don't have any reason to doubt – depicts horrifying scenes. The killing – in this case, the slaughter – of unarmed individuals is – it's an atrocious act, it's an outrageous sight, and of course we condemn it. We have been very clear about this, that we continue to believe the Islamic Republic – that is to say, the Afghan Government continues to believe that diplomacy is the only durable and just way to reach a political settlement here. I won't speak for the Taliban, but they continue to engage in that diplomacy in Doha. The Islamic Republic, the Afghan Government is sending a senior delegation to Doha. The special envoy and his team are engaged, supporting these intra-Afghan discussions in Doha. We continue to believe – and the international community continues to believe, including, if you look at recent statements from some of our closest allies, but also from countries with whom we share little else – that this diplomatic path is the most effective, and certainly the best path to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, to afford and offer the Afghan people what has eluded them over the course of not only the past 20 years, since 9/11, but really the past 40 with the violence they've endured in their own country.

**QUESTION:** And can I just follow up? Last week you said, however, that you – it's the United States position that the Taliban, their efforts to engage in Doha demonstrate that they understand that diplomacy is the path forward here to gaining legitimacy. Do you still believe that, and are you on the same page as the Pentagon who has said some different things about the intentions of the Taliban?

**MR PRICE:** Well, on your second question, I don't believe we said – we have said different things at all. What I said the other day is that, quote, "The Taliban too understands that only through diplomacy can they garner any sort of legitimacy." My Pentagon colleague certainly didn't say anything different from that. And it is the opinion of this government, it is the opinion of the international community that any government – the international community broadly I should say – that any government that comes to power through the barrel of a gun, that comes to power through force in Afghanistan, any government that doesn't respect fundamental and universal rights is not one that will have legitimacy in the eyes of the broad international community. It is not one that will have the support of the Afghan people.

And now I've heard quite a few of you ask, "Well, so what?" Well, it's very important because any government, future government of Afghanistan that wants durability will have to be one that governs justly, and what we seek is a just and durable outcome. And only through diplomacy, only through the Afghan people having a say will any future government be able to accrue that legitimacy, will be able to accrue assistance from the international community, which has been vital – indispensable, I would say, to the Afghan Government. And that's why only through that process will any future government be able to achieve that durability.

**QUESTION:** Let me ask again, "So what," that same question, because I've been harping on this for days now and I just – what does it say? How do you square your idea that they might care about international legitimacy with the idea, one, of what Kylie asked about, slaughter of these commandos who were trying to surrender, the fact that the Indians have closed their consulate in Kandahar, the French are organizing – are basically telling all French citizens to get the hell out and organizing a evacuation flight, and you are sending these visa seekers to other places because, precisely because you know that it's not safe for them and your allies know it's not safe for their people. So I just don't understand how you can get up here with a straight face and try and say, oh, well, it's all going to be okay because the Taliban want international legitimacy, when there's no indication even within this

government you don't really believe that.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, to be clear, it's a tremendously challenging set of circumstances, but a couple points, and this is important, President Biden has emphasized this ever since he announced the military withdrawal, the United States is not abandoning Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, you are. You basically said – he said, as it had been for ages and ages, for 20 years it was a condition – it was supposed to be conditions-based withdrawal. The White House got up and said when he made the announcement that it no longer —

**MR PRICE:** I – I would – I will have to —

**QUESTION:** — the conditions-based – it no longer mattered what the conditions —

**MR PRICE:** — stop you right there.

**QUESTION:** — were and that you guys were going.

**MR PRICE:** I will have to stop you right there because —

**QUESTION:** Is that not correct?

**MR PRICE:** That is not correct. That —

**QUESTION:** Did Jake Sullivan not say that the President had decided that it would – that the withdrawal did not have to be conditions-based and would not be – and that it didn't matter what happened afterwards?

**MR PRICE:** Matt. Matt, as you know the previous administration signed an agreement with the Taliban. That – well, am I wrong? So that —

**QUESTION:** Well, I'm sorry, who is doing the withdrawal right now? It's not the previous administration.

**MR PRICE:** That – that agreement – that agreement dictated that should our military personnel remain in Afghanistan past May 1st of this year, the status quo would have been eradicated. Our forces, American servicemembers, would have starting – could have starting that very day come under dire threat from a Taliban that would once again start targeting Americans. This President, this administration has no higher priority than the safety, the well-being of Americans around the world, and that certainly includes our service members. So the idea that we could have ignored an agreement that the previous administration arrived at, even if, as the President said, it may not have been the agreement that this administration would have made, it would have had dire implications for American service members. So the idea that the status quo could have endured until now, that's just wrong.

Again, we intend to maintain a partnership with the Afghan Government, with the people of Afghanistan. It's certainly our intent to maintain a diplomatic presence so we can carry out that partnership. And beyond that, we will remain focused, just as this administration has since the earliest days, on the diplomatic process that currently is ongoing in Doha right now.

**QUESTION:** Ned.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** I have two questions, one on DAS Hady's meetings, if you have any readout for his

meetings in Israel and Palestinian territories. And can you confirm the reports that the U.S. consulate will be reopened in September in Jerusalem?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to confirm any reports of that nature at the moment. When it comes to Deputy Assistant Secretary Amr, as you know, he's in the region. He's meeting with Israeli officials, with officials from the Palestinian Authority, but he is also meeting with elements of civil society.

And as we talked about the other day, it's that element of his engagements that is also quite important to him, it's quite important to us, making clear that the United States is engaging broadly with our Israeli partners. And we are re-engaging and building back that partnership with the Palestinian people, again, knowing that at the end of the day, our policy is one that seeks to achieve equal measures of safety, of security, of prosperity, and, importantly, of dignity for Israelis and Palestinians alike. If we have a fuller readout of DAS Amr's trip, we'll be sure to provide it.

**QUESTION:** One more on Lebanon. Will Lebanon be a topic of discussion between Secretary Blinken and his French counterpart this afternoon? And does the U.S. support the EU sanctions on Lebanese political leaders?

**MR PRICE:** I have every expectation that Lebanon will, in fact, be a topic of conversation between Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Le Drian later today at the French embassy. As you know, earlier this month, the – or late last month in Matera, the Secretary had an opportunity to meet with Foreign Minister Le Drian and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan to discuss this subsequent to that. Our ambassador to Lebanon, Ambassador Shea, French Ambassador Anne Grillo, they met with the Saudi Ambassador Walid Bukhari in Beirut for diplomatic consultations as part of and a follow-on to that trilateral engagement on the dire economic situation currently in place in Lebanon, and to discuss how together we can most effectively support the needs of the Lebanese people.

**QUESTION:** And on the sanctions, EU sanctions on political leaders?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have anything for you there.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Quickly back on Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Who will care for the Afghans once they are removed from Afghanistan? Will it be State or DHS? And how many flights will this involve? How much will this operation cost?

And then it appears that many of the Taliban's fighters have been allowed by Pakistan to cross into Afghanistan to join the fighting. Pakistan reportedly also is allowing Taliban fighters to be treated in Pakistani hospitals. It also continues to provide sanctuary for the Taliban's political and military committees and leaders. Is this acceptable to the United States? While Pakistan has facilitated the peace process, does the U.S. believe it continues to provide any form of military support for the Taliban offensives?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have said before that this conflict is not one that the United States alone either can or should solve. This is a conflict that the international community needs to be engaged on. For many years, the international community – some corners of it, at least – were content to let the United States and our NATO allies take the burden in Afghanistan. Now, however, is the time for the international community to show support for the people of Afghanistan, to be constructively engaged in the diplomatic process. When it comes to Pakistan, we know that Pakistan has much to gain from an

Afghanistan that is peaceful, that is stable, that's secure. And Pakistan has the potential to have a critical role in enabling that outcome. We do appreciate Pakistan's efforts to advance the peace process and stability in South Asia, including by encouraging, as Pakistan has done, the Taliban to engage in substantive negotiations.

When it comes to various details of the SIV applicants, where they will go as they await their processing, who will care for them, we don't have any further details for you at the moment. Again, some of those details may be ones that we won't be in a position to share given operational security concerns.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thanks so much. Jahanzaib Ali from ARY News TV, Pakistan. Sir, I hope you have seen some recent interviews of Prime Minister Imran Khan and his articles in American media. He said that Pakistan will not allow any American base in Pakistan to carry out counterterrorism operations. So I just wanted to request you to clarify: Has the United States asked Pakistan to provide any military base?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, the United States and Pakistan share any number of interests. We have interests in the realm of counterterrorism; we have interests in the region. And those regional interests certainly include an Afghanistan that is stable, that is peaceful, that is secure. We have worked very closely with Pakistan over the course of many years in pursuit of some of those mutual interests, and I think I would leave it at that.

**QUESTION:** Just a couple of days ago you said that legitimacy and assistance for any Afghan government can only be possible if that government has the consent of the Afghan people. So we all know that Taliban has no democratic system; they just hand-pick their leaders. There is no voting; there is nothing. So is the world ready to accept any hard-core, nondemocratic Islamic state in that part of the world now?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I will tell you what the world is not ready to accept, and it is not ready to accept a government that comes to power only by force, that has no respect for the human rights of the Afghan people, for the universal rights of the Afghan people. And this gets back to the point before. That is not a government that will have legitimacy in the eyes of much of the international community, and importantly, it's not a government that I would suspect will have the assistance of the international community. And any government that has a concern for its own durability would obviously do well to keep that in mind.

**QUESTION:** Ned, is anyone from State going to this conference in Uzbekistan, other than Zal?

**MR PRICE:** Special Envoy Khalilzad —

**QUESTION:** Khalilzad.

**MR PRICE:** — is there. They're traveling there tomorrow, I believe.

**QUESTION:** Right, but is anyone — are you aware of anyone else going? And is there any — I mean, this is obviously focused on one issue, but clearly the Afghanistan withdrawal looms large, in the background. Is there a concern here within the administration or in this building — which I guess would be the same thing — that the Central Asian nations might not be so receptive to U.S. entreaties or appeals for help in stabilizing Afghanistan given the fact that you are leaving? I stopped myself from saying "cutting and running." So since you're withdrawing, is there a concern? And — but also, I — a logistical point on anyone other than Zal going?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Special Envoy Khalilzad is our senior —

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** — department official responsible for certainly diplomacy towards what we seek in Afghanistan. So he will be there with, as the NSC announced, Liz Sherwood-Randall. Together they will represent the United States in a conference hosted by the Government of Uzbekistan. It will discuss a number of issues, but include — that includes regional cooperation and regional connectivity.

As you know, the Secretary has had an occasion now to meet both in person with some of our Central Asian partners and virtually with the C5. It is — these are countries, again, with whom we share any number of interests. We have sought to engage them to deepen that cooperation, and importantly, to deepen that regional connectivity that is so important to many of our shared mutual interests.

**QUESTION:** But is there a concern that they might not be so receptive now —

**MR PRICE:** These —

**QUESTION:** — now that you're pulling out?

**MR PRICE:** These are countries that will make sovereign decisions about what and how — about their level of cooperation with the United States, what they are prepared to do vis-a-vis support for a stable and secure and peaceful Afghanistan. I think what I said before applies across the board, that the international community has a constructive role to play to support that goal. It's not only in our interests, and in fact, it is much more — it is certainly in the immediate interests of Afghanistan's neighbors that Afghanistan see a future that one day is stable, peaceful, and secure.

Conor. Sorry, let me — I've — let me come back to — yeah. Sorry.

**QUESTION:** Cuba and Haiti?

**MR PRICE:** Yep, yep.

**QUESTION:** The Department of Homeland Security's Secretary said today that Haitians and Cubans fleeing political violence and arriving on U.S. shores will not be permitted to enter the United States and instead will be sent to a third country. Given the State Department is responsible for third-country referrals, are you in discussions with third countries? Has a third country agreed to take in Haitians and Cubans who are seeking refuge in that instance?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what Secretary Mayorkas was illustrating yesterday was our sincere concern with the reality, and that is that anyone who takes to the seas to seek refuge in the United States, be it from Cuba or from Haiti, would put their life at own risk — at their own risk and would not gain entry to the United States. This is a journey that is dangerous and not one that would allow them to secure entry. That was really the humanitarian concern that Secretary Mayorkas was voicing yesterday. I don't have anything for you on third countries. Obviously, we work very closely with DHS when it comes to issues of asylum, but I wouldn't want to comment beyond that.

**QUESTION:** Can I have one more on Haiti? You said, I believe, the other day — it might have been yesterday — that you were waiting for consular access to all three Americans who'd been arrested in Haiti. Have you since had consular access to all three Americans?

**MR PRICE:** We have continued to have consular access to detained Americans. I confirmed the other day that we're aware of three Americans who have been detained as part of the investigation. I'm not

able to provide additional details given privacy considerations.

**QUESTION:** Follow-up on Cuba?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) This gets to what you were discussing yesterday, but reportedly Cuba, the internet restrictions have been eased slightly. But there – the Cuban foreign minister yesterday accused the United States of orchestrating the protests again through Twitter campaigns, through social media campaigns. Do you have any further comment on the situation there with the internet, and also about the detention of a journalists for the Spanish newspaper *ABC*, *ABC*?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to the detention of Camila Acosta of *ABC*, we know that the world is watching as Cuban authorities arrest and beat dozens of their own citizens, and that includes journalists and independent voices. We know that many remain missing. We join their families, Cuban human rights defenders, and people around the world in calling for the immediate release of those detained or missing for merely demanding freedom by exercising what is a universal right to free assembly and free expression. Violence and detentions of Cuban protesters and disappearances of independent activists remind us, constantly remind us that many Cubans pay very dearly for exercising rights that should be universal. And universal means everywhere around the world and anyone.

When it comes to the internet shutdowns, we spoke about this yesterday indeed, but we do condemn the use of partial or complete government-imposed internet shutdowns. We call on Cuba's leaders to demonstrate restraint and urge respect for the voice of the people by opening all means of communication, both online and offline. The abuse of journalists, of independent voices, the attempted suppression, including through technological means, of the voice of the Cuban people, this is not something that could ever silence or quell the legitimate aspirations of the Cuban people for freedom, for human rights, for what their own government has denied to them for far too long.

Let me – everyone – yes, I don't think I've called on you.

**QUESTION:** This is going back again to Afghanistan. What kind of role do you anticipate China to play, especially now after the withdrawal? Are you worried about – at all about what China might do after the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** Well, our relationship with China, as we say, is multifaceted. It is in some areas adversarial. It is in many, if not most, areas competitive. It is in some areas – there are some areas in which our interests align and where there is the potential for cooperation. We've talked about that in the context of climate, of course; in the context of Iran's nuclear program, China – the – China being a member of the P5+1.

But there is the potential for constructive engagement on Afghanistan, and this goes back to the prior point, that an Afghanistan that is more secure, that's more stable, that is peaceful – that is not only in the interests of the United States of America. It is certainly in the interests of Afghanistan's neighbors. It is in the interests of the broader international community as well. So we look to China, as we do other regional countries, to play a role that is constructive and that helps bring about that outcome that is in our collective interests.

**QUESTION:** Follow-up on that. So are you saying that you're not worried at all about China working exclusively with Taliban? Not – you're not necessarily worried about other countries or governments in that area trying to basically further destabilize that area or that region?

**MR PRICE:** I'm saying that China – as do other countries, but China being, of course, an important

country in the region – has the potential to be a constructive force when it comes to the cause of an Afghanistan that is more secure, that is more stable, that ultimately is peaceful. This has the potential to be one of those areas because it is an area where our interests do align, where the United States and the PRC can find some area of agreement and can work together constructively. The ability to do that would certainly be not only in our national interest but also the collective interest as well.

Conor.

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask you one question on passports? I know we had the briefing this morning, but the State Department says that over 150 staffers are returning to the office this summer. But given the interest in travel – the rise in vaccination rates, the reopenings around the world – why wasn't the State Department more prepared to deal with this rush of passport applications?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Conor, we are weighing our important mission sets and also the safety, health, security of our personnel. And the department is still, in Washington here, we are still subject to occupancy restrictions owing to the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic. We have been able both here at main State and around the world to gradually resume operations, some operations that had been slowed over the course of the pandemic, and we certainly expect to be able to do more of that as conditions here in this country continue to improve. And it's certainly our hope that we'll be able to do more of that in our overseas installations as well.

**QUESTION:** What's your message to Americans, then, whose passports are expired and had anticipated traveling this summer or even in the fall, given the fact that they wouldn't be able to have their passport renewed?

**MR PRICE:** Well, our message is that —

**QUESTION:** Sorry.

**MR PRICE:** Our – do you want to come up here?

**QUESTION:** I don't envy you.

**MR PRICE:** Our message, Conor, is that we are working just as expeditiously as we possibly can, knowing that the traveling public has legitimate interests in travel. We are gratified to see travel become possible once again given that the pandemic is easing, certainly in this country and in other countries – some other countries around the world. We will continue to contribute resources to this very important mission set.

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask one follow-up on Europe travel? Do you have any indication of when the travel restrictions against the Schengen Area might be lifted? And can you also just give a little of the logic behind why the Schengen Area continues to be listed on the travel ban but other countries with higher infection rates – Indonesia, Colombia, Mexico, parts of Africa, Eastern Europe, Russia – are not on the banned list?

**MR PRICE:** The various travel restrictions will be lifted as soon as we safely and responsibly can. The broader point here is that this is not a political decision. These are decisions that are informed by public health, that informed by the science, that are going to be and at the moment are being weighed by our public health professionals, including at the CDC. So as soon as those who are expert in the field determine that it is safe to repeal the various travel restrictions, I assure you there will be no delay in doing so. We understand the importance to the traveling public, to trade, to our relations and people-to-people ties with some of our closest allies and partners around the world.



Quick final question, (Inaudible.).

**QUESTION:** On security assistance to Haiti, is the U.S. still considering sending – sorry, considering the request to send troops to protect key infrastructure? If so, what size of force, how many soldiers is being analyzed? Are there discussions about a UN-led or multilateral force? And if so, what countries are you talking to about this with?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we continue to evaluate the Haitians' – the Haitian Government's request for assistance to determine how best the United States can address them. After close consultations, including in the context of the interagency delegation that was in Port-au-Prince on Sunday, we believe our focus should be assisting the Haitian Government with navigating the investigation into the assassination of President Moïse, determining who is culpable, supporting the Haitian Government as it seeks justice in this case. Of course, the situation on the ground is evolving rapidly, and we continue to be in close contact with our Haitian partners about how we can best assist.

I should also add that the Department of Justice, together with the Department of Homeland Security, is providing assistance to Haitian authorities. The Department of Justice will continue to support Haitian authorities in their review of the facts and the circumstances surrounding this attack. We are also taking a close look at the Haitian Government's needs in the context of critical infrastructure and how the United States might be able to assist the Haitian Government in protecting that critical infrastructure.

Just a moment to spend on the State Department. In response to a request from the Haitian Government and building on longstanding cooperation, the Department of State is deploying an advisor to the Haitian National Police Judicial Police and bringing on board an advisor to the Haitian National Police Inspector General. The advisor to the Haitian National Police Judicial Police will provide technical assistance to build the capacity of the Haitian National Police to investigate and to address serious crimes. The advisor to the police's inspector general will help the HNP improve its capacity to address allegations of corruption, of human rights abuses, police misconduct.

We also currently support seven subject matter experts who advise the Haitian National Police on topics such as counternarcotics and community policing as well. We are also supporting training and procuring vehicles, radios, protective equipment to build the capacity of the Haitian National Police to protect Haitians from violence.

And then finally, in addition to the State Department support I just mentioned, as I alluded to before, DHS is sending experts from the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, or CISA, to work with their Haitian counterparts in improving aviation and, as I mentioned before, critical infrastructure security as well.

Joel, quick final question.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, just – if I can, just one follow-up on Cuba, your comments about the internet, matter of internet access there. Senator Rubio has called for the U.S. to use satellite-based technology to provide internet access to overcome Cuban Government efforts to cut that. Is that something that the administration is considering?

**MR PRICE:** We are considering any number of ways and we have considered any number of ways to support the Cuban people – that is, to support them, their humanitarian needs; it is to support them in their broader efforts to secure greater degrees of liberty and freedom and human rights. But I don't have anything specific to offer at this time.

Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:17 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – July 21, 2021](#)

*07/21/2021 06:30 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

1:05 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. A couple things at the top.

We join Norwegians and others around the world in remembering the horrific July 22nd, 2011 attacks in Utoya and Oslo. On that day, Norway experienced its deadliest attack since World War II. And since then, our thoughts and prayers have been with the victims, as well as with their family, their friends, and the first responders as well.

These types of attacks remind us of the threat we all face from violent extremism and terrorism. The entire international community has a stake in preventing this kind of violent extremism and terror going forward.

Next, the department released the 2021 Investment Climate Statements. These reports analyze the business climates of more than 170 countries and economies that are current or potential markets for American companies. U.S. businesses can use the Investment Climate Statements to inform their international investment decisions in any one of the covered economies. The Investment Climate Statements are, also, points of reference for foreign governments. looking to improve their business climates and attract U.S. investment.

The reports include information on barriers to investment U.S. companies are likely to encounter. They also highlight progress made on reducing these barriers and creating a fair, open, transparent market that's attractive to foreign direct investors.

The Department of State works with our foreign government partners to build business environments that are not only economically sound, but also adhere to high standards such as protecting the environment and respecting human rights.

The Investment Climate Statements are one of the many ways in which the department connects our foreign policy work to the needs and the aspirations of the American people and U.S. companies as well.

With that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Really? That's it?

**MR PRICE:** That is it.

**QUESTION:** You have nothing else to say? Okay. All right, well, I was going to start with Sesame Street and —

**MR PRICE:** Grover asked some hard-hitting questions.

**QUESTION:** My daughter – yes, exactly. My daughter —

**MR PRICE:** You might want to take a cue.

**QUESTION:** My four-year-old daughter is an enormous fan, and I'm sure she'll love to see it. But I won't start with that, because there are other, more pressing matters.

**MR PRICE:** I would welcome it.

**QUESTION:** I'm sure you would. Toria, up on the Hill, just a while ago said that you guys have reached an agreement with the Germans on Nord Stream 2, and so I'm wondering if you – recognizing their – that this joint statement that she talked about hasn't come out, yet/ I'm just wondering if there's any more you can add to what she said ahead of the release of that statement.

**MR PRICE:** There is not more that I'm prepared to add right now. We talked about this some yesterday, and we talked about our rationale in approaching this challenge, and I made very clear yesterday, as did the President in his meeting with Chancellor Merkel earlier this month, that we continue to oppose Nord Stream 2. We continue to view it as a Kremlin geopolitical project whose goal is to expand Russia's influence over Europe's energy resources. We continue to believe it's a bad deal for Germany, it's a bad deal for Ukraine, it's a bad deal for Europe and Europe's broader energy security goals.

**QUESTION:** And yet you're prepared to allow it to go ahead without —

**MR PRICE:** And —

**QUESTION:** — without trying to – without trying to stop it, even at this late hour?

**MR PRICE:** And to demonstrate that opposition, we have consistently applied sanctions and examined potentially sanctionable activity, and acted on that. And of course, we have in May imposed sanctions on 19 entities and vessels, and at the same time – as you've heard from the Secretary, as you've heard from the President – we have come to the conclusion, as any rational observer would, that sanctions are unlikely to stop, to stand in the way of the completion of the pipeline, to prevent the pipeline's construction. And so, that is why this administration determined that it was not in our interest to significantly undermine, to weaken our bilateral relationship, our ally, the relationship we have with our ally, Germany, for a —

**QUESTION:** Okay, but it's really – no need —

**MR PRICE:** — but if I could just —

**QUESTION:** There's no need to repeat everything that you said yesterday.

**MR PRICE:** — no, no, no, but if I could just finish a couple points – for a pipeline whose construction would continue, nonetheless.

Now, to your question – and I mentioned this yesterday, or I alluded to it – the Germans have put forward useful proposals, and we've been able to make progress on steps to achieve our shared goal, and that shared goal is very important. That shared goal is ensuring that this pipeline cannot be weaponized against Ukraine, against any other European partner. That is our goal in doing so. I do expect we'll be able to share more details on this today.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** But one other point I want to really emphasize here: We are committed to following the law; we are committed to continuing to examine entities that have engaged in potentially sanctionable activity. Any decisions on sanctions or sanctions-related decisions, those will be made on a case-by-case basis consistent with the law.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Well, just three very quick points. One. If you're committed to following the law, then you would actually follow the law, right? Which says that —

**MR PRICE:** And we have, correct.

**QUESTION:** Well, I think that a lot of people think that's debatable. The second thing is that you say "any rational observer" would realize that sanctions wouldn't stop this. Well, are you saying that members of Congress, who are Democrats as well as Republicans, are irrational?

**MR PRICE:** We have looked at this —

**QUESTION:** Are you saying that Senator Shaheen is irrational, that Senator Menendez is irrational —

**MR PRICE:** We —

**QUESTION:** — because they think that this could actually be stopped?

**MR PRICE:** We've looked at this issue very closely, and we have examined —

**QUESTION:** And they haven't?

**MR PRICE:** I'm speaking for us.

**QUESTION:** Oh, right. So you —

**MR PRICE:** I'm the spokesperson for the Department of State.

**QUESTION:** So you know more than they do? That's the idea?

**MR PRICE:** I'm saying I can speak to the Department of State, and what I can say is that we have looked at this issue very closely. We examined a range of options, a range of tools at our disposal. We came to the conclusion that for a pipeline that was 90 – more than 90 percent complete, on the day this administration assumed office, to potentially undermine our relationship with Germany, and to send a signal to our allies and to our partners the world over that the United States is willing to throw asunder important relationships, that's not something that we were eager to do, certainly.

We also know that perhaps now more than ever we need our allies, we need our partners, across a range of challenges to confront a host of threats. And in this briefing room, we've discussed our cooperation with Germany on any number of fronts, from the PRC, to Afghanistan, to the climate crisis, to the shared values that we have more broadly.

I will also say that even as we came to this conclusion and going forward, we have shown that we are going to always follow the law. We enacted sanctions, as I said, in May on 19 entities and vessels. That is in contrast to two sanctions that were levied by the previous administration under which more than 90 percent of this pipeline was completed.

**QUESTION:** All right. The last thing, and it's kind of a minor thing, but you keep referring to this – to

the pipeline as a Russian geopolitical project, as if in some way the phrase “geopolitical project” is pejorative. Why?

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** There are innumerable U.S. policies that are geopolitical projects.

**MR PRICE:** Of course. Our —

**QUESTION:** So why do you —

**MR PRICE:** No, no. I don’t – we have not intended the term “geopolitical project” to be —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, you have. You use it constantly. It’s, like, in the talking points along with —

**MR PRICE:** It is – to us, it is more than a pipeline.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** It is more than a pipeline that carries —

**QUESTION:** Well, so is your campaign against Huawei and 5G, so is your campaign against any number of things.

**MR PRICE:** I don’t think you’re going to find – I don’t think you’re going to find – I didn’t —

**QUESTION:** So “geopolitical project” is not intended to be a —

**MR PRICE:** A geopolitical – a —

**QUESTION:** — and not intended to be pejorative?

**MR PRICE:** Oh, no, no, no. It is —

**QUESTION:** You’re not saying that Russia can’t have geopolitical projects because you don’t like them.

**MR PRICE:** States have geopolitical projects.

**QUESTION:** Okay, thanks.

**MR PRICE:** This is a geopolitical —

**QUESTION:** That’s all.

**MR PRICE:** No, no, but you asked the question.

**QUESTION:** Well, I did, but —

**MR PRICE:** This is a geopolitical project intended to exert, and to expand, Russia’s influence over Ukraine and other parts of Europe.

Other questions. Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Let me pursue that. One of the things that Toria mentioned was that there’s a pursuit of

a tenure extension of – after 2024 of the transit rights in Ukraine. What’s the enforcement mechanism for that? I know you said at the beginning that you’re not going to get into the details, but if I can pursue that, what – how could this actually be enforced?

**MR PRICE:** There are a number of good questions about this. We are going to have an opportunity today to speak to this in some detail. I would expect today you will see an official release as well, so I’m going to reserve comment until we’re in a position to do that.

Other questions? Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Different topic. News reports say that the U.S. is putting pressure on the Israeli Government to stop all settlement activities in the Palestinian territories. Is that accurate, and do you have any time for the reopening of the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to the reopening of the U.S. consulate, Secretary Blinken was clear on this when he visited Jerusalem and Ramallah, earlier this year. He noted then that the United States will be moving forward with the process to reopen our consulate in Jerusalem and will do so as part of our effort to re-establish that partnership with the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority precisely because it allows us to engage with them, it allows us to execute our assistance programs, it allows us to execute our public diplomacy mission, and to conduct the sort of diplomatic reporting that we need. I don’t have a timeframe to offer for you, but we’ll be happy to keep you posted.

When it comes to settlement activity, we have also been clear and consistent on that. We believe it’s critical to refrain from unilateral steps that increase tensions and make it more difficult to advance a negotiated two-state solution. This is a message we have conveyed in public, as I have just now, but also in private. And it has been the longstanding position, certainly the position of this administration and had been a longstanding position of prior administrations.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Could we go to a new topic?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** To Deputy Secretary Sherman’s visit to China that’s coming up. You’ve been saying in recent days that the United States will only – only goes ahead with a visit such as this one if there is a point to it, if it’s constructive, the lines that you’ve given on that.

So what made you think – what made the department think that it was the right time for her to go to China? Is there something that she – specifically she hopes to achieve there?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. So as we announced this morning, and I’m sure you all have seen the announcement, the deputy will travel to the People’s Republic of China on July 25th. She will travel there after her stops in Tokyo and Seoul and Ulaanbaatar as well. In the PRC, she will take part in meetings in Tianjin where she will meet with PRC officials, including State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. These discussions, as we’ve said, are part of an ongoing U.S. effort to hold candid exchanges with PRC officials, designed to advance U.S. interests and values; and overall to allow us to responsibly manage this incredibly consequential bilateral relationship.

We said earlier this week before we were in a position to confirm the trip that, as you alluded to, the deputy would be prepared to travel if her engagement there would be substantive, constructive; if it were indeed to be a forum and a venue for us to accomplish what we seek to accomplish, and that is to advance U.S. interests, to explore and to discuss how we can manage this relationship responsibly,

and how we can address the competition and responsibly manage the competition – and the stiff competition, that we welcome with the PRC.

And so the PRC has confirmed an in-person meeting with State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. We've said all along that we seek for our senior-level engagement with PRC officials to be substantive and constructive, and we believe this meeting has the potential to be just that.

Look, when – in the context of relationships that are complex, that are challenging, that are dynamic, we believe it's important to maintain open lines of communication between high-level officials, and that includes in times of, as in the case with the PRC, sustained competition, even when the PRC is taking actions that challenge our interests, that challenge our values. And these are shared interests. These are shared values. And so, I think it's important in that context to note that the deputy will be traveling to the PRC, after having visited Japan, after having visited the Republic of Korea, after having visited Mongolia as well. She'll be traveling there, as we have said, from a position of strength, not unlike how Secretary Blinken met with Director Yang and other PRC officials in Anchorage on the way back from the Indo-Pacific region, where we had engaged in consultations with our Japanese and South Korean counterparts as well.

I think broadly speaking, the deputy intends for this engagement to show and to demonstrate to the PRC what responsible and healthy competition can look like. As I've said before, we know this relationship is going to be competitive. We welcome that competition. We welcome that stiff competition. But we also want to make sure that the playing field is level, and importantly, that competition doesn't veer into conflict. We want to make sure that this is a relationship that has guard rails there – where there are clearly defined parameters to the relationship as well. And we believe, again, that engaging in practical, substantive, and a direct manner, as we expect this visit will be, will help us achieve those goals.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on that quickly?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** When you talk about wanting responsible and healthy competition with the PRC, has there been any indication that they are interested in engaging in that kind of competition since President Biden has taken office or since Secretary of State met with Chinese officials earlier this year?

**MR PRICE:** Much of what we've done in the early months of this administration is to test the – test various propositions. We want competition with China where we're competing against one another. This is a relationship that is fundamentally predicated on competition, it's fundamentally competitive at its core, in our estimation, but again, where the playing field is level, where the rules of the game are clearly defined and enforced, and where there are guard rails to ensure and to see to it that competition doesn't spill over into something more dangerous, including, at worst, conflict.

So we have tested that proposition in a number of ways. The Secretary and National Security Advisor Sullivan met with Director Yang, met with other senior PRC officials in Anchorage, where we had our first senior-level engagement with the PRC. Of course, Secretary Blinken has had an opportunity to speak to Director Yang on a couple of occasions since then. President Biden, I would be remiss to add, has had an opportunity to speak to President Xi.

And so these open lines of communication are important in their own right because we believe – and especially at times of stiff competition – that we need dialogue. We need constructive dialogue, but it's also important for us to – for the PRC to hear from us, and for us to hear from the PRC, perspectives on the relationship. And that will help us test the proposition, and arrive at a conclusion as to how we



can most effectively ensure that the relationship is conducted on a level playing field, that those guardrails are there, and that it is managed responsibly.

So this is an ongoing endeavor for us. The deputy's travel and engagement in PRC will be the next phase in that process.

**QUESTION:** Yes, if I – UK-EU – you wanted to ask on the —

**QUESTION:** Could I – just one more thing on the PRC? Sorry.

**QUESTION:** Sure.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Just briefly, the – you also mentioned – the State Department mentioned that she's going on to Oman. Oman obviously has had a key role in indirect diplomacy with Iran. Is that one of the key elements there of going to Oman?

**MR PRICE:** Oman has played an important mediating role in the region. We'll have more on her travel and engagements in Oman as that gets closer, but certainly we've worked closely with Oman on a range of regional priorities. Iran is one of them, Yemen is another, and we'll have a fuller description of that visit as the time comes.

**QUESTION:** I just wanted to ask on the UK-EU agreement on Northern Ireland. The – Prime Minister Boris Johnson wants to renegotiate parts of that. The E.U. today has rejected that attempt at renegotiation, just saying that it imperiled the Good Friday Agreement, among other things. Just wanted to know where the U.S. stands. Are they – is the U.S. worried about the Good Friday Agreement or is the U.S. worried about the flow of goods between the UK and – between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK – things like sausages, medicine, even seeing eye dogs – that London says have been obstructed by the current deal?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have seen the reports of the UK's command paper proposal on the Northern Ireland Protocol. We would refer you to the UK and to the E.U. for questions on the negotiations. Of course, the United States is not a direct party to them. But we do and we have encouraged all parties to prioritize political and economic stability in Northern Ireland in the context of these discussions.

To your question, President Biden has been nothing but unequivocal in his support for the Belfast and the Good Friday Agreement, which was an historic agreement at the time, remains significant and incredibly important. We support a close relationship between the UK and the EU, and between all communities in Northern Ireland as well. And we continue to encourage the parties to negotiate within existing mechanisms, and to avoid unilateral actions.

**QUESTION:** Sorry.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Just further to that, do you have any comments on how the implications of this might impact a future U.S.-UK trade deal?

**MR PRICE:** Look, I – what we're going to focus on now is what we would like to see broadly, and that is we would encourage all the parties to prioritize political and economic stability in Northern Ireland in these discussions while continuing to negotiate within existing mechanisms and avoiding unilateral actions. I'm not going to entertain hypotheticals, what might happen. Right now, we're focused on

what is happening between the parties.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on Varosha in Cyprus, are you planning to impose sanctions on Turkey after the steps that it has taken?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we are looking at a number of steps, but let me just back up, and I'm sure you saw the statement from the Secretary that was released last night. In it —

**QUESTION:** A little late last night.

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, we operate under the assumption that you all like information at the —

**QUESTION:** That we're all awake at 10 o'clock? Okay, okay.

**MR PRICE:** You like information at the speed of news, so we're happy to hold things.

**QUESTION:** Well, it was news about four hours earlier, so — or five. Just to point that out.

**MR PRICE:** It's — we think it's news when the Secretary speaks.

The — as you heard last night, we condemn the announcement by the Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar and Turkish President Erdogan regarding the transfer of parts of Varosha to Cypriot — to Turkish Cypriot control. Such a move is clearly inconsistent with UN Security Council Resolutions 550 and 789, which are very explicit in their calls for Varosha to be administered by the United Nations.

Since last year, since October of 2020, Turkish Cypriots and Turkey have ignored calls from the international community and from the UN Security Council to reverse their steps on Varosha. The — we view Turkey — Turkish Cypriot actions in Varosha, which have the support of Turkey, as provocative, as unacceptable, and incompatible with their past commitments to engage constructively in settlement talks.

We continue to support efforts to refer this situation, which we deem to be very concerning, to the UN Security Council, and we will urge a strong response from the international community. Again, to go back to the basics, we support a Cypriot-led comprehensive settlement to reunify the island as a bizonal, bicomunal federation to benefit all Cypriots and the wider region. We continue to encourage efforts to de-escalate tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and to call for the resolution of issues through dialogue and in accordance with international law, not unilateral action.

**QUESTION:** What about the sanctions at the UN and is the U.S. prepared to take such actions against Turkey too?

**MR PRICE:** As I — as you have heard us say before, we don't preview policy actions, and certainly not any sanctions, but we do support efforts to refer this to the UN Security Council and we will urge the international community to muster a strong response. The United States would be certainly a part of that.

Conor.

**QUESTION:** A Russian hacker named Peter Levashov was freed yesterday on time served for his hacking activities. There was some speculation that he could be part of a prisoner exchange for either Paul Whelan or Trevor Reed. Did the administration have any role in his sentencing and freeing, and is there a prisoner swap underway?

**MR PRICE:** Conor, you won't be surprised to hear that I don't have anything for you on that. We have

made very clear – and President Biden was clear with President Putin, Secretary Blinken was clear with Foreign Minister Lavrov, other U.S. officials at multiple levels have been unambiguous with their Russian counterparts – that Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed, their release from their unjustified detention is an absolute priority for us. We are working very hard and doing everything we can to see to it that they are reunited with their families as soon as is possible. They have been held against their will, of course, away from their families. They've missed birthdays; they have missed anniversaries. They have missed important life occasions and, importantly, their families have missed them. And so we will continue to do all we can. As you know, we don't often speak publicly of our efforts to effect the release of Americans who are unjustly detained around the world, but we are always, always working on these cases.

**QUESTION:** So just no denial, then, that the administration maybe played a role in the judge's decision here?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have anything for you on that. I'm just not entertaining the question.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. You speak publicly all the time. We just went through this on Monday, after you —

**MR PRICE:** We say —

**QUESTION:** — went after the Iranians for talking about —

**MR PRICE:** Well – no.

**QUESTION:** — about a prisoner swap.

**MR PRICE:** What – and what I said on Monday is that we have made it a priority.

**QUESTION:** No, but don't say that you don't talk about it, because you do.

**MR PRICE:** We don't detail it. We don't detail it. I think —

**QUESTION:** Well, you talk about it all the time.

**MR PRICE:** — Matt, you – I think, Matt, you would agree with that, that we do not detail our efforts to release – to seek the release, to effect the release of Americans who are unjustly detained around the world. And we don't do that for the simple reason that their release, expeditious release, is our top priority. And we wouldn't want to do anything that could complicate, that could delay their potential freedom.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Is there anything new on either Haiti or Cuba? And please don't repeat the statement from last night or your comments yesterday about the Cuba review. I'm just asking, is there anything new that you can report to us today on either of those Caribbean situations?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we did release a statement on the new —

**QUESTION:** Go ahead and read it for us, all 20 minutes of it.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I – well, I am not going to – I'm not going to read the statement. But I will just say very briefly that the formation of a new government in Haiti is a positive, it's a necessary step to respond to the Haitian people's needs and to begin Haiti – to begin restoring Haiti's democratic institutions. We do welcome efforts by Haiti's political leadership to come together in choosing an interim prime minister as well as a unity cabinet to chart a path forward in the wake of the assassination of President Moïse, and we're committed to working with Haiti's new government to

support its investigation into the assassination, to expand our COVID-19 vaccination efforts, and to promote security and the rule of law.

And we'll continue, as we have done, to coordinate with Haitian and international partners to support efforts to establish the conditions necessary for Haitians, importantly, to vote in free and fair elections – in free and fair legislative elections and presidential elections as soon as possible.

We urge, in the meantime, members of Haiti's new government to work with civil society to find solutions to the many pressing challenges facing Haiti and to facilitate that return to long-term stability and prosperity.

Conor.

**QUESTION:** On the investigation, Haitian authorities said today that —

**QUESTION:** You couldn't not do it, could you? It was just impossible for you not to re-read the entire – okay, sorry.

**QUESTION:** No, you're good. The Haitian authorities said today that they arrest – that they have in mind three foreigners who they believe helped to fund the operation that assassinated the president. Is the U.S. Government aware whether or not any of those three are American citizens? And they asked again for further FBI help in tracking down those three potential suspects. What is the FBI doing? Can you provide any sort of update on the assistance?

**MR PRICE:** So we are aware and we can confirm the detention of U.S. citizens in Haiti. We're monitoring the situation closely. The Haitian Government has been cooperative in our requests for consular access to the detained U.S. citizens. Anywhere, anytime a U.S. citizen is detained overseas, the department works to provide all appropriate consular assistance. That has been the case here as well. I'm not able to go into further details given some of the privacy considerations.

In terms of the investigation, we have been very clear all along that, of course, this is a Haitian investigation. We've deferred investigative questions to Haitian authorities. We've also relayed to Haitian authorities and as well as publicly to all of you that in terms of our assistance, we do see the investigation as one area in which the United States can make potentially valuable contributions to this Haitian-led effort. DHS and the FBI have continued to do that. The State Department has provided other forms of assistance, as we've discussed previously, but I'm not in a position to detail where that is right now.

**QUESTION:** And you have nothing – there's nothing new on the Cuba remittances or the embassy staffing review, correct?

**MR PRICE:** Nothing I'm in a position to add today.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And on the Iran prisoner thing, still – there's nothing new on that either?

**MR PRICE:** We were very clear on this.

**QUESTION:** Okay, okay.

**MR PRICE:** We spoke over the weekend; we spoke on Monday.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, on Cuba.

**QUESTION:** Could I —

**QUESTION:** Assistant Secretary Julie Chung put out some tweets about Cuba, and one of them mentioned, “We are going to focus on applying hard-hitting sanctions on regime officials.” Could you tell us a bit more about, like, what kind of sanctions you’re considering? Is this going to be GLOMAG? Or is there – is there – there are other ways that you could do this? And then is this a situation where you think sanctioning officials is going to make a difference?

**MR PRICE:** Well, so as not to repeat everything I said yesterday and to not face the ire —

**QUESTION:** The wrath.

**MR PRICE:** — the wrath, I will just make the very brief point that we spoke yesterday of steps that we are studying and looking into that would support the Cuban people, but also steps that would seek to hold to account Cuban Government officials responsible for the repression, for the crackdown, for the violence in the context of these peaceful street protests.

When it comes to sanctions, the Treasury Department’s OFAC, the Office of Foreign Assets Control, is exploring designating Cuban officials responsible for violence, repression, human rights violations against those peaceful protesters. We’re also working diligently with the international community to condemn the violence and repression that the Cuban people have faced. This is, as is almost always the case, one of those areas where U.S. action will be meaningful, it will be, we expect, effective, but it will be all the more meaningful if we are able to speak with one voice with the international community and we are able to make clear that the international community does not abide the regimes repression, crackdown, deprivation of human rights and civil liberties for the Cuban people.

So as you can expect, I’m not in a position to detail now what any potential sanctions might look like, what authorities we might use, but we are certainly looking at ways that we can hold accountable those Cuban regime officials who have been responsible for what we’ve seen.

**QUESTION:** So you don’t – there aren’t enough sanctions against Cuba already?

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** You feel there’s still more room?

**MR PRICE:** Well, there – we are confident there is more room. There are broad sanctions imposed against Cuba, of course, with humanitarian carve-outs and tools we can use to ensure that much-needed humanitarian supplies can reach the Cuban people. But we are confident that we have policy tools available to us, to potentially include sanctions, that could be wielded against specific individuals who may be responsible for some of what we’ve seen.

**QUESTION:** Ned, what about helping the Cubans receive internet service? Do you have anything on this?

**MR PRICE:** We discussed this yesterday.

**QUESTION:** Sure.

**MR PRICE:** I’m happy to give you the quick summary, but we are working with the private sector and with Congress to identify viable options to make the internet more accessible to the Cuban people. And when we talk about our collaboration with the private sector, we are actively collaborating to identify solutions and proposals that are creative and to seek to ensure that the Cuban people have access to that free flow of information. That’s so important to us in large part because we have seen the actions that the Cuban Government has taken in the context of these peaceful demonstrations —

the internet crackdowns, the blockages, the efforts on the part of the regime to stifle the voice of the Cuban people, to stifle their access to information – and so we are exploring options with both Congress and the private sector to that effect.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** A different topic, Tanzania.

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** The opposition leader Freeman Mbowe was apparently arrested today. Does the United States have any comment on that?

**MR PRICE:** We have seen these reports. We are looking into them. If confirmed, it would be very concerning. As you know, Secretary Blinken had an opportunity earlier this month on July 6th to speak with Tanzanian President Hassan, and Secretary Blinken, in the context of that conversation, reiterated and spoke about the importance of political rights, civil liberties, as well as the importance of ensuring a democratic, peaceful, free, and prosperous future for all Tanzanians. That is what we continue to hope to see, and so we'll be looking into these reports.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I just have one quick question? I understand we might get more information on this today, but do you have a figure for the number of SIV applicants that will be relocated before the U.S. troop withdrawal?

**MR PRICE:** So what I can say is I can speak to the two groups that we have detailed to date. The first group is that group that has completed their security clearance – their security vetting procedures, the rigorous security vetting procedures, and that group, because they have completed that important stage in the process, will be relocated starting – flights will start later this month to Fort Lee in Virginia. And so there – we said there are 700 principal applicants along with their family members.

The other group of applicants entail applicants who have not yet completed that security vetting step. They will be relocated to third countries. And that group, if I have it here, I believe is 2,500 principal applicants and their families. But beyond that —

**QUESTION:** Wait, wait, no. Is it —

**QUESTION:** That was 4,000 —

**QUESTION:** No, is it 4,000? Did it go down 1,500?

**MR PRICE:** Sorry, sorry. I'm sorry. It was 4,000, 4,000, 4,000, I'm sorry. You're right, 4,000 principal applicants and their families. Thank you for catching that.

**QUESTION:** So, I mean, previously you guys had been saying that the relocation effort would be complete before the U.S. military withdrawal. So does it just demonstrate how complicated this is, how grand this effort is that it may take a little bit longer, frankly? Because we're talking about maybe 5,000 of these SIV applicants that you're saying are in the works, but as we well know, there's upwards of 10,000, maybe close to 20,000 who are in the full line here.

**MR PRICE:** That's right. And we are working, as we have said, as quickly as we can to process as many of these SIV applicants as efficiently as we can, and we've done so consistent with the fact that this is a program that is written into law, it's statutorily defined, more than a dozen steps that

applicants need to go through, but we have surged resources, we have surged staff to help us process this. As I've said, we have increased the pace at which we are processing these applicants. And you see, if you look at the most recent quarterly report, a pretty marked increase between the early months of this year to mid this year in terms of what we are able to process.

The other important point, though, is that the SIV program will not come to a close when the military withdrawal is completed later this year, and that's because the Department of State and our embassy intends to remain engaged on the ground. We intend to continue with our partnership with the Afghan Government, and in this case, importantly, with the Afghan people, and so we'll continue to be in a position to process applicants.

I will add that last night we did begin notifying eligible SIV applicants and their families regarding the option they have to be relocated to Fort Lee in Virginia. This is the first of many steps the department is taking to honor the U.S. Government's commitment to our Afghan SIV applicants, and it's an important step in our effort to begin relocating them to the United States this month.

**QUESTION:** And on Iran, on the demonstrations over there —

**QUESTION:** I just want to — well, I guess maybe it can be answered in the — later on. But when you say 4,000 to these third countries, that's the actual principal applicants.

**MR PRICE:** Principal applicants.

**QUESTION:** So once you factor in the families, do you have an estimate of the total number of people?

**MR PRICE:** It's — it is a rough estimate.

**QUESTION:** I mean, if it's 700 principal applicants for Fort Lee but that means 2,500 total, what does 4,000 — my math is from elementary or high school, middle school.

**MR PRICE:** It's — it's — it's an extrapolation.

**QUESTION:** Exactly.

**MR PRICE:** It's an —

**QUESTION:** But does it work —

**MR PRICE:** It is —

**QUESTION:** — if you do that extrapolation, like, the 700 over 2,500 and for —

**MR PRICE:** We're not — when we talk about 2,500, obviously, that's a round number. It's not precise.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, obviously not exact. But is there an estimate of the total number of people who will be — who are in —

**MR PRICE:** Well, one, we have to see how many people take us up on that offer. As you heard from the President —

**QUESTION:** Right. But if everyone, if all of them took it up, how many people are we talking about, including family members?

**MR PRICE:** So we have – we’ve talked about 2,500 for Fort Lee based on that —

**QUESTION:** No, not for Fort Lee. For the other, for the 4,000.

**MR PRICE:** So the SIV program allows a principal applicant along with a spouse and dependent children to come to the United States. And so 2,500 is, of course, the extrapolation based on 750. You – I don’t have my calculator in front of me, but —

**QUESTION:** Well, I just did it, but I – but I don’t – anyway. Whatever.

**MR PRICE:** And of course, once we determine how many people, how many applicants do wish to take us up on this offer for relocation, we’ll have a precise figure.

**QUESTION:** Can I have one quick follow-up on all of that too?

**MR PRICE:** Yep.

**QUESTION:** Is this group, then, of 4,000 plus the 700 principal applicants – is that the total universe of people that you are willing to evacuate? Or are you going to do more down the line?

**MR PRICE:** We are looking at all potential contingencies. This is the group that we’re speaking to at the moment, the group that we’re – the groups that we’re actively making plans for. But we’re looking at all potential contingencies.

**QUESTION:** So of the 10,000 principal applicants who are waiting for their cases to be adjudicated, is – are all of those people going to be evacuated at some point, or – out of the 20,000 that are in the pipeline, are all of those people going to be – like, we still don’t have a sense of the scale from the administration of how many people you’re willing to pull out.

**MR PRICE:** We are looking at all contingencies. We have a commitment and a special responsibility to those individuals who have applied and who are able to complete the SIV processing, and we’ll have more to share on what that looks like going forward.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on the demonstrations in Iran, do you have any comment on the security forces crackdown?

**MR PRICE:** I do. We are closely following reports of protests in Iran’s Khuzestan province, including reports that security forces have fired on these protesters. We support the rights of Iranians to peacefully assemble and to express themselves. Iranians, just like any other people, should enjoy without – should enjoy those rights without fear of violence, without fear of arbitrary detention by security forces. And so we’re monitoring this very closely.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Going back to North Korean issue, Northeast Asia issue, during the deputy secretary’s visit to China, does she have a plan to ask any kind of cooperation regarding North Korea with China?

**MR PRICE:** We’ll have more to say, I would expect, in the aftermath of the deputy’s visit to the PRC. I – what I would say broadly now is —

**QUESTION:** The aftermath? That sounds like it’s not going to go well.



**MR PRICE:** The – after the deputy’s visit to the PRC. What I would say broadly now is that, as I’ve already alluded to, this is a relationship for us that is predicated principally on competition. There are elements of this relationship that are adversarial, but there are also going to be elements where our interests are aligned. And in cases where our interests are aligned, we do seek to explore the potential for cooperation. We’ve talked about that in the context of climate, for example. We’ve talked about that in the context of Afghanistan, potentially. We’ve also talked about that in the context of the DPRK.

It is in no one’s interest for the DPRK to be a threat to the region and potentially beyond. It is in no one’s interest to see a humanitarian catastrophe potentially unfold in the DPRK, and so I think it is safe to say that we do have some alignment of interests when it comes to the DPRK and we’ll be in a position to explore that.

Secretary Blinken, the last time he spoke with Director Yang, spent much of that conversation speaking to our DPRK policy review, which had recently been completed, knowing that the PRC does have influence and a relationship with the regime in the DPRK that perhaps few other countries do.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, will the U.S. and China discuss about any way to bring North Korea to a dialogue?

**MR PRICE:** I don’t want to go any further into what they may discuss vis-a-vis the DPRK or any other issue. But they will certainly explore those areas where our interests are aligned because this visit is very much about advancing U.S. interests. It is about exploring ways in which – and areas in which we might cooperate, where that cooperation would be in service of U.S. and shared collective interests.

**QUESTION:** Regarding that also, the deputy secretary said during the trilateral meeting between Korea and Japan and the U.S. that the cooperation among three countries would be the big message to North Korea. So what could be the message?

**MR PRICE:** I’m sorry, what – what would be the message to —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, the – like, the meaning of the message.

**MR PRICE:** Well, the purpose of the trilateral meeting wasn’t so much to send a message to North Korea. It was to leverage the trilateral relationship. We know just how important the trilateral relationship is to that challenge. It is one that – it’s a relationship that we have sought to bolster and to reinforce over the years. Of course, when he was deputy secretary, then-Deputy Secretary Blinken spent quite a bit of time in the region seeking to strengthen this trilateral relationship. It was certainly – it’s precisely why Secretary Blinken met with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Europe not all that long ago as well.

We know across all these levels that a robust and effective trilateral relationship among these three countries is critical for our shared security and common interests in defending freedom and democracy, upholding human rights, championing women’s empowerment, combating climate change, promoting regional and global peace and security, and bolstering the rule of law and the rules-based international order throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, just one more question. During the trilateral meeting, or before or after, did the deputy secretary make any suggestion for the improvement of Korean-Japan relationship?

**MR PRICE:** We issued a readout of this, so I wouldn’t want to go beyond that readout. But just to reiterate the importance we attach to that trilateral relationship, not just in the context of the DPRK but also in the broader regional context as well.

Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 1:54 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – August 2, 2021](#)

*08/02/2021 06:22 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:24 p.m. EST

**MR PRICE:** We just have one element at the top, and then we will return to your questions.

Secretary Blinken will participate this week in five virtual minister ministerial meetings related to ASEAN, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. These are the U.S.-ASEAN – these are the U.S.-ASEAN, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, and the Friends of the Mekong Ministerial meetings.

The Secretary participated in the Special U.S.-ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting on July 13th and reiterated our U.S. – the U.S. commitment to our strategic partnership with ASEAN and our strong support for ASEAN centrality.

During this week's meeting, Secretary Blinken will underscore that commitment and reiterate U.S. positions on pressing regional issues, including calling on the Burmese junta to immediately end the violence and restore Burma to the path of democracy. Supporting freedom of the seas in the South China Sea, improving resilience and transparency through the Mekong-U.S. partnership, and urging ASEAN members to fully implement UN Security Council Resolutions on the DPRK.

The Secretary will share with ASEAN our plans for additional support in the fight against COVID-19, including through sharing additional vaccine doses. He will also discuss our plans to support ASEAN's economic recovery and plans to combat climate change. He looks forward to a fruitful discussion with our ASEAN counterparts and regional partners this week, and we'll have more details on that as the week progresses.

And so that that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Okay, let's just start with Afghanistan.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** I'll be really brief because I think that after the announcement and the background call and now the Secretary's comment, we've probably got pretty much all the answers that we're going to get, I think. But I just want to make a point. The Secretary talked about how this is a gesture of friendship and generosity from the United States to this new – this group of people who are now going to have P-2 status or eligible to apply for P-2 status. But isn't it a kind of a hollow gesture if they have to leave the country at their own expense and at their own – on their – that they don't any support in leaving the country and then have to – and then have to find a way to make ends meet for 12 to 14 months once they get to a third country, without any assistance from you guys at all? Don't you think that significantly reduces the number of people who are going to be able to take advantage of this?

Which I understand is done at your – it's well-meaning, but I don't – frankly, I just don't see how it's going to make much of a – much of an impact.

**MR PRICE:** Well, Matt, I would actually take issue with at least part of your premise, and let me just start with the requirement that you alluded to that Afghans do, in fact, need to be outside of the country in order for this processing to take place. And just to put it very simply, that is due to the security situation in Afghanistan and the lack of resettlement infrastructure, including personnel in place in the country, which is why Afghans eligible and referred to the P-2 program must be outside Afghanistan in a third by for their cases to be —

**QUESTION:** But —

**MR PRICE:** But just let me – let me

**QUESTION:** Well, not only is it —

**MR PRICE:** But let – Matt, let —

**QUESTION:** That's worse than a Catch-22.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I'm going to —

**QUESTION:** You're telling them that they can leave because the situation is too dangerous, but they can't stay because the situation – they have to leave —

**MR PRICE:** So there – there are —

**QUESTION:** — but they can't stay —

**MR PRICE:** There are a couple —

**QUESTION:** This is level Catch-44.

**MR PRICE:** There are a couple elements to your question. If you would allow me to answer all of them, I certainly will.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, all good. Sorry.

**MR PRICE:** We recognize, as the Secretary said, that it is extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country or, in some cases, to find a way to enter a third country. We recognize that. Like many refugees, as the Secretary just said, refugees all over the world – this is not, lamentably, unique to Afghanistan – they will face challenges seeking that safety.

We are continuing to review the situation on the ground as we have done in the context of this new P-2 program and the context of the launch of Operation Allies Refuge. We will continue to consider all available options and our planning will evolve. The fact that we are announcing this new P-2 program today is just the latest evolution of that process. It was a couple weeks ago that we announced Operation Allies Refuge, which was an evolution of our thinking taking into account contingencies and conditions on the ground.

But I also want to make very clear that once Afghans are – well, both for Afghans who are displaced internally within their own country and for Afghan refugees who have fled their country – Afghan refugees eligible to refer – to be referred to the P-2 program may contact the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the country office in the country —

**QUESTION:** Human Rights and Refugee – High Commissioner for Refugees. Or both?

**MR PRICE:** Sorry. I'm sorry. Yes, for Refugees – I'm sorry – in the country office. It is also quite relevant to this discussion that the United States is the largest single donor of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. On June 4th of this year, we announced more than \$266 million in new humanitarian assistance. That brings our total assistance over the course of these years to nearly \$4 billion. And now humanitarian assistance from the American people helps our international humanitarian partners provide support, as I said before, to Afghans who are displaced within their own country, but also to Afghan refugees in the region. The United States has been the world's largest humanitarian donor, and that includes, as I said, to Afghan refugees in the region.

This funding allows our partners to provide life-saving food, nutrition, protection, shelter, livelihood opportunities that are essential, as well as other services like health care, water, sanitation, hygiene services, to respond to the humanitarian needs generated by conflict, by drought, and the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic. This humanitarian assistance provides protection to the most vulnerable Afghans, and that certainly includes Afghans who have forced – have been forced to make the grueling decision in some cases to have to leave their country.

But let me make one other point. We are talking about this program today, the P-2 program, but as you heard from the Secretary, the broader point is that we seek to establish the conditions in Afghanistan where all Afghans can achieve a level of safety and security. That's not only our goal. That is a goal that we are working with the broader international community to bring about. As we have said repeatedly, it is not only in our interest but it's in the interest of Afghanistan's neighbors to —

**QUESTION:** All right. Well, how is that goal going so far?

**MR PRICE:** — to Afghans' neighbors to see peace and security for the people of Afghanistan. So that is why we have not only invested tremendously in this humanitarian assistance, we have not only invested and will continue to invest in our partnership with Afghan security forces, but we are investing intensively, as the Secretary said, in the diplomacy, supporting the diplomacy between the Afghan parties, bringing together the international community, again, with an objective that all Afghans are able to live in peace and security within their own country.

The reason we're talking about this program today, and the reason we've spoken to the SIV program and launched the very ambitious Operation Allies Refuge is because there is a subset of Afghans who, over the course of the years, owing to their extraordinary service to the United States, be it to our military, to the State Department, or in the case of P-2 the P-2 program, to NGOs, to media organizations, these individuals face an especially acute threat. And so that's why, even as our goal is to bring about an Afghanistan where all Afghans can live in safety and security, we also have a special responsibility to these Afghans who face an especially acute threat.

And we have designed this program in consultation with a number of stakeholders. It was late last month that a consortium of nearly two dozen media organizations as well as the Committee to Protect Journalists and other NGOs wrote to Secretary Blinken and wrote to President Biden writing that: We urge the Biden administration to create the support the creation of a visa program for Afghans who worked with the U.S. press and now seek safety in the United States.

As I've said before, we are always looking at conditions on the ground, we are exploring contingencies. You have seen us act as those conditions have evolved in the context of these programs that we have announced and spoken to over the course of recent weeks, and we'll continue to do that going forward.

**QUESTION:** Well, Ned, but even before the withdrawal is complete, we see tens of thousands of

people fleeing, okay? And yes, while it is quite relevant that the United States is the largest humanitarian donor, isn't it always quite – isn't it also quite relevant that the reason that this is happening now is because you guys are withdrawing, and you bear not only a special responsibility to assist inside of the country, but also a special responsibility to those trying to get out?

And this program, the P-2 program in particular, which offers them no support other than the fact that they are eligible to apply if they get nominated or referred, they have to get outside the country, they have to stay there for 12 to 14 months while these things – while this is – stay wherever it is while this is processed. That's just – the Secretary said that this is an – incredibly hard, it's incredibly difficult.

**MR PRICE:** It is. It is. And —

**QUESTION:** And you keep mentioning all these other refugees from around the world. Well, this is a situation where this outflux, this outflow of people, is directly related to the fact that you guys are leaving, right?

**MR PRICE:** Let me address a couple elements. One, P-2 is a category of refugee status. You are right that the P-2 designation, the P-2 status, doesn't automatically confer benefits to refugees once they're outside of the country. But our point is, both through UNHCR and through the tremendous generosity of the American people, the largest humanitarian donor – \$266 million just a couple months ago, billions of dollars over the course of the years – refugees, Afghan refugees do have support and are eligible to receive support from the United States Government, from the UN, from other humanitarian donors. So it's not accurate to say that these individuals are necessarily and entirely left to fend for themselves.

We don't want to sugarcoat this. This is an arduous decision for anyone to have to leave his or her country, especially if they're forced to make the journey, at least in the first instance, alone. But there are forms of support and the United States will continue to be the largest humanitarian donor, knowing that it is the generosity of spirit of the American people, knowing that in this case, in the case of the P-2 program, in the case of the SIV program, we do have a special responsibility to these individuals who, in many cases, face an especially acute threat because of the work they have done on behalf of the American people or directly on behalf of the U.S. Government.

Missy.

**QUESTION:** And how would you – a question about Afghanistan. First of all, you referenced and Secretary Blinken referenced the assistance the United States will provide to other countries that will be absorbing some of the Afghan refugees. Is there anything you can say about how, if at all, that money will actually go to the people who are going to go stay in Pakistan or wherever for the year or however long it takes for them to have their applications processed? My impression had been that that aid would go to – go through the government and maybe go to refugee camps, whereas many of these people will be setting up on their own, et cetera. Anything you can say about that?

Secondly, are you going to be surging new, like, personnel or resources to countries that are expected to have larger numbers of these people to be able to process their stuff? And then, in the announcement this morning it said that this P-2 designation included people who worked for U.S.-funded projects that were funded via grants or cooperative agreements, but it did not include subcontractors. And I just wonder why is that, because my understanding is that, at least in the past, contracts have represented at least half of the reconstruction funding, and so the sub – the contractor is usually a smaller group, the subs are like the Afghan NGOs or the Afghan employees. Why is that the case?

And finally, can you just give us an update on media access to Fort Lee? Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** Sure. So there's a lot there.

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MR PRICE:** Let me see if I can remember all that and address them in turn.

**QUESTION:** Well, the last one is easy.

**QUESTION:** (Laughter.) Sorry.

**MR PRICE:** So in terms of the – what we are providing, the tremendous humanitarian support that we have provided over the years to Afghan refugees, both internally displaced refugees within – internally displaced people within the country of Afghanistan and Afghan refugees outside of Afghanistan, much of this funding goes to our international and humanitarian partners, who are then in a position on the ground in neighboring countries or in the broader region to provide that support to some of the 18.4 million Afghans in need. And that includes Afghans both in Afghanistan and also Afghan refugees in the region. As I said before, these humanitarian partners then, in turn, can provide the sort of life-saving support that all too often is a lifeline for Afghan refugees: food, nutrition, protection, shelter, opportunities for livelihood, essential health care, water, sanitation, hygiene services.

That – those are the kinds of services that our humanitarian partners are in a position to provide. USAID and the department works closely with humanitarian partners not only in this region but also throughout the world in a well-honed process to see to it that that funding is distributed in an effective means.

In terms of personnel, we just announced this program today. We've obviously spoken, when it comes to the SIV program, of the universe of people who may – who are in that pipeline already. But we just announced this program today, so I think it would be premature for us to render an estimate as to how many may apply for this.

But that is relevant to your questions about eligibility, and just to recap, Afghan nationals are eligible for the P-2 program under certain conditions. Number one, Afghans who do not meet the minimum time and service for an SIV but who worked or work as employees of contractors, locally employed staff, interpreters and translators for the U.S. Government, United States Forces Afghanistan, the ISAF, or International Security Assistance Force, or Resolute Support. It also applies to Afghans who worked or work for U.S. Government-funded programs or projects in Afghanistan supported through a U.S. Government grant or cooperative agreement as well as Afghans who were or are employed by U.S.-based media organizations or nongovernmental organizations.

Now, this program was designed, as we've said before, to provide an additional form of support to those Afghans who by dint of their work on behalf of the U.S. Government or the American people face an especially acute threat. And so this really drove the parameters of the program, the distinction between contractors and subcontractors. This program, we have designed it – as we have in the Iraqi context as well – to apply to those Afghans who in our judgment face an especially acute threat. That is not to say that it will cover all of those who may come under threat. Again, there is the P-1 refugee program that remains available for broader groups of Afghan nationals. There is the SIV program for a separate set of nationals, and now the P-2 program for these Afghan nationals who have worked for the U.S. Government or for the American people over the years.

In terms of media access to Fort Lee, this is something that we have explored. DOD may be able to offer additional details, but we'll continue to update you on the progress, as the Secretary did today, of the SIV relocation flights and the SIVs who have successfully arrived in the United States.

**QUESTION:** DOD has referred us to the State Department, just so you know.

**MR PRICE:** Understood. Understood.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan too. Afghanistan president has blamed today the American troops speed to leave – or speedy pullout for the worsening violence in his country. Do you have any comment on that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, there's one party that is in most cases responsible for the outrageous and atrocious acts of violence that have been perpetrated against the Afghan people, and that's the Taliban. Of course, other terrorist groups – ISIS-K – also active, but we have seen an increase in these ongoing Taliban attacks. They show little regard for human life, for the rights of the Afghan people, including the basic right of the Afghan people to live in safety and security. The targeted killings, the destructions of buildings and bridges, other vital infrastructure, other violent acts against the people of Afghanistan – we recognize they are in stark contravention to statements from the Taliban leadership.

We've seen from the loss of innocent Afghan life and the displacement of Afghans, the civilian population, the people – it is the people of Afghanistan who suffer the most and who bear the brunt of these horrific attacks. If the Taliban leadership truly supports a negotiated solution to this conflict, as they say they do, as their actions in Doha potentially suggest they do, they must stop these horrific attacks. You heard this from the Secretary just now; you've heard this from him before; you've heard this from me before. But the world won't accept the imposition by force of a government in Afghanistan. The world will not accept a government in Afghanistan that doesn't respect basic human rights – the rights of women, the rights of minorities, the rights of Afghan girls to pursue an education. The key point is that legitimacy and, importantly for the durability of any future government of Afghanistan, assistance can only be possible if that government – whatever form it takes – has basic respect for human rights.

And so that's why we continue to do all we can to galvanize, to support the intra-Afghan negotiations in an effort to arrive at an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned government that fulfills the rights of its citizens and that will support especially the rights of the Afghan people, including that paramount right to live in safety and security, free from violence and, in some cases, persecution.

**QUESTION:** Ned, can you give one example of something that the Taliban have done on the ground that supports your theory or your wishful thinking that they care about international acceptance? One thing.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, we know that the Taliban seeks a role in Afghan society, seeks a leadership role in Afghan society.

**QUESTION:** Really?

**MR PRICE:** Of course. That we can agree on. It is absolutely indispensable – and I think this should be a pretty obvious point too – that any government in Afghanistan will require international assistance.

**QUESTION:** No, it won't. The Taliban did not require international assistance when it ran the country the last time around. They didn't care. They didn't want it. I know that I've gone on; I'll stop.

**QUESTION:** And literally one country recognized it.

**QUESTION:** It's – it – this is nuts what you guys keep saying. The Secretary himself said they say



that they want international – they want their leaders to be able to travel, they don't want sanctions. There's nothing that has happened, that they have done on the ground over the course of the last several months – since April, since this was announced – to suggest that they, in fact, do want what you guys hope that they want.

**MR PRICE:** The Taliban —

**QUESTION:** Is there? Can you name one thing?

**MR PRICE:** The Taliban continue to engage in Doha. There has been progress in Doha.

**QUESTION:** Ned, you know what? If I had a room at the Four Seasons in Doha and was negotiating on – I would say whatever, but that doesn't matter what happens in Doha, frankly.

**MR PRICE:** It absolutely does.

**QUESTION:** No. What matters is the atrocities that you even said are being committed on the ground right now and are getting worse every day.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I'm afraid we might be mixing —

**QUESTION:** I'll stop.

**MR PRICE:** — personal opinions with —

**QUESTION:** It's not – it's fact. You admitted – you acknowledged it, that it's getting worse. You acknowledged that there are horrendous – I'll go back to my notes.

**MR PRICE:** It is – any Afghan government will seek a few things. Number one is durability. It will not be to – it would not be to the Taliban's benefit, it would not be to anyone's benefit to have a government that is beset by civil war and violence.

**QUESTION:** Fair enough, but you're the one – your words – outrageous and atrocious attacks —

**MR PRICE:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**QUESTION:** — against the Afghan people that are only getting worse.

**MR PRICE:** Absolutely. And that's why we are supporting the intra-Afghan talks. We are seeking to do all we can to support the arrival at an outcome that is just, and then importantly, is durable. All parties want a solution that is durable. Now, clearly, they may have different visions at the moment of what that durable solution might look like, but that's the point of these talks: to arrive at a solution and an outcome that is Afghan-led, that is Afghan-owned, and importantly, a solution that, at least in our estimation, has to respect the basic and fundamental rights of the Afghan people. That's not a sentiment that is unique to United States. We have heard that from any number of Afghanistan's neighbors, from other countries in the region, from other members of the international community as well.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I want to move on to another topic, to the Palestinian-Israeli issue. First, the Israeli court today put off enforcing the eviction of the Palestinians from Sheik Jarrah. I wonder if you would urge them to sort of nullify the judgment to begin with on that issue. Then I have a couple more.

**MR PRICE:** Well, these reports were just emerging, but we are closely following the reports regarding the Sheik Jarrah hearing. We have made this point before: Families should not be evicted from homes in which they have lived for decades. We're not going to get into these emerging reports or to comment on various detailed legal discussions, but we're closely following them and will continue to do so.

**QUESTION:** Also, last month, maybe a couple of weeks ago and so on, Mr. – the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Hadi Amr warned the Israelis that the PA was on the verge of collapse and so on – on the verge of collapse. Are you – you still believe that, that the PA is about to collapse? Are you taking any sort of emergency or urgent measures to sustain it, to augar it, if you would?

**MR PRICE:** Well, DAS Amr, the State Department, the administration, we remain engaged with our Israeli and Palestinian counterparts to take tangible steps that will improve the quality of lives and advance freedom, security, prosperity for all. Obviously, you have heard us speak to additional humanitarian assistance that we've been able to offer even in recent days. We're doing all of this – the diplomacy, the assistance, the engagement – in an effort that at its core is really predicated on the simple idea that Israelis and Palestinians deserve equal measures of safety, of security, of freedom, and importantly, of dignity.

DAS Amr was in the region just a few weeks ago. He met with both representatives of governments – the Israeli Government, the Palestinian Authority – but he also met with elements of civil society. And that is a partnership, and especially when it comes to that partnership with the Palestinian people, that we are in the process of rebuilding, and we've been able to make some tangible steps there, including with the announcement of the additional humanitarian support.

**QUESTION:** Is he back – is he back in the building? Is he back in town?

**MR PRICE:** My understanding is he is.

**QUESTION:** Okay. One last thing regarding the conflict. It was contingent on – apparently contingent on passing the budget, and it seems that it has done that. So do you have any sort of target date for reopening the consulate in Jerusalem?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Secretary Blinken was very clear when he was in Jerusalem, when he was in Ramallah that the United States will be moving forward with the process to reopen our consulate in Jerusalem. I don't have any additional details to share at this time, but we'll be happy to do so when we do.

**QUESTION:** I wonder if you could comment on the report that the Russian ambassador to the U.S. has said there's 24 Russian diplomats who've been asked to leave the country by September 3rd after their visas expired. So why are they being asked to leave? Were any of these people acting in a manner inconsistent with their diplomatic status? And is this a retaliation against something Russia has done?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me first address Ambassador Antonov's remarks. I understand he made these remarks during a media interview. But his characterization of the situation is not accurate; it's incorrect. The three-year limit on visa validity for Russians, it's nothing new. When visas expire, as you might expect, these individuals are expected to leave the country or apply for an extension. That is what is at play here.

But since you did raise the – this issue, let me take an opportunity to speak to the broader issue, and that is a statement that you all saw from us – from Secretary Blinken – on Friday. And we issued this statement in response to what the Russian Government has mandated and what took effect

yesterday, and that's namely that the prohibition on the United States from retaining, hiring, or contracting Russian or third-country staff except for our guard force, which very lamentably has forced us to let go of hundreds of staff members across Russia, across embassy and the mission community there. It is unfortunate because these measures have a negative impact on our – on the U.S. mission to Russia's operation, potentially on the safety and security of our personnel, as well as our ability to engage in diplomacy with the Russian Government.

I will say that we reserve the right to take appropriate response measures to Russia's actions. The Russian Government has also indicated that it will impose similar measures on the embassies of some other – some of our partners and allies. We also strongly object to this and will stand in solidarity with the other countries, the other members of the diplomatic community there who are affected by this.

The point we've made before is that our actions on March 2nd and April 15th, the measures we put into place to hold the Russian Government accountable for its range of threats to our interests and to our people – those were a response. We did not escalate; we did not seek an escalation. Those were a response to the Russian Government's harmful actions, and we continue to believe that at times like these, we do need open channels of communication between our governments, including through our respective embassies. So we're continuing to evaluate the situation and will update you as we have new developments.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Could we pursue that a bit? The ambassador – another thing that he said was that three-year validity is unique or almost unique to Russia. Is that accurate as far as you see?

**MR PRICE:** So the Office of Foreign Missions did issue some guidance recently. What we have said – and we can get you more details if we're able to share on how this applies to Russia – but we have – we announced last week that the department will limit the assignment duration of most newly arriving members of foreign, diplomatic, or consular missions in the United States to a maximum of five consecutive years. Now, of course, that doesn't apply to all missions, but the limitation on duration does help us to balance the lengths of tours for bilateral diplomats assigned to foreign missions in the United States and for U.S. diplomats' assignments overseas.

**QUESTION:** Five years. Is that not the —

**MR PRICE:** The maximum is five years across the board.

**QUESTION:** So when he's talking about three years, is that accurate? I mean, is that something that's the case with Russians?

**MR PRICE:** I couldn't comment as to whether that is unique to Russian diplomats or not.

**QUESTION:** Well, can they apply for renewals?

**MR PRICE:** We'll see if we can get you more information on that.

**QUESTION:** Well, because, I mean, you said that after the three years for the Russians, when they either have to leave or they —

**MR PRICE:** Apply for an extension.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Can they get an extension? Or you say no —

**MR PRICE:** They can apply for an extension. They can apply for an extension, and just as —

**QUESTION:** But have – and have you – but have you said that we will not accept any extension requests?

**MR PRICE:** What we've said is that they can apply for an extension. As in all cases, applications are reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

**QUESTION:** All right. But this – but this – but you're saying in response to his question is that this is not like a retaliatory move for the broader issues or the —

**MR PRICE:** This is not – the characterization that he put forward is not accurate.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** He also said that you make it impossible for them to get visa again to come back. He said they likely will not come back because you guys make it impossible for them to get visa renewal. Is that – do you dispute what he's saying?

**MR PRICE:** What we have consistently said is that we believe that in a relationship like this that, at least at the present, is characterized by disagreement, by tension, by friction, and all of that is probably putting it lightly, that we need more communication rather than less. We think it is in our interest. We tend to think it's in the interest of our two countries, that we are able to communicate effectively and openly, and we can do that through our embassies, but our embassies need to be adequately staffed. The measures that the Russian Federation put in place on Sunday has, as we said before, forced us to let go of hundreds of our employees across our facilities in Russia. That, in turn, has a ripple effect on our ability, on the ability of our diplomats in Russia to do their jobs. We think that is quite unfortunate.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. The U.S. NSA met with the Pakistani counterpart last week. There are reports of Pakistan supporting the Taliban. Was this conveyed in this meeting to Pakistan? And what is their response?

And my second question is: As – what's the U.S.'s assessment with the meeting between the Chinese foreign minister and the senior Taliban leaders last week?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, the White House I believe did put out a readout of National Security Advisor Sullivan's meeting with his Pakistani counterpart, so I would refer you to that document. When it comes to Pakistan and its role in the region, we do appreciate Pakistan's efforts to advance the Afghan peace process and stability in South Asia, including by encouraging the Taliban to engage in substantive negotiations. Pakistan has much to gain and will continue to have a critical role, be well positioned to have a role in supporting the outcome that not only the United States seeks, but that many of our international partners, many of the countries in the region also seek. So we'll continue to work and to communicate closely with our Pakistani partners on this.

**QUESTION:** On China?

**MR PRICE:** Oh, on China. Well, we've made the point before when it comes to the PRC that this is a relationship that, to use one word, is complex. To use three terms, it is one that is oriented around competition; in some areas, it is adversarial; in some areas, it is cooperative.

Now, as you know, our deputy secretary was recently in the PRC. She had an opportunity to explore all three of those areas in a conversation that was candid and expansive. One of those areas where

there is at least the potential for some level of cooperation is Afghanistan. As we've said before, it is in no one's interest to see the country descend into all-out civil war, to see the country wracked by violence for years to come. It is in everyone's interest for – to see a solution to the conflict that is just, that is durable, that is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. If I'm not mistaken, I think I saw a statement from the PRC that used that exact term: an outcome that is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

So there is an alignment of interests, at least in some areas, when it comes to what we seek in Afghanistan, what the PRC seeks in Afghanistan, and what the broader international community seeks in Afghanistan. And we'll continue to explore how we might be able to coordinate and work together towards that shared goal.

Take a final question or two. Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on Russia for one second?

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** So you said that the U.S. is continuing to evaluate the situation regarding the embassy and the staffing. What do you mean by that? Do you mean the U.S. is questioning if they should keep open this embassy in Moscow? Do you mean you're looking at how to respond both of those things? Can you just be a little more explicit?

**MR PRICE:** Well, so of course, our embassy in Moscow does remain open. When it comes to our other facilities, operations remain suspended at the U.S. consulate general in Vladivostok. All public-facing services were halted earlier this year at our consulate general in Yekaterinburg. The CG there no longer provides consular services, including U.S. citizen services such as passport issuance, notarial services, and consular reports of birth abroad.

What we have voiced strong objection to, including from the Secretary that you saw on Friday, was the idea that because of the prohibition on the use of Russian or third country staff, that we would have to diminish some of the services and some of the operations that are – that take place at our embassy in Moscow. What I was referring to there – and obviously, we regret this decision that the Russian Federation has taken. Of course, we are going to continue to evaluate what might be appropriate – what may be an appropriate response for us to take going forward.

Said – or (inaudible).

**QUESTION:** Ned, at what level the U.S. will participate on the International Conference on Lebanon on Thursday – or Wednesday?

**MR PRICE:** I will let you know if we have anything to say ahead of that when it comes to events later this week. But you heard us reinforce last week, with the most recent developments, that we have renewed our calls to quickly form a government that is empowered and that is committed to implementing critical reforms. It is critical that Lebanese political leaders set aside their political differences and form a government that is committed to and empowered to enact these reforms. The Lebanese people for far too long have been left to, in many cases, suffer because of the political impasse, the political intransigence and inflexibility that Lebanon's political leaders have demonstrated. With the appointment of Mikati as prime minister-designate, we are renewing our calls for the Lebanese Government to make that progress, to show flexibility, and to put the interests of the Lebanese people ahead of their own political or personal interests.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I wanted to ask about Secretary's travel to India last week. How was it and what do you think were the key achievements of that trip?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry, what was the last part?

**QUESTION:** What are the main point – main achievements of his trip to India last week?

**MR PRICE:** Yeah. Well, it was – as I think you heard from us at the time, it was the Secretary's first opportunity as Secretary of State to travel to India. It was also an opportunity for us to explore ways that we can strengthen and deepen the global – the comprehensive global strategic partnership that we have with India.

The other point that we made is that we have a number of shared interests and shared values with the Government of India. We have talked about this in terms of our economic ties, in terms of our trade ties, in terms of our cooperation on climate, in terms of regional security issues, in terms of India's role as an important member of the Quad and our joint cooperation to put an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, including with the enhanced vaccine production capacity that the Quad arrived at earlier this year. And as you know, President Biden is very much looking forward to a leader-level Quad summit later this year.

But with all that, our relationship with India is one that also extends to the Indian people. The ties between the American people and the Indian people are deep, they're enduring, they are predicated on familial ties, they are predicated on mutual respect for one another's heritage and culture, and these are also ties that were on full display during not only the meetings with our government counterparts but also with elements of civil society. And the Secretary, as he almost always does, had an opportunity to visit the embassy in New Delhi and to thank not only the American diplomats who are there, but also the Indian nationals who are so important and so vital to our mission to deepen and strengthen that comprehensive global strategic partnership.

So – go ahead.

**QUESTION:** So – yeah. Sorry if I missed this. Has the Pakistani NSA, did – he had any meetings in this building, including with the Secretary?

**MR PRICE:** The national security advisor did not meet with the Secretary. As you know, we were traveling all last week. But the White House did read out his meeting with National Security Advisor Sullivan.

Thank you all very much.

**QUESTION:** Thanks.

**QUESTION:** Thanks.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:07 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – August 3, 2021](#)

*08/03/2021 09:04 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:32 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Okay, we have a few things at the top, and then we will get right to your questions. Today, as you have heard, we announced a major milestone in the administration's global vaccination efforts. The United States has now donated and shipped over 110 million vaccines around the world. In June, President Biden committed to donate at least 80 million vaccines from the U.S. supply to countries throughout the globe. Today's announcement is a fulfillment of that promise and a reassurance that we are doing this with one singular objective, and that is to save the lives of the American people and people around the world.

The first tranche of over 110 million vaccines is just the beginning, as we expect to begin shipments of the half billion Pfizer vaccines at the end of this month. We will continue to work with COVAX and our regional partners to ensure these vaccines are delivered in a way that is equitable and follows public health data. For more information on our deliveries, I encourage you to visit [state.gov/covid-19-recovery](https://state.gov/covid-19-recovery). I assume you all also saw the fact sheet that the White House put out this morning on that score.

Next, we are very concerned about the worsening conflict in northern Ethiopia and its impact on humanitarian relief efforts. We renew our calls on parties to the conflict to end hostilities and for the initiation of talks to achieve a negotiated ceasefire. We call on the TPLF to withdraw its associated military forces immediately from the Amhara and Afar regions. At the same time, we renew our calls for the Amhara regional government to withdraw immediately its associated military forces from western Tigray and for the Eritrean Government to withdraw its military forces permanently from Ethiopia. All parties should accelerate unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict, and the commercial blockade of Tigray must end.

And finally, this week the department welcomes 700 young African leaders to the virtual Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit, featuring opening remarks from Secretary Blinken. After six weeks of virtual academic study and leadership development at higher education institutions across the country, fellows will connect with other young African leaders and with the U.S. Government, business, and private sector representatives.

During the summit, fellows will hear from Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, USAID Administrator Samantha Power, Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Matt Lussenhop, and members of Congress. Fellows will also learn about U.S. foreign policy and – U.S. foreign policy priorities in Africa and discuss topics such as climate change, public health, and social justice.

Previous fellowship participants have proven that their experience extends well beyond their six-week



program. With the support of the Young African Leaders Initiative, or YALI, and the established alumni network, alumni of this fellowship will continue to build on their skills and positively impact their communities and future generations.

With that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Just semi-logistically, to start off on Ethiopia. You may or may not know that the embassy in Addis put out a – what used to be known as a warning notice, but an alert earlier today that appeared to suggest that you guys were considering kind of evacuation – I don't know – flights or convoys or something from this area. Do – one, are you aware of this? And two, is that actually what is being considered? It told people that they should right now talk to the UN about if they want to leave and relocate, but I just want to know if – is this something that is being considered?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Matt —

**QUESTION:** By the U.S.

**MR PRICE:** As you know, Matt, our posts around the world constantly update American citizens and, in turn, the broader public on the safety and security situations in any given country. That's – our embassy in Addis is no different. I don't have any actions to preview at this time, but the point we've been making for a number of weeks now – too many weeks now – is that we are gravely concerned by the ongoing violence in the Tigray region and other parts of northern Ethiopia. And we know that that fighting has more recently, as I just said, expanded into the Afar and Amhara regions. So as the safety and security conditions continue to evolve, our embassy in Addis will issue appropriate notices to the American citizen community there.

**QUESTION:** I'm aware of that. My – I was just asking if it was something – an evacuation flight —

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to preview any coming operations.

**QUESTION:** Can we – on to what – the situation in the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman. What's your understanding of the situation with these ships that appear to be – well, are in distress and potentially hijacked?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, these reports have only recently emerged. We've – we are aware of the reports of a maritime incident in the Gulf of Oman. We are concerned; we are looking into it. We are coordinating with partners, but at this point I just don't have anything more for you on it.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** Daphne.

**QUESTION:** Do you have reason to believe that Iranian-backed forces have seized the tanker in the Arabian Sea, as has been suggested?

**MR PRICE:** It's far too premature for us to render a judgment. As I've said, these reports are just emerging. They are concerning, certainly, at first blush. We are looking to learn more. We will continue to share information and coordinate with our partners as we do learn more.

**QUESTION:** Would you agree, though, that the vast majority or, in fact, all incidents like this have either been – you have eventually determined that either Iran or its proxies were behind them, right?

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** In that specific location? It's not as if you think the Canadians are behind this, right?

**MR PRICE:** As we said in the context of the Iranian attack on the *Mercer Street*, we have seen a very disturbing pattern of belligerence from Iran, including belligerence in the maritime domain. So yes, that is absolutely the case. But when it comes to this specific incident, it's too early for us to offer a judgment just yet.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yes, to remain on Iran, as the new president is sworn in, do you regret, as Israel, that the European Union sent representative to the ceremony in Tehran? And also with Iran, have you heard indirectly from Europeans or other partners anything about when and how the negotiations in Vienna could resume, if they will?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we would need to refer you to the EU to speak to their decision to send a representative to —

**QUESTION:** I was asking for your reaction to their decision, not the decision.

**MR PRICE:** Sure. We don't have a reaction to offer. We would need to refer you to them for comment.

When it comes to the negotiations and the seventh round that has yet to be announced, we've made very clear that we continue to believe that an Iran that is permanently and verifiably prohibited from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon is in our interests. And we continue to believe that diplomacy offers the most viable, most effective path forward. That is why we have said for several weeks now that we are prepared to return to Vienna to resume those indirect negotiations towards a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

We've also said for a couple weeks now, however, that it's very clear that officials in Iran, in the Iranian Government — they have decisions to make within their own system about the course they want to pursue. Obviously we're in the midst of a transition in Iran. We continue to believe it's in our national interest. We continue to coordinate and to be in close contact with our partners and allies in the P5+1. There is a great deal of consensus and shared conviction among that group, within that group, that Iran must not be allowed to ever obtain a nuclear weapon. And the United States, we continue to stand with our partners and allies and we continue to be prepared to engage in that endeavor diplomatically.

**QUESTION:** But you don't know how and when they will resume?

**MR PRICE:** Again, it is clear that the Iranian Government has decisions to make about the course they wish to pursue. As the Secretary said the other day in New Delhi, the ball is very much in Iran's court. We are prepared to resume those diplomatic negotiations precisely because we feel it is in our interest to do so.

**QUESTION:** And any update on the reaction to the attack on the Israeli ship?

**MR PRICE:** Any update on the reaction to —

**QUESTION:** The response.

**MR PRICE:** The response. So you heard the Secretary speak to this yesterday. We have offered our deepest condolences to the families, to the loved ones of the deceased, the — to the British and

Romanian governments. And we will continue working with our partners and allies to address this attack. We are confident, as we said over the weekend and as the Secretary reiterated yesterday, that Iran was responsible for this attack. We are working with those partners, with those allies to consider those next steps. We are consulting with governments inside the region and beyond on an appropriate response, and an appropriate response will be forthcoming.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On the EU's participation in Raisi's taking oath of office on Thursday, okay, you said that you have no reaction to that. But did they consult with the State Department letting you know that they were – they had been invited, that they're going?

**MR PRICE:** We consult very closely with the EU on just about every subject imaginable. I'm not in a position to read out specific diplomatic consultations. I also would note that the EU foreign minister issued a public statement explaining the EU's belief that open lines of communication are a good thing. But again, we are not – it's not up to us to comment on that decision. You need to – we would need to refer you to the EU for that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And you just said that – okay, and you've been saying that you're ready for the seventh round of the negotiations in Vienna and that the ball is in Iran's court. I'm sure you remember that when Zarif's report to their parliament came out, after that there was reaction from within the country that the national security council, their national security council, was saying that the – what the U.S. had offered in terms of sanctions relief did not meet with the standard or with their law on the subject. And they're saying that now the ball is in the U.S. court, actually. So how is this going to work out?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it's very clear and it's very simple. We are prepared to return to Vienna to resume these indirect negotiations in close coordination with our P5+1 partners and allies – some of our closest allies in the world in the form of our European allies, along with Russia and China, as well as the EU as a bloc in this case.

So there should be no question we are prepared to do so. It is also beyond question, I would say, that the Iranians have some decisions to make. They are in the midst of a transition. We've all seen the reports that have emerged from Tehran in recent days in the context of that transition, but the Iranians are the ones who will need to make decisions going forward about how they would like to pursue this endeavor.

**QUESTION:** One more question. Today there was a report by a semi-official news agency close to their national security council that somebody – an official, unnamed official – had said that the Raisi government is going to take the prisoner exchange subject off the table. Have you heard anything? And if so, what would – how would the U.S. negotiate, continue negotiations especially on – in this aspect?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we've seen that report. We have said all along that securing the release of these unjustly detained American citizens is an absolute priority for us. We have engaged in discussions towards this end precisely because it is such a priority for us. We will not stop pursuing their release until they are able to be safely united with their families. We will pursue any and all means to seek that through available channels, because it does remain such a priority for us.

**QUESTION:** Ned, can I just – just in the context of what's been going on over the last couple of months with Iran since the indirect talks resumed or started in Vienna, you have the Houthis increasing their offensive in Marib and the situation in Yemen getting worse. Presumably, you think that these people are Iran-affiliated, Iran-tied, and that they take their orders from Tehran.

You have the DOJ charging Iranian agents with attempting to kidnap journalists from the United States. You have the attack on the *Mercer Street* vessel, which was a deadly attack. And you have this – whether or not this report today is true about the prisoners, you have Abbas Araghchi's comments from the other week that you personally labeled outrageous and said they were ridiculous.

So my – this is my question: Is there anything that you can think of that Iran could do that would make you say, no, I'm sorry, we're not interested in going back to the talks in Vienna because you have shown on virtually every level no goodwill at all? Is there anything that you can think of that Iran might do that would make the talks – that would make you uninterested in continuing?

**MR PRICE:** What I would say, Matt, first of all, is that I think the timeline requires some context. It – these activities, the broad swath of these activities, don't date to January of 2021. They don't date to the start of the talks in Vienna later this year. Across virtually every realm, whether it is the maritime realm, whether it is support for proxies and for militants throughout the region, whether it is across every challenge we face – of course, the nuclear program and the advancements that Iran has made – that dates not from 2021, but I think you can trace quite a bit of that to 2018.

And the point we have made is that under the last administration we were promised, the American people were told, that a strategy of so-called maximum pressure would cow Iran into submission on every front, that it would lead to a better – so-called better deal on the nuclear program, that it would keep Iran from providing funding and supplies and support to its proxies, that Iran would be deterred from undertaking attacks in the maritime realm against our partners in Iraq, even against American forces in Iraq. Quite the opposite has happened since 2018.

**QUESTION:** So this is —

**MR PRICE:** And —

**QUESTION:** So your position is that this is all the Trump administration's fault?

**MR PRICE:** No, I – my point is that as long —

**QUESTION:** Because I'm old enough to remember there was a night when President Obama was about to deliver the State of the Union, and the Iranians took a bunch of American sailors prisoner during a period of quote/unquote rapprochement.

**MR PRICE:** And do you remember how that ended? Now 12 —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I do remember. But it still happened.

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** And so I – so bad Iranian behavior has been going on for years and years even —

**MR PRICE:** Oh, I'm not —

**QUESTION:** — even during —

**MR PRICE:** I am not —

**QUESTION:** — the lifetime of —

**MR PRICE:** I'm not arguing with that.

**QUESTION:** Even during your participation in the JCPOA.

**MR PRICE:** I'm —

**QUESTION:** Right?

**MR PRICE:** No one —

**QUESTION:** So it's a bit – it's a bit rich to say that all of this is the Trump administration's fault when it – when yesterday you were asked in a completely different context about who's responsible for the increase in violence in Afghanistan, and you said, rightly, that it is the Taliban who is responsible for that increase.

So saying that – the suggestion that all of what Iran is doing now and has been doing for the last couple weeks, the last couple of months, is the fault of the previous administration —

**MR PRICE:** It is —

**QUESTION:** — is a bit hard to take.

**MR PRICE:** It is – the point that is undeniably true is that Iran has acted with a greater degree of impunity since the shackles on its nuclear program have been removed.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** You have heard this from us before because we sincerely believe it and it is very much true that —

**QUESTION:** Okay. But the bottom line, my question —

**MR PRICE:** — that Iran has license – feels that it has license, I should say —

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** — to do these things that in many cases it was not doing before.

**QUESTION:** Let me try to get an answer to the question that I asked at the beginning, which was just: Is there anything that you can think of that they could do or they would do that would make you uninterested in returning to – or that would take the offer of returning to the Vienna talks off the table?

**MR PRICE:** I am not going to weigh in on a hypothetical, on a blue-sky hypothetical at that. What I would say is that it will always be in the interest of the United States of America to see to it that Iran is permanently and verifiably prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon. It is hard for me to imagine – again, without being categorical about this – to – where we would arrive at a point where we would say —

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** — Iran should have a nuclear weapon.

**QUESTION:** Well – all right, well, you changed it a little bit. But basically, you're saying there's nothing that Iran could do that would make you take the offer of talks —

**MR PRICE:** No, I – those words did not come out of my mouth. I —

**QUESTION:** Well, I know.

**MR PRICE:** The words that came out of my mouth were —

**QUESTION:** All right, I'll stop.

**MR PRICE:** — it will always be in the interest of the United States of America —

**QUESTION:** And I won't say another word.

**QUESTION:** Ned?

**QUESTION:** South Africa?

**QUESTION:** Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** We'll go to Afghanistan and then South Africa.

**QUESTION:** Do you — does the State Department have a response to the blast in central Kabul today that reportedly was targeting the acting defense minister?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have seen — of course, we have seen the reports that have emerged today. I'm not in a position to attribute it officially just yet, but of course, it does bear all the hallmarks of the spate of Taliban attacks that we have seen in recent weeks. We unequivocally condemn the bombing and we continue to stand by our partners, our Afghan partners.

I think the broader point in all of this is that there is broad international consensus that there is no military solution to the conflict, and that is why we're looking at ways and means by which we can help accelerate the peace negotiations that are ongoing. It's important — I'd make a couple points. It's important for the Taliban to recognize that it cannot achieve its objectives by seizing power through violence, and if it seeks to do so, it will repeat history and become, as you heard from the Secretary, an international pariah. The history of Afghanistan over the last — decades, 40, 50 years, is very clear. It indicates that an effort by one side or one party to impose its will on others results only in bloodshed, only in instability, only in violence, and Afghan leaders at this moment have a unique opportunity — really for the first time in decades — to build a country that is stable, that is sovereign, that — the point we made yesterday — in which all Afghans are able to live in safety and security. And seizing this opportunity, it's in everyone's interests. And that's why we've been encouraging both sides, the Islamic Republic and the Taliban, to take advantage of this, because it's in the interests of the Afghan people as well.

The wise thing to do is for both sides to engage seriously and urgently in the peace negotiations to respond to the wishes of the Afghan people for a political agreement. We — it's very clear the two sides have disagreements, but they need to put the interests of their country and the future of the Afghan people first.

The simple point is that there is no path to a stable Afghanistan that is at peace with itself and the world without a political agreement, and that's — this is not — this is something that you've heard from me, you've heard from the State Department, especially in recent weeks. But I want to reiterate the point that there is broad buy-in from the international community that this is the case.

Let me give you just a few examples. The extended "Troika," which includes Russia, China, and Pakistan, issued a statement that said: "We reiterate...there is no military solution in Afghanistan and a negotiated political settlement through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process is the only way forward for lasting peace and stability..." The U.S.-Europe communique, which includes the EU,

France, Germany, Italy, NATO, Norway, and the UK: “We reaffirm...there is no military solution to the conflict, we stand by Resolution 2513...we do not support any government in Afghanistan imposed through military force.” The C5+1, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan: “here is no support for the imposition by force of a new government in Afghanistan.” The joint statement of diplomatic missions in Iran – this includes Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, the EU, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, NATO, Spain, Sweden, and the UK – call for an urgent end to the Taliban’s ongoing military offensive. We join in calling on the Taliban and all parties to immediately end the violence, to agree to a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, and engage fully in peace negotiations to end the suffering of the Afghan people.

You heard with Secretary Blinken just the other day in New Delhi, his Indian counterpart, Foreign Minister Jaishankar, he said similarly: “nilateral imposition of will by any party will obviously not be democratic and can never lead to stability, nor indeed can such efforts ever acquire legitimacy.”

So we – this is the position of the international community. That matters not only for purposes of legitimacy of any future government, but for very practical purposes that are imperative to durability, and that includes but is not limited to humanitarian assistance, to international assistance, to the assistance that any future government of Afghanistan would need if it is to achieve that durability.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up?

**MR PRICE:** Yeah, sorry. Sorry, we’ll follow up.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, I just wanted to follow up on two things.

**MR PRICE:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** First off, clearly factions of the Taliban believe that there is a military solution. So is the United States prepared to deny them of that military victory? Is that what you’re saying?

**MR PRICE:** The Taliban has said otherwise. Now, again, their actions —

**QUESTION:** They’re not acting —

**MR PRICE:** Actions are going to speak louder than words, of course. They continue to be engaged in Doha. So look, we’re going to be looking to their actions. They have said that they see the utility of a negotiated solution. They are engaged in Doha. But the simple point remains that if they attempt and seek to do otherwise, if they seek to contravene what they have said, then they will be an international pariah. They won’t have the support of their people. They won’t have the support of the international community. And the concern on the part of all of us – one of many concerns – is that the result will be civil war, will be a civil war in which the Afghan people do not have and won’t be in a position to achieve the safety and security in which they deserve to live.

**QUESTION:** Okay, so you’re not prepared to say that the U.S. will militarily deny them victory.

**MR PRICE:** The President has been very clear that we went into Afghanistan with a singular mission, and that was to defeat the network that was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and to ensure that Afghanistan could not become a staging ground for attacks on the United States going forward. We’ve achieved that mission. In the first instance, Osama bin Laden was killed more than 10 years ago. The network behind the 9/11 attacks has been decimated for many years now. And we continue to retain

the capacity, as you've heard from the military and President Biden and others, to see to it that Afghanistan does not become a staging ground, cannot become a staging ground for attacks against the United States.

All the while, we will continue to support the diplomacy. We will continue to rally the international community. We will continue to do all we can to achieve this negotiated settlement which the Afghan Government is behind, which the Taliban says it's behind, and which, as I just rattled off, the international community is absolutely behind.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** You can say that the international community is behind it, but for three years we've been in Doha. The Taliban is not committed to the peace talks. It's very, very clear. Just yesterday, Embassy Kabul said that the massacre of civilians could be war crimes. So why continue with the fiction of Doha when the Taliban is in civil war and, for all intents and purposes, they're killing civilians as well as targeting officials? What is the point of being in Doha or even participating in it to give them the cover of being involved in peace negotiations?

**MR PRICE:** Doha is a tactic. We're in Doha because we believe, the international community believes, the Government of Afghanistan believes, and the Taliban say they believe that diplomacy is —

**QUESTION:** But it's a failure.

**MR PRICE:** Is — has it achieved the results any of us want? Of course not, not yet. But we're not ready to throw in the towel on diplomacy.

**QUESTION:** Isn't it political cover for withdrawal? You inherited the withdrawal. For what other purpose are we still there?

**MR PRICE:** The diplomacy began well before the withdrawal.

**QUESTION:** Three years ago.

**MR PRICE:** Right.

**QUESTION:** And nothing has been achieved. They've never agreed to anything substantive in terms of a permanent solution.

**MR PRICE:** These are parties that until relatively recently were not speaking to one another. So progress has been too slow. It has been too incremental. It has not achieved what we ultimately want it to achieve. But the United States and the international community and the Government of Afghanistan and, at the very least, elements of the Taliban are behind this. And in the case of the Taliban, they say they're behind it. So again, look, we're going to judge them based on their actions. Their actions to date have sent a different message, but we are going to continue to do all we can to facilitate, to galvanize, to organize that diplomacy because we are confident, the international community is confident, these dozens of countries and international coalitions that I just mentioned are confident that only through diplomacy can we bring about a stable, secure, peaceful Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** Ned, is the U.S. helping?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** Is the U.S. helping the Afghan military to defend the cities, especially by providing Air Force or —



**MR PRICE:** I would refer you to DOD on that. They've spoken to discrete operations in recent days, but I would need to refer you to them to comment on that.

Nick.

**QUESTION:** A follow-up.

**MR PRICE:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** There were two people who suggested that the military strategy did offer a potential way forward, and that was today. Special Envoy Khalilzad and then David Petraeus also said that essentially the Afghan Government needs to find its military bearings and come up with a new military strategy, and it's essentially too weak to negotiate a political settlement. That was Special Envoy Khalilzad, and then David Petraeus said that the U.S. Government – the only way it would be able to reverse the Taliban gains was by restoring a situation where it was providing close air support and reconnaissance. Is that something that the administration would consider doing? And could you give us additional context on what Special Envoy Khalilzad meant when he said that the Afghan Government needs to find its military bearing?

**MR PRICE:** So to the first part of your question, this gets back to the original mission that was set out for us in Afghanistan 20 years ago. October of 2001 we went in to defeat the al-Qaida network that was responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Osama bin Laden was brought to justice 10 years ago. Afghanistan ever since has not been able to be a staging ground for attacks against the United States, and we retain the capabilities to see to it that terrorist groups aren't in a position to reconstitute and pose that sort of threat going forward.

So President Biden, this administration, has been very clear that our military has accomplished what was asked of it. It is now the function of other elements of the administration, including in large part the State Department, to do all we can, including diplomatically, to bring about the stable, secure Afghanistan that has eluded us not for the past few months, not for the past decade, not for the past two decades, but, for many reasons, for the past 40 years. So that is what we're working on. And we are using a number of tools at our disposal. In the first instance and certainly from this building, diplomacy is at the top of that list.

Now, when you talk about – in reference to Special Envoy Khalilzad's remarks today, the special envoy has been very clear that there is no military solution to this. The special envoy has been at the forefront of our efforts. I mean, this has been the guiding principle behind Doha, and special – Ambassador Khalilzad was and is an architect of Doha, bringing the parties together, supporting the parties in their diplomacy.

Now, what he was referring to today were tactical decisions that the Government of Afghanistan may be in a position to make to thwart some of those Taliban gains as they approach major power centers. His remarks I believe are public, but that's the gist of it. This is not about there being a military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, because there is not one.

**QUESTION:** So just to follow up, then sort of in parallel with what Matt was asking you about Iran, given attacks on defense forces, on the defense minister, on these troops some weeks ago who tried to surrender, is there anything that the Taliban can do – you say actions speak louder than words – is there anything that they can do that would cause you to essentially say that the Doha process will amount to nothing and ought to be ended?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, it is fair to say that we believe – and I think it is fair to say at least for the foreseeable future we will continue to believe – that only through diplomacy can we achieve a just and

durable political settlement, and the point is that only a just outcome can be a durable one. And this goes back to what we've said before. Any party, any element that seeks to take Afghanistan by force, that rules in – without regard or respect for the basic rights of the Afghan people – that, in our minds and in the minds of the international community, is not likely to be a durable outcome. Because that party won't have legitimacy, won't have the support of the international community, won't have the financial support that the international community is able to provide.

**QUESTION:** I just – I mean, I – not to get too philosophical about it, but I just don't see where you guys sort of get that argument from. I mean, history is littered with examples of powers that took – governments that took power via military force and remained extremely durable. I mean, look at the Vietnam War for example. The Government of Vietnam is now obviously becoming almost a strategic partner with the United States after having defeated it in that war. They took power by force. Where do you get this idea that somehow a government that achieves power via military means is not going to remain durable?

**MR PRICE:** It's not our idea. This is an idea that is a consensus view. It is commonly held. And the fact that it is commonly held is an element of proof itself. The list of countries and the collections of countries that I just went through, speaking to the fact that there's no military solution, that there is no support for the imposition by force of a new government of Afghanistan – the fact that all of these countries have signed on to that sentiment, have repeated it – it is a deeply held conviction – should be a very strong signal to the Taliban, to any other party in Afghanistan that they are not going to have legitimacy, but more important – more practically, they're not going to have that international support that a government, a fledgling government, would need.

**QUESTION:** And —

**MR PRICE:** I skipped over, yes, South Africa. I'm sorry.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. So my question is going to be South Africa, but then sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, if I can.

**MR PRICE:** Mm-hmm, sure.

**QUESTION:** By the way, good to see you again, Ned.

**MR PRICE:** Yes, thank you, Pearl.

**QUESTION:** There is vaccine hesitancy everywhere, not just in Africa, but a lot of what is on the minds of South Africans is driven by misinformation and increasing their fear. And yes, I did see the fact sheet that came out of the White House today, which is great – the 5.66 million doses that arrived in Johannesburg on the 31st.

All of that is well and good. I'm wondering if you can help dispel of this notion that free donations from the United States – that you are simply dumping vaccines in Africa after initially having kept vaccines for yourselves and for Americans. These fears, Ned, I think sometimes possibly stemmed from the contaminated Johnson & Johnson vaccines in South Africa in June – had to dispose of 2 million doses. So I'm wondering if you could articulate for South Africans right now who are doubting.

And there are a lot of reports from Eastern Bloc countries that are pushing this misinformation and it is increasing this misinformation and fear. So now, millions of South Africans don't actually want to take these vaccines that are coming, and this is going cross-border into Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and so on, where there is the third phase continuing there. So if you could speak to that.

I do have another question.

**MR PRICE:** Let me take that one, and then —

**QUESTION:** Sure, sure.

**MR PRICE:** And it's a really important question and I appreciate the opportunity to speak to it. I would start by saying that President Biden, when he announced that the United States would be — would provide an arsenal of vaccines for the world, announced that the United States would be sharing 80 million doses from our own domestic stockpile.

To be very clear, these are the same brand names, the same vaccines that go into the arms of and that have gone into the arms of the American people. We seek to ensure safe and effective vaccines are delivered in a way that is efficient, that is equitable, and that follows the latest science and public health data. The vaccine doses the U.S. Government is donating internationally — we know they are safe. They are effective. They have received emergency use authorizations from both the FDA and the WHO on the international level, and they're the same vaccines that we are making available to the American people. That's the 80 million that has since turned into 110 million.

Of course, the President has also said that starting next month, we would begin shipping the half a billion doses — and these are Pfizer, and millions of Americans have received doses of the Pfizer vaccine that, again, are safe and, importantly, effective. Now, you're absolutely right —

**QUESTION:** So Ned, are more vaccines going in August or are the — a portion of the allocation from the half billion only going to start going out in September? Can you just, like — how is that working out?

**MR PRICE:** The — my understanding is that the shipments of those half a billion Pfizer vaccines will start later this month — excuse me, August.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** Now, you did raise the point of misinformation and disinformation. It's a real one. It is a problem. It's a challenge that is being faced the world over. We believe that the best antidote to misinformation and disinformation is information, which is why we appreciate the opportunity to speak to it, to make the point that these vaccines are safe and effective.

We also know that disinformation magnifies the risk of potential — magnifies the risk of the pandemic. Until and unless people the world over are vaccinated — that is to say people feel safe accepting a vaccine — no one will be safe. We have seen recently with the Delta variant that as long as this virus is circulating anywhere, it is a threat to people everywhere, including Americans here at home, people around the world. So that is why it is an urgent priority for us to see the fair and equitable distribution of these vaccines just as we're doing what we can to put out truthful information to counter some of this misinformation and disinformation.

**QUESTION:** So I just want to follow up. It's great to see that we have got a senior State Department official actually in the region right now, Amb. Nuland, which is great. So I wanted to find out — I did ask a few months ago about how far away we were to actually seeing an assistant secretary of state appointed. I know Deputy Secretary Sherman was on the Hill today testifying, mentioned something about that.

But how far along are we, and what prompted her specific visit? Because there's a lot going on in the region right now after the looting and riots in South Africa. The eye, kind of, was not focused on the monarchy issue in Eswatini, so we've got issues boiling up there. You've got the northern Mozambique

Cabo Delgado issue, although DOD and Cutlass Express just finished their military exercises on maritime domain awareness in that region. I'm seeing that South Africa has not been invited in participating in those military exercises.

I looked at the State Department FY22 budget as well as DOD's. I don't expect you to speak to DOD today, but I don't see enough money under the security cooperation aspect that perhaps might help these types of exercises and see countries like South Africa becoming one of your leading partners on the continent, as you're doing, perhaps, with Ghana and Kenya.

So we've got multiple issues going on there. We've got China, Russia, increasing influences involved with Tanzania and so on. So what prompted Amb. Nuland's visit? How far along are we to actually seeing an assistant secretary of (inaudible)? And when will we see a Biden Africa doctrine?

**MR PRICE:** Lots of questions. Let me try and take them in turn.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** So first, Deputy Secretary Sherman is on the Hill testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee today on the administration's position on the authorization for the use of military force and describing where it is we stand on the need for a narrow and specific framework that will ensure that the President, the Executive Branch, can continue to have the authority to protect against threats while ending these so-called forever wars, which is a priority of the President.

As you know, the President has put forward a nominee for our African Affairs Bureau, Molly Phee. She is a tremendous public servant, someone who has deep experience in AF, someone who knows the continent and its issues inside and out. You heard the Secretary yesterday when he was right here make the case that the dozens of nominees who – State Department nominees who are awaiting their confirmations that we have urged the Senate to move expeditiously given the number of challenges, threats, and opportunities we face the world over. So yes, we feel that it is an urgent matter for us to have an assistant secretary for the African Affairs Bureau. We feel it's an urgent matter for us to have an assistant secretary of our Bureau of South and Central Asia, as we talked about Afghanistan. We need a Senate-confirmed assistant secretary for our East Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau, given the relationship we have with the PRC, our investment in the Indo-Pacific, the ongoing collaboration with ASEAN, as the Secretary is doing right now. We've talked quite a bit about our Near Eastern Affairs Bureau in the context of this briefing already today. It's important for us to have a Senate-confirmed assistant secretary there. I could go down the list, and there are dozens there.

So again, we are encouraging and doing all we can to facilitate their swift confirmation because we too would like to see —

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you a follow-up question? I'm sensing a contentious relationship with Zimbabwe in between things going back and forth between the Zimbabwean Government spokesperson, President Mnangagwa's spokesperson, and the U.S. embassy. What are you doing to improve your engagement with Zimbabwe and to see that getting better?

I know that, for instance, in the Trump administration, Zimbabwe had already been singled out as an adversary along with Iran and China. I know national security officials in the White House had done so. We've had a whole string in the last decade of these contentious relationships. What, if anything, are you doing in terms of maybe strengthening democracy specifically to Zimbabwe, if you can speak to that? Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have made very clear that we are a steadfast friend of the people of Zimbabwe. Over the years, we provided more than \$3.5 billion in assistance. That sum is the amount we provided

since Zimbabwe achieved its independence in 1980. We share the Zimbabwean people's aspirations for a country that offers democracy, justice, human rights, prosperity for all, supporting human rights, supporting these values in Africa and around the world. It is absolutely a priority for us and we'll continue to work on ways to support those aspirations of the Zimbabwean people.

Rich.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. China's Foreign Ministry has responded to the House Foreign Affairs minority staff's report on the COVID origins as "concocted lies and distorted facts." I'm just wondering if this administration has reviewed that report. It's a lot of open-source, circumstantial information, but is it something that the administration is using or has used to inform its investigation into COVID's origins?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Rich, we are working this aggressively on a number of fronts. Number one, the Secretary met with Director-General Tedros in – last week when we were on travel in New Delhi. And —

**QUESTION:** No, no, no.

**MR PRICE:** Where did we meet with him?

**QUESTION:** In Kuwait.

**MR PRICE:** In Kuwait, correct. I'm sorry. We met with him in Kuwait. Because – and it was during that meeting that Secretary Blinken and the director-general agreed on the need for a phase two WHO study that is guided by nothing more than science, expertise, in a way that is unbiased, that is apolitical, that is free from interference. We continue to believe that is imperative. It is not just the United States that believes that. As you'll recall, it was a couple months ago now that we, together with about a dozen or so of our partners and allies around the world, issued a joint statement. A number of other countries issued their own similar joint statements calling for this phase two study.

But that is not all we're doing. President Biden has requested, as you know, the U.S. Intelligence Community to redouble its efforts to collect and analyze information relevant to the origins of COVID-19 and to report back on their analysis and their recommendations for area of further inquiry that may be required, including specific questions for the PRC. The administration is looking forward to the results of that analysis and we'll keep working with our likeminded partners around the world to press the PRC to participate, like I said, in a full, transparent, evidence-based international investigation and to provide access to all relevant data and evidence.

For us, this is incredibly important. It is not only about the past. It is important that we understand the origins of this virus for many reasons, including going forward as well. This is about understanding how we can see to it that an outbreak does not again become an epidemic, and that an epidemic does not again become a pandemic. That's our goal. That's why we're working so aggressively and so focused on this.

**QUESTION:** Would the U.S. consider consequences, sanctions, penalties of any sort if there were, in fact, no phase two investigation in China, which the Chinese Government has given no indication – in fact, quite the opposite?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, I don't want to get ahead of it. We are determined and we know we have – we know there is an absolute imperative for us to do all we can to get to the bottom of this, not only

for the question of accountability but also for the important question of how we can save lives going forward.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on Tunisia, President Saied has terminated the mission of the Tunisian ambassador to Washington. Are you aware of that and do you have any comment?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we, as you've heard from the Secretary and others, we are directly engaged with Tunisian leaders. We urge President Saied to provide a clear roadmap to quickly lift the emergency measures and return Tunisia to its democratic path. The Secretary had an opportunity to speak with President Saied. He was very clear in his message, as you heard directly from Secretary Blinken; I believe it was yesterday that National Security Advisor Sullivan had an opportunity to do the same. Tunisia's leadership is hearing a clear and unequivocal message from the United States about the imperative of returning Tunisia to that democratic path.

**QUESTION:** And anything on the ambassador? And do you consider what happened as a coup d'etat?

**MR PRICE:** Again, this – it's been a fluid situation. Our focus is on encouraging Tunisian leaders to adhere to the Tunisian constitution and to quickly return to normal, democratic governance. In some ways more important than the question of labels is the critical work of supporting Tunisia in its return to that democratic path, and that's what we're focused on right now.

Yeah, Ben.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. On the Secretary's engagement with ASEAN countries this week, during yesterday's background briefing the State Department officials mentioned that he would have an opportunity to address China on issues like human rights. I'm just wondering when he addresses China in front of ASEAN members and other regional countries, what's his messaging going to be like, sort of the tone of his message? Will it be sort of conciliatory, or will it be more like when he met his counterparts in Alaska where he used very strong language?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think the message that he will relay – and of course, he has engagements with our ASEAN partners every day this week – is the message you've heard him relay in public, and that is the fact that the United States is not here to force countries, to force the international community, to have a binary choice. It's not a question of the U.S. or China.

What we are going to hear and what was reflected last night in the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, what will be on high display tonight during the U.S.-ASEAN Ministerial and the events throughout the course of the week, are the shared values that we have with our ASEAN partners. ASEAN is in many ways predicated on not only the shared interests – and that does include an interest in a free and open Indo-Pacific – but the shared values that, to us, are key to ASEAN centrality in our strategic partnership with ASEAN.

What brings this group of countries together is that we do have some common concerns. Some of those concerns we have in the context of the PRC, but we also are united in our shared values. And again, many of those shared values are not irrelevant to the challenges we've seen from a PRC that is more repressive at home and more regressive – more aggressive in the region.

**QUESTION:** And one – just second question. Japan's foreign minister will also be participating in a couple of the meetings. Do you have anything you can say on any prospects of U.S.-Japan-ASEAN cooperation that might come out of this week's meetings?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have anything specific to add on that. Obviously, our bilateral relationship with Japan is – it is a treaty ally. The number of shared interests and shared values there are profound. We've talked about our trilateral cooperation with Japan and the ROK and the importance there in securing that vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and in the context of the DPRK as well. But always, we support ties and deepening relationships between our friends and allies in the region, and ASEAN and Japan certainly fall into that category.

Yes. Please.

**QUESTION:** On North Korea. So last week, we learned that South Korea and North Korea, the leaders exchanged letters in April. So I'm wondering if any letters have been exchanged between the United States and North Korea, because it's been more than four months since you've completed the policy review on North Korea, and we learned – I mean, we know that you've reached out to North Korea. But where are we? I mean, what's the current status of the North Korean issue? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to the inter-Korean communication, let me just say that the United States supports inter-Korean dialogue and engagement, and we welcome the announcement on the restoration of inter-Korean communication lines. We believe that is a positive step, and we believe it's a positive step because diplomacy and dialogue are essential to achieving the complete denuclearization and to establishing permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula. And as you know, those were key conclusions of our recently concluded DPRK policy review.

As you also know, we have reached out to the DP – the regime in the DPRK. I don't have an update for you on any response, but I will say that our offer remains to meet, as you've heard from Ambassador Sung Kim, anytime, anywhere, without preconditions. It's up to the DPRK to respond positively to that outreach.

**QUESTION:** What about in ASEAN? I mean, the Secretary, we know that he's not going to be – will be having a meeting with North Korea. But have you proposed any – like the meeting or suggested to North Korea to maybe be able to participate in that meeting with the Secretary?

**MR PRICE:** Has North Korea been proposed to —

**QUESTION:** No. Have you proposed maybe North Korea to maybe – as a – maybe a chance to having a maybe conversation with that ASEAN —

**MR PRICE:** I don't believe it's been raised in that context, no.

**MR PRICE:** Daphne, last question.

**QUESTION:** An (inaudible) Belarusian activist was found hanged in a park in Kyiv. Does the State Department have any comment on this? His colleagues accused the Belarusian security services of murdering him. Does the U.S. have any reason to believe that's the case?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we are deeply saddened by the reports of the tragic death of Mr. Vitaly Shishov. We will continue to closely monitor the Ukrainian authorities' investigation into the cause of his death. Mr. Shishov was an important member of the Belarusian civil society and had been forced to live outside his country due to the repression and ongoing crackdown on journalists, on civil society, on political opposition, on athletes and ordinary citizens by the Lukashenko regime.

We condemn in the strongest terms the ongoing violent crackdown on Belarusian civil society and transnational repression by the Lukashenko regime. We've seen alarming incidents of that in recent weeks alone. Of course, Ryan Air is top of mind, as is the incident at the Olympics just this week.

And so we'll continue to monitor the regime's actions very closely and renew our call for an end to the crackdown, the immediate release of all political prisoners. A genuine dialogue with the opposition and civil society is called for in the OSCE Expert Mission Report, and free and fair elections with international observations.

Now, when it comes to the death of Mr. Shishov, we'll continue to closely monitor the investigation. And – but we would refer you to Ukrainian authorities for comment.

Very quick, yes.

**QUESTION:** Any announcement ahead of the Lebanon conference tomorrow in Paris, anything new you have?

**MR PRICE:** So I do —

**QUESTION:** Participation and contribution.

**MR PRICE:** So I don't have any details to preview in terms of a contribution. As you may know, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield will be sitting in the chair for the United States, and I would expect very high-level U.S. participation.

Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:33 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – August 12, 2021](#)

*08/12/2021 06:04 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:04 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Let me start by saying that our first responsibility has always been protecting the safety and the security of our citizens serving in Afghanistan and around the world. As we have said all along, the increased tempo of the Taliban military engagement and the resulting increase in violence and instability across Afghanistan is of grave concern. Our embassy in Kabul has been on ordered departure since April 27th, and we've been evaluating the security situation every day to determine how best to keep those serving at our embassy safe. This is what we do for every diplomatic post in a challenging security environment.

Accordingly, we are further reducing our civilian footprint in Kabul in light of the evolving security situation. We expect to draw down to a core diplomatic presence in Afghanistan in the coming weeks. In order to facilitate this reduction, the Department of Defense will temporarily deploy additional personnel to Hamid Karzai International Airport. Secretary Blinken, together with Secretary Austin, had an opportunity to speak with President Ghani to coordinate our planning earlier today.

Let me be very clear about this: The embassy remains open and we plan to continue our diplomatic work in Afghanistan. The United States will continue to support consular services, and that includes the processing and operations of the Special Immigrant Visa program, and will continue to engage in diplomacy with the Afghan Government and the Afghan people. Additionally, we will continue our focus on counterterrorism.

At the same time, our efforts to relocate interested and qualified Afghan SIV applicants will continue to ramp up. To date, Operation Allies Refuge has brought more – has brought to the United States more than 1,200 Afghans who worked side by side with Americans in Afghanistan. That includes interpreters and translators, along with their families. Additional flights will begin landing daily, and you're going to see the total number grow very quickly in the coming days and the coming weeks.

We'll begin implementing these measures soon in close coordination with allies and partners. For operational security reasons, I can't go further – into further details on the next steps, but as we have long said, we are committed to supporting Afghanistan and its people. That commitment remains.

**QUESTION:** Just one logistical thing on the flights that you just mentioned, on the – that they'll be landing daily. Was the – you gave some numbers a couple days ago – two days ago, maybe.

**MR PRICE:** That's right.

**QUESTION:** 995 – is that still —

**MR PRICE:** We were at 995.

**QUESTION:** Is that still the number, or —

**MR PRICE:** We're at 1,200 as of today.

**QUESTION:** Oh, I'm sorry, did I miss that at the opening? Sorry.

And then – and these new flights starting daily. Like today, tomorrow?

**MR PRICE:** They'll start daily in the coming days. Our focus is on increasing the tempo of our relocation operations. As we've said, we have a solemn, a sincere responsibility to these brave Afghans – in many circumstances, in many cases at great personal risk to themselves have worked with the United States over the past 20 years. We're going to honor that responsibility and increase the pace of those relocation flights.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And then – and I'm sorry I missed that at the top. And then on the embassy, when you say it will remain open, will it remain open in its current location?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me be very clear, because this is a point I want to leave no uncertainty about: The embassy remains open. We continue our diplomatic work, our diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. We will continue to do the priority functions. That includes supporting peace, security, assistance, cooperation on counterterrorism; consular services, as we've been talking about, especially in the context of the Special Immigrant Visa program. We are always, as I said at the top, reviewing the environment in especially complex operating environments, and of course, that includes Kabul.

And so today's announcement is really a continuation of one of our most important responsibilities, and that is doing all we can to ensure the safety, security, the welfare, the well-being of our people. As you know, we went on ordered departure in Kabul on April 27th with an eye to the security environment, but since then and going forward, we are going to continue to prioritize these key areas, knowing that our partnership with the Afghan Government and our partnership with the Afghan people will be enduring. And so that will continue.

**QUESTION:** But that doesn't – sorry, but my question was: Is the embassy going to remain open in its current location?

**MR PRICE:** The embassy remains open, Matt. We are always – we are —

**QUESTION:** Can you move to the second part of the question? Will it remain open at its location or is it going to the airport?

**MR PRICE:** We are always evaluating the situation on the ground. We are planning for all contingencies. This was a contingency, in fact, that we had planned for. So I'm not going to entertain hypotheticals. I'm not going to go into what additional contingencies may arise, but it's very important to say that our embassy remains open and our diplomatic mission will endure.

**QUESTION:** Does – yeah, but —

**QUESTION:** Ned, it's not a hypothetical. Is the embassy staying at its current location or is it moving locations to the airport?

**QUESTION:** Or anywhere else.

**MR PRICE:** Christina – Christina.

**QUESTION:** Or anywhere else?

**MR PRICE:** The embassy remains open in its current location.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** I'm not going to entertain hypotheticals from there.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.)

**MR PRICE:** Okay. Okay. All right.

**QUESTION:** Ned, my last one and I'll let everyone else go because I know – yeah. But my last one is: The people who are being drawn down, the staffers who are leaving, are they flying out commercially or is it that that's what the military is going in to do?

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** To take – to take them out.

**MR PRICE:** The military will be there to help effect an orderly and a safe reduction in our personnel. I do expect that the military will help with these relocation operations. But as we know, Hamid Karzai International Airport does remain open. Commercial flights continue to take off and land at the airport. So the military is not the only way in or out of Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** The situation is such, though, that you don't think that these people are safe getting out of the country on a commercial flight? Is that —

**MR PRICE:** The situation is such that this President prioritizes, above all else, the safety and security of Americans who are serving overseas. As I've said, we have planned for any number of contingencies with an eye towards the deteriorating security situation. We have said for some time now that we have been gravely concerned by developments. So given the situation on the ground, this is a prudent step, a prudent reduction in our civilian workforce.

Yes, Christina.

**QUESTION:** Can you give us some kind of – I know (inaudible) embassies – but if you can't tell us how many people you think are leaving, can you give us, like, a percentage and some kind of an idea of how big a reduction this is of the footprint? Does this change the exit timeline at all for the overall U.S. withdrawal? Is that being expedited? And do you think you can get the number of SIVs out on these flights – even with the tempo picked up, do you think you can get enough of them out by the time you still have the facilities and the capacity to do so?

**MR PRICE:** So you're right, we aren't in a position to speak to numbers. What we are in a position to speak to are the functions that we intend to press forward with given our diplomatic presence on the ground in Kabul. And so that includes engagement with the Government of Afghanistan; it includes engagement with the people of Afghanistan, specifically our efforts to press forward with diplomacy, security, assistance, counterterrorism cooperation; consular services, including the processing of SIV applicants.

So I'm sorry I'm not in a position to detail numbers, but those functions are what we're prioritizing and what we intend to carry forward with.

**QUESTION:** So what kinds of staff are leaving, then? If those are the ones – people that do that are

staying, who's leaving?

**MR PRICE:** So staff who are leaving, staff involved in this reduction of civilian personnel, include, for example, those who may be able to perform functions back – well, elsewhere, whether that's back here in the United States or elsewhere. It includes staff who may not be necessary to continue with those core functions. So we are taking a very close look at our staffing footprint arrayed against this set of priorities, knowing that we are committed to an enduring relationship with the people of Afghanistan, committed to a diplomatic relationship as well. And so we're taking a very close look and we'll start that reduction in civilian personnel in the coming days.

Kylie.

**QUESTION:** How's that different from what you did in April? You already said it —

**MR PRICE:** It's – it is not different. As we've said, this is – we went on ordered departure in April. We have undertaken a reduction in staffing since then. We obviously haven't detailed numbers, but as we have said, including in the context of SIV processing, we determined, for example, that there were people based at the embassy who could have been based back here in the Washington, D.C. area who could help adjudicate the chief of mission-level processing for SIV applicants.

Now, what is true is that we are going down to a smaller diplomatic presence given the security situation. But as you've said, our overall status has not changed. We have been on ordered departure since April 27th. We've taken prudent measures since then to reduce the size of our footprint in Afghanistan with an eye towards the security environment. That's what we're doing here.

Yes, Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Can I – so you said that today is a continuation of what has been happening, but it appears very clearly to be a preparation for a full evacuation of all U.S. diplomats from Afghanistan. So what is your response to that?

**MR PRICE:** My response to that is that's not true. This is not a full evacuation. This is not —

**QUESTION:** Preparation, I said.

**MR PRICE:** We are – and I think it's a very important distinction between planning and contingency planning. Right now, we are – the embassy remains open. We will continue to have a diplomatic presence on the ground to fulfill these important functions. Now, of course, the safety, the security, the welfare, the well-being of American citizens serving overseas is of the utmost priority to this President. So, of course, we are undertaking prudent contingency planning. That's precisely what we did to lead us here today. We have watched as the security situation has changed. We have watched very closely. Not only have we watched, we have engaged in planning exercises to prepare us for an eventuality like the one we're talking about today. That's what we'll continue to do.

**QUESTION:** And what message does this send to the people of Afghanistan today, who are facing these threats from the Taliban, these military offenses, that the U.S. is not only militarily withdrawing but also taking out some of their diplomatic personnel?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the message we are sending to the people of Afghanistan is one of enduring partnership. We have said from the beginning that the United States will be a committed partner to the people of Afghanistan, and you can measure that in any number of ways. Today, of course, we are continuing to have a diplomatic presence. Our embassy remains open; our diplomatic engagement on the ground will continue. That will allow us to fulfill the consular services, the humanitarian support

services.

And on the topic of humanitarian support, you look at what the United States has invested in the people of Afghanistan – not only in recent days, but of course over the past 20 years. On June 4th, we announced more than \$266 million in new humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. That sum total brought the total U.S. humanitarian aid for Afghanistan to nearly 3.9 billion over the course of our involvement in Afghanistan. That will not change. Even given the more difficult security environment, we can continue to provide humanitarian support; we can continue to provide humanitarian assistance. And importantly, we will continue to press forward in every way we can with the diplomacy to – in an effort to bring about a just and a durable solution to this conflict.

And let me spend just a moment on that. I know we've talked about that in – a number of times this week, but there has continued to be movement on the ground. As you know, Ambassador Khalilzad and his team have been in Doha this week. They have taken part in a couple gatherings already. Today, they took part in a gathering of countries from the region and beyond, as well as from multilateral organizations, with a couple goals in mind: number one, to press for a reduction of violence and a ceasefire; and number two – and this is important – a commitment on the part of those countries represented and those organizations represented in Doha not to recognize any entity that takes control of Afghanistan by force, not to recognize any force that seeks to take control of Afghanistan at the barrel of a gun.

The meeting today has included representatives not just from the United States and Qatar, which is the host, but also the UN, China, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, the UK, the EU, Germany, India, Norway, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan. That in and of itself is a broad and inclusive group of countries and international organizations. And this group actually came together – and I think you will be seeing this later today in the form of a formal statement that will emanate from this gathering – they agreed, first and foremost, that the peace process needs to be accelerated. And they also agreed, importantly, that they will not recognize any government that is imposed through military force.

So this is not just the United States making this point. This is not just the United States speaking with our voice. This is the international community, as you see represented in the consensus that has emerged today, regarding this very simple point: any force that seeks to take control of Afghanistan with the barrel of a gun, through the barrel of a gun, will not be recognized, will not have legitimacy, will not accrue the international assistance that any such government would likely need to achieve any semblance of durability.

And before I go on, let me just say this is an important statement that either has or soon will emanate from Doha today. But it's not the first of its kind. We have seen the international community come together to speak with one voice on this very point over the course of weeks and months. I've spoken just recently about the UN Security Council statement that emanated last week, where the members of the Security Council recalled Resolution 2513, reaffirmed that there is no military solution to the conflict, and declared they do not support the restoration of an Islamic emirate.

It's not just a UN Security Council statement. There have been any number of settings and venues that, over the course of recent weeks and months, we have heard this message emanate loud and clear. The previous gathering of the extended troika – there was one this week – but the previous gathering of the extended troika, meaning the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan concluded: "We reiterate...there is no military solution in Afghanistan and a negotiated political settlement through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process is the only way forward for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan." The U.S.-Europe communique, the – which includes the EU, France, Germany, Italy, NATO, Norway, and the UK: "We reaffirm...there is no military solution to the conflict...we stand by UN Security Council Resolution , and we do not support any government in Afghanistan imposed through military force." There is a C5+1 statement – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan – that had a similar point. The embassies represented in Kabul only recently put out a very similar statement, and it was signed by the embassies of Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the EU delegation, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, NATO, Spain, Sweden, the UK. Just today, we heard a very similar statement from German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. The Indian Government has made a very similar point as well.

This has been the – I hesitate to call it the emerging consensus, because it is the established consensus of the international community. Nick.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. It's precisely because of that that it begs the question: What difference do you think that this new joint declaration is going to make against the Taliban's offensive? We've heard this again and again, as you've just laid out, and it has not changed the fact that they've now seized 10 provincial capitals.

**MR PRICE:** Every time the Taliban hears the international community speak with one voice, it reinforces that very simple message.

**QUESTION:** But the present —

**MR PRICE:** You're right. The diplomacy has not achieved what we want to see achieved. We are not trying to sugarcoat this. It has been a very tough road. It has been a tough slog. There are important contextual data points, however. Number one, as we've said before, this diplomacy has been ongoing for less than a year. A year ago, the Islamic Republic – that is to say, the Government of Afghanistan – and the Taliban were not speaking to one another. They were not sitting in the same room. That has changed. Earlier – that has changed within the past year.

Another important data point: They are sitting in the same room right now. Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman, Mullah Baradar, senior Taliban leader, are in Doha together. Ambassador Khalilzad has met separately with both sides. Both sides have presented to the gathering, presented their ideas going forward.

Now, I want to be very clear: There is daylight between the presentations that have taken place so far. But the fact that they remain engaged in this, the fact that the international community is speaking clearly, speaking resolutely, speaking with one voice – we intend to move forward with that process, to continue at it, to continue to support these intra-Afghan talks in the hopes – and ultimately something we will do all we can to support – that this ends up in an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led political solution to what has been – again, not three weeks, not three months, not six months, but really 40 years of conflict.

The people of Afghanistan deserve an end to this conflict. They don't want to see 40 more years of civil war. They don't want to see four more years of civil war. We don't want to see four more months of conflict. We're realistic about the difficult road that we've already been down, and the difficult road that presumably lies ahead. But we are going to continue supporting this diplomatic effort because we know, and our international partners know, the international community writ large knows that the only way to diminish the violence, to establish the ceasefire, and to put the parties down a road to a political settlement is through diplomacy.

Nick.

**QUESTION:** Switching now to —

**QUESTION:** Can you say what percent of the civilians are being – civilian population is being drawn down?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to speak to numbers. I'm just – I'm not. But —

**QUESTION:** More than half, less than half?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I'm just not in a position to speak to numbers. Nick.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** Switching to the Western Hemisphere, I want to —

**MR PRICE:** Let's do a couple more questions on Afghanistan, and then we'll switch to the Western Hemisphere.

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask you the – I mean, understanding you don't want to talk about numbers, can you give us some sense of the troop deployment, what that's going to look like, what service branch are they from, who are these troops? And then also, what are those troops going to do? I mean, they're going to the airport, so they're going to be based there, and then, like, what do they do? Are they running convoys in to the embassy to grab people and bring them to the airport so that they can be evacuated? Like, what is their mission beyond – and can you give some more details of that beyond the idea that they're just there to support the withdrawal?

**MR PRICE:** Yep. So Nick, you are in luck. My very able colleague at the Pentagon, John Kirby, will be briefing at 2:45.

**QUESTION:** Very able colleague and predecessor.

**MR PRICE:** And predecessor. He will be briefing at 2:45, which is another reason I want to make sure we take a few more questions before then.

Let me just say – and Kirby will go – presumably be able to go into this in a bit more detail – but these incoming forces, these incoming assets, will be based at the airport for one reason and for one reason only, and that is to help effect the reduction in our civilian footprint. They are not – they will not be relocated there for any other reason. This is about doing all we can to ensure the safety and security of our personnel as we reduce the size of our civilian footprint in Kabul.

**QUESTION:** Can you say how long they're planning to be there?

**MR PRICE:** I would refer you to the Pentagon for that.

Missy, please.

**QUESTION:** Again going back to an earlier question about what message this is sending, can you just – do you expect there to be – or what would be your response to the critics who are saying this is going to further embolden the Taliban and make them feel like they have even more rein to push for a political agreement that suits their interests? And then will you be letting us know if the embassy is indeed closed? I know that it remains open right now. If you could just talk about how you're going to communicate that in the future, that would be great.

**MR PRICE:** Well, on your second question, we are always going to put the safety and security of our people first. We don't want to do anything, we don't want to say anything that could expose them to any additional risk. At the same time, we want to operate with transparency to the extent we can on sensitive areas like this. So we will strive to do both of those things. And as we have more details to share, we will.

Look, in terms of the signal this sends, I want to be very clear about what this is and what this is not, starting with the latter. What this is not: This is not abandonment. This is not an evacuation. This is not the wholesale withdrawal. What this is is a reduction in the size of our civilian footprint. This is a drawdown of civilian Americans who will in many cases be able to perform their important functions elsewhere, whether that's in the United States or elsewhere in the region.

So the message shouldn't be – the implications of this shouldn't be outsized. I think all parties – the Afghan Government, the Taliban, our international partners with whom we have been in touch about this – need to understand that we intend to continue our diplomatic presence on the ground. At a more basic level, we intend to continue that enduring partnership with the people of Afghanistan and the Government of Afghanistan.

So this shouldn't be read as any sort of message to the Taliban. The message that the Taliban should be receiving is really the message that is emanating from Doha right now, from the United States, from the Qataris, from the litany of countries in the region and well beyond, and the international organizations that have been very clear and speaking with one voice that this rather large, broad, inclusive constellation of countries and important stakeholders will not recognize any entity that seeks to take Afghanistan by force. That's the message the Taliban needs to be reading.

**QUESTION:** Ned, how is this not —

**QUESTION:** Ned, I'll give you points for the old college – giving it the old college try on this. But when you talk about the message that this sends as enduring partnership, in what language does turning your tail and sending 3,000 troops in to – and you say it's not an evacuation, but you lost that point when you said that the military, the 3,000 troops are going to be flying these drawn-down staffers out. It's —

**MR PRICE:** I did not say that there would be 3,000 troops.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Sorry. You didn't. Others have said that that's the number that's going in. But that the military, the U.S. military, is going to be – is going to be taking these people out, that is an evacuation. And I'm very cognizant of the difference between a drawdown where people leave commercially or if they drive out on their own. That's not what this is. So I don't understand the message of "enduring partnership" when you're basically leaving.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, we can do two things at once. Let me explain.

**QUESTION:** You can —

**MR PRICE:** We can do all we can, take prudent measures to ensure the safety and security of our departing civilian personnel, which this is. This is only about that. It is solely and exclusively about doing all we can to ensure the safe relocation of our personnel, of elements of our civilian personnel, from Afghanistan. That should in no way mitigate the enduring partnership, the enduring relationship we seek to have with the people of Afghanistan.

I talked about that in humanitarian terms. I've talked about that in terms of the diplomacy that the U.S. is supporting between the Afghan parties, the intra-Afghan dialogue that we are supporting, hopefully on the path towards an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led political solution. I've talked about that in the terms of the work we have done and are doing to galvanize the international community to bring Afghanistan's neighbors together to speak with one – and countries much farther afield to speak with one voice. So we are in no way abandoning the people in Afghanistan. Far from it. We are going to continue doing everything we can, everything we can, to bring about an Afghanistan that – in which Afghans can enjoy safety, stability, security.



Now, again, I'm not wearing rose-colored glasses. I'm not here to tell you that there aren't significant challenges. That is very clear. It's very clear from what we're seeing. But our goal is, through diplomacy, through continuing support for the ANDSF, a force that far outnumbers the Taliban by a figure of more than 3 to 1, by most estimates —

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) warfare in Afghanistan has never been a problem?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** I said, because asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan has never been a problem?

**MR PRICE:** Christina, I have been the first to tell you that this is not without its difficulties. This is not without its challenges.

**QUESTION:** No, I know that. But —

**MR PRICE:** But let me just finish, we —

**QUESTION:** Now, we've been sitting here for weeks listening to you say this, and I respect you, and like, we all know that you have a job to do. But there is no way you can sit there and say that the people of Afghanistan, watching the Taliban take over provinces, watching their country crumble, are now going to watch American diplomats get on military planes and leave the country, that that sends a signal that the U.S. is with them in the long haul, diplomatically.

**MR PRICE:** Look at what we've been doing. Look at the investment we have made in Afghanistan. Look at the investments, whether — however you measure it, whether it is humanitarian, whether it's political, whether it's diplomatic, whether it is the security investments that we have made. Again, we've cited this bullet point a couple times: President Biden's budget requests \$3.3 billion for the ANDSF going forward, a fighting force that is, at least quantitatively, much larger than what the Taliban have to muster. Look at what we're doing diplomatically in Doha and around the world.

So again, this is about one thing, and one thing only. It's about the priority this President attaches to the safety and security of Americans who serve in this government, civilian Americans who serve in this government. That is not a priority that we are willing to risk. And so what we are speaking about today is about that, and about that only. Again, our partnership in any number of forms with the people of Afghanistan that ultimately is aimed at bringing about — over the longer term; we know this will have challenges — an Afghanistan in which all Afghans can enjoy a measure of safety, and security, and stability. We're not there yet. We're not close. But that remains our goal, and we're going to continue doing everything we can to do that.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I want to ask you about Western Hemisphere migration —

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Let —

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) one more on this? I'm sorry.

**MR PRICE:** We'll do one more on Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** All right. The fact that you have to reintroduce troops into Afghanistan in order to now pull these staffers out, the fact that it seems U.S. officials were caught off-guard by the speed of the Taliban offensive — did the administration fail to plan or fail to understand what U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan would entail, would create?

**MR PRICE:** Conor, I presume my Pentagon colleague will speak about this in more detail. But —

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** But I just want to contextualize. This is not the reintroduction of military forces to pursue the mission that they were pursuing prior to May 1. This is the repositioning of forces to Hamid Karzai International Airport in order to help effect the safe reduction in our civilian personnel. That is the only thing this is about. This is not about re-engaging militarily in conflict in Afghanistan.

**QUESTION:** But does it speak to a failure to plan or to understand what would happen after U.S. troops started to leave?

**MR PRICE:** As – as – I started with this point and it bears repeating. All throughout, before the President announced his decision, after the President has announced his decision, before the latest surge in violence, in the context of this ongoing surge in violence, we have always been engaged in contingency planning. This was a contingency that we had foreseen. This was a contingency that we had planned for. So it is not the case that we're being caught flat-footed. We engage in contingency planning, DOD does the same, knowing that the situation is going to be fluid. Recently the trend lines have not been moving in the right direction. Of course, our goal through diplomacy on the part of the State Department is to reverse those trend lines. But in the meantime, we have engaged in contingency planning to be prepared for a situation just like this.

Yes, please, in the back.

**QUESTION:** I had a question that there are some reports that suggest that the special envoy, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad is trying to convince Taliban leaders to spare the U.S. embassy, attacking the U.S. embassy in Kabul, in exchange for international aid in any future government, even that includes the possibility of Taliban leaders. Is that option – is the U.S. considering that option in order to preserve and keep sort of presence in Afghanistan in case there is a fall of Kabul in the hands of Taliban?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, we are not going to put too much stock, certainly, in the words of the Taliban. We are going to be looking at their deeds. But in terms of what they have said, the Taliban have said very clearly that they are not out there to target diplomatic compounds. Now, we are not going to rest on the words of a group like the Taliban. That is precisely why we are taking prudent precautions in the repositioning of these assets in order to help effect the safe reduction in our civilian personnel. But not only have the Taliban said that, but, of course, in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, the Taliban also made assurances that our forces would not be targeted.

We have been very clear that if the Taliban go back on that commitment, whether in the context of this reduction in civilian staffing, whether in any other context, we will respond and we will respond in no uncertain terms. We have not left any ambiguity about that.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on a new region – this is at the border of Colombia and Panama. There are thousands of migrants that want to come here to the U.S. The Colombian Government has called it like a humanitarian tragedy and has asked the U.S. for help. What is your message to those migrants that wants to come here and to the Colombian Government, particularly to the foreign minister that is calling the U.S. so they can help Panama and Colombia in this issue?

**MR PRICE:** Well, of course, Colombia, is a strategic partner of ours. We work very closely with Bogota. We work very closely with the Colombian Government on any number of fronts. Colombia has, for example, generously hosted Venezuelan refugees. Colombia has been a constructive force when it comes to what we collectively are doing to try to support the democratic aspirations of the

Venezuelan people. We've been in a position to provide humanitarian assistance to the region, including to Colombia for its willingness to accept refugees from Venezuela.

At the same time, we are still very much in the midst of a pandemic, and there are certain limits on what we're able to do at the moment. But we'll continue to work on this very closely and support the Government of Colombia how we can.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** How about Venezuela? Tomorrow is – are set to start the Venezuelan talks in Mexico. Nicolas Maduro has said that the first point in this agenda is a total withdrawal of the U.S. sanctions to Venezuela. Are you reviewing the sanctions? Are you willing to waive sanctions in order so the conversations keep forward – go forward?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have long been committed to promoting accountability for the Maduro regime and its enablers for the actions that undermine democracy or fail to respect human rights. We've also been clear that the Maduro regime can create a path to easing sanctions by allowing Venezuelans to participate in long overdue free and fair presidential, parliamentary, and local elections, creating the necessary conditions to enable free and fair elections take place in Venezuela. It requires the Maduro regime to engage in sincere discussions with the opposition, led, of course, by Interim President Juan Guaido, that result in a comprehensive negotiated solution to the Venezuelan crisis.

As we noted, in the June 25th joint statement with our EU and Canadian partners, we welcome substantive, credible advancements to restore democratic processes and institutions in Venezuela, and are willing to review sanctions policies based on meaningful progress in comprehensive negotiation. But that's what we need to see: meaningful – meaningful progress.

**QUESTION:** Last one, I'm sorry. About the request of President Ivan Duque to designate Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorism – are you're reviewing this request?

**MR PRICE:** We make those determinations based on the facts and based on —

**QUESTION:** The FARC killed in Venezuela, and they even did a terrorist attack in a military base in Cucuta where American troops were.

**MR PRICE:** We make those determinations on a regular basis based on the facts and our assessment of them. As a matter of policy, we don't comment on deliberations or potential deliberations related to the use of a designation authority.

Last question, please.

**QUESTION:** Okay, this is on media law in Poland.

**MR PRICE:** Ah, yes.

**QUESTION:** There was a strong statement by Secretary Blinken yesterday and, as I understand, Secretary Wendy Sherman spoke with the Polish authorities yesterday. But the media law seems to be going forward. So what steps are you planning to take and what is on the table now?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you did hear directly from Secretary Blinken yesterday on our deep concern, the very troubling developments that transpired in Poland yesterday. The Secretary of State statement speaks for itself. We are deeply troubled by the two pieces of legislation that Poland's parliament passed yesterday. I said this yesterday, the Secretary said this in his statement, that Poland is an important NATO Ally, a NATO Ally that understands the transatlantic alliance is based on mutual

commitments, mutual commitments to shared democratic values and prosperity.

So with that in mind, we urge the Government of Poland to demonstrate its commitment to these very shared principles not only in word, but also in deed. I will —

**QUESTION:** So what steps are you going to take now? What is on the table?

**MR PRICE:** So we are engaged diplomatically; you cited one step that we took. But given the level of concern, we will remain engaged on this. And both publicly, as I just did, and privately, we are urging the Government of Poland to demonstrate its commitment to these shared democratic values.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On Brazil, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visited Brazil last week and expressed confidence in Brazilian electoral system. But after that, President Bolsonaro continuously says that the voting system in Brazil is not trustworthy. And this week, we saw a military parade near the congress just hours before legislators were scattered to debate a bill about the current voting system. So I have two questions. First is how does the U.S. see this military parade in this context that we are having in Brazil right now? And the second is if President Bolsonaro continues to argue without evidence that the voting system is fraudulent, is the U.S. going to continue to engage with Brazil? Or is the U.S. going to take some other measure?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I don't have a specific comment on the parade. But let me say broadly – and as you alluded to, the National Security Advisor and a delegation was in Brasilia within the past few days. We firmly believe that Brazilian authorities can carry out free and fair elections that represent the will of Brazilian voters, as they have on many occasions in the past. During National Security Advisor Sullivan's trip to Brazil, he stressed the importance of not undermining confidence in the election process, especially since there were no signs of fraud in prior elections. That was his message. That will continue to be the message we reiterate. Thank you all very much.

**QUESTION:** Wait, Ned. I have a non-Afghan, non-contentious question, and it's extremely brief.

**MR PRICE:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** It has to do with Bahrain. So if you don't have an answer at the top, I guess it can be taken. And it's just about – there are numerous prisoners who are deemed by human rights groups as being political prisoners in Bahrain. There's a academic who's on a hunger strike now – now in a month – a month into it. And groups have been asking the U.S. to get behind calls for these – for the release of this one guy, but also others more generally. Is this something that has been brought up with Bahraini officials recently by this administration?

**MR PRICE:** I don't know enough about the case offhand, so we'll see if we can get you some information on that.

**QUESTION:** Anything in general on this – the general situation would be good.

**MR PRICE:** Great.

**QUESTION:** Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** Will do. Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:47 p.m.)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Major Garrett of CBS Face the Nation](#)

*08/22/2021 12:30 PM EDT*

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Washington, D.C.

**QUESTION:** We go now to the State Department and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Mr. Secretary, good morning to you, sir.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Good morning, Major. Thanks for having me.

**QUESTION:** In another venue this morning, your counterpart, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, said the United States has secured or is looking into, quote/unquote, “alternate methods” to move U.S. personnel from where they are to the Karzai International Airport. What does that mean? What specifically can you tell us about that?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, first, Major, we’ve gotten about 8,000 people out over the last 24 hours. And if you go back to July when this effort really started, we’ve gotten about 30,000 people out between our military flights and the charters that we’ve organized to get out of Kabul and out of Afghanistan. But we’ve seen these wrenching scenes of people crowded at the gates, of people hurt, people killed. It’s an incredibly volatile situation, and we’re very focused on that. And here’s what we’re doing.

First, we’re moving people out as quickly as we can from inside the airport and out of Afghanistan to alleviate crowding in the airport so we can get more people in from the outside and alleviate some of the crowding outside. But second and most important – and this goes to Jake Sullivan’s point – we’re in direct contact with American citizens and others, and we’re able to guide them the best way to get to the airport, what to do when they get there. And that is the, I think, safest and most effective way to get people there, get them in, and get them out. That’s what we’re focused on.

One other point. We’ve also now have agreements with more than two dozen countries on four continents to help service as transit points or other relocation points for people that we’re getting out of Afghanistan as we finish processing them, as we finish doing security checks. And that too I think is going to alleviate some of the bottlenecks that we’ve seen in the system to enable this to flow even more quickly and more effectively.

**QUESTION:** With your indulgence, Mr. Secretary, can we get precise on this? When Jake Sullivan says “alternate methods,” does that mean U.S. military is now getting outside of the perimeter of the airport and going to find Americans and bringing them safely there?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** The best way, the most effective way, the way I’m focused on to get folks in, again, is to be in direct contact with them and to help guide them and to give them instructions on where to go, when to go there, and then we can bring them into the airport safely and effectively.

**QUESTION:** So they are still effectively on their own getting to the airport?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Again, we found that the best way to do this is to be in direct touch with them. The President and the Secretary of Defense have been clear that we will do whatever it takes to get Americans home and out of harm's way.

**QUESTION:** Civilian commercial airliners are being added to the mix. Why? And what is that going to look like?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Yeah, so there's a process by which we can ask civilian airliners to join in this effort – not to bring people out of Kabul but to bring them from these different staging points that we have arranged with, as I said, now nearly two dozen countries around the world. Because once they're there, they'll spend some time there where we can finish processing them, when we can finish doing security and background checks, and then they move on to their ultimate destination. We need more planes in the mix to do that piece of it, to move them from these initial points of landing on to places that they'll ultimately resettle.

**QUESTION:** How long will Karzai International Airport remain open under the security perimeter provided by the United States military?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, what we're focused on is getting as many people out as fast as we can as effectively and as safely as we can. It's also important to note the Taliban has said that it intends to keep the airport open. It wants a functioning airport. And it has made commitments about the safe passage of people with no deadline attached to that, and we will hold the Taliban to that commitment.

**QUESTION:** Do we have a deadline attached to it, Mr. Secretary? My question is essentially: Will it stay open under the auspices of the U.S. military after August 31st?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** And again, our focus is making sure every single day we're getting as many people out as we can as fast as we can. That's our focus.

**QUESTION:** And under that umbrella, Mr. Secretary, of all the people – that includes U.S. citizens, quite obviously. You have said and the President has committed to our Afghan allies, interpreters and the like. Does it also – that umbrella term – extend to those in NGOs who assisted the United States throughout the 20-year campaign in Afghanistan?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Yeah, Major, a few things. Obviously, American citizens are our priority as well as the people who worked directly for us. Allies and partners, we're committed to them and to helping them get out. But also, to your point, Afghans more broadly at risk. We're focused on all of that. But our intense focus is making sure that we get our fellow Americans out if they want to leave.

**QUESTION:** The President said that we have an agreement with the Taliban. Mr. Secretary, that implies we are negotiating with them. Does that not confer upon them already legitimacy?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** No, we have – we've had for a long time contact with the Taliban both at a political level in Doha going back – going back some years, as well as now on the ground in Kabul a working relationship in order to deconflict, in order to work through any problems with people getting to the airport. That's been very important to making sure that we can actually advance our own interests in getting people out safely and effectively as possible. So that's the nature of the relationship.

**QUESTION:** And someone in our audience might listen to you, Mr. Secretary, and say, "Oh, so we

have to ask the Taliban for permission for American citizens to leave.” True or not true?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** They are in control of Kabul. That is the reality. That’s the reality that we have to deal with. We have one mission —

**QUESTION:** How comfortable are you with that, Mr. Secretary?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** My – what I am focused on, what we’re all focused on, is getting people out and making sure that we’re doing everything possible to do that. And in this case, it is, I think, a requirement of the job to be in contact with the Taliban, which controls Kabul. And look, what we’ve seen, Major, is also pretty remarkable. Go back a week. The government fell. And by the way, I was on the phone with President Karzai\* the day before, when he was telling me his intent, as he put it, to fight to the death. Well, the next day he was gone. The military collapsed.

And in the space of that week, our military went in, secured the airport, got our embassy to safety at the airport from the embassy compound, began this remarkable evacuation effort. And as I said, we had about 8,000 people out just in the last 24 hours. Since going back to the end of July, it’s 30,000 people. And that’s quite extraordinary. It doesn’t just happen. A tremendous amount of planning and effort went into that, including a lot of pre-planning. And that’s what we’re focused on now, getting that mission done.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, you may have heard in our poll that 60 percent of those we talked to now fear that there is more threat of terrorism in the United States because the Taliban is in control of Afghanistan. Are they wrong?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Remember, Major, we went to Afghanistan indeed for one reason, one major purpose, and that was to —

**QUESTION:** Right. But right now, they’re fearful. Are they wrong?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** The threat of terrorism metastasized out of Afghanistan a long time ago. It is more acute in many other places around the world. And in Afghanistan itself, we were able to vastly diminish al-Qaida and any threat that it poses. If it reconstitutes, we’re putting in place measures over the horizon, as we say, to make sure we can see it and act on it. And we have terrorist threats, again, that are more acute in other places in the world where we don’t have military forces on the ground. Since 9/11 our capacity to deal with terrorism effectively in places where we don’t have boots on the ground has grown immensely, and we now are able to do things that we couldn’t do 20 years ago. If this threat re-emerges in Afghanistan, we’ll deal with it.

**QUESTION:** Secretary of State Antony Blinken, we thank you for your time.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thanks for having me.

\*President Ghani

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks on Afghanistan at a Press Availability](#)

*09/03/2021 04:57 PM EDT*

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Washington, D.C.

Press Briefing Room

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Good afternoon. Good to see everyone. I'd like to give you an update on the ongoing efforts across the State Department regarding Afghanistan, and then happy to take questions after that.

So earlier this week, a few hours after the military mission in Afghanistan ended and a new diplomatic mission began, I laid out some of the main elements of our plan for this next chapter.

Here's where we are as of today.

First, our new team in Doha is up and running.

Second, we're in constant contact with Americans who remain in Afghanistan and may still wish to leave. We've assigned case management teams to each remaining American citizen who has expressed an interest in leaving. As you know, starting in March, we sent 19 separate notices to American citizens in Afghanistan encouraging and then urging them to leave. Most of the remaining American citizens are dual nationals whose home is Afghanistan and whose extended families live there. So it's no surprise that deciding whether or not to leave the place they call home is a wrenching decision.

We're also in touch with others working to help at-risk people leave Afghanistan. That includes our foreign partners, news organizations, and private foundations. There are a lot of extremely complex logistical issues to address and coordinate. We're working through them as quickly and as methodically as we possibly can.

Let me say a few words also about those Afghans who applied for – or may be eligible for – Special Immigrant Visas. There have been questions about the backlog of SIV applicants and why more of these men and women weren't already out of Afghanistan by the time the evacuation operation began. So let me give you a little bit more context on this.

When we took office, we inherited a backlog of more than 17,000 SIV applicants. The program was basically in a dead stall. There had not been a single interview of an SIV applicant in Kabul in the nine months prior to us taking office going back to March of 2020. COVID-19, of course, was a major impediment. As you may know, the process for approving a Special Immigrant Visa is not a simple one. There are 14 steps laid out in a statute passed by Congress – these are congressional requirements. They involve multiple departments and agencies, not just the State Department. The most time-consuming steps often aren't handled by this Department.

But we were determined to fix this. Within two weeks of taking office, we restarted the SIV interview process in Kabul. On February 4th, one of the very first executive orders issued by President Biden directed us to complete a review of the entire SIV program to identify causes of undue delay to find ways to process SIV applications more quickly and effectively. I directed additional resources – significant additional resources to the program, including adding 50 people to the team in Washington to process applications. We also sent more SIV adjudicators to our embassy in Kabul, doubling the resources at our embassy in Kabul working on SIV cases. And all of this was in the springtime. When our embassy went on ordered departure in April and many embassy personnel returned to the United States, we sent more consular officers to Kabul to work on processing SIV applications.

As a result of these and other steps including working with Congress, by May we had reduced the average processing time for Special Immigrant Visas by more than a year. Even in the midst of a COVID surge in June, we continued to issue visas. And we went from issuing about 100 Special Immigrant Visas every week in March to more than 1,000 every week in August.

In July, some of you will remember, we launched Operation Allies Refuge with relocation flights to bring Afghans eligible for SIVs, as well as their family members, to the United States. And of course we negotiated third-country sites to host SIV candidates as we processed their applications.

We continue to process as many SIV applications as possible. We're exploring alternative ways to process applications, so applicants don't have to wait in Afghanistan until we're finished but instead if they can go – get there, get to a third country for additional processing before coming to the United States.

We've also now learned from hard experience that the SIV process was not designed to be done in an evacuation emergency. There are lessons here that we need to learn, we will learn, even as our work continues – ways to make the program run more efficiently, more effectively.

One final note on the SIVs. I want to thank the many veterans of the war in Afghanistan who are working individually or through veteran service organizations to help Afghans who helped them. State Department officials conferred with veterans' groups throughout the evacuation operation. I just spoke with several of them, along with Denis McDonough, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, who are using their voices, their networks, their resources to do all they can to help their friends and comrades. We will partner with them on how to help SIV candidates in Afghanistan; they have ideas that we'll be incorporating into the planning and work that we're doing. We have a relocation task force that is up and running right now, and the information, the ideas that we're getting from the veterans community are being put into that process. And simply put, I shared our gratitude to them for their incredibly important and passionate advocacy.

Helping these Afghans is more than a priority for us – it is a deeply held commitment, and it's an ongoing one. We're going to do everything we can to keep it in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

Third, our diplomacy with allies and partners continues to intensify.

That diplomacy has already produced a statement signed by more than 100 countries and a UN Security Council resolution that makes clear the international community's expectations of a Taliban-led government, including freedom of travel; making good on its commitments on counterterrorism; upholding the basic rights of Afghans, including women and minorities; and forming an inclusive government and rejecting reprisals.

In a couple of days on Sunday, I'll be traveling to Doha, where I'll meet with Qatari leaders to express our deep gratitude for all that they're doing to support the evacuation effort. I'll also have a chance to meet with Afghans, including our locally employed staff from Embassy Kabul, who are now safely in

Doha preparing for their journey to the United States. And I'll convey our pride and thanks to the diplomats, troops, and other U.S. Government employees in Doha who are doing truly heroic work around the clock to keep this process moving forward as quickly and humanely as possible.

From there, we're heading to Ramstein Air Base in Germany, where – again – I'll have a chance to meet with Afghans awaiting processing and the Americans who are staffing that effort. I'll also meet with Foreign Minister Maas of Germany, and we'll hold a ministerial meeting on Afghanistan, with him live and then virtually with other partners that will include more than 20 countries that all have a stake in helping to relocate and resettle Afghans and in holding the Taliban to their commitments.

Fourth, we continue to maintain channels of communication with the Taliban on issues that are important to us, starting with the commitment to let people leave Afghanistan should they choose to do so.

Fifth, we're working closely with our partners Qatar and Turkey to help get the airport in Kabul up and running as quickly as possible.

Sixth, on the humanitarian front, the U.S. Treasury Department has issued specific licenses to allow U.S. government agencies, contractors, and grant recipients to continue to provide critical and lifesaving humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan, despite sanctions on the Taliban. Consistent with our sanctions, this aid will not flow through the government, but rather through independent organizations.

Seventh, we've heard from many private companies, NGOs, foundations looking to help welcome Afghans arriving in the United States. Some have already made very, very significant pledges. That's terrific; it's also not surprising. That's what we do. The United States stands for – stands apart from many for our global leadership in private philanthropy, and welcoming immigrants and refugees into our communities, that's part of our DNA. We're issuing a call to action to other companies and organizations that want to help Afghans starting new lives in the United States. We will help you find a way to make an impact.

Last night, I had a chance to go out to the Dulles Expo Center – some of you may have visited – where I saw the incredible operation that we – together with DHS, DOD, HHS, USAID – are running to welcome new Afghan arrivals when they first touch down in the United States. Many thousands of people have fled fear and desperation and now hope for a better life and future here with us. And our people made that happen.

Earlier today, I had a chance to meet with our team from Embassy Kabul, back home in the United States. I spoke with employees across the Department at an all-hands town hall. These past few weeks have been very intense. They've demanded a lot from a lot of people here at the department – people who rose to the challenge and continue to give their all. I talked to colleagues, consular officers, who were on the line shoulder-to-shoulder with the Marines, including those who lost their lives, literally pulling people into the airport and into safety and ultimately on to freedom. And again, we talk a lot about the numbers and we throw a lot of statistics around, but each one of those was a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a parent, a grandparent, and I have remarkable pride in what our people did, what our service members did, what our other colleagues across the government did to help.

And as I said the other day, particularly for those who gave their lives in this effort, some of us – maybe the most exceptional among us – are called upon to do a life's work, a life's service, in a short period of time. And those 13 did a life's work of service in a very short period of time. And what I told our own colleagues here today who were part of that effort, no matter what they do going forward in the, I hope, many, many years that they will continue to serve, they too have already done a life's

work of service in a very, very short period of time.

We're not stopping our work to help Americans and at-risk Afghans in Afghanistan. We're going to do everything we can moving forward to continue this mission and also to learn from it. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to the American people, to reflect on what we did, how we did it, what worked, what didn't, what we can do better. We'll deliver on that, too.

And with that, I'm happy to take any questions. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Humeyra.

**QUESTION:** Hello, Mr. Secretary. Thank you for being here today. I want to ask you two questions. One is about the headlines of the day, and the other one is a wider issue you just mentioned.

The first one is we have reporting today that Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar will lead a new Afghan government set to be announced soon. I would really like your reaction to this. What does the U.S. Government think about this new specific government? And I know that you have mentioned certain criteria and principles, but I really would be super keen to get your take on this specific government.

And the second one is I would like to ask you about accountability. And you just said – you just talked about reflecting upon what happened, what went wrong. And this is not to in any way diminish the work of this department and anybody else, I mean, as a person, but you and others in this administration have said there will be a time and place for that kind of accountability. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan specifically referred to it as a hot wash. So where is the State Department in that process, and is this going to be in a format of a formal investigation? What is that going to look like? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you. So with regard to the government, we've seen different reports of a government in formation. I have not seen anything final or dispositive of what that government looks like, who's in it, who's not. So I'm going to reserve comment and judgment until we see that. That may be coming up in the hours ahead, in the days ahead, but I haven't seen anything final.

But I'd say two things about it. First, as we've said and as countries around the world have said, there is an expectation that any government that emerges now will have some real inclusivity and that it will have non-Talibs in it who are representative of different communities and different interests in Afghanistan. So we'll see what, in fact, emerges.

But I have to tell you that as important as what the government looks like is, more important still is what any government does. And that's what we're – that's what we're really looking at. We're looking at what actions, what policies any new Afghan government pursues. That's what matters the most.

So the expectation is to see inclusivity in government, but ultimately the expectation is to see a government that makes good on commitments that the Taliban have made, particularly when it comes to freedom of travel; when it comes to not allowing Afghanistan to be used as a launching ground for terrorism directed at us or any of our allies and partners; when it comes to upholding the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women and minorities; when it comes to not engaging in reprisals. These are the things that we're looking at – and again, not just us, many countries around the world.

Second part of the question: We are committed to looking at everything we've done from day one through the present and to draw lessons from it. I think that there also needs to be, including across the State Department, a look back at the entire 20 years to understand the entire course of this war

and engagement with Afghanistan and to ask the right questions and to learn the right lessons from that. So we'll have more, I'm sure, in the days and weeks ahead about what process we're going to be engaged in, but we are committed to doing that.

**MR PRICE:** Margaret.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, Ned.

Mr. Secretary, a State Department official said the other day that the majority of Afghans who are Special Immigrant Visa recipients were left in Afghanistan. I'm wondering if you have a specific number on that. When you said today that one option would be a third country for processing to cut through the bureaucracy, are U.S. taxpayers giving money to do that? How does that work? Is that just a theory on paper, or are things actually in process to get them out right now?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** First of all, Margaret, good to see you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Welcome back. A few things on this.

So, I think as you know, we have evacuated roughly 124,000 people. Many remain at the so-called lily pads as they're being processed and then moved, in many cases on to the United States, or in some cases to other places. And given the premium that we put on getting people out as quickly and as safely as possible – but now the premium on once they're out and either at a lily pad or in some cases already in the United States – then really digging into exactly which categories they may fit into. Were they locally employed staff? Were they SIVs, Afghans at risk, potential P-1 or P-2 parolees, et cetera? All of that work now is what we're doing.

So I can't give you specific numbers. What I can tell you is this: Of the roughly 124,000 people who've been evacuated, the vast majority – the vast majority, 75, 80 percent – are Afghans at risk. And of those, some significant number will be SIVs, either people who already hold an SIV visa or those who are actually in the pipeline. Some number will be potential P-1 or P-2 refugees or – and some other number will be Afghans at risk, prominent in one way or another, who may not fit into any of those categories. We're working through all of those numbers now, and again, I think we'll have more to say on that in the days and weeks ahead as we actually work through them.

But the bottom line is the overwhelming majority of people who came out of Afghanistan were Afghans at risk in one way or another, including a significant number of SIVs.

**QUESTION:** But for those who remain that you were talking about and potentially bringing to a third country for processing, what does that look like? What are you doing right now to get those SIVs who were left behind?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** So a few things on that. There are a lot of things happening from the political to the practical to enable us to continue to bring people out of Afghanistan who wish to leave, including, of course, any remaining American citizens who want to leave; including SIVs; including Afghans at risk, including also third-country nationals who may be there. The political I've already touched on, which is to say working from the commitments that the Taliban has made, we have worked intensely across the international community to set a very clear international expectation of what the world is looking for from the Taliban when it comes to freedom of travel, now enshrined in, among other things, the UN Security Council resolution.

That, by the way, is significant in a number of ways, one of which is that, as you know, the Taliban,

among other things, is seeking sanctions relief – UN sanctions. It is seeking the ability for its leaders to travel freely, which, again, under UN sanctions they currently cannot do absent an exemption. And if a Taliban-led government is in violation of this latest Security Council resolution on freedom of travel, it'll be – it's pretty hard to see how they would get, for example, that kind of relief. That's just one example.

So that's the – that's part of the political piece. And we're in very, very active coordination with like-minded countries around the world so that we're all – we continue to work together and use the leverage and influence we have to hold the Taliban to the commitments it's made.

The practical, though, is also very important – making sure that there is the ability for people to travel, as a practical matter – the airport in Kabul where a tremendous amount of work was done in the last days of the military evacuation operation to make sure that we got and then shared with other countries the very detailed information necessary for how to get the civilian airport up and running once we left, including even bringing the American contractors back who'd been running the airport for 20 years. And we've shared a tremendous amount of very detailed information, and some of our partner countries are now working to make that real.

Second, looking – and I'm not going to go into detail here – but looking at different ways of being able to travel out of Afghanistan across land. And again, some of that will be – will be self-evident – as well as making sure that we have very clear and precise plans to help people, as necessary, use those routes outside of Afghanistan.

So all of that is being put into place as we speak.

**MR PRICE:** Alex?

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary. It's been four days since you stood here and talked about the 100 to 200 Americans who remain. In those four days, has that number changed at all? Has any – have any more people managed to get out, and if so, how? And you talk a lot about the conversations that are being had around how to get more people out, whether it's Afghans or Americans. Has that been more solidified, and is there any sense that the Taliban may renege on their – on their decision to allow those people out?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Yeah. Thanks, Alex. So a couple of things on this. As I mentioned, we are in very regular contact with a relatively small number of American citizens who remain in Afghanistan and who've indicated that they're interested in leaving. And we have dedicated teams assigned to each of these American citizens to be in constant contact with them. We're providing them with very tailored, very specific guidance. Let me just say that for their protection and also to protect the viability of the – of our tactics, I'm not going to go into any details beyond that for now, just to say that we're in very active contact.

And again, people need to understand the position so many of this relatively small group of people are in. As I said, throughout these – for many months, going back many months – going back to March, we issued 19 different notices to those registered with the – with the embassy, as I said, encouraging them and then urging them to leave Afghanistan. And then when the evacuation actually began a few weeks ago, there was an intense hour-by-hour effort to be in contact with those who nonetheless remained.

And as I've talked about before, I think in the course of those two weeks with this small group of people, 55,000 phone calls initiated, something like 30,000 emails, 6,000 Americans we were able to evacuate. But part of the reason that some small number remain is that for this particular group, as I said, these are almost exclusively people who've been living in Afghanistan for years, for decades, in

some cases for all their lives, and Afghanistan is home. And so it's especially wrenching for them to make the decision about whether to leave or not. And in a number of cases, we were in contact with people who told us at first that they didn't want to leave, then decided that they did, or some who said yes they did, and have now decided that they don't.

My only point here is that we are in very direct, active contact with this group, and there's absolutely no deadline on this work. We're going to be in very close touch, and as they desire to leave, we're going to make sure that we're doing everything we can to help them do exactly that.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you all.

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**To:** Good ander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
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**[European and Eurasian Affairs Assistant Secretary Dr. Karen Donfried and Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs Senior Bureau Official Matt Murray On the Secretary's Upcoming Travel to France](#)**

*10/01/2021 01:25 PM EDT*

Dr. Karen Donfried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs

Matt Murray, Senior Bureau Official Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs

Via Teleconference

**MR PRICE:** Hey, good morning, everyone, and thanks for joining us for this call previewing the Secretary's upcoming trip to France. As you know, we officially announced it this morning.

Just a reminder: This call is on-the-record, but it's embargoed until the call is completed. We will focus on taking your questions pertaining to the trip during this call, and as we always do, we'll have a transcript provided after the fact. Another reminder: This call is embargoed until its conclusion.

It's our pleasure today to have two excellent speakers to preview the upcoming travel. We have our newly-confirmed Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Dr. Karen Donfried, and we also have Senior Bureau Official for the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs Matt Murray with us to brief you today. The briefers will give an overview of the trip, and then we will take your questions.

And so, with that, I will turn it over to Assistant Secretary Donfried. Please, go ahead.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** Thanks so much, Ned. I am very glad to be here.

The Secretary will travel to Paris October 4th to 6th to chair the Ministerial Council Meeting of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or the OECD, and to commemorate the organization's 60th anniversary. This visit follows President Biden's call with President Macron on September 22nd and the Secretary's engagements with Foreign Minister Le Drian in New York last week to set the path on how we can deepen the cooperation and coordination between our two countries.

While in Paris, the Secretary will have bilateral engagements with our oldest ally, including, of course, a meeting with Foreign Minister Le Drian to discuss cooperation on a range of issues. Throughout his engagements, Secretary Blinken will emphasize how the Franco-American partnership is one of our strongest and most enduring bilateral relationships, and how as NATO Allies we have a joint commitment to shared transatlantic values which is ironclad.

You've heard this from both President Biden and Secretary Blinken before, but to reiterate, the United

States is deeply committed to strengthening the transatlantic relationship, and working with our allies and partners to address global challenges and opportunities together. The Secretary will also emphasize how the United States welcomes France's and the EU's leadership and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. France and the EU are important allies in the region, and France especially has been a key player in focusing Europe's attention on this increasingly important area.

Additionally, President Biden and the Secretary welcomed the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy released in September and reaffirmed the strategic importance of French and European engagement in the region.

As the Secretary noted in New York last week, we agree that the September 15th announcement would have benefited from better and more open consultation among allies. Our meetings in Paris are part of our commitment toward a process of in-depth consultations going forward. We recognize this will take time and will take hard work, and it will need to be demonstrated not only in words but also in deeds. We are all committed to working closely with our French counterparts at every level on this important effort.

Secretary Blinken will also discuss how the United States will work with France to revitalize and raise the level of ambition of the U.S.-EU relationship, working closely with our French counterparts when France assumes the presidency of the Council of the European Union in January. We're working closely with France to push for higher climate ambition at the upcoming COP26 in Glasgow, and we're confident France will maintain a strong focus on combating the climate crisis for its upcoming EU presidency in 2022. On the pandemic, our two countries share concerns about the health of our citizens, and the Secretary will discuss how our countries can continue to reduce the spread of COVID-19, share vaccine doses through COVAX in support of global vaccination efforts, and work together to safely restore global trade and travel.

I'll now hand it over to Senior Bureau Official Matt Murray now to go into a bit more depth on the important aspects of our engagements at the OECD. Over to you, Matt.

**MR MURRAY:** Great. Well, thank you very much, Assistant Secretary Donfried, and good morning, everyone. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to talk more about Secretary Blinken's participation as head of the U.S. delegation to the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting. The Secretary will be joined there by U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, and Chair of the Council of Economic Advisors Rouse, as well as Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment here at the State Department, Jose Fernandez. The experience and seniority of this delegation attests to the importance we accord to this ministerial, to the OECD, and more broadly to multilateralism.

As the assistant secretary noted, this ministerial occurs during the OECD's 60th anniversary year. And since its founding in 1961, the OECD has become the premier forum for free market democracies to develop evidence-based economic policy and tackle shared challenges. Today the OECD's 38 member-countries work together to create better policies for better lives.

As chair of this year's ministerial, the United States is focusing its agenda on building back our economies and societies after the COVID-19 crisis in an inclusive and equitable way. During the ministerial, Secretary Blinken will emphasize the importance of addressing the climate crisis as a top priority of the Biden-Harris administration. With more than 60 percent of the world's GDP, the OECD can be a key driver for ambitious action, especially in modeling commitments and action in this decisive decade to move toward a net-zero economy by 2050. The Secretary will also discuss the importance of quality infrastructure development, including via Blue Dot Network certification, as key to building a truly sustainable economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, Secretary Blinken will address other key areas of cooperation and focus, including global trade and technology policies that serve our people, protect our interests, and promote our research and innovation capabilities. He will also emphasize our shared democratic values, including respect for human rights, promoting the free flow of data with trust, and finding inclusive and equitable economic strategies. We will highlight the importance of creating an economic system that grows from the bottom up and the middle out to build a better system that truly benefits workers.

During the ministerial, members will adopt a new vision statement to guide the organization for the coming decade. We look forward to a successful ministerial that will ensure our economic cooperation reflects transparency, equality, and fairness; generates better, sustainable, and more equitable economic opportunities for our citizens; and leaves a greener world for future generations.

So, thanks very much, and I'll turn it back over to Ned Price.

**MR PRICE:** Thanks very much. Operator, if you just want to repeat the instructions for asking a question, we'll then move to that portion.

**OPERATOR:** Sure. Once again, if you do have a question, please press 1 then 0. You will hear an acknowledgment tone that you've been placed in the queue, and you may remove yourself from queue at any time by repeating the 1 0 command. If you're on a speakerphone, please pick up your handset before pressing the number.

**MR PRICE:** Great. We'll start with the line of Francesco Fontemaggi.

**OPERATOR:** One moment, please. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Hello. Nice to hear you, Ned. Hope you feel better.

I wanted to ask you if there is any meeting planned for the Secretary in Paris with the President Macron, and, also, now there's been the phone call between the two presidents, the meeting with Le Drian in New York, the meeting between the ambassador and Jake Sullivan here in D.C. Is there any deliverables you expect from the meetings in Paris for the agenda set up by the presidents? Thank you.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** I'm happy to jump in here. Thanks so much for that question. So, as you know, President Biden spoke with President Macron last week, and following up on that, Secretary Blinken had the opportunity to meet with Foreign Minister Le Drian in New York. And we are still working on the specific bilateral engagements that the Secretary will have when he is in Paris, but the process of in-depth consultations that we are undertaking at the direction of both presidents will look at a variety of areas where we can deepen that cooperation. And let me just try to give you a better sense of what that would be.

One area, perhaps obviously, where we're looking to deepen our cooperation is in the Indo-Pacific. And there, as you know, the EU strategy came out on the Indo-Pacific just very recently last month; and France is going to play a critical role in that EU strategy. And we're looking forward to seeing how France's very strong input will inform that EU strategy, and the U.S. is keen to deepen our cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Secondly, we are also looking at the Sahel and ways we can work more closely together in fighting terrorism there. As you know, France recently killed a senior terrorist leader who threatened both of us. And all of this will follow on the work that France consistently does to protect our security in the Sahel with the strong support and cooperation of the United States. So, we'll be looking at ways to do even more together in the Sahel.

And just to give a third example, we also will be looking at transatlantic security, and European security, and ways that we can support France's efforts to strengthen European security and defense capacity, as necessary. And, of course, we always do that in conformity with NATO. It is very much in our interest and Europe's interest for those capacities to be strengthened. And having a more effective, capable European alliance is very much in our interest as well.

So, that just gives you a sense of what the Secretary will be focused on when he's in Paris, and we'll certainly be happy to share more information as we have it. And I just want to say that in my opening comments, I mentioned that we recognize that all of this will take time and hard work. And when I said that, I was quoting Secretary Blinken directly. And we are very keen to be continuing this conversation and looking for ways to deepen our strong and enduring cooperation with France. Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** We'll go to the line of Matt Lee.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you, and your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi there. Hello?

**MR PRICE:** Hey, Matt, we've got you.

**QUESTION:** Hey, all right. Ned, hope you're feeling better.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** You gave us all a big scare.

**MR PRICE:** Rumors of my demise are premature.

**QUESTION:** (Laughter.) I don't think anyone was predicting your demise, but whatever. And sorry we'll miss you in Paris. But for Assistant Secretary Donfried, congratulations on your confirmation and welcome aboard.

Look, the sense that we're all getting from – since the President's phone call with President Macron, and then the Secretary's meeting with Foreign Minister Le Drian, and then Jake Sullivan's meeting yesterday with Ambassador Etienne – and now this trip is that you guys recognize not only that the whole AUKUS thing would have benefited from greater communication or greater whatever, openness, but that you guys really screwed this up here. So, I'm wondering, how much blame are you guys willing to accept for making a mess of this. Do you think you have done enough already or are you prepared to go further? That's my question. Thank you.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** Thanks so much. You started out so nicely by congratulating me on my confirmation, which I appreciate —

**QUESTION:** I – yeah, well, get used to it. I'm never nice.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** Oh, okay, you were just starting out that way. Look, I think that we have been clear that we agree with the French that the September 15th announcement would have benefited from better and more open consultations among allies.

Now, that said, President Biden and Secretary Blinken have been very open about their focus on revitalizing alliances and partnerships to support the rules-based international order. That means both strengthening longstanding historic ties, including with our NATO Allies and the EU, as well as working through new configurations such as the Quad or AUKUS. And our goal here is to have a network of alliances and partnerships that will continue to be our greatest source of strength, and we think this

network of alliances and partnerships is critically important to dealing effectively with 21st century challenges. And we are going to work hard with the French to deepen our relationship with them. They have an enormous interest and commitment to the Indo-Pacific. They are deeply engaged there. And we are looking toward building and deepening these partnerships, whether with France or with allies in other parts of the world. And I do believe we will get there, but it will take some hard work.

And, you referenced all of the examples of how we've already begun that hard work, and I know Secretary Blinken is looking forward to carrying that forward next week. Thanks so much.

**MR PRICE:** We'll go to Andrea Mitchell.

**OPERATOR:** And one moment. And your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I just want to echo what Matt said about how we are all wishing you a speedy recovery.

**MR PRICE:** Appreciate it.

**QUESTION:** And I've been thinking about you.

**MR PRICE:** Thanks.

**QUESTION:** And to Assistant Secretary Donfried, congratulations. I do want to follow up, though, and ask about the lack of trust, because there's been no explanation as to why it had to be kept secret, why – among our oldest allies, which – with our oldest ally you couldn't just say, look, we think this in America's interest and give them a heads-up. For them to learn about it through the media and all the rest, isn't it going to take more than a visit and more than promises to restore a feeling of trust on their part?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** Thanks so much for the congratulations, Andrea. Appreciate it. So, I think that when we talk about alliances, there are really three key elements – that you share interests, that you share values, and that fundamentally alliance is built on trust. So, I'm not for a minute going to underestimate the important of trust in any of these relationships. And I think the key to successful alliance is all of those three elements, and the French have been very clear that they feel that trust has been disturbed. And we understand that for these relationships to be as effective, as we want them to be, we need to make sure trust is there. And I agree that words are not sufficient to rebuild trust, that actions matter, deeds matter. And so, the outcome of these conversations that began last week – President Biden with President Macron, Secretary Blinken with Mr. Le Drian – and that will continue, and as you know, the President will be meeting with President Macron later in October as well, that out of these conversations need to come concrete actions that show how, in working together, we will rebuild that trust.

And I would say that is our plan for how to move forward and show that this relationship between France and the United States, the broader transatlantic relationship, that these relationships are – will deliver, and thereby we build trust that we are going to deliver concrete results that make the U.S. safer, that make France safer, that deliver for our citizens. And I do believe it will be those concrete deeds and actions that rebuild the trust. Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Nick Wadhams.

**QUESTION:** Thanks very much. Hi, thanks. Assistant Secretary, could you detail a little bit more what those concrete actions would be? Would the U.S. consider revising the terms of the AUKUS deal, for example, or sending – signing some sort of contract or other agreement with France on incorporating

its submarines, for example, into AUKUS? I mean, I just would love to get a bit more of a sense of what those concrete actions would actually be. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thanks, Nick, and I'm happy to let the assistant secretary to weigh in, but I would just remind everyone we're here to preview the call – the upcoming trip next week, in the first instance to Paris, and to speak about the itinerary and the important bilateral and OECD engagements that will be going on there. So, we'll have plenty of opportunity to talk about AUKUS and what comes next, including next week, but just want to keep us focused as much as we can on the trip. But, Assistant Secretary, if there's anything you'd like to add.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** Thanks so much for that, Ned. I would just say AUKUS is not intended to replace existing arrangements or existing partnerships; and on the contrary, we welcome the opportunity to discuss how to include the EU and other partners in our initiatives around the Indo-Pacific going forward. And just to reiterate, we welcome the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, we welcome France's engagement in the region, and we're looking forward to discussing the specifics of how we can deepen cooperation on the priorities identified in that strategy that we share. And that could include strengthening international rules and ocean governance, digital connectivity – but those are all of the things that we will be discussing going forward. Thanks so much.

**MR PRICE:** We'll go to Missy Ryan.

**OPERATOR:** One moment. And your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Okay, thanks. Thanks so much. I'm glad you're feeling better, Ned. I just had a quick follow-up on the France and the AUKUS questions, not to – if it's possible to talk about this in the context of the trip just to inform our understanding of how things are going to go.

There has been a lot of commentary and some suggestions from the French themselves that this situation is – besides the – setting aside the trust issues and the feelings of the French, that it's an indication of a sort of fundamental shift in the way the U.S. engages with Europe, an indication that now the priority is Asia.

So, what would you all – how do you respond to that suggestion that this is really an illustration that the primacy of the transatlantic relationship is over? How would you respond to that idea, or what can the Secretary and the department and the Biden administration do to allay those concerns on the part of the Europeans? Thanks.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** Thanks so much for that question. I think it's getting back to this point of whether there's a competition between or among our allies. The President and the Secretary have been clear that they believe the U.S. is stronger when we are engaging globally with our allies and partners.

And when we're talking about the Indo-Pacific, we will be doing that with our partners in the Indo-Pacific, our allies there, as well as with our allies in Europe. So, our goal here is to create a strong web of allies and partners as we look to meet challenges that face us in the Indo-Pacific. I realize it will take us hard work to get there, but that is the goal. And I know the Secretary of State and the President are committed to both working with our NATO Allies and the Quad in the Indo-Pacific to build this stronger network of allies and partnerships to help us meet these 21st Century challenges. That is our goal.

**MR MURRAY:** And if I could build on that – this is Matt Murray from the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs – I think it's worth highlighting here that Secretary of State Blinken traveled to Pittsburgh this week, along with Secretary Raimondo and Ambassador Tai, to participate in the

inaugural U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council Ministerial.

And as the question was regarding the importance of the transatlantic relationship, I think it's very much worth flagging this event, because it was at the TTC Ministerial where Secretary Blinken and the other co-chairs worked with their European counterparts to look towards setting the agenda and work plans for the coming year for the Trade and Technology Council, which was an outcome, as you all know, from the U.S.-EU Summit in June.

And we, definitely, see and made clear this week that Europe and the United States have a shared interest in ensuring that we do have strong transatlantic trade and investment ties, and that other countries around the world abide by international rules and norms.

And I think as we look ahead to the OECD Ministerial next week, there is an opportunity to build on that, to work with some of our most important allies through the OECD. As I noted earlier, the OECD has become the premier forum for free market democracies to face shared challenges and meet the commitments to our people. And this commitment to the OECD, and to multilateralism more broadly, I think also demonstrates what Assistant Secretary Donfried just noted about the importance of the transatlantic relationship, and that this is another – from the economic perspective, the European Union is a very important economic partner. And we want to continue to build on that relationship through opportunities like the Trade and Technology Council this week as well as the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting next week. Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** We'll take a couple final questions. We'll go to Simon Lewis.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is now open.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks a lot, Ned, and echoing all the well wishes. I wanted to ask a question on the OECD to Senior Official Murray. There's a few countries that are hoping to get membership in the OECD. I think six proposed at this meeting. I wonder if you guys have a position on – you have a specific position on those countries. It's Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. And specifically, Brazil; I wonder if you have any comment on sort of what specifically would you want the Brazilians to – if you're not going to support their membership at the moment, is there any kind of specific metrics that you're looking for them to fill before they could become a member? Thanks.

**MR MURRAY:** Yeah, thanks for the question. I don't think at this point we're prepared to talk about specific countries, but we very much look forward to working with members of the OECD after the Ministerial Council Meeting to find a path forward on OECD enlargement.

We see the OECD's global relevance derived not necessarily from its size or composition of its membership, but from the quality and the impact of its policy instruments and best practices. So, you know, our view is that we need to ensure that the OECD can absorb and integrate new members without weakening its high standards or the effectiveness of its work. And we need to ensure that candidate countries are also prepared and committed to becoming members.

As you know, the OECD is a consensus-based organization, so any decision on which country would be invited to join the accession pipeline will ultimately need to be made by all 38 member countries. Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** We'll go to Piotr Smolar from *Le Monde*.

**OPERATOR:** And your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yes, good morning, everyone. You underlined this morning several times the necessity to

demonstrate the closeness of transatlantic ties in deeds, not in words. But let me ask you this about a very precise example. Yesterday in Geneva, interagency delegations from the U.S. and Russia convened for the second meeting of the Strategic Stability Dialogue. One of its main aspects is arms control in the European space, and President Macron wants the Europeans to be a part of the discussion – not only to be informed, but to be in the room. Is this going to happen?

**MR PRICE:** Piotr, that's something we can discuss in another forum. I know that we issued a readout of those talks yesterday, and as we always do, we brief our allies in the aftermath of those discussions. But we'll happy to address that in another venue, and we can get back to you on that.

Let's go to Robin Wright.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. And your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. And best wishes, Ned. For those of us who are not on the trip, I'd be very grateful if you could give us a sense of what the United States and France might be able to do in the Indo-Pacific, in terms of deployments or developing strategy. And can you – might you kind of help us understand what deeds the United States might do for France not just on global issues like providing vaccines to COVAX and on the environment?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** So, what I'll say on that is those are exactly the sorts of issues that we will be discussing in the coming days and weeks. And the reality, as you know, is that we have a very close partnership with France already in the Indo-Pacific, and France is very engaged. So, it'll be building on the strong cooperation that is already there and seeing how, by enhancing and deepening that cooperation, we can make what we do in the Indo-Pacific together more meaningful and more effective. So, I don't have those specifics for you today, but you've touched on exactly the sorts of issues that will be at the heart of the conversations coming up, so stay tuned.

**MR PRICE:** And we'll conclude with Joel Gehrke.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you, and your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks for doing this, and congratulations, Assistant Secretary Donfried. I have questions for both of you, one briefly on the – following up on my colleagues on the AUKUS front and U.S.-Franco relations. Is there any policy step that you've heard or in consideration from the French side that might be taken to mend the breach that they've described? And if so, can you tell us, have – do they have any kind of requests specifically that would reassure them? And if not, how do you – I guess I wonder while we – as we keep having these conversations about managing the fallout from this, how do you on the one hand have good, sound policymaking that isn't transactional between allies, and on the other hand, not sort of stumble into sort of managing emotions instead of doing policy?

And then for Mr. Murray, I wondered if you could put a finer point on the relationship between U.S. engagement with the OECD and sort of the broader China competition. You've mentioned that the OECD is this forum for democratic economies. We're obviously coming off the Trade and Technology Council, which I've heard described before as a place where perhaps the U.S. and the EU could begin to create kind of a common market with high standards to create alternatives that people – that companies and countries aren't necessarily dependent on China for things. I wonder how – if there's a relationship between the TTC we just did and your engagement next week with the OECD.

And of course, it's interesting in light of all the atmospherics that the OECD is chaired by an Australian now, or a director-general of Australia. So how is this forum for kind of that broad Indo-Pacific European cooperation on the economic front? Thank you.



**ASSISTANT SECRETARY DONFRIED:** Thanks so much for those questions. I would say that I don't think there's a silver bullet in terms of how we are working to deepen our relationship with the French going forward. Clearly, a takeaway from AUKUS was the need for better and more open consultations among allies. So, if that's the takeaway, then what we're doing now is saying okay, how do we use those deepened consultations to actually be a force for good in pursuing American interests, French interests, European interests, et cetera. And I tried to give you a sense earlier of the variety of themes that we're going to be discussing in that context. One of those themes is very specific in terms of deepening our cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, but we're also going to be looking at ways to stand together more closely against terrorism, and I think that likely will focus on the Sahel. We also will be talking about how we can deepen that cooperation, with regard to transatlantic security and European security.

So that gives you a sense of the topics, but what we'll be doing in the coming weeks is then deciding the concrete policies that will advance our shared interests in those areas. Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** And we'll take one final question from Nike Ching of VOA.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you, and your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. Glad to hear your voice, also second all the well wishes from others. Good morning, Assistant Secretary. Congratulations. Good morning, Matt. Glad to hear your voice.

I would like to ask about the Blue Dot Network. Are there deliverables as the U.S., Australia, and Japan are working with the OECD to develop a methodology for certification of infrastructure projects? Some observers say the Blue Dot Network is a warning shot to China's Belt and Road Initiative. What is your take?

And separately, can I also ask about Mexico? Maybe Ned, could you please shed some light? Is the migration crisis on the agenda? As large groups of Haitians recently headed to the U.S.-Mexico border, what does the U.S. ask from Mexico? Is the U.S. providing assistance to Mexico to fly some Haitian migrants back to their homeland? Thank you very much.

**MR MURRAY:** Yeah, thanks very much. This is Matt. Yeah, I think to your question about the Blue Dot Network, the United States very much values our partnership with the OECD in developing and implementing the Blue Dot Network infrastructure initiative, and we look forward to further discussions on this topic at the Ministerial Council Meeting next week. As the Blue Dot Network emphasizes, we want to work together with many of our likeminded partners and allies to raise the standards for infrastructure development and to help ensure that infrastructure investment is open and inclusive, transparent, and financially, environmentally, and socially sustainable.

And this also ties into the previous question about China and the OECD and the Trade and Technology Council. The administration is very interested in engaging likeminded partners and allies to talk about the behaviors of non-market economies, including China. And the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting is a key opportunity to affirm the OECD's shared values of transparency, equality, and fairness, to generate better and sustainable and more equitable economic opportunities for our citizens and leave a greener world for future generations. And then this line very much follows on this week's successful U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council.

At the OECD, we welcome China's participation in the Ministerial Council Meeting as an observer. And separate from the Ministerial Council Meeting and more generally, the U.S. Government has undertaken a comprehensive review of the U.S.-China trade relationship, because the United States welcomes healthy, fair competition with our trading partners. And economic competition with the PRC should be fair. And it's in this context that we very much want to continue to have engagements in

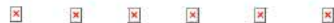
multilateral settings, such as the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting. Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** And Nike, to your second question, we're just focused on Paris today. We'll have more to say on potential additional elements as the days go on.

So, with that, want to thank everyone for joining this call, want to thank our speakers, Senior Bureau Official Matt Murray and newly confirmed Assistant Secretary Karen Donfried. Thank you all for tuning in and we'll talk to you shortly.

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken and OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann at a Joint Press Availability](#)

10/06/2021 02:39 PM EDT

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Paris, France

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**MODERATOR:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen – those in the room, those watching online – to this final press conference for the OECD’s Ministerial Council Meeting. We’ll have a – we’ll hear a few remarks from the Secretary-General, followed by remarks from the Secretary of State, who chaired the meeting. And then we will take some questions and answers. I now hand the floor over to the Secretary-General Mathias Cormann.

**SECRETARY-GENERAL CORMANN:** Thank you very much and welcome everyone. Good evening. Thank you to the U.S. Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, for chairing this Ministerial Council Meeting. This has been an extremely successful MCM. The United States leadership of this MCM has been absolutely central to its success. Thank you also to the vice chairs, Korea and Luxembourg, particularly to Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Finance Minister Pierre Gramegna.

About 70 ministers and 180 delegates joined our discussions, either in person – most of them in person here at the OECD – or some in virtual format.

(Via interpreter) Your commitment for democracy, the rule of law, gender equality, and market economy principle, and international order founded on rules and international cooperation, and equal opportunity for all to fulfill their potential – these are the values which gather us today. In all of the OECD, the economic outlook have improved.

(In English) In our recent, interim economic outlook, we project global growth of 5.7 percent this year and 4.5 percent in 2022. However, the recovery remains uneven, exposing both advanced and emerging markets to risks. Slow vaccination progress in some emerging markets and especially in low-income countries are a global concern. Renewed outbreaks of the virus, especially in countries with relatively low vaccination rates, are forcing developing countries to restrict activities, resorting in bottlenecks and adding to shortages in supply chains.

So over the past two days, the recovery and optimizing the strength and equality of the recovery from COVID-19 has been front and center in all of our discussions. Ending the health, economic, and social crisis caused by the pandemic and optimizing the strength and the quality of that recovery is our shared key priority. There’s strong agreement on the need to accelerate vaccine deployment across the world, including by supporting the ACT Accelerator and its COVAX facility.

Beyond the pandemic, we also had rich exchanges on key global challenges: driving and supporting global leadership on more ambitious, effective, and globally coordinated action on climate change; seizing the opportunities of the accelerating digital transformation by better managing some of the associated and growing risks, challenges, and disruptions; finalizing a multilaterally agreed approach to international taxation. And we're really at the pointy end of that process now, we hope, making international tax arrangements fairer and work better in the context of digitalization and globalization. And we focused on advancing gender equality and on advancing equality of opportunity more generally on the foundation of strong, cleaner, fairer economic growth. And as market-based democratic nations, we committed to actively supporting the crucial work of the WTO to help ensure we can have a well-functioning, open, global market underpinned by rules-based multilateral trading system in good working order.

Ministers affirmed two unique tools to help optimize the strength and equality of the post-COVID recovery: the COVID-19 recovery indicator dashboard, which provides a succinct but comprehensive set of outcome indicators that can help countries measure whether the recovery is indeed strong, inclusive, green, and resilient. Ministers also operationalized a new OECD International Programme for Action on Climate, which offers a new steering and monitoring instrument to pursue the transition to net zero emissions by 2050. The IPAC preliminary dashboard, composed of key climate indicators, provides an overview of country progress towards net zero emissions.

A series of other important decisions were made, which are all reflected in the statement.

Finally, at this MCM, we have also revitalized the organization's commitment to effective multilateralism. And the positive and active engagement of the United States in effective multilateralism is so important, and it's been so good to have the U.S. provide leadership to this Ministerial Council Meeting in the leadup to this event, but in particular over these last few days.

We have taken an important step forward to strengthen our global reach, relevance, and impact through the new OECD global relations strategy. The strategy, which will ensure our engagement with nonmember countries, is aligned with members' interests, shapes our contributions to global fora, including the G20, the G7, and APEC.

In relation to the six current accession applications in front of us, I particularly thank Secretary Blinken for his statement at this MCM yesterday that the U.S. is committed to see the OECD continue to grow stronger and indicating the readiness of the U.S. to work with all our members to build consensus on the way forward so that applicant countries that share our values and meet the OECD's high standards can pursue a path to membership. As secretary-general, I will now seek to facilitate that consultation over coming weeks.

(Via interpreter) We are looking forward to the coming intense multilateral agenda of the coming months in order to ensure the success of COP26, of the G20 summit, and of the ministerial conference of the WTO. When I joined the OECD four months ago, I described this place as a place where we can identify global collective solutions that we can implement at the national level. This is a place of political innovation, a dynamic forum to facilitate knowledge sharing and inspire collaboration and action. During this MCM, the members have fulfilled this potential, and I have the honor of heading the secretariat by supporting its work today and in the coming years.

Thank you, and I will now turn to Secretary of State Mr. Antony Blinken.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you so much, Secretary-General. It's been really wonderful to be with you and the entire team and all the delegations here this week. Let me just start by saying how terrific it always is to be back in France, to be in Paris. And I'm particularly grateful for the very constructive discussions that we had over the last couple of days as well with the closest of partners,

the oldest of allies, France, and the work we're doing to deepen even more the relationship.

But I really want to convey to you, Mathias, and to everyone at the OECD both thanks and congratulations for such a successful ministerial meeting. And it was particularly good to just be in the same room with most of our colleagues and to see each other face to face or still occasionally mask to mask. It's also been an honor to lead the U.S. delegation. It included senior officials from across the administration, including our Special Envoy for Climate, the U.S. Trade Representative, the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, the Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment. We all came to Paris because the OECD is such a valuable forum for getting important work done on behalf of our economies and on behalf of our people.

That's been the case for the past 60 years, but I think as evidenced by what we have done over the last couple of days, that's arguably even more the case now and going forward. Since its founding 60 years ago, the OECD has evolved into a forward-looking institution where the world's leading market-oriented democracies come together to identify urgent global challenges, to share best practices, to drive research, to inform policies, and to recommit to shared values, which are the foundation of everything that we're doing. This year, we continued that tradition by focusing on the theme of a green and inclusive future.

And that actually ties together three of the most critical challenges that our countries face today: stepping up our response to the climate crisis, shaping the global economy in a sustainable way, and addressing deep-rooted inequities that hold our democracies and our economies back. Over the past two days, OECD member states shared strategies for investing in a green future and moving toward a net zero economy by 2050. We agreed that the climate crisis must and will remain at the top of the OECD agenda. The cooperation and the data-driven policy analysis that the OECD provides is also vital as we seek to repair the damage of the COVID-19 pandemic and build back better from it.

We focused as well on global corporate minimum tax rate, which many OECD member states, including the United States, support. It would help us avoid a self-defeating race to the bottom in which our countries lower our corporate tax rates only for others to lower theirs in response. This is a race that has gone on for decades, and no country has won it. A shared approach on taxation will level the playing field for workers and businesses, foster greater equity within and among our nations, and it will create a strong foundation for countries around the world to fund and finance things that are vital to the lives of their citizens. We have now nearly 140 countries, representing more than 90 percent of global GDP, that have already agreed to this effort. So it is time to seize the moment and get it done.

We aligned on the need to spark a race to the top for quality infrastructure projects around the world to support more projects that are climate resilient, environmentally sustainable, free from corruption, and truly benefit the communities where they're built. Too often, what we've seen is infrastructure projects, especially in developing economies, that simply aren't done that way. They're built with imported labor, they steamroll local communities, they leave countries in debt. Through projects like the Blue Dot Network – which is an initiative of the United States, Japan, and Australia, in collaboration with the OECD and Build Back Better World – we will champion a different approach.

On a central issue of the future economy, we share a belief that the OECD should be a key international forum to develop the rules of the road that will guide the use of emerging technologies – like AI, cybersecurity – and help strengthen the supply chain security that is so vital to all of our countries.

We also discussed strategies for how to bridge the gender digital divide to ensure that women and girls can fully participate in the digital economy. We simply will not achieve a strong, equitable, resilient global economy if women and girls aren't fully included. The same is true for LGBTI persons,

for racial and ethnic minorities, anyone else excluded from full participation in the global economy. And the OECD is doing vital work across all of those areas.

We in the OECD are united by a commitment to, as I said, the shared values that have made possible all of our progress over the last 60 years: democracy; the rule of law; human rights, including gender equality; and open, inclusive, and transparent market economies. That's what sets the OECD apart, and it's especially important today at a time when these principles are challenged by authoritarian governments that argue that their model is better at meeting people's basic needs. Now more than ever, we must prove that our approach can make life better for our people and for people all over the world.

So we just approved the OECD 60th Anniversary Vision Statement. It reaffirms our commitment to those ideals, and critically, to seeing them put into practice, because ultimately that's what this is all about. It's taking the ideals that bring us together and putting them into practice. I'm confident that they will continue to guide us for the next 60 years and beyond.

So Mathias, again, thank you. It's been great to be here with you. But I'm especially grateful for your leadership, not just these past few days but ever since you've been on the job with a very, very important agenda going forward. And thanks to all the member states of the OECD for such a productive and, I believe, principled ministerial conference. Thanks very much.

**MODERATOR:** We'll take a first question from AFP (Inaudible)

**QUESTION:** Hello, Mr. Secretary. You met with Mr. Macron, Mr. Le Drian since you came here. On European defense and the situation in Sahel, how – to what extent is the U.S. ready to support France and the EU? And should we expect announcements by the end of the month? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you very much. Following the conversation between President Biden and President Macron a few weeks ago, we were directed to take what is one of the most important relationships in the world and make it even better, make it even stronger, deepen our consultations, deepen our cooperation, deepen our coordination. And that's exactly what we're doing. There's a lot of work that goes into this, and we've had teams meet in a variety of ways in the last – in the last days and indeed in the last weeks. That's going to continue.

And as you noted, there are a number of areas where the two presidents agreed we should focus our efforts. One is on the work that we're already doing in the Sahel and to look for ways, practical ways to deepen that cooperation. Another is in Euro-Atlantic security, again, working as we have for so many years now, not only within NATO as allies but also looking at ways to enhance and increase European capacity, something that the United States supports, and as well in the Indo-Pacific, where the EU has put out an important strategy. France played a critical role in developing that strategy.

We're about to do the same in the coming months and we're in intensive consultations to make sure that our strategies are linked up and joined together, because it is vitally important to the United States that Europe in general, France in particular, be a strong and engaged partner in the Indo-Pacific.

So we had very good conversations this week in all three of those areas, as well as many others where France and the United States work very closely together. This is ongoing work. It will be continued in the days ahead, including by the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who will be here in a couple of days. And then we fully expect that President Macron and President Biden will be speaking in the weeks ahead and also meeting to continue this work.

**MODERATOR:** Next question is from Kylie Atwood of CNN.

**QUESTION:** Good afternoon. Secretary Blinken, two questions for you. First, do you believe that after this visit France and their trust in the United States has been restored? And given the strategic security dialogue with Mexico on Friday, I wanted to ask how you would assess the U.S.-Mexico relationship right now. And in the meetings on Friday, will you raise one issue – that is, the Mexican Government recently failing to approve visas for DEA agents who have been assigned to Mexico over the last year? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Great. Thanks, Kylie. Let me start with the second question first. So we are indeed heading to Mexico in a couple of days. We will be convening for the first time this High-Level Security Dialogue and talking about a broad range of common security issues and challenges, and that follows on the economic dialogue that brought us together just a few weeks ago in Washington.

I've got to say, if the security dialogue matches in quality what we experienced with the economic dialogue, that would be – and I fully expect it will – very, very positive and also productive, because I have to say we had one of the best exchanges I remember in – at least in my experience with our Mexican colleagues just a couple of weeks ago. And I think that's very much the spirit in which we're approaching the security dialogue in a couple of days.

We have the Attorney General taking part. We have the Secretary for Homeland Security taking part of this. We will be spending time with President Lopez Obrador as well as with our counterparts and we've got a very broad-ranging agenda, and I think it's evidence of the fact that the relationship, while some issues like migration understandably get a lot of headlines, is incredibly broad and deep-rooted, and so I think we'll be covering a lot of ground. I don't want to spoil the fun, so we'll have an opportunity to talk in more detail about that going forward.

**QUESTION:** Any details on —

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** We'll have a chance to talk more about Mexico in Mexico. So come on down.

And then with regard to France, as I said, look, you have to obviously ask our friends here for their views. From my perspective, the conversations we've had just in the last 24 hours were very positive, very productive, and reflect a lot of important work that's in progress, work that was tasked by President Biden and President Macron to, as I say, deepen consultations, deepen cooperation, deepen coordination across a range of issues that make a real difference for citizens of France and citizens of the United States.

We're looking at very practical cooperation in a number of areas. I talked about it a moment ago with our colleague, including in the Sahel, including with regard to Euro-Atlantic security, and including in the Indo-Pacific. And I think it's evidence of the seriousness of purpose that we have that we've had our teams meeting very consistently and regularly on this. My visit is followed by, as I said, Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, coming to continue to work on this. And what we're doing, I think, is ultimately teeing up some very practical additional initiatives that the presidents will have an opportunity to discuss in the coming weeks.

**MODERATOR:** Next question from Will Horobin of Bloomberg.

**QUESTION:** Hello. A question about international tax negotiations. There are two days to go until the Inclusive Framework meeting. Are you confident of a deal on Friday that will include all G20 members? And will the U.S. be able to implement such a deal if it requires changes to tax treaties?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Mathias, do you want to have a start at that?

**SECRETARY-GENERAL CORMANN:** Well, the G20 finance ministers' meeting in Venice in July reached a historic agreement on an international tax deal that is designed to make international tax arrangements fairer and work better. There was more detail to be worked through and those discussions are continuing. As I stand here before you, I'm quietly optimistic that in time for the G20 Leaders' Summit towards – at the end of October that we'll be in a position to finalize an agreement. There is more work on the way and we will continue to engage in those conversations in the same positive and constructive and solutions-focused spirit that has characterized this process so far. We are very, very close. We obviously believe that it is very much in the world's interest to finalize a deal. The combined effects of globalization and digitalization have created distortions and inequities that need to be addressed, and Secretary Blinken went through some of those in his opening remarks. And a lot of work has been done. We're very close. Conversations are continuing. As I stand here today, I'm quietly optimistic that in time for the G20 Leaders' Summit we will be able to finalize an agreement.

Of course, the Inclusive Framework meeting on Friday is a key meeting and we'll give it our best and we'll see how we go.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** And I would simply say that I share the quiet optimism. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. It's a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make the international tax system fairer. It's a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help countries raise the revenue necessary to actually do things important to bettering the lives of their citizens and to building back better from COVID. And my sense of the conversations in the last couple of days is that a broad array of countries share that view, share that perspective. We still have some work to do but, as the Secretary-General said, I think we've made good progress in the last couple of days and we want to bring this over the finish line.

**MODERATOR:** Great. The final question is Simon Lewis from Reuters.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you. Mr. Secretary, while you've been here there was a readout from the Russian Foreign Ministry about a call you had with Foreign Minister Lavrov, so I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what it is you're discussing with the Foreign Minister on the Iran deal, and what are you hoping Russia can do to bring Iran back into that deal? And also, on that call did you discuss the eight Russians who were expelled from NATO, which is a story that just broke today?

And just another, separate issue: There's been a significant increase in Chinese activity near Taiwan, and does that give you – does that give the U.S. cause to change its calculus in any way and does that contradict the agreement that – with China that the President talked about yesterday, which seemed to be a reference to the understanding between the U.S. and China that Taiwan issues should be resolved by peaceful means? Is that something that the U.S. side is going to bring up during the talks in Zurich?

Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you very much. With regard to the call with Foreign Minister Lavrov, yes, we focused on the JCPOA, and the United States and Russia I think share an interest in seeing a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. Russia has been an important participant in this effort, and we talked about where things stand. We talked about the commitment of the United States to return to compliance, but the necessity of Iran being willing to do the same thing. And I noted again to Foreign Minister Lavrov that the runway is getting shorter and shorter on that prospect and on that interest that we share because, as I've said before and as we've talked about before, given what Iran is doing with its nuclear program that is inconsistent with the obligations under the JCPOA and the constraints imposed by the JCPOA against spinning more sophisticated centrifuges, enriching uranium to 20 percent and even 60 percent, we are getting closer and closer to a point where simply returning



to compliance with the JCPOA won't recapture the benefits of the agreement. So we had an opportunity to compare notes on where we stand and where we hope to go.

With regard to Taiwan, I have to tell you and reiterate that we are very concerned by the PRC's provocative military activity near Taiwan. As we've said, the activity is destabilizing, it risks miscalculation, and it has the potential to undermine regional peace and stability. So we strongly urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure and coercion directed at Taiwan. We have – the United States has – a commitment to Taiwan that is rock solid and, over many years, has contributed to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the region. And we will continue to stand with friends, with allies to advance shared prosperity, shared security, shared values, as well as continue to deepen our ties with a democratic Taiwan.

**MODERATOR:** We have to close the press conference there, and I thank you all very much for your questions. Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you.

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## [Department Press Briefing – October 7, 2021](#)

10/07/2021 07:40 PM EDT

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:11 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good to see everyone. Before we get to it, let me just say – just a moment of personal privilege to say thank you for everyone who reached out with the warm wishes and regards over the past couple weeks. I very much appreciate it. I want to also be sure to thank my team and others in the department who were in a position to stand up so I could take a step back for a couple days. The past 10 days have not always been fun, but I'm extraordinarily grateful to have the team around me, to be able to work with all of you, and also extraordinarily grateful to have benefitted from safe and effective vaccines that I know prevented serious illness in this case.

So now we'll make the pivot from public health to foreign policy. Have just a couple elements at the top.

Today, I have the pleasure of welcoming the Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons Jessica Stern to the department as she officially assumed her duties late last month. This appointment reflects the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to advance and to protect the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons at home and abroad.

Prior to joining the department, Special Envoy Stern served as Executive Director of OutRight Action International, based in New York, where she specialized in gender, sexuality, and human rights globally.

At OutRight, she helped register LGBTQI+ organizations internationally, secure the mandate of the United Nations Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, expand the UN General Assembly resolution to include gender identity, and founded the UN LGBTQI Core Group. You can read her full biography on the department's website.

We look forward to working with Special Envoy Stern as she leads department efforts to advance the administration's priorities, and that includes pursuing an end to violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and sex characteristics.

Finally, we are concerned and disappointed by recent reports from Tunisia on infringements of – on freedom of the press and expression and the use of military courts to investigate civilian cases. It is essential for the Tunisian Government to uphold its commitments to respect human rights as outlined in the Tunisian constitution and affirmed in Presidential Decree 117.

We also urge Tunisia's president and new prime minister to respond to the Tunisian people's call for a clear roadmap for a return to a transparent, democratic process, involving civil society and diverse political voices.

So with that, happy to turn to your questions. Start wherever. Matt. Shaun? Sorry, called you Matt.

**QUESTION:** I won't imitate.

**MR PRICE:** Please. I hope you don't.

**QUESTION:** Perhaps let's start in Iran.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** On several developments there. Rob Malley earlier talked today with a senior official from South Korea. This comes as South Korea, the Republic of Korea, is in a dispute with Iran over some \$7 billion in frozen assets. Was this a topic of discussion and do you see any headway on that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, so Special Envoy Malley did, in fact, have a conversation with his counterpart in South Korea. This is not the first conversation they've had. Special Envoy Malley routinely speaks to his counterparts in the P5+1, as well as in other parts of the world, and this includes in the Indo-Pacific with our ROK allies in this regard. They spoke and Rob issued a tweet on their conversation to confirm it took place. The ROK has been a stalwart partner. The ROK and we see eye-to-eye when it comes to the utility of a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. When it comes to the issue you referenced, we appreciate the ROK's vigorous enforcement of existing sanctions. Those sanctions do remain in effect, as you know, until and unless we are able to reach that mutual return to compliance.

**QUESTION:** So the 7 billion is still – there has been no movement on that, basically it's still there?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any update on that. That's right.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you something else on Iran before —

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Just on – you've been asked this many times before, but in terms of the resumption of indirect talks of Vienna, an Iranian official – yesterday I believe it was – said it could resume within days. Do you have anything to say on that, in terms of any —

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have heard similar statements from the Iranian Government at various levels over the past couple weeks. If you recall, we were talking about this in New York, which seems like it was just last week, a couple weeks ago now. And we have heard from the Iranians that they expect negotiations to resume soon. We hope their definition of soon matches our definition of soon. We would like negotiations to resume in Vienna as soon as possible. We have been saying this not for weeks now, but for months now.

We think it is important for the parties to come back together, to continue, to resume where we left off in Vienna after the sixth round so that we can resume this seventh round on the basis of what we have accomplished to date. We think it is important for a number of reasons, but also because, as we have made very clear, we continue to believe the diplomatic path is open. We continue to believe that a diplomatic approach is the best means to verifiably once again ensure that Iran can never obtain a nuclear weapon with the permanent and verifiable restrictions that the JCPOA put in place.

But we also think a – imminent return to Vienna is necessary because this is not a process that can go on indefinitely. This is not a process that can drag out or that can be dragged out. We are firmly of the belief that we need to work quickly, we need to work with alacrity and a great deal of speed to see to it if we can achieve that mutual return to compliance that we have been sincere and steadfast in

seeking to achieve for the better part of a year now.

**QUESTION:** So is resumption hinging on what? I mean, who's going to —

**MR PRICE:** It's hinging on the Iranians.

**QUESTION:** Who's going to take the —

**MR PRICE:** It is hinging on the Iranians. We have made very clear that we are prepared, willing, and able to return to Vienna as soon as we have a partner to negotiate with indirectly. We have also made clear that we would be happy to engage in direct negotiations. And in fact, this process would be much more effective if we had a direct negotiating partner. The Iranians have not been willing to do that, as we know. The Iranians have heretofore not been willing to return to Vienna just yet. We have heard these repeated statements of soon, of within days. Again, we hope their lexicon matches ours when it comes to this.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. And we're all really happy to see you well.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** It's a great advertisement for vaccinations.

**MR PRICE:** Yes, thank you.

**QUESTION:** On Iran, can you expand on the conversations between the Secretary and Foreign Minister Lavrov in terms of what the Russians are willing to do, if they are, to help persuade the Iranians to come back to the talks? And I have a follow-up.

**MR PRICE:** Well, the Secretary did have an opportunity to speak to Foreign Minister Lavrov yesterday. The brunt of the conversation was on the mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. We have – of course, it goes without saying, we have a number of profound disagreements with the Russian Federation. There are areas where our interests do align, and this is one of them. Russia, the Russian Federation, is an original member of the P5+1. Russia has been constructive in its engagements in the context of the P5+1. We agree with the Russian Federation that Iran should not be able to acquire a nuclear weapon. That is precisely why we and the Russians agree on this one issue that we should resume negotiations in Vienna as soon as possible. The Russians similarly read out this call, made similar points. This is one of those issues where our interests do, in fact, overlap.

**QUESTION:** And there was – a number of years ago, there were a number of conversations, before the JCPOA, about the Russians being involved in a deal with the Iranians on buying some of their processed uranium. Is there any thought of that, of the Russians stepping in in any way?

**MR PRICE:** Well, right now the thought is on resuming the mutual compliance with the JCPOA, testing the proposition that we can achieve that mutual return to compliance. The United States, the Russian Federation, our other partners in the P5+1 context – all of us are united in the belief that the JCPOA continues to provide the best and the most effective framework for achieving our mutual interests. And it is a mutual interest on the part of the United States, of France, of Germany, of the United Kingdom, of the European Union, of Russia and China, that Iran should not be able to acquire a nuclear weapon.

So look, we're not entertaining at the moment, or at least not discussing publicly, other modalities, other alternatives because we still have a framework in the form of the JCPOA that would provide

precisely what we would like to see, precisely what our partners and allies in the P5+1 would like to see, and what Iran was willing to agree to as recently as 2015, implementation in 2016, and certainly, the last government in Iran being willing to engage in good-faith, businesslike – indirect but businesslike – negotiations in Vienna. That's what we would like to see happen to see if we can affect that mutual return to compliance.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Change in topic?

**MR PRICE:** Anything else on Iran?

**QUESTION:** I just – I have one more Iran question.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** But I also have another question on another topic. The – Namazi – I saw the tweet earlier this week.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Are you getting any indications that Iran is going to offer any kind of humanitarian gesture on that case?

**MR PRICE:** Well, this – these are cases that I will say a couple things about. These are cases that in the first instance we are prioritizing to the utmost degree. This is something we have done in parallel but independently of discussions regarding a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, precisely because we do not want or wish to tie – potentially tie the fates of detained Americans and other – and others to the fate of a proposition that has always been uncertain.

We want to see these Americans released. They have been held against their will for far too long. The fact that they have been held against their will unjustly – without basis, without cause, for this period, for any period – is an abomination. It is especially jarring in this case, in the case of Mr. Namazi given the serious medical condition that he has, his need to receive urgent medical care.

And so we are appealing and we have appealed to the Iranian Government to do what is right, to do what is just, to do what is humane in this and all cases, and to release Mr. Namazi and the other unjustly detained Americans in their custody. We have long made the point that using human beings, individuals, for political leverage has no place in foreign policy, it has no place in the international system. It does not afford any country, whether that is Iran or any other country, any additional leverage. And in fact, it just leads to international condemnation.

We have worked closely with a number of our allies and partners. We've recently spoken to this in the Canadian context. And in fact, our Canadian allies have launched an initiative to establish a norm to see to it that the practice of holding individuals for the purposes of political leverage is something that is cast aside, is something that no country resorts to. Obviously, we have a lot of work to do. We are working this in the case of Iran; we are working this in the case of all other countries where this occurs.

**QUESTION:** I have an Afghanistan question, but I can come back after.

**MR PRICE:** Sure. Okay, go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Thank you. Good to see you. Welcome back.

**MR PRICE:** Yes, thank you.

**QUESTION:** So the Secretary is in Mexico tomorrow and he will be talking about security arrangements. The Mexicans say maybe that is dead, this agreement that has been sort of the bedrock of U.S.-Mexican security relations for more than a decade is dead. Do you agree that – do you, the State Department, the Biden administration agree that Merida is dead or at least has outlived its usefulness (a)? And (b) as you negotiate a new arrangement, what are the two or three elements that the U.S. really wants to see in any kind of future security arrangement with Mexico?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you alluded to, the Secretary will be in Mexico tomorrow, on Friday, to take part in this High-Level Security Dialogue. He'll be there with his counterparts from Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, the Attorney General, and the Homeland Security Secretary to discuss precisely this set of issues.

When it comes to Merida, look, this is an initiative that has been on the books for I think it is 13 years now. We believe we are due for an updated look at our bilateral security cooperation and that we need an approach that addresses the concerns and the priorities of both governments. And this will really be one of the core elements of the discussions tomorrow.

Our foreign assistance has supported deeper law enforcement assistance and coordination and information sharing between our countries, and it has helped strengthen ties between our security agencies and helped strengthen that security relationship more broadly. We also know that the Merida Initiative helped Mexico strengthen rule of law and counternarcotics capacity and has enabled Mexican law enforcement agencies international accreditation at the federal and state levels, resulting in increased transparency, professionalization of institutions, and respect for human rights. And our security cooperation has strengthened as threats from fentanyl and illicit finance has evolved.

So all of this will be on the table and more – tomorrow – will be on the table. The Merida Initiative has produced some significant gains. We want to see to it that those gains are preserved, that that cooperation is deepened, and that we have an updated approach that accounts for the threats of today and the threats that have evolved over the course of the, some, 15 years that Merida has been in place.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** So you're saying those gains, but in perhaps a new forum or a new agreement?

**MR PRICE:** We don't have anything to announce yet in terms of what that might look like, what that might mean, but certainly we want to see to it that our mutually beneficial cooperation with Mexico continues on these important security matters. The High-Level Security Dialogue tomorrow will be the natural complement to the Economic Dialogue that took place with our Mexican partners a couple weeks ago now. You had an opportunity to hear from the Secretary yesterday just how productive those discussions were on the economic front. I know that the Secretary – I know that our counterparts from DHS and the Department of Justice – are similarly hoping and expecting for a constructive discussion on the security issues tomorrow in an effort to deepen that cooperation further.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I wanted to add my voice to my colleagues in welcoming you and seeing you behind the podium there.

**MR PRICE:** Thanks very much.

**QUESTION:** A very quick couple of questions on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. The Israeli press reported yesterday that the Biden administration is – quietly and behind the scenes – is putting pressure on the Israeli Government to freeze settlements. You know there was a big, I guess, plan or a huge plan or a huge settlement – can you comment on this? Do you guys – what is your position on the settlements?

**MR PRICE:** Well, part of your question I will comment on; part of your question I won't comment on. I'll start with the latter. We don't comment on private diplomatic conversations, private conversations that may be taking place, whether that's between the Secretary and his counterpart and the President and his counterpart. But what we have said many times before is that we believe it is critical for all parties to refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions and undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-step – two-state solution. That, of course, includes settlement activity.

**QUESTION:** No, Ned – I mean, you guys have always stuck to this line about anything that would prejudice a two-state solution outcome and so on. But in fact, you say unilateral steps. We're talking about one side who is doing this, which is Israel. It is taking the land. It is throwing people out. It is making the two-state outcome almost impossible. So what is there left for the United States to do in order to pressure Israel to end these activities that actually render the two-state solution almost impossible to attain?

**MR PRICE:** Said, the two-state solution is something we discuss with our Israeli partners at just about every opportunity. It continues to be the guiding principle for our approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it continues to be the guiding principle, the guiding framework, for a simple reason: The two-state solution is the best means by which to protect Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state while affording to the Palestinian people what they have long sought, and that includes self-determination, dignity, safety, security, prosperity in a state of their own. And so that is why we've remained focused on this.

Look, we don't always – in fact we never read out our private diplomatic conversations, the back and forth we have, whether that's with our Israeli partners or any partner around the world. But suffice to say we have made our position very clear, and when it comes to unilateral action like settlement activity, we have also made that very clear. And in fact, I just reiterated where the United States stands on settlement activity. There should be no question about that.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) on the settler violence. It is – I know you guys addressed that last week, but this has increased. I mean, the settlers are not deterred. The Israeli Government is not doing – Israeli forces are not doing anything. They just watch as they attack. Today they attacked a seven-year-old girl. I mean, it's happening every single day. They're throwing people out and so on. Why can't you take a stronger stand on settler violence?

**MR PRICE:** Said, I think we have taken a strong stand on settler violence, and you saw our statement the other day. We made very clear in that statement that the United States Government – that this administration strongly condemns the acts of settler violence that took place against Palestinians in villages near Hebron and the West Bank on September 28th. We appreciate Foreign Minister Lapid and other Israeli officials' strong and unequivocal condemnations – condemnation of this violence.

And again, look, we believe it is critical for all parties to refrain from those unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions and, again, undercut efforts to achieve a negotiated two-state solution. That includes, as I was saying before in a different context, annexation of territory, settlement activity, demolitions and evictions, incitement to violence, and providing compensation for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism. We have been very clear on all of those things, just as we were on the settler violence you referenced within recent days.

Yes, Michele.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Senator Blumenthal says that two charter flights have left Mazar-e-Sharif and made it to Doha with 800 Americans and Afghan allies. I wonder, one, what role the State Department played in any of that, and two, how many Americans do you think are still in need of evacuation.

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me start with that second question first. This is a figure that continues to be dynamic, and it continues to be dynamic because it's a number that goes down with each flight, with each overland transfer, with each departure of a U.S. citizen or a lawful permanent resident from Afghanistan for those who wish to do so. It also goes up because – especially in recent weeks because we have been quite successful with our efforts to facilitate the departure of Americans and lawful permanent residents and others who wish to depart Afghanistan. You've seen that in the context of the flights that have departed from Kabul International Airport; you referenced some of the private charter flights as well. I made a reference to overland transfers additionally.

Since August 31st, we have assisted 105 U.S. citizens and 95 lawful permanent residents to depart. An additional number of U.S. citizens and LPRs have departed on charters or have independently – on their own – crossed a land border. Those figures that I cited – 105 citizens and 95 lawful permanent residents – those are individuals that the United States Government directly facilitated, whose departure they directly – we directly facilitated, I should say. When it comes to the issue of charters, we are not in a position to confirm private charters that depart Kabul and – that depart Kabul or Mazar-e-Sharif, as the case might be, because of operational security considerations, because of our desire not to, in any way, impede such operations.

But let me make a couple broad points. When it comes to private efforts to facilitate the departure of Americans, of lawful permanent residents, and others from Afghanistan, there are a really two elements to relocating these groups of people: One, there is arranging the departure and safe passage out of Afghanistan, but there is also the issue of where these individuals can go temporarily as well as eventually to resettle permanently. And when it comes to the Department of State, we have been working very closely with the Department of Defense and other interagency partners, as well as with many of these outside groups and entities, to evaluate requests for assistance on a case-by-case basis to support these privately organized flights.

This support takes any number of forms, but it does involve evaluating the passenger manifests provided to us by the private groups or – by the private group or groups, as the case might be, organizing these flights to see which proposed passengers, if any, may be potentially eligible for permanent resettlement in the United States through some affiliation with the U.S. Government. Now, in many cases – and you have heard this from many of these private groups – we have provided that direct and effective assistance. Again, we don't confirm on a case-by-case basis, but many of the groups have spoken to our assistance and support.

That is not to say that these private charters are not without challenge, and we have also spoken of the challenges that these present. We've made the point that without personnel on the ground in Mazar-e-Sharif, in this case, it is – we are unable to ensure the fidelity of intended manifests, and there is no ability on the part of the U.S. Government directly to determine whether the passengers aboard the plane would be eligible for relocation or for resettlement in the United States.

Now, there have been several instances in which private entities have chartered aircraft to transport individuals out of Afghanistan where identity checks on arrival at transit destinations have revealed that



many of the passengers were not, in fact, eligible for relocation to the United States and, in some cases, that despite our best vetting and vetting to the best of our ability, the manifests were not accurate.

And when this happens, it does put these individuals in a very difficult spot. It puts them at risk with no plan for relocation to the United States. It has the potential – we are cognizant of the fact that it has the potential to damage the bilateral relationship when it involves landing in a third country, as it does in these cases. And it makes it more difficult for the U.S. Government to rely on partner countries to assist in future relocations out of Afghanistan.

So that is why we go to great and I would say extraordinary efforts on the front end, working with groups or individual groups, to do all we can to vet manifests on the front end, to provide each and every form of assistance we can, to see to it that where there are manifests where we feel we have a good sense of the fidelity of that manifest and that manifest provides us with an ability to relocate, to move many of these people through the system and ultimately to relocate them to the United States, we have been in a position to provide that assistance on any number of occasions. But again, we just don't speak about individual flights for that reason.

So sticking with Afghanistan?

**QUESTION:** Mexico? Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** Afghanistan. We'll come back to Mexico.

**QUESTION:** Could you answer the question —

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** — on how many Americans do you think are left since you've taken a hundred out and you were telling us about a hundred were there, but that number changes? And then, if you are facilitating to the extent that you just talked about, trying to validate these passenger manifests, and you've said before you're working on landing rights for some of these flights – at least you were – you have to have some idea of the number of people who've gotten out on charter flights. Can you give us guidance on either of those things?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we are, again, striving to provide data that is both timely and that is accurate, and the data that is most accurate is that data that entails operations that the United States Government ourselves have facilitated. And so that's why we have until now spoken to the 105 U.S. citizens and 95 LPRs that we have directly – whose departure from Afghanistan we have directly facilitated.

We are aware of other U.S. citizens and LPRs who have been aboard private charter flights. We have a sense of that from the manifests. But again, where these operations are not ones that we are directly facilitating, in the first instance we have usually less fidelity there, and so we are reticent to provide precise figures there, although in the case of many of these private charters I know groups have provided their own numbers to give you some sense of roughly what this universe may look like.

When it comes to the number of Americans who remain in Afghanistan, this is a figure, again, that is dynamic. We said as of a couple weeks ago the figure was around a hundred Americans in Afghanistan who wished to depart at that time. This – of course, since then, several dozen Americans have departed Afghanistan with our assistance or via other means. But we're also aware that, again, as we have demonstrated our ability to affect the departure from Afghanistan of Americans who wish to leave, others have raised their hands. And so this is a number that is changing by the day and it is a number that is by no means static. So —

**QUESTION:** Blumenthal says dozens are in contact with his office. So is it dozens? Is that —

**MR PRICE:** We are certainly in contact with dozens of Americans in Afghanistan who wish to leave, but it is difficult for us to put a firm figure on it, just because people are departing, and as Americans in Afghanistan who previously may not have made themselves known to us or previously may have told us “I am content to stay here” or “I am going to stay here” for various reasons, as they see our ability to facilitate the departure of Americans and LPRs, they are raising their hands for the first time or changing their calculus after seeing that.

Afghanistan?

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**MR PRICE:** Conor. Sure.

**QUESTION:** The number that you provided of 105 U.S. citizens and 95 LPRs, that’s the same number from about a week and a half ago.

**MR PRICE:** That’s right.

**QUESTION:** Why haven’t any – has there been difficulty getting in touch with people? Why haven’t you been able to facilitate more Americans getting out?

**MR PRICE:** It’s a combination of a number of things. There are – there is a universe of Americans who wish to leave. There is a smaller universe of Americans who are fully prepared to leave in various ways, whether that means they or their family members have travel documents, are ready to leave at this moment. That’s a smaller universe than the universe of Americans that we’re in touch with that have expressed some desire to leave. We work closely with our partners on – when it comes to flights, and when it comes to flights departing Kabul International Airport. We have continued to work very closely with our Qatari partners on this as well. As you know, they have been able to facilitate the departure of dozens of Americans and LPRs on charters aboard their aircraft. We have also been able to do this via overland routes. We are continuing to work with partners and to communicate with Americans on the ground on – regarding future opportunities to depart Afghanistan should they choose to do so.

**QUESTION:** When we were given that number – I think it was a senior State Department official who said that there were about 100 U.S. citizens and LPRs in Kabul ready to go that you guys were working with. Did that group get out?

**MR PRICE:** So I believe what you’re referring to was just a few days ago when that senior State Department official made that statement. We have – there have not, to my knowledge, been any USG-facilitated flights departing Kabul International Airport since then, but this is something that we are always in the background working to arrange with our Qatari partners, working closely with our Turkish partners on the ground as well when it comes to KIA operations. And then we’re in constant and regular touch with Americans regarding other avenues to depart the country if they should choose to do so, including overland.

**QUESTION:** Were the Turkish involved in it?

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**QUESTION:** There’s apparently – can you provide any update on the number of Afghans who were evacuated and then have been sort of red-flagged and had to be moved elsewhere? How large is that

group of people and what your plans are to do with them.

**MR PRICE:** So I cannot – the Department of Homeland Security may be in a better position to provide you specific figures. What I can say is that the processing, the security vetting that you're referring to is a process that entails reviews by the Department of Homeland Security, by law enforcement, by our Intelligence Community. In many cases, these reviews are able to be conducted expeditiously and result in an all-clear in a relatively short period of time. There have been cases where we have been unable to secure an expeditious resolution of a particular case. In such instances, additional checking does tend to verify that the person is who she or he says they are, and that person is able to continue on with their journey. So sometimes it does take a bit longer, but the continuous checks and vetting – in nearly all cases that I'm aware of – has resulted in resolution and the ability of individuals to continue their travel in relatively short order.

Yes, please, hello.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask you something about India, about Deputy Secretary Sherman's visit to India. What are the key points of her travel, visit there? What were the main issues of discussions during her meetings in Delhi?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the Deputy Secretary, as you said, has been in India over the past couple days. I – she is – has just concluded her visit and she will be moving on to Pakistan from there. She has had an opportunity to go engage substantively and constructively with some of our key interlocutors. She had a meeting with the Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla. They discussed, as we often do with our Indian partners, growing security, economic, and Indo-Pacific convergence between India and the United States, including around topics that are of mutual interest to both of our countries: ending the COVID-19 pandemic, combating the climate crisis, and accelerating clean energy deployment, deepening trade and investment ties, and expanding cooperation on cybersecurity and emerging technology.

We, of course, have worked closely with India over the course of many months now, after an announcement that emerged from the first virtual Quad Leaders' Summit, about India's role as a key COVID vaccine manufacturer for the region. And so this is one of the many areas where we have enjoyed a deep and collaborative relationship with India. In the course of that meeting, they also discussed pressing regional and global security challenges. That includes those posed by events in Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, the People's Republic of China. They also discussed ongoing efforts to return Myanmar to a path to democracy.

The deputy also had an opportunity to meet with Indian Minister of External Affairs Dr. Jaishankar. They discussed some of these same issues. But overall, this was an opportunity for the United States to deepen our strategic partnership with India, a partnership that affords opportunities for both countries and a partnership that is incredibly important to us as we seek to underscore and to underline a free and open Indo-Pacific. And India to us, as member of the Quad, as an important geopolitical partner, is an instrumental element to that overarching goal.

**QUESTION:** One quick one. Were they able to decide on the dates for the 2+2 next month here in D.C.?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have anything to announce in terms of a future meeting.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Do you have any better understanding of China's intentions regarding Taiwan after Jake Sullivan's meetings? And anything else about the fact that this will only be a virtual meeting between the two leaders rather than an in-person meeting? And —

**MR PRICE:** Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** It's okay.

**MR PRICE:** So when it comes to Taiwan, let me take that first. And you've heard from the State Department – you've heard from the White House on this in recent days. But we are very concerned by the PRC's provocative military actions near Taiwan. As we said, this activity is destabilizing, it risks miscalculations, it undermines regional peace and stability. And so we strongly urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure and coercion against Taiwan.

We've said this many times before, but our commitment to Taiwan is rock solid. And it contributes, we believe, to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the broader region as well. And so we'll continue to stand with our friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity, security, and values, and we'll continue to deepen our ties with a democratic Taiwan.

The other point I would make is one of the elements that I think distinguishes our approach, not only to the PRC but also our approach to Taiwan, is that it is not something that we are speaking to ourselves. And you have seen over the course of many months now that we have been able to raise the priority of this issue on the agenda. It featured in the joint statement with Prime Minister Suga in April of 2021, when he visited the White House. It similarly featured in the joint statement after President Moon's visit in May of this year. The G7 communique in June of this year made a reference to the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. And the more recent AUSMIN statement from last month, September of this year, says that Taiwan holds an important role in the Indo-Pacific region, and we invite – we invite you to join us in maintaining and expanding strong ties with Taiwan.

So this is something that, consistent with our broader approach to the Indo-Pacific, consistent with our broader approach to the PRC, we have worked concertedly with allies, with partners in Europe, in the Indo-Pacific, around the world, to make very clear not only where the United States stands, but also where we stand together with our allies and partners.

Yes, Michel.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Do you have anything on the so-called virtual summit?

**MR PRICE:** In terms of the virtual summit, I know that the White House made clear yesterday that President Biden and President Xi would have an opportunity to convene virtually before the end of the year, but I don't have any additional details beyond that.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** First on Libya, the U.S. has been pushing the Libyans to hold the elections on December 24th, but yesterday the parliament has postponed Libya's legislative elections until January instead of being held on December 24th as planned. Are you aware of that? Do you have any comment? And how will you deal with this?

**MR PRICE:** We are aware of that. Our goal when it comes to Libya is a sovereign, stable, unified, and secure Libya with no foreign interference and a democratically elected government that supports human rights and development and that is capable of combating terrorism within our borders. And so

that's why we have increased our diplomatic focus on supporting that progress in Libya, including through the work of our Special Envoy Richard Norland.

Now, we know that elections – free and fair elections – are a core part of that. There is an urgent need for Libyan leaders to come up with creative compromises on an electoral framework. As we underscored in Berlin in the conference that Foreign Minister Maas convened in June and the UN Security Council session on Libya the following month in July, the international community expects national elections to take place in the roadmap adopted by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, and we welcomed that in UN Security Council Resolution 2570 in April.

So the conduct of free and fair elections, holding of free and fair elections, is extraordinarily important to us. It is something that we will continue to work with our partners in the international community to continue to support as we work to help the Libyan people achieve their broader aspirations.

**QUESTION:** Ned, do you prefer both elections, presidential and parliamentary elections, to be held on the same day instead of being held one in December and the second in January?

**MR PRICE:** I don't know if we have a position on that. If we do, we'll get back to you.

**QUESTION:** And one more, Ned, or two more. One on Egypt: A delegation of Egyptian parliamentarians and politicians is visiting Washington this week to discuss human rights in Egypt. Did any official in this building meet with the delegation?

**MR PRICE:** Yes, I can confirm that our Acting Assistant Secretary for our Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Yael Lempert did meet with members of the dialogue – of the dialogue international task force visiting today from Egypt. We welcome this visit and the opportunity to discuss our ongoing concerns about human rights in Egypt. The delegation included two individuals nominated by Egypt's parliament to the National Council for Human Rights. That's Chairman Mohamed Anwar El-Sadat and board member and Ambassador Moushira Khattab.

We have, as we've made very clear, concerns related to human rights in Egypt, and we've relayed those concerns directly to Egyptian authorities on any number of occasions. Such meetings can provide productive ways to engage on these concerns and show the United States can support – show United States support for Egypt in achieving the objectives set out in its own national human rights strategy which it launched last month.

**QUESTION:** And last on Iran, Iran-Lebanon: A third tanker containing a shipment of Iranian oil destined for Lebanon docked in Syria's Baniyas port on Wednesday, and they are on their way to Lebanon. Are you aware of that too, and what's your reaction?

**MR PRICE:** We are aware of that, and what we would say is that, broadly speaking, fuel from a country subject to extensive sanctions like Iran is not very clearly a sustainable solution to Lebanon's energy crisis. We support efforts to find transparent and sustainable energy solutions that will address Lebanon's acute energy and fuel shortages. This is, in our minds, Hizballah playing a public relations game, not engaged in constructive problem solving.

**QUESTION:** And what about the sanctions on Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Again, there is no change in terms of our approach to these sanctions. We do not foresee that until and unless we are able to achieve a mutual return to compliance, as we are eagerly seeking to do.

We'll move around. I haven't – please.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. I have a question about China. There's been a lot of focus on the tone of the meeting yesterday, especially compared to the one in March in Alaska. And people kind of thinking about what that might mean for the U.S.-China relationship and where it's going. So I was hoping you could clarify just kind of a fundamental question about where things stand right now, which is: Has anything at all changed in the U.S.-China relationship and where it's going between that first meeting in March and right now?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, I think there is a mistaken assumption out there that our relationship with the PRC is binary, that either we're in a period of engagement with the PRC or we're in a period of confrontation with the PRC. That is fundamentally just not how it works, at least it's not how it works today.

Our relationship with Beijing is one that is dynamic; it is one that is multifaceted; it is one that at its core is defined by stiff competition. And the point of this engagement is to see to it that through dialogue, including at high levels, as took place yesterday between the National Security Adviser and Director Yang – to see to it that we can manage this competition responsibly. That is the dynamic that is with us now; it's what we expect the dynamic to be going forward.

There are – when it comes to our relationship with the PRC, there are areas of competition. And again, most of our engagement with the PRC is predicated on this idea of competition, and in many cases stiff competition. It is a relationship that, in some ways, is adversarial. And our goal, of course, is to minimize these points of friction in the relationship, and part of that is engaging constructively in dialogue with our partners, with the PRC.

And there are also areas where there is room for cooperation, and we've spoken to some of those areas for cooperation and potential areas for cooperation: working together on climate change, committing to it that we work together, that we work constructively to address the existential challenge of climate change, the existential threat of climate change that poses that very threat not only to the United States but also to the PRC. And it's especially important that we do so when you have the world's largest emitter and the world's second largest emitter coming to the table and taking responsible action and demonstrating leadership, raising that level of ambition, not only for the sake of our own two countries, but also to galvanize action on the part of countries the world over.

So we will – and you heard from the White House yesterday there will be an opportunity for the President to engage directly with President Xi in the coming months. This is very much part of that belief that in order to manage the relationship, in order to establish and reinforce those guardrails on the relationship there needs to be dialogue. It doesn't fundamentally shift the nature of the relationship. It is a relationship that is complex; it is a relationship that is dynamic; it's a relationship that's multifaceted. And when it comes to the PRC or any other challenge that we face, we can do multiple things at once.

Daphne.

**QUESTION:** On Mexico, could you share a bit more what the U.S. hopes to see come out of the security dialogue tomorrow? Will the U.S. raise Haitian migrants moving to the U.S. border through Mexico, and what will that message be, if so? And should we expect any sort of announcement on the Merida Initiative?

**MR PRICE:** I don't want to get too far ahead of tomorrow because tomorrow is another day, but also because we are doing a call to preview this engagement this afternoon. I will just say that this dialogue comes at an opportune moment, and it's opportune because the threats of the 21st century are complex, they are dynamic. They are also threats that we need to confront together. These are threats that are transnational. These are threats that, by definition, know no borders. And so that is

why this dialogue, the highest-level dialogue to date in this administration of this sort, will build on previous discussions that we've had with our Mexican partners, in terms of how to protect our people, how to prevent transborder crime, how to best pursue criminal networks, while also promoting human rights and the rule of law.

So we'll have much more to say on this today and, of course, the Secretary and his counterparts will have more to say tomorrow.

**QUESTION:** Completely separate issue, Western Sahara.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** The Secretary put a statement yesterday welcoming Staffan de Mistura's appointment as the UN special representative on Western Sahara. Could you go into what you're expecting from this in terms of his discussions, the U.S. position that Western Sahara is under Moroccan sovereignty? Is that a position that is up for review? Is that something you're willing to discuss? What do you see —

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you heard from the Secretary yesterday, we strongly support Personal Envoy de Mistura's leadership in resuming the UN-led political process to advance a durable and dignified solution to the conflict in Western Sahara. We will actively support his efforts to promote a peaceful and prosperous future for the people of Western Sahara and the broader region. We remain engaged with all sides in support of that effort and will support a credible, UN-led, political process to stabilize the situation and secure a cessation of any hostilities. We are consulting with the parties about how best to achieve that lasting settlement. We don't have anything further to announce at this time. As I've said, we are consulting with the parties about how best to achieve that lasting settlement.

**QUESTION:** So the U.S. still considers Western Sahara to be under Moroccan – to be legitimately part of Morocco?

**MR PRICE:** We don't have anything to announce beyond what we've said.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** So I have a question on China and North Korea, and I seriously think we should talk more about Indo-Pacific if the United States is serious – seriously think the Indo-Pacific is important. So anyway – so regarding China, President Biden said that he and President Xi will abide by a Taiwan agreement. Of course, he meant the agreement about Taiwan, but it just caused some confusion and anxiety in Taiwan, so can you just clarify what he meant with that Taiwan agreement?

And my second question is about North Korea. And so the World Health Organization has started shipment of COVID medical supply to North Korea, and I remember like three weeks ago the U.S. special envoy, Ambassador Sung Kim, he said that he was prepared to closely work with North Korea to address humanitarian concerns. And so do you – can you share any progress on that, like, front?

**MR PRICE:** Sure, I'll take those in turn. First, on Taiwan, the President, the State Department, we have been clear and consistent that our policy for some four decades now has – that is to say, our "One China" policy – has been guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, by the three joint communiques, and the six assurances provided to Taipei. Those documents form the basis of our approach to Taiwan and to cross-strait relations.

When it comes to North Korea, look, we've made this point the world over: Even when we disagree with a particular regime, we believe that we must work to the best of our ability to do all we can to alleviate the suffering of the people. And so we continue to support international efforts aimed at the

provision of critical humanitarian aid to the DPRK. It's important to emphasize, at the same time, that the DPRK regime itself is primarily responsible for the humanitarian situation in the country. The regime continues to exploit its own citizens, to violate their human rights, to divert resources from the country's people to build up its unlawful WMD and ballistic missiles program.

But we do support efforts to alleviate the suffering of the North Korean people. We are involved in efforts to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid to the neediest in North Korea. This is most evident, I would say, in our ongoing work to expedite approval – approvals in the UN 1718 Committee for organizations from around the world to deliver lifesaving aid to the DPRK.

**QUESTION:** So I have one follow-up question on that. So yesterday the UN special representative for human rights in North Korea, he said that – basically he called on – that the UN sanctions against North Korea should be reviewed and eased to facilitate humanitarian assistance. So – and so can you just clarify how the United States view the relations between the UN sanctions against North Korea and the humanitarian aid?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I believe he was referring to the UN sanctions regime, not the U.S. sanctions regime. Look, we have made very clear that our policy calls for a calibrated, practical approach that seeks serious and sustained diplomacy with the DPRK to make tangible progress that increases the security of the United States, our allies, and our deployed forces. Our goal remains the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and to that end we remain prepared to meet with the DPRK without preconditions – anytime, anywhere. We have made specific proposals for discussions with the DPRK in our messages to them, and we hope that they respond positively to our outreach.

Again, we support efforts to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the North Korean people, cognizant that, again, it is far too often the regime that is the cause of that suffering. We also know that our – whether it's our own sanctions regime, whether it's the UN sanctions regime, there are certainly carveouts in these regimes to ensure that in the first instance we are not doing anything that would compound the suffering, the deprivation of the North Korean people.

Thank you all very much. We'll see you next week.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:11 p.m.)

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**To:** Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
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[\*\*Senior State Department Officials on the Secretary's Upcoming Bilateral and Trilateral Meetings with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan\*\*](#)

10/12/2021 07:30 PM EDT

Senior State Department Officials

Via Teleconference

**MODERATOR:** Hey, good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining the call. We're happy to have an opportunity to preview for you the Secretary's engagements tomorrow with his Israeli and Emirati counterparts. As you know, the Secretary will take part in bilateral engagements with both counterparts, followed by a trilateral meeting with the three of them.

We will conduct today's call on background. You can use the material and attribute it to senior State Department officials. For your knowledge only, we have with us today two senior State Department officials. We have and as well. Our two speakers will preview tomorrow's events. As a reminder this call is embargoed until its conclusion.

And so with that, I will turn it over to our first speaker to detail the Israeli bilateral component. Please.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** , that's me, right?

**MODERATOR:** That is you. I hope it is.

**PARTICIPANT:** Right. I just want to make sure. Good day, everybody. This is . Tomorrow, Deputy Assistant Secretary – sorry. Tomorrow, Secretary Blinken will meet with Foreign Minister Lapid. This will follow several conversations with the foreign minister since the new Israeli Government formed earlier this year. It'll, of course, reaffirm the rock-solid relationship between our two countries. And Secretary Blinken will underline the U.S. enduring support for Israeli security, including the Biden administration's commitment to Iron Dome replenishment.

They'll also touch on our concerns about the region, from Iran to Syria to economic development. And on China, as the Secretary has noted, with allies and partners worldwide, we'll be candid with our Israeli friends over risks to our shared national security interests that come with close cooperation with China.

With regard to the Palestinian people, the Secretary will reaffirm our belief that a two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish democratic state living in peace alongside a viable and democratic Palestinian state. And the Secretary will be expressing appreciation for Foreign Minister Lapid's recent strong statement condemning settler violence in the West Bank.

As we've consistently said, we believe it's critical for all parties to refrain from unilateral steps, such as demolitions, evictions, settlement, growth, incitement of violence, and payments to those incarcerated for acts of violence, all of which exacerbate tensions. Similarly, it will be important for the parties to work to advance equal measure of freedom, security, and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

And finally, I expect the two sides to discuss the ongoing economic and security crisis in Gaza. With that, I turn it over to

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Hi, everyone. Tomorrow the Secretary will also meet with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed and take the opportunity to affirm our deepening cooperation, especially where it reduces the risk of conflict and helps our partners enhance their security and economic development. The Secretary will thank the UAE for hosting Americans, Afghans, and other individuals in transit from Afghanistan over the past several months. Simply put the UAE support for this effort is critical to our operations and we remain deeply grateful for their humanitarian efforts and compassion.

I expect the two will discuss a range of bilateral and regional issues as well. On Yemen, they'll both discuss perspectives on achieving a sustainable ceasefire and ensuring unity among the various Yemeni forces defending against the Houthis. On Lebanon, they'll confer about our shared desire to see urgent implementation of reforms to rescue the country's deteriorating economy. Specifically, the Secretary will also reaffirm in Syria that our focus remains on reducing suffering of the Syrian people and working with our allies to advance a broader political solution to the conflict, in which accountability for the atrocities committed by the Assad regime will be a necessary component.

Turning to the remarkable event of the day, the Secretary will also meet the foreign ministers in a trilateral format. This meeting highlights our continued celebration of the first anniversary of the Abraham Accords and normalization agreements, and we will see the announcement. We'll launch two trilateral working groups featuring the U.S., Israel, and the UAE, one on religious coexistence, the other on water and energy issues. This reflects our belief that the Abraham Accords and normalization agreements writ large can help to achieve a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. These working groups will seek to realize that promise, to link up two important U.S. partners in the region, and find new ways to solve old problems together in Israel and the UAE, but also across the region and beyond, to the benefit of U.S., Israeli, and Emirati interests. Thanks.

**MODERATOR:** Great. Operator, do you want to repeat the instructions for asking a question?

**OPERATOR:** Certainly. Once again, if you'd like to ask a question, please press 1 then 0. And as a reminder, please wait until I say I've opened your line to ask your question.

**MODERATOR:** We will start with the line of Nick Wadhams.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. For both of you, a broader question on the Abraham Accords. Can you talk about the prospect that other countries will join? Is there any notion that the Abraham Accords could at some point include Saudi Arabia, for example?

And then for State Department Official Number Two, on the bilateral talks with UAE, can you give us an update on where things stand on discussions with UAE over the F-35 and the administration's concerns about UAE's partnership with China, and specifically its use of Huawei in its next gen telecommunications networks and whether that's complicating the potential sale of the F-35? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Official Number Two?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Sure. When it comes to the Abraham Accords, the Biden administration strongly supports states normalizing relations with Israel. We welcome efforts by think tanks, civil society, and others to advance normalization efforts. We believe that these agreements have shown that there are real benefits to breaking down old barriers, increasing cooperation, especially in ways that promote economic development and people-to-people ties.

This is something that we are actively working to expand. I'm not going to get into any one specific country, but we think there are real benefits, economic and strategic and people-to-people, for all the parties that have already normalized and all that we hope will take that step in the future.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to the line – sorry. Go ahead, please.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Official Number One, anything to add?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** I think we're good.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Missy Ryan.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, just two quick questions just to follow up. Could you again – you got at some of this, but can you again sort of say what the Biden administration perspective is on the meaning and the effect of the Abraham Accords at this moment in time?

And then on – you mentioned the – in regards to the UAE, Yemen. Can you talk a little bit more about what the United States is hoping specifically that the UAE's role in advancing the peace processes in Yemen will be? And like, we all understand pretty clearly what the Saudi role will be. But at this stage, given the abolition of the Emirati military role in Yemen, can you just talk a little bit about what the United States envisions for the Emiratis or is asking of them? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Sure. So I mean, I guess on the Abraham Accords, the only – well, actually, what we said earlier is that it's not a substitute for the two-state solution, and we continue to kind of welcome the economic cooperation between Israel and all countries in the region, and we hope that normalization can be leveraged to advance progress on the Israeli-Palestine track. So that's what I would add onto what was said earlier.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Sure. And on the second point, the UAE is an important partner and an important player inside Yemen and has important influence on the various elements of the anti-Houthi coalition. And we will continue to work with them both to provide support inside Yemen and also to ensure the unity of the various actors on the ground.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to the line of Lara Jakes.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks so much. SDDO1, I'm wondering – or actually either one of you. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the extent that Iran is going to be part of these discussions, I would imagine more specifically with Israel's role. I'm sure you saw Prime Minister Bennett recently said something, and I'm paraphrasing here, to the extent that he may not speak as loudly as Bibi did, but he's vowing to be even tougher on Iran than Bibi. And I just wonder to the extent that this is helpful or harmful in trying to get Iran back to negotiations during this pause. Thank

you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Why don't I jump in on this one, for the UAE side. We've had many discussions with a variety of U.S. partners about the U.S. approach to Iran, including our partners in Israel and among Arab Gulf States. We continue consulting closely with our key partners as this process proceeds.

The United States has stated an objective alongside Iran of returning to mutual compliance with the JCPOA and are – continue to work to achieve that goal. We believe in the importance of consulting with our partners in the region, as they also have a critical role to play in advancing greater security and prosperity in the region. Special Envoy Malley has met with GCC officials to discuss the importance of elevating diplomacy to confront regional challenges, which underscores how seriously we take these consultations.

When it comes to the trilateral meeting, I think we're – we'll discuss a range – the leaders involved will discuss a range of regional issues and may well touch on this and will also be heavily focused on the affirmative agenda of working to realize the full benefits of normalization. And the unity of America's partners in this region in new ways I think will send a powerful message as well.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Matt Lee.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, hi. Two real quick ones. One, on the Jerusalem consulate issue, what is taking so long? It's now October and the Israeli Government is going to have a budget together soon, so if that's the holdup, how much longer until this consulate gets reopened? And have you guys just basically dismissed the arguments in Israel against it?

And then if I just could, and I don't expect an answer to this, but I thought I'd put it out there anyway – did you guys make anything or notice or have anyone at the Friedman Awards dinner last night that was attended by the former secretary of state, former ambassador, and the former prime minister of Israel? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Thanks, Matt. On the consulate, as the Secretary said in May, the U.S. is moving forward with the process of reopening our consulate in Jerusalem, and we have nothing more to share at this time.

We'll have to get back to you on your second question.

**MODERATOR:** We will go to Barak Ravid.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you for doing this. First, I want to follow up on Matt's question about the consulate. Do you think this is going to turn into a bilateral problem between Israel and the U.S. as long as Israel resists on reopening the consulate?

And a second question about China: When you said that you're going to be open with Israel about the risks with China, what do you mean? Are there any specific requests about Chinese investments in Israel?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Thanks for that question. Look, I've got nothing more to share on the consulate than what I said earlier. We're just going to need to leave it at that. On China, look, the U.S. views China as a competitor that challenges the existing international rule-

based order. And as we've said previously, our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.

I don't have anything further to add at that – on that. I don't know if my colleague does.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Nothing further.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Nadia Bilbassy.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Thank you for doing this. I have two questions on the Palestinian issue. You said you're going to discuss the economic crisis in Gaza. So what tangible steps would you take to alleviate the suffering of the people in Gaza? Will this assistance go via the PA, the UN?

And also, you keep saying that you're committed to the two-state solution, but we have not seen any initiatives from the Biden administration to restart the peace process. Is this something that you're considering or is this becoming, like, a statement or kind of lip service that you say it whenever you have a meeting on the Palestinian issue? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Thanks for that question, Nadia. In terms of Gaza, we are going to be – we have been and will continue to be engaging with the Government of Israel and all parties on how to advance tangible steps to improve the quality of life in the immediate term and stabilize the situation. I think we've started to see some of those steps and will start to see more in the future.

On the two-state solution, the Biden administration started out with a clear commitment to the two-state solution. We continue on with that commitment and we seek to advance it as we can, when we can, as best we can. So that's really all we can say – I'm trying to think – at that time. Yeah, I'll leave it there.

**MODERATOR:** We will go to Ron Campas.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yes, can you hear me? I'm on.

**MODERATOR:** We can.

**QUESTION:** Hello? Hello, (inaudible).

**MODERATOR:** Yeah, yeah, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** What's going on with Sudan? Is that closing up anytime soon? And you talked about leveraging normalization to advance the two-state solution. There was a paper out by the Israel Policy Forum the other day that made some specific recommendations, like cleaning up the way money gets into Gaza, for instance, not inside bags of cash, maybe through the – getting the United Arab Emirates to set up a formal route so the money gets to the right people. Another thing is building up infrastructure in the West Bank.

What's the – what do you think when you say leveraging normalization to advance a two-state solution?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** I'll let my other colleague come in on this, but we –

I don't think we have anything to share with you on the Sudan today. I just will note that Sudan is a signer of the Abraham Accords, but we have nothing new to share with you on that today.

In terms of the practical steps that we're working on both for the West Bank and for Gaza, we've been working really diligently since the beginning of the administration and redoubled our efforts after the conflict in May. Again, I think you've seen some of the fruits of those efforts bearing out in recent weeks and months, but we really have nothing more to get into at this time in terms of details.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Olli Harb, Al Jazeera.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thanks for doing this. You mentioned that the Secretary will discuss Syria with his Emirati counterpart. What will the Secretary's message be in regards to UAE's normalization with that government, including a recent push to deepen economic ties? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Thanks, Olli. The Secretary is going to reaffirm that in Syria our focus remains on reducing the suffering of the Syrian people and working with our allies to advance a broader political solution to the conflict in which accountability for the atrocities committed by the Assad regime will be a necessary component. I think that's our message, and that's what I would expect that he will reiterate.

**MODERATOR:** Take a couple final questions. Will Mauldin.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thanks so much. I just wanted to follow up on Lara's question about the Iran negotiations and their connection to these two countries tomorrow. I see that the foreign ministry of Israel says in the statement that the foreign minister discussed with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan today the need for an alternative plan to the nuclear agreement. And we certainly haven't seen any movement of Iran back to the negotiating table, so wondering if Secretary Blinken will also be discussing an alternative to the nuclear agreement, and if so, what leverage that the U.S. has with Tehran. Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Just a reminder, we want to keep it focused on tomorrow's engagements and discussions there. I don't know if either of our senior officials want to weigh in on that.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Very good question for the Iran team.

**MODERATOR:** We will – Will, we can also talk offline.

We'll go to Bryant Harris.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**MODERATOR:** Bryant, are you there?

**QUESTION:** I apologize. Can you hear me now?

**MODERATOR:** We can.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. So on the aid to the Palestinians that the Biden administration is hoping to restart, especially on the issue of Gaza reconstruction, there's still – is there still a hold from Ranking Members Risch and McCaul on the aid? And if they do not lift the hold, what do you intend to do

about it to ensure delivery?

And two, on the Iron Dome, I know the bill for the one billion is still on its way through the Senate. The line here has kind of been that this is to replenish the Iron Dome batteries depleted during the war last May. But just looking at the amount it would spend, the U.S. was giving 1.7 billion to the Iron Dome over the past decade, so this is a huge increase over what it receives every year. So is all of this money going to replenish the depleted missile batteries, and if not, where is the rest of this funding going to? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Look, thanks for your questions. On – and they're good questions – on Iron Dome, I'll just say that we remain unwavering in our commitment to Israel's security and will work to strengthen all aspects of the partnership. The – we – look, we remain committed to the Iron Dome funding. We remain committed to Israel's qualitative military edge, consistent with U.S. law. And the – and I'll just leave it there.

On our funding, on the funding that you mentioned that was on hold, that hold was released some weeks ago and that funding has proceeded.

**MODERATOR:** We will go to Jacob Magid.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi. I was just wondering – I feel like we've been hearing these two statements about opposition to unilateral steps and support for improving the lives – for equality for both Israelis and Palestinians – for quite a few months now. I get that's the talking point, but I'm curious if there's anything specific that Israel or the Palestinians can do that would have an add-on to that statement, or if that's going to continue to be the line.

And in addition, if there's any comments on these approvals of Palestinian IDs that Israelis gave for about 442. I know Gantz had talked about thousands afterwards – after meeting with Abbas a couple – a month ago or so, and now the – it's less than 500, so I don't know if – is this sufficient in your eyes? I think there's tens of thousands of Palestinians in this scenario looking – that are undocumented. Any comments on that?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Look, thank you very much. And we've been – we've been clear that both parties need to refrain from unilateral steps. And when we say that, right, we are talking about the annexation of territory, settlement activity, demolitions, evictions, incitement of violence, as well as providing compensation to individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism and the like. So that's what we mean when we talk about asking the parties to refrain from unilateral steps that can inflame the situation.

When it comes to positive steps, we are pleased that Israel is issuing those IDs, and we expect that we'll see more positive steps moving forward.

**MR PRICE:** And we'll conclude with the line of Marc Ross.

**OPERATOR:** Please, go ahead. Your line is open.

**MR PRICE:** Marc, are you there?

**QUESTION:** Oh sorry, I had myself on mute. I apologize. It's Marc Rod actually, not Marc Ross, but thanks for taking my question.

So to sort of comment on something that one of my colleagues asked a little bit earlier from a bit of



different angle, have U.S. officials outlined to their Israeli counterparts what exactly the alternate solutions or alternate steps with regard to Iran look like in the event that Iran does not come back to talks?

**MODERATOR:** Marc, I – go ahead.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** No, go ahead, .

**MODERATOR:** No, I was just going to say, Marc, I think that is a question that's beyond the scope of this, and I don't think we have anything to say beyond what we've already spoken to in the context of Iran on this call. But for everyone on the phone, I do expect you'll have an opportunity to hear from Secretary Blinken and the ministers tomorrow in the context of their meetings, and these are, of course, questions that we're happy to take as a department in other fora.

So thank you very much, everyone. Again, this call was on background. You can attribute all of this to senior State Department officials, and the embargo is now lifted. We'll see many of you tomorrow.

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**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan at a Joint Press Availability  
**To:** Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** October 13, 2021 4:07 PM (UTC-04:00)

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[\*\*Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan at a Joint Press Availability\*\*](#)

*10/13/2021 03:45 PM EDT*

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Washington, D.C.

Benjamin Franklin Room

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, good morning or, almost, good afternoon, everyone. Just over a year ago, the leaders of Israel and the United Arab Emirates signed the Abraham Accords. Today, I am honored to host Foreign Minister Lapid, Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah, to review the progress that's been made in the past year in the normalization of relations, and what more we can do together to shape a more peaceful and prosperous region. The UAE-Israel relationship has, I think it's fair to say, flourished this past year. This May, Israel opened an embassy in the UAE, the first it has ever had to a Gulf nation. And a few days ago, Israel's new ambassador to the UAE presented his credentials. In July, the UAE opened an embassy in Israel, the first Gulf state to take that action.

In addition to these diplomatic strides, the people-to-people ties between the two countries are also thriving, even with COVID. Direct flights are now connecting Israel and the UAE. Tourists are seizing the opportunity. Around 200,000 Israelis have visited the Emirates this past year alone. We strongly support these historic steps, and we're committed to continue building on the efforts of the last administration to expand the circle of countries with normalized relations with Israel in the years ahead.

We believe that normalization can and should be a force for progress, not only between Israel and Arab countries and other countries in the region and beyond, but also between Israelis and Palestinians. As President Biden has said, Israelis and Palestinians equally deserve to live safely and securely and to enjoy equal measures of freedom, prosperity, democracy. The President has also been clear that a two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state, living in peace alongside a viable, sovereign, and democratic Palestinian state.

Today, our three countries discussed two new working groups that we are launching together. The first is on religious coexistence. This is a moment of rising anti-Semitism, rising Islamophobia, and we want Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States to work together to build tolerance and ensure that all religious groups can worship in their traditional ways without violence, without intimidation, without discrimination.

The second working group is on water and energy, critical issues for our countries in the face of the climate crisis, and places where the United States, Israel, and the UAE can be in a sense greater than

the sum of our parts to the benefit of our people, the region, and even the world. We're very pleased that Israel has joined the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate, a joint U.S. and UAE initiative to catalyze new investment in climate-smart agriculture. Israeli and Emirati firms are already planning to collaborate on a number of renewable projects.

And I want to commend the UAE for its plan to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, the first country in the GCC to do so, and Israel for its new plan to reduce emissions by 85 percent by 2050.

Finally, the trilateral partnership also makes it possible for our countries to discuss other urgent regional issues more effectively, to do it together. For example, today we talked about a range of regional security issues, including Iran, Syria, Ethiopia. That's what normalization has made possible; transformative partnerships on the urgent challenges facing our countries and facing the world. And that's why it's so important, and it's why I am deeply grateful to both of you for being here today and for the work that we're doing together. So thank you very much, and with that, Yair.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** Thank you, Secretary of State Blinken, Your Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, friends. Two weeks ago in Bahrain, I met a king in his palace, an American admiral on his ship, and a Jew who cared for the only synagogue almost single-handedly. And they all said the same thing. They said no one believed the things happening here are possible.

And they were wrong. The things that are happening are happening exactly because people believed, because today there are leaders in the Middle East who believe we can change history together. In the past four months, Israel opened embassies and offices in the UAE, in Morocco, in Bahrain. We have turned the cold peace with Egypt and Jordan into a warm peace – we signed economic and civil agreements – and we greatly strengthened our relations with the European Union and with our neighbors in the Mediterranean.

His Highness Sheikh Abdullah and I have become friends and partners. Our friendship is based on shared values, on moderation, on religious tolerance, on the importance of fighting terror and radicalization. The partnership is based on economics, progress, and technological excellence. This partnership isn't just between Jews and Arabs, but between citizens of the world who want to be partners in the fight against climate change, against poverty, against the pandemic that has taken the life of millions.

President Kennedy said, all people are entitled to a decent way of life. This includes, of course, the Palestinians. Our goal is to work with the Palestinian Authority to ensure that every child has that opportunity.

At the center of my visit here is the concern about Iran's race to nuclear capability. Iran is becoming a nuclear threshold country. Every day that passes, every delay in negotiations brings Iran closer to a nuclear bomb. The Iranians are clearly dragging their heels, trying to cheat the world to continue to enrich uranium, to develop their ballistic missile program.

Secretary of State Blinken and I are sons of Holocaust survivors. We know there are moments when nations must use force to protect the world from evil. If a terror regime is going to acquire a nuclear weapon, we must act. We must make clear that the civilized world won't allow it. If the Iranians don't believe the world is serious about stopping them, they'll race to the bomb.

Israel reserves the right to act at any given moment, in any way. That is not only our right; it is also our responsibility. Iran has publicly stated it wants to wipe us out. We have no intention of letting this happen.

I don't want to conclude with fears, but with hopes. We are writing a new chapter in our history.

There is an alliance of moderates focused on life, focused on hope, focused on optimism, focused on looking forward.

I thank you both for this alliance, for the friendship we have. It is a source of hope for the whole world. Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Secretary Blinken, for us, having us both – my dear friend Yair Lapid, the foreign minister of Israel, myself – in D.C. is a strong commitment of the United States in building bridges, yes, but building bridges between two successful nations, but also two successful nations which are committed and devoted for further development, changing the narrative in the region, especially among our youth, towards a more positive one.

Our entire effort towards the future should be based on how can we make our people respect and admire good successes in the region. Unfortunately, in the last few decades, we haven't seen many of those. And what I believe the United States is telling the rest of the world in embracing the Emirates and Israel is that the United States is serious about changing this narrative in the region, and thank you for that, Secretary Blinken.

We in the UAE are very proud that in less than 50 years of our federation, we've managed to come where we are today. And how can we create a nation which respects values but also respects and celebrates tolerance?

I'm sure that this would have a further effect in the region, and I'm sure that the more of a successful UAE-Israeli relationship there'll be, that would not only encourage the region, but also encourage the Israeli people and the Palestinian people that this path works, that this path is worth not only investing in but also taking the risk.

We are extremely impressed, obviously, with our growing relationship with Israel, but we will always depend that we have a friend, a partner in the U.S., which will excite us and will show us how to do things even better. So thank you, Secretary.

**MR PRICE:** We'll now turn to questions. We will start with Will Mauldin of *The Wall Street Journal*.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much. Sheikh Abdullah, I wanted to ask if the conflict with Yemen came up, and if so, what was discussed in terms of humanitarian or – humanitarian efforts or possible durable ceasefire involving you or your neighbors?

For Foreign Minister Lapid, I did want to ask: I saw that you spoke yesterday with Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, about an alternative plan to the nuclear agreement if Iran doesn't come back to the table. I'm wondering if you discussed that with Secretary Blinken or if you will discuss that with him, and what that would involve – what you would want it to involve.

And then finally, for Secretary Blinken, I wanted to ask also about Iran. Do you expect Iran to return to the negotiating table imminently in Vienna? And if not, how much time do you think they should have? A couple of months? Should it be sometime next year?

And I also wanted to ask you, if I may, about the consulate in Jerusalem. Would that be something that you made progress on with Foreign Minister Lapid? Is there any chance that that will be opened, which is something you had envisioned after traveling to Israel? Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Well, Yemen is always on the agenda with friends, and we have to just keep in mind that what's dragging us in the situation is the lack of will and commitment on the Houthi side in ending this conflict. We are all working very hard among friends to

ensure that the Yemenis can have a better life. But at the same time, we have to keep in mind that we don't end up with a situation where we have another Hizballah threatening the borders of Saudi Arabia. And the Houthis have managed to develop their capabilities in the last few years in a way which is much faster than the trajectory of Hizballah developing its capabilities.

So absolutely, we would like to end this today. We would like to help with the rest of the international community in developing and rebuilding Yemen. But we have to make sure that we have enough partners and international understanding that we don't have another Southern Lebanon situation in Yemen.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** Well, as President Biden has said in the visit when Prime Minister Bennett was visiting Washington, I think the exact goal, if diplomacy fails, other options will be on the table. And yes, we are discussing in length the option and I discussed this with Mr. Sullivan, we're going to discuss this in the bilateral meeting with Secretary Blinken, and we have mentioned this even in this session.

As I was saying in my opening remarks, sometimes the world has to show its hand in order to make sure Iran understands the consequences of running to become a threshold country. We're not going to allow this to happen, and I think everybody in this room share this sentiment, and we are discussing how to make sure this will never happen.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** We're united in the proposition that Iran cannot be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon, and President Biden is committed to that proposition. We believe that the diplomatic path is the most effective way to ensure that that doesn't happen.

But as we've had occasion to discuss in recent weeks, despite the fact that we've made abundantly clear over the last nine months that we are prepared to return to full compliance with the JCPOA if Iran does the same, what we are seeing – or maybe more accurately not seeing from Tehran now – suggests that they're not. And time is running short because, as we've also had an opportunity to discuss together, we are getting closer to a point at which returning to compliance with the JCPOA will not in and of itself recapture the benefits of the JCPOA, and that's because Iran has been using this time to advance its nuclear program in a variety of ways, including enriching uranium to 20 percent and even 60 percent, using more advanced centrifuges, acquiring more knowledge.

And so that runway is getting shorter. I'm not going to put a specific date on it, but with every passing day and Iran's refusal to engage in good faith, the runway gets short. And so as the foreign minister said, we are discussing this among ourselves, and we will look at every option to deal with the challenge posed by Iran. We continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective way to do that, but it takes two to engage in diplomacy, and we have not – we have not seen from Iran a willingness to do that at this point.

With regard to the second part of your question, Will, I mentioned this in my opening remarks: We believe strongly that Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live safely, securely, with equal measures of freedom, prosperity, democracy. And we will continue our own efforts toward that end. And in a sense, I can't stress this enough, advancing equal measures of freedom and dignity is important in its own right and as a means to advance toward a negotiated two-state solution. So our approach will be to work toward a more peaceful, secure, prosperous future for the people of the Middle East as a whole, and for Israelis and Palestinians as well in particular. We are unwavering in our commitment to Israel's security, and we will work to strengthen all aspects of the U.S.-Israel partnership.

To advance the goal that I mentioned, we will work closely with Israel, deepen our diplomatic ties with the Palestinians, and consult with partners in the region and beyond who have a common interest in

supporting efforts to advance a lasting peace. And as I said in May, we'll be moving forward with the process of opening a consulate as part of deepening those ties with the Palestinians.

**MR PRICE:** We'll turn to Yuna Leibzon from Channel 12.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. First question, Secretary Blinken. You just mentioned that all paths are on the table and the diplomatic path is your preferred path. But is a military path also something – is that something that you're considering that is also on the table?

And the second question is: Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Bennett, have said that Israel is operating all the time against the Iran nuclear deal, including that it has the right to defend itself. Is that something that is being done in coordination with you?

And a question to Minister Lapid about Abraham Accords. Have other countries been discussed? Has —

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** You have to raise your voice a little bit.

**QUESTION:** Sorry. A question to you about the Abraham Accords. Are other countries being discussed? Has there been any kind of process or something new that you can share with us about the efforts joining other countries? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you. I'm happy to start.

First, to be very clear, Israel has the right to defend itself and we strongly support that proposition. We've also been clear, as I said a moment ago, that we believe a diplomatic solution to our concerns with Iran – concerns that are shared among the three of us and among many countries around the world, including our European partners, including Russia and China – that a diplomatic path is the best and most effective way to do that. And so we've been clear that, as I said, we would like to see a mutual return to compliance of the JCPOA. But Iran's responses, or rather lack thereof, have not been encouraging.

So even as we remain ready to return to talks and think that we should do so soon, if Iran has a realistic position, we continue to believe that we could reach an agreement on a return to mutual compliance. But for the reasons I cited a few minutes ago, the runway that we have left to do that is getting shorter and shorter, and so we are watching Iran's comments, posture very, very carefully. And as the minister said, we are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn't change course, and these consultations with our allies and partners are a part of that.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** I would like to start by repeating what the Secretary of State just said. Yes, other options are going to be on the table if diplomacy fails. And by saying other options, I think everybody understands here, in Israel, in the Emirates, and in Tehran what is it that we mean.

About the Abraham Accords, yes, we want to expand the Abraham Accords. We're working on expanding the Abraham Accords. But first and foremost, and we've discussed this today at length, we want to make sure the current agreements we have will be a success story. And it is so far a success story on the people-to-people level, on the ability to make this into business, energy, water, the working groups we have decided to open today. These are all great achievements, and we are going to push forward as hard as we can on this while working on expanding the Abraham Accords to other countries, including the ones you don't think of.

If I may I will say a few words in Hebrew, but it's going to be the same. (Laughter.)

(In Hebrew.)

You listened to me like you understand every word in Hebrew.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Every third word.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** Every third word. I know you know some.

**MR PRICE:** Our final question will come from Joyce Karam of *The National*.

**QUESTION:** Yes, hi. Thank you. Joyce Karam with *The National* newspaper. My question to Sheikh Abdullah: A year on, how is the UAE planning to leverage the Abraham Accords to advance a two-state solution? And given that your counterpart, Mr. Lapid, has already visited Abu Dhabi in June, are you planning a visit to Israel in the near future?

And to Secretary Blinken, two quick questions. You mentioned that the administration is working to expand the pool of the Abraham Accords. What incentives are you providing to other countries to join? And allow me a question on Syria to Secretary Blinken. A number of Arab countries are resuming normal ties with the Assad regime. Does the Biden administration endorse this rapprochement and what is the U.S. policy in that regard? Thank you.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Well, Foreign Minister Yair was kind enough to invite me to visit Israel, and I'm going to visit soon to meet a friend, but also a partner. We need to not only celebrate this relationship, but look at new venues of cooperation. Today, one of the initiatives that we've signed off on when it comes to climate change – we are extremely interested in seeing how we can work with Israeli technology, Emirati technology in building not only bridges between us, but with third parties as well.

The Palestinians are going to be the most important element of the success of peace in the region. We cannot just talk about peace in the region without the neighbors – the Palestinians and the Israelis are not in talking terms to start with. So I'm quite excited to see that in the last few weeks, Israeli ministers are starting to meet with the PA. This is a good start. We have to keep encouraging them, but also in broadening the opportunities for them. Today, I think the relationship between Israel and the UAE helps us, both of us, to be more candid with each other, but also to encourage the others whenever there is more to be done. So I think the UAE-Israeli relationship will be not only a way of encouraging our two people, but beyond, in the region. So I look forward to seeing you, Yair, in Israel soon.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** My house is open to you. You know that.

**FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED:** Thank you, sir.

**FOREIGN MINISTER LAPID:** And my wife is expecting for you to come over for dinner.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** I'm tempted to leave it there, but – (laughter) – let me talk about Syria first and then come to the second part of the – the first part of the question second.

First, to put this in focus, these initial nine months of the administration we have been focused on a few things when it comes to Syria: Expanding humanitarian access for people who desperately need that assistance, and we had some success, as you know, with renewing the critical corridor in northwestern Syria to do that; sustaining the campaign that we have with the coalition against ISIS and al-Qaida in Syria; making clear our commitment, our ongoing commitment to demand accountability from the Assad regime and the preservation of basic international norms like promoting human rights and nonproliferation through the imposition of targeted sanctions; and sustaining local ceasefires, which are in place in different parts of the country. So this has been the focus of our action for these

last nine months.

As we're moving forward, in the time ahead, keeping violence down; increasing humanitarian assistance and focusing our military efforts on any terrorist groups that pose a threat to us or to our partners, with the intent and capacity to do that. These are going to be the critical areas of focus for us, and they're also, I think, important to advancing a broader political settlement to the Syrian conflict consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

What we have not done and what we do not intend to do is to express any support for efforts to normalize relations or rehabilitate Mr. Assad, or lifted a single sanction on Syria or changed our position to oppose the reconstruction of Syria until there is irreversible progress toward a political solution, which we believe is necessary and vital.

The question of incentives. I think – for others who might join in the normalization effort, I think the incentives are being demonstrated every single day by the UAE and Israel. And the incentives are simply this: These efforts and the normalization is profoundly in the interests of the people in the countries in question, and is providing all sorts of new opportunities, as evidenced by the extraordinary jump in tourism, the business relationships that are being built every single day, the work that our countries are doing together increasingly in a wide variety of areas. Those are very powerful incentives, because it simply means that people will have a better life, more opportunity, more security, more prosperity.

So I think, going forward, it's exactly what Sheikh Abdullah said. The proof is in what has already been created, and I think as more and more people see that, understand it, become aware of it, they will want to do the same thing.

And I'd just conclude by saying – I think I mentioned this before – one of the most powerful things is this. Abraham in the Bible was known for having the temerity to argue with God, to ask why, or maybe even more appropriately, why not. Israel, the United Arab Emirates, they asked, "Why not?" And now they are demonstrating every single day why it is so important that countries come together and work together and join together and create more opportunity for their peoples.

So this is a very powerful answer, and I suspect that more and more countries in the region and beyond will see that in the months and years ahead. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** That concludes the press conference. We invite our delegations to remain seated as the press leaves the room. Thank you.

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## [Department Press Briefing – October 18, 2021](#)

10/18/2021 06:01 PM EDT

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

2:10 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon, everyone.

Before we turn to today's business, I just want to spend a moment picking up where Secretary Blinken left off this morning. As you know, today is a very somber day here at the Department of State. Some of my colleagues were lucky enough to work for Secretary Powell. I've heard many of them over the course of this morning tell their favorite stories about Secretary Powell. They have, without exception, done so with a spark in their eye and with appropriate warmth in their voice. All of us here are fortunate enough to work in an institution that Secretary Powell has shaped and one that continues to reflect his tremendous legacy.

Speaking for myself as a child of the late Cold War and the first Gulf War, I remember thinking there could be no leader bigger, no leader greater than someone like General Powell, whom we now know as Secretary Powell, at least in this building. He was an inspiration to not only my generation, but many generations of America. Americans across this country are lucky enough to have experienced a trailblazing leader with integrity, with character, perhaps most of all with decency. And this institution in this country are better off because of Colin Powell, whom we all miss very dearly.

Now turning to today, the United States welcomes the opening of the Syrian Constitutional Committee's sixth round of negotiations today in Geneva. We stand firmly behind UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and UN Special Envoy Pedersen, who brought the co-chairs together in advance of the Constitutional Committee for the first time yesterday.

It is essential the Syrian regime and leaders of the opposition engage constructively in Geneva, consistent with the political process outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

The Syrian people deserve nothing less after more than a decade of war.

And with that, I will be happy to turn to your questions. Matt, do you want to start?

**QUESTION:** Yes, please. Thank you. A couple of brief one. On Russia and NATO, you, I'm sure, have seen that they had suspended their office – their liaison office with NATO in Brussels, and I'm wondering if you have anything to say about that. And if you don't or if you don't care, that's fine, but do you have any reaction to them also closing down NATO's office in Moscow?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we would refer you to NATO for further information, but we do note that NATO recently withdrew the accreditation of eight members of the Russian mission to NATO who were serving as undeclared Russian intelligence officers. NATO's policy towards Russia remains consistent. It has strengthened its deterrence and its defense in response to Russia's aggressive action while, at

the same time, leaving the door open for meaningful dialogue. That continues to be the case.

**QUESTION:** Okay, so no specific reaction to them suspending or closing down the office in Moscow?

**MR PRICE:** Nothing now on that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Secondly, do you have any comment on the bombing in Tigray by Ethiopian planes?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we've seen these reports of an attack on the capital in Mekelle. We are in the process of looking into them. We, broadly speaking, do remain gravely concerned by what has been escalating violence for some time. That includes the expansion of fighting in northern Ethiopia and in regions throughout the country, and, of course, the growing risk that that fighting poses to the integrity of the Ethiopian state. Not only does it pose a risk to the state, it undermines critical efforts to keep civilians safe, and importantly, to deliver humanitarian aid to Ethiopians who are in dire need of such support.

We urge all parties to end hostilities immediately, and for the Ethiopian Government and the TPLF, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, to enter into negotiation without preconditions toward a sustainable ceasefire. We continue to believe that a sustainable ceasefire will help establish conditions for a dialogue that is credible, a dialogue that is inclusive, and to find a political settlement to the longstanding political grievances that have led to the conflict.

Moreover, as we've said before, the Government of Eritrea must immediately and permanently withdraw its forces from Ethiopia, consistent with the comments already made by both Ethiopia and Eritrea.

**QUESTION:** Can I have one more on Ethiopia?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** The executive order on sanctions went into effect weeks ago. What is the administration waiting for to impose sanctions under that regime?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have been very clear that we are prepared to use every tool at our disposal until and unless the various parties change their course. Obviously, the executive order that went into effect in September, I believe it is, does afford the U.S. Government an important tool to hold accountable those who are responsible for the violence, those who are responsible for the suffering of the Ethiopian people. We are absolutely prepared to use that tool and other appropriate tools as might be appropriate.

Humeyra.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on Iran. I wonder how the United States view Iran's request for a meeting in Brussels with EU officials to discuss the draft text from June. Do you think this is a way of them trying to slow roll you?

**MR PRICE:** Well, to be clear, we do not think it is necessary. We are, together with our allies and partners in the P5+1, of the same mind that negotiations in Vienna – a seventh round of talks between the P5+1 and Iran, indirect in the case of the United States – should resume as soon as possible. We have been very clear at that. The destination we seek is in Vienna, not an intermediate step in Brussels. Of course, we understand that Mr. Mora recently is in Tehran. Certainly appreciate the efforts of the EU to engage in this dialogue on behalf of the Joint Commission, on behalf of our allies

and partners who seek the same goal, and that is a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA as negotiated in Vienna – and importantly, picking up in Vienna with a seventh round that takes up where the sixth round left off.

This is the message that we heard consistently from our allies and partners when we were in New York City on the margins of the UN General Assembly. This is the message that the Secretary has heard on a bilateral and multilateral basis in his conversations before the UN General Assembly and after the UN General Assembly. There is no daylight with our partners. There is no disagreement that a mutual return to compliance remains in our interests, it remains in the interests of our allies and partners, and that we should resume the work of testing the proposition as to whether we can get there in Vienna as soon as possible.

Yes, please.

**QUESTION:** One on Iran as well, if I could. Saudi Arabia said last week that they've had four interactions, or what they call interactions or discussions, with Iran since April. And is this department encouraged by these interactions? Do you see it as good for possibly encouraging Iran back to the table, and/or any concern with these interactions given that they're both regional foes?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we certainly think constructive dialogue can be a useful tool for de-escalating tensions, regional tensions. We're supportive of dialogue broadly speaking. We're supportive of dialogue in this case.

Yes, Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Well, I don't know if this has to do with Iran or not, but since I haven't seen a readout of it, what was the purpose of this virtual call the Secretary did with the Israelis and the Emiratis and the Indians?

**MR PRICE:** So you will see a readout of that later today, but —

**QUESTION:** If it wasn't Iran, then we can move on to Shaun.

**MR PRICE:** It was not Iran. It was not Iran.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So —

**MR PRICE:** It was – well, you'll have a readout later today.

**QUESTION:** (Laughter.) Okay.

**MR PRICE:** But obviously this is a collection of four countries – the United States, the UAE, Israel, and India – with whom we share many interests. It was an opportunity for the ministers to discuss a range of topics, including expanding economic and political cooperation in the respective regions, deepening economic – excuse me, discussed climate change, energy cooperation, maritime security, a whole range of issues. But you'll see a readout of it later today.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Can we go to Venezuela?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Can we do more on Iran?

**MR PRICE:** One more on Iran? Sure.

**QUESTION:** Right – would you say that the administration is sort of growing increasingly pessimistic that Iran even wants to come back into a deal? Are you preparing now for the possibility that this whole thing might just fail and it's time to move on to not necessarily a plan B or other options, as the Secretary put it, but a new policy prerogative and declare sort of the death of the return to the JCPOA?

**MR PRICE:** Well, to your question, Nick, look, we're not optimistic; we are not pessimistic. We are clear-eyed. And we are taking into account precisely what we are hearing from the Iranians, what we are not hearing from the Iranians, what we are seeing from the Iranians, what we are not seeing from the Iranians. We are in the midst of – in the midst of watching closely as the Iranians, it seems, form their own consensus as to what path they would like to choose. We are engaged in ongoing consultations with our allies and partners. As you know, Rob Malley is now in the Middle East. He has just concluded a set of good meetings in the UAE. He'll be going on to Qatar, to Saudi Arabia, as well during this trip.

But look, we have been very clear and we have been clear for some time now this is not an exercise that can go on indefinitely. The Secretary made this point on the 8th floor of this building last week when he was with his Emirati and Israeli counterpart. We continue to believe that there is a path for diplomacy. We continue to believe, as I said before, that a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, one that is diplomatically negotiated, is the best and most effective means at our disposal to see to it that Iran is once again permanently and verifiably prevented from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

But of course, diplomacy, like many things in life, it takes two. And we have not seen – heard those messages, we've not seen actions to date that are all that comforting when it comes to what the Iranians might seek in the near term. But of course, the door remains open.

All the while – you heard this from the Secretary, you heard this after National Security Advisor Sullivan's meeting with his Israeli counterpart on October 5th – the President has made clear that if diplomacy fails we are prepared to turn to other options, and this is part of the intensive consultations that we are undertaking with our allies and partners in the region and beyond.

Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Can I just ask a quick follow-up? What do you make of the fact that it now looks like Iran is exporting about a million barrels of oil a day and seemingly has no financial incentive to come back to negotiations? The economy is doing better, it's gone back into positive territory, the currency is no longer in freefall. It feels like sanctions enforcement has tailed off and, really, there's no leverage, economic leverage, despite the sanctions that the administration has in place to compel them back to the table.

**MR PRICE:** Look, I would dispute the premise that Iran doesn't have economic incentives to come back to the table. These were economic incentives that led Iran to the table in the deal that came together in July of 2015 that was implemented in January 2016. These are some of the same incentives that remain today.

When it comes to our sanctions and sanctions enforcement, I just want to be very clear that our sanctions on Iranian oil and petrochemicals remain fully in place. We will continue to enforce them together with our allies and partners around the world until and unless Iran chooses a path of diplomacy and a path to a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** And what are you doing, then, about the fact that China continues to import, like, 750,000 barrels a day from Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Look, these are consultations that we're having with our allies and partners. We have been very clear about where we stand in terms of our sanctions, in terms of our sanctions enforcement. The PRC has also been very clear in terms of where they stand on a potential mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. The PRC is an original member – a founding member, you might say – of the P5+1. The authorities in Beijing have made very clear that, like the United States, like the Russian Federation, like the EU, like the French, like the Germans, like the Brits, we are all of the mindset that a mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action remains in our collective interest. And right now, we are waiting to be able to render a verdict as to whether Iran is willing and able to return to the negotiating table in Vienna.

Shaun.

**QUESTION:** Venezuela. Over the weekend, the Maduro government said it was suspending talks with Guaido. They were citing the extradition of Mr. Saab. Do you have any reaction, first, to the severing of the dialogue, what this bodes for the future in Venezuela, and also to the linkage with the extradition?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. Look, at the broadest level, Nicolas Maduro needs to end the human rights abuses and needs to allow the Venezuelan people, his people, to participate in free and fair presidential, parliamentary, regional, and local elections. We have been consistent in terms of where we stand with the Venezuelan-led negotiations between the Unity Platform and the Maduro regime. We support them, we continue to support them, and we continue to believe that they should lead to the peaceful restoration of democracy that the people of Venezuela so earnestly desire and deserve. They should end – they should result in an end to the regime's human rights abuses and to the alleviation of Venezuela's dire humanitarian suffering and put an end to a crisis that has gone on for far too long.

By suspending participation in these negotiations, the Maduro regime, on the other hand, has made very clear that it is putting its interests once again above the interests of the Venezuela people. Just think about it. They are putting the case of one individual above the welfare, above the well-being, above the livelihoods of the millions of Venezuelans who have made clear their aspirations for democracy, for greater freedom, for prosperity, and, at a most basic level, an alleviation of the humanitarian suffering that the regime has inflicted on the Venezuela people.

We will continue to work with the Venezuelan – with our Venezuelan international partners to, in the meantime, provide assistance to address the crisis in Venezuela. We call on the international community to redouble its support to the Venezuela people as they work to peacefully restore democracy to their country.

As I think all of you know, we'll be headed in that direction tomorrow. We'll be going to Ecuador and Colombia Tuesday through Thursday of this week, and we'll have an opportunity there to discuss some of these broad themes as well.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on the CITGO-6.

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

Let – Shaun, were you – yeah.

**QUESTION:** Happy to go to that. But just a brief follow-up on that.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** I think I know the answer, but I want to ask if the – linking the extradition to this, is that something that would be under discussion for the United States? Do you see some – any type of linkage there that you could have?

**MR PRICE:** It is often difficult for undemocratic, autocratic, repressive governments to understand a simple and fundamental truth about how we operate in this country, and that is that our law enforcement is independent of politics, of policy. The criminal charges against Alex Saab long predate and have no relation to the political negotiations between the Unity Platform and the Maduro regime. These operate on a second track. So no, there is no linkage.

**QUESTION:** Well, then how do you – how would you explain the whole Huawei case?

**QUESTION:** Ned, to follow up on that, just because it's —

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** — unclear where they are, and if this – if you're worried about their fate being linked to this as well.

**MR PRICE:** Well, we are aware of the reports that the CITGO-6 have been moved from – back from house arrest into custody, but we can't confirm their current locations. We often do have difficulty obtaining access to and confirming reports about detained individuals in Venezuela, but we make every effort to provide appropriate consular assistance even if that's by phone, by video conference, by other means. We have been in frequent and direct contact with their families, however, and that will continue.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I don't think you just – just had said that the criminal charges are another thing in terms of the political negotiation in Mexico, but regarding the CITGO-6, their families here in the U.S. are demanding that the Biden administration take steps towards guarantee their safety and their release. And they are even suggesting that you kind of make some kind of exchange between Alex Saab and the CITGO-6. Is this even possible? Are you considering?

**MR PRICE:** Look, to be very clear, these are wrongful detainees. These are individuals who were lured to Venezuela by the Maduro regime and arrested upon their arrival. The regime continues to detain them to gain political leverage. They are holding them as political pawns. We call on the regime to release them immediately so that they can return to be reunited with their families in the United States.

If you take a look at the history of this case, after cancelling their initial appearance before a judge dozens of times over the last three years, a Venezuelan court convicted these individuals after a sham trial without any evidence. Having already spent four years wrongfully detained in Venezuela on these specious charges, they should be immediately and unconditionally released.

We have spoken many times before about the practice, the heinous practice of arbitrary detention of individuals, of holding individuals on trumped up charges, putting them through sham trials, refusing to afford them real due process. It is a practice that is as reprehensible in Venezuela as it is anywhere else in the world. And Secretary Blinken has made a point of working closely with our partners and allies, including, prominently, with our Canadian allies, to reinforce the norm that taking and holding individuals for nothing more than political gain is a practice that must be discarded, is a practice that

has no place in the modern world. And that's what we'll continue to do.

**QUESTION:** So no exchange? No Saab for CITGO-6?

**MR PRICE:** These are individuals who were wrongfully detained who should be released unconditionally.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I want to ask you about the visit of Secretary Blinken to Colombia in two days. The U.S. has said that Colombia is a strategic ally, and with this trip I think that you want to show that. However, President Ivan Duque was here in Washington two times in the last three weeks looking for a meeting with President Joe Biden. Is President Joe Biden ignoring President Ivan Duque, or is he avoiding a meeting with Duque?

**MR PRICE:** No. There is no avoiding; it is very true that Colombia is a strategic partner of ours. That is precisely why the Secretary will be visiting Colombia on his first trip to South America as Secretary of State in just a couple days. He, of course, will have an opportunity to meet with President Duque, with his foreign minister counterpart. We'll have an opportunity to meet with other government officials, with civil society, with business counterparts. So this is very much an effort to showcase, to strengthen, and to deepen the relationship – the important relationship – between the United States and Colombia, and we'll have an opportunity to speak to that in the coming days.

Jenny.

**QUESTION:** On Haiti, do you have any update on the kidnapped Americans and Canadian? Do you – does the State Department know where they are? Who is taking the lead on trying to get them?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you heard from us over the weekend, we can confirm that 17 individuals – 16 of whom are U.S. citizens – were kidnapped on October 16th, on Saturday, in the greater Port-au-Prince area. We have made this point before, but the welfare, the safety, the security of U.S. citizens abroad is one of our highest priorities.

Our embassy team in Haiti has been in constant contact with the Haitian National Police, with the missionary group Christian Aid Ministries, and family members of the victims. We'll continue to work with them; we'll continue to work with the Canadian Government, given that one of the victims is a Canadian citizen; and with our interagency partners in this ongoing investigation.

The State Department has – is part of a small team that is now on the ground that has been dispatched to Haiti to work closely with Haitian authorities on this matter. This is something that we have treated as – with the utmost priority since Saturday. Our teams across the building have been working closely with our interagency partners, and as I said before, with our partners on the ground in Haiti to do all we can to seek a quick resolution to this.

**QUESTION:** Is the State Department aware of their whereabouts? Are you in touch with this gang that has said they kidnapped them?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we're not going to go into specifics, but we have been in close touch with the families, with the group to which this group of missionaries belongs, and we'll continue to coordinate closely with them.

**QUESTION:** Following up on Haiti. Thank you. There were calls in the wake of the assassination for the U.S. to become involved in Haiti, to help provide security. Is that the kind of thing, being reminded how dangerous it is there, that the U.S. is re-evaluating?



And then on the other hand, there's a question of whether migrants should be deported back to a country like Haiti that's just dangerous, where gangs operate with impunity. Is the administration re-evaluating that policy, or is it – are we going to proceed forward with not intervening in Haiti and sending migrants back to the country?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me start with the first element of your question, the conditions in Haiti. We have had a series of engagement – engagements with Haitian authorities, with civil society, with other actors on the ground, of course, before the assassination of President Moïse and in the weeks after. And one of the messages we've heard at every level is the real concern about security, about security conditions in Port-au-Prince and across the country.

It is no secret that Haiti faces severe security challenges. That is why our International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Bureau, or INL, has provided capacity building to the Haitian National Police to support the Haitian National Police's development as a professional and an accountable institution able to – better equipped to take on some of these challenges. INL provides technical assistance through embedded subject matter experts, training, equipment, and other security assistance to help improve citizen security in Haiti.

We realize what a priority this is for the people of Haiti, and that's why we have provided funding to the tune of \$312 million in assistance over the last decade alone to strengthen law enforcement and capacity of the Haitian National Police and to maintain peace and stability throughout the country.

In response to the increasingly perilous security situation on the ground, in recent weeks alone we've allocated an additional \$15 million to partnering with the Haitian National Police on top of those existing efforts, including \$12 million specifically to strengthen the police's capacity to respond to gangs, including efforts with communities to resist gangs and additional anti-gang subject matter experts in support of the Haitian National Police to establish an anti-gang task force among other measures that have been implemented as well.

To the second part of your question, we are a partner to the Haitian people and to the Haitian Government. We remain committed to supporting the Haitian people during this especially difficult time. We have been clear. We have been resolute on that both before the killing of President Moïse and, of course, in the weeks since.

It is important to us that we are doing all we can, and we continue to do all we can to provide assistance that supports and promotes stability, resilience, health, and safety for Haitians at home. And in accord with that we have provided \$5.5 million in assistance and support – to support the reception of Haitian migrants returning to Haiti. This is administered by USAID and it supports several aspects of the International Organization for Migration's ongoing efforts to provide immediate reception services for migrants returned to Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haitien.

When it comes to our immigration policy, U.S. immigration law remains in effect. Migrants arriving by irregular means and without a legal basis to remain are subject to removal under U.S. law. We are committed to supporting safe, orderly, and humane migration throughout our region, and we're engaging with partners throughout the migratory corridor in the region to underscore our shared responsibility for helping to manage migration, knowing that what happens in Central and South America, what happens in the Caribbean, is of collective interest to all of us.

It is part of the reason why Secretary Blinken is eager to take part in a ministerial this week when we travel to South America precisely on the challenge of regional migration. It is a follow-on discussion in some ways to the ministerial that we attended in Costa Rica earlier this year, and we've had any number of opportunities, including recently in the General Assembly with some of our regional partners, to discuss how together as a hemisphere, as partners and allies throughout the hemisphere,

we can work together to manage migration and how the United States can continue to develop a partnership, including in the Northern Triangle, to provide opportunities for individuals in their home countries.

The right to remain is what one of the participants at the SICA Ministerial called it. Making sure that those throughout the region, whether that's in Haiti, whether that's in the Northern Triangle, whether that is in any other country in our hemisphere or beyond, that individuals who might seek or aspire to seek a better life somewhere actually feel the promise and the hope and the potential within their own countries. And that's precisely what our partnership with the region is all about.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Secretary Powell is being remembered for many significant achievements today. But do you think that his reputation on the world stage is at all diminished by him garnering support for the Iraq War from allies like Australia based on poor intelligence?

**MR PRICE:** Secretary Powell is remembered in this building, in this country, and I think around the world as someone who exemplified the utmost integrity, character, and decency in all that he did. Secretary Blinken made the point today that he was a man of ideas, but he wasn't ideological. And in that same vein, he was someone who could admit when he was wrong. And I think he is someone whose example really exudes leadership. When you think about a leader and you think about the qualities, whether that's in a military leader or in a leader within this institution, a leader within our body politic, I think we would all do well if we were able to emulate what General Powell, what Secretary Powell, exemplified in this country and on the world stage.

Please.

**QUESTION:** Ned, so on Turkey, President Tayyip Erdogan on Sunday said, United States has proposed the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. There was a recent request that was sent up – that you guys did not comment on, but it was sent up – in return for Turkey's investment in the F-35 program. So can you confirm the president's comments that it was indeed this – this was a proposal that was coming from the U.S. side?

**MR PRICE:** Let me say as a matter of general policy, and you know this, Humeyra, the department does not confirm or comment on proposed defense sales or transfers until and unless they have been formally notified to Congress. When it comes to Turkey, we strongly value our partnership with our NATO Ally Turkey. It's an important NATO Ally. We have longstanding and deep bilateral ties, and Turkey's continued NATO interoperability remains a priority.

Now, when it comes to the issue you raised, I will say that we remain – the Department of Defense, I should say – remains in consultation with Turkey on an F-35 dispute resolutions – dispute resolution. Turkish officials have publicly acknowledged their interest in purchasing F-16 aircraft. We would refer you to Turkish Government – to the Turkish Government to speak to its defense procurement plans. What I can say is the United States has not made any financing offers on Turkey's F-16 request.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So let me elaborate just a little bit on that. Has the United States encouraged Turkey at any of its consultations to submit that request for F-16s?

**MR PRICE:** As I said, the Department of Defense does remain in consultations with Turkey on the F-35 program. How that dispute may be resolved, I'm not in a position to speak to that dialogue what – but to be clear, we have not made any financing offers on Turkey's F-16 request.

**QUESTION:** Does that mean that the arguments that President Erdogan is making, like we have paid

this amount of money for the F-35 program and we would like that to be counted for our potential F-16 request, you're basically saying you have never told Turkey that that is possible.

**MR PRICE:** What I'm saying is that the Department of Defense continues to be engaged in a dispute resolution mechanism with Turkey on the F-35, but I'm not going to prejudge the outcome of that.

**QUESTION:** Is that technically possible, what President Erdogan is referring to, saying something like a store credit – we have paid this much amount of money and now we want that? Is that technically possible?

**MR PRICE:** This is all part of a dispute resolution mechanism. Again, I don't want to prejudge it. I don't want to go into private conversations between the Turkish Government and this administration. So I will leave it that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Finale one. On – given the Congress, given the bipartisan opposition, would the administration be looking at perhaps lobbying for F-16 sales to Turkey in Congress?

**MR PRICE:** Again, this – I think this goes back to my first answer, and that is, we don't speak to any defense sales or transfers until and unless they're notified to Congress.

**QUESTION:** Could I ask you —

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** — on the F-16s? So when you say the U.S. hasn't made any financing offer – so you're confirming the request if you're —

**MR PRICE:** Well, the Turkish Government has made public —

**QUESTION:** Has that been formally submitted to you?

**MR PRICE:** I would have to refer you to the Turkish Government. They have spoken publicly to their interest, but in terms of a process there, I need to refer you to them.

**QUESTION:** And then also on the S-400, I mean, do you – would you be comfortable with a situation where they had the S-400 up and running with the F-16? I'm not talking about the F.35. Separate from that dispute, would you be concerned about a situation where they had the S.400 operating in a system where they were in an – in a theater where they were also flying the F-16?

**MR PRICE:** This is, I think, perhaps a more convoluted way of asking the same question Humeyra was asking, so I'm going to give you the same answer, that the Department of Defense is engaged in dispute resolution discussions with Turkey on the F-35 —

**QUESTION:** I'm not talking about the F-35. I'm talking about the F-16.

**MR PRICE:** But – well, this question is coming up in the context of discussions regarding the F-35, so don't want to prejudge those, don't want to go into private discussions.

**QUESTION:** But just one more thing, actually. When you say dispute resolution, Turkey has been removed from the F-35, so what are these talks about? Is it about trying to find a way to get their money back, or is it about finding a way to allocate that money to – what is the dispute resolution for?

**MR PRICE:** As you know, we've been very public about the lack of interoperability, the fact that the F-35 program is not consistent with the S-400.

**QUESTION:** Sure.

**MR PRICE:** We have been very clear about that. We've also been clear that the imposition of sanctions under Section 231 of CAATSA in response to that S-400 acquisition, it signaled the seriousness with which we approach this.

But again, when it comes to private discussions between the U.S. Government and our Turkish counterparts about follow-on to our very clear decision on the lack of interoperability between the F-35 and the S-400, I'm going to let those discussions take place behind closed doors, as they have been.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On China, the *Financial Times* reported this weekend that they tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic missile in August. Was the State Department aware of this test, and did it catch you by surprise, as characterized in that article?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we're not going to comment, of course, on matters that may pertain to intelligence or the specific reference in the article you mentioned. But what we have said for some time now is that we are deeply concerned about the rapid expansion of the PRC's nuclear capabilities, including its development of novel delivery systems. These developments underscore that the PRC, as we've said before, is deviating from its decades-long nuclear strategy based on minimum deterrence.

As of the end of last month, September of 2021, the PRC had launched at least 250 ballistic missiles this year. All of this is concerning, especially concerning, I should say, given the PRC's lack of transparency into its evolving nuclear posture. And this nuclear buildup just, in our view, reinforces the importance of pursuing practical measures with the PRC to reduce nuclear risk. We have reached out to the PRC. We have made very clear our interest in engaging with the PRC, as responsible countries would and do, in the context of these powerful weapons and weapons systems.

In the meantime, we will continue to maintain the capabilities to defend and to deter against a range of threats from the PRC, threats to the United States, threats to our allies, threats to our partners as well.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan, last week this department said the latest figures for U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents leaving Afghanistan with American assistance were 129 U.S. citizens, 115 LPRs. Do you have a figure or an approximate figure of those Americans who are leaving without U.S. assistance on these occasional charter flights? And also, do you have an update on a figure, an approximate figure, on the number of Americans who remain in the country and want to leave?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. Well, you cited the numbers as of last week. It was 129 U.S. citizens, 115 lawful permanent residents the U.S. Government had directly facilitated since August 31st. I can confirm that yesterday, October 17th, another Qatar Airways charter flight with both U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents departed Kabul and landed in Doha. We haven't been able to update our tally just yet because we are still processing those passengers as they deplane in Doha. But when we do have an updated figure, we'll be happy to pass that along.

In terms of a broader figure of individuals who have departed Afghanistan via a variety of means since August 31st, our estimate of that is probably a couple thousand, a couple thousand individuals, have departed Afghanistan. Of course, our efforts, we are focused and prioritize American citizens, lawful permanent residents, Afghans to whom we have a special commitment. We will continue to do that.

We will continue to do that through charter flights, which, as we discussed last week, we aim to make more routine and to add a degree of automaticity to their occurrence. We are continuing to work with our partners to see to it that the commercial airport in Kabul, Kabul International Airport, can resume normal commercial activity as quickly as possible. We want to provide additional options, including in the form of a fully functioning commercial airport, to see to it that those who wish to depart the country have another option to do so. In the meantime, we will support these charter flights. We will continue to support overland transfers as well.

In terms of a number of American citizens, this is a figure that, as you know, is not static. It is not immutable precisely because as Americans in the country – some of whom may be identifying themselves to us for the first time – see that we are able to effect the safe departure of Americans and LPRs and others from Afghanistan, that their calculus has changed. They have determined that they do wish to depart the country. That range has been anywhere from below a 100 – right now it is somewhere in between 100 and 200 given that some Americans have – additional Americans have raised their hands, seeing our ability to effect their safe departure.

But again, we are constantly in touch with them to determine their status, to determine their plans, determine what kind of documentation they have. And importantly, we are in regular contact with our partners and allies, and additionally with the Taliban to make clear the political side of that equation. Just as we are focused on operations and logistics to put Americans on planes – those Americans who wish to leave – we are focused on ensuring that the Taliban lives up to its commitment to allow safe passage, to allow freedom of movement, again, for those who wish to leave the country.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan, can you confirm that the U.S. will participate in the Moscow talks or won't?

**MR PRICE:** We will not participate in the Moscow talks. The Troika Plus has been an effective, a constructive forum. We look forward to engaging in that forum going forward, but we're not in a position to take part this week.

**QUESTION:** Why?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** Why? If it was effective, why not?

**MR PRICE:** It has been effective in the past. It's just logistically difficult for us to take part this week.

**QUESTION:** So you support the process to —

**MR PRICE:** We do.

**QUESTION:** – in the future you might take part?

**MR PRICE:** That's right. That's right.

**QUESTION:** But – what, are there no flights between here and Moscow? I mean, how is it logistically difficult?

**MR PRICE:** There – it is just not a meeting we're able to take part in this week. But again, it is a forum that has been constructive in the past. And so —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but presumably, if you thought it was worth going to, you could find a way to get someone – you could find someone to go and get them there, right? So —

**MR PRICE:** Well, I am non —

**QUESTION:** The logistics is not — as long as there are flights, that's not a — so what's the — so what is it? What is the real reason?

**MR PRICE:** We are not in a position to take part this week. But again, we look forward —

**QUESTION:** So if it was next week, you could take part?

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't want to entertain that hypothetical. But again, the Troika Plus, including the Troika Plus that the Russian Federation has hosted in the past, has proven to be a constructive forum. And so we'll engage with our partners going forward in that forum.

All right. Seeing no hands.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:54 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – November 03, 2021](#)

*11/03/2021 08:32 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Sorry we are starting a few minutes late here.

**QUESTION:** Welcome back.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you. It's good to be back. It's less good to be back when you arrive back at 2:30 in the morning, but here we are. A couple of things at the top and then happy to take your questions.

First, since the earliest days of this administration, we have talked about – but, more importantly, implemented – a foreign policy that delivers for the American people. In other words, it's a foreign policy that aims to make life better, easier, safer, for American workers, families, and communities.

It is rooted in the recognition that foreign, economic, and domestic policy are inextricably linked and that domestic competitiveness, national security, and a strong middle class are mutually reinforcing.

And that was precisely the agenda we executed against over the last few days in Italy and the UK.

Just look at the priorities from the trip:

First, in Rome, the President cemented progress on the global minimum tax – a major achievement secured through American, and in this case through presidential leadership, that will help stop a global corporate race to the bottom and improve our capacity to make investments in workers and in communities at home. And earlier today you heard from one of our senior officials offering some more context on the GMT.

Second, we took joint steps with Europe to re-establish historical transatlantic trade flows in steel and aluminum, providing a relief to American companies and to American consumers across the board.

Additionally, we were laser focused on lowering energy prices and securing our supply chains. On the latter, we worked with our partners to ensure stable, secure global supply chains for critical goods, medicine, and technology that the American people and the American economy depend on.

We further advanced the Build Back Better World initiative – the so-called B3W initiative – which promotes a high-standard, climate-friendly global infrastructure around the world. B3W indeed helps our partners overseas, but it also helps American firms and American workers compete globally on every aspect of infrastructure, from the physical to the digital to the health realm as well.

And, of course, in Glasgow we confronted climate change, an existential challenge but also the greatest economic opportunity of our time. And you've heard the President make this point repeatedly,

including in his remarks yesterday in Glasgow. We can and will create good-paying, union jobs and new industries as we address the climate crisis.

During COP26, President Biden and Secretary Blinken held productive meetings with leaders from around the globe to step up that global ambition and action in tackling the climate crisis.

They demonstrated that the United States is back in the Paris Agreement, back at the table, and back to leading with the power of our example – they demonstrated our commitment to support those from the frontlines of the climate crisis.

We accelerated our progress through diplomacy in a number of ways:

We reached an agreement by more than 100 countries representing 85 percent of the world's forests to stop deforestation by 2030.

We released the U.S. Long-Term Strategy to outline how we'll get to a net-zero economy by 2050.

We developed the methane – the U.S. Methane Emissions Reduction Action Plan, which included new, robust rules that will reduce emissions, that will cut consumer costs, and support job growth.

We announced more than 100 governments, including some of the world's biggest emitters, have now joined the Global Methane Pledge.

We created partnerships like Net Zero World, the Clean Energy Demand Initiative, and First Movers Coalition to drive innovation and new technology.

And we established the President's Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience, or PREPARE, as the acronym goes, to support climate adaptation efforts for more than half a billion people around the world.

This must be a whole-of-society effort – not only from nations around the world, but also the private sector, philanthropies, and others who are dedicating themselves to climate action, including climate activists around the world.

Action by state, local, and tribal governments paired with societal leadership is what propelled America forward and brought down emissions even as we were faced with the task of re-entering the Paris Agreement in the earliest days of this administration – on the first day of this administration.

The President underscored that investing in a clean energy future is an enormous opportunity for every country to create good-paying jobs and spur our economic recovery, which is what his framework will do.

It will be the largest investment in American history to combat the climate crisis.

It will cut emissions by well over one gigaton in 2030.

It will save consumers money on their energy bills.

Provide tax credits to install solar panels and weatherize homes.

Leverage manufacturing credits to ensure U.S. energy is clean and competitive.

And accelerate our shift to electric vehicles and school buses.

This is about jobs. It's about competitiveness versus complacency, as you heard from the President



yesterday from Glasgow. This is about making the world a safer, cleaner, healthier place for children all around the world.

It's in the interest of every single nation to act and to make a generational investment in our climate resilience and in our workers and communities. That is precisely what the United States is doing and what we will continue to do.

Second, I am pleased to announce the appointment of Ambassador William H. Moser as the director of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, or OBO. This appointment underscores the importance placed on the mission and the work of OBO to build and operate secure, sustainable, technologically innovative, and resilient diplomatic platforms that are produced by the best in American architecture, construction, and facility management.

Ambassador Moser is a familiar face around OBO as he served as OBO's principal deputy director from 2015 to 2017, and acting director from 2017 to 2018. He's held several senior leadership positions as a member of the Senior Foreign Service – including as ambassador to Moldova and Kazakhstan – and has demonstrated leadership and management skills needed to provide the global platform to advance U.S. policy overseas.

We look forward to OBO's achievements and contributions to U.S. diplomacy under his leadership, and we welcome Ambassador Moser to the job.

So with that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thank you, and welcome back. I hope you enjoyed Rome and Glasgow.

**QUESTION:** Without us.

**QUESTION:** With what?

**QUESTION:** Without us.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, without us. Well, I'm sure that that was an added bonus. (Laughter.)

**MR PRICE:** Everyone – everyone was welcome. No one was excluded.

**QUESTION:** Let's start with Ethiopia, because we understand that Ambassador Feltman is going to be going there, possibly other places. So if I could kind of combine this with Sudan, because they happen to be next to each other, and they're both in his portfolio. What's he going to be doing in Ethiopia? Is he going to Sudan? You just put out this joint statement with the Brits, with the Saudis, and the Emiratis. What do you expect out of that, if anything, from the other – mainly the Saudis and the Emiratis, from the others who are on that? And is he going anywhere else?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. Let me start with Ethiopia, then we'll move to Sudan. Obviously, a lot of action and activity to speak to.

When it comes to Ethiopia, let me make the point that we are gravely concerned by the escalating violence, by the expansion of the fighting that we've seen in northern Ethiopia and in regions throughout the country. We are concerned with the growing risk to the unity and the integrity of the Ethiopian state. The safety of U.S. citizens, U.S. Government personnel, their dependents, and the security of our facility remains among our highest priorities, and we note the nationwide state of emergency declared by Ethiopia's Council of Ministers, and we urge all parties to use restraint, end hostilities, and ensure civilians and their rights are respected.

As the Secretary said just a couple days ago, we have been alarmed by reports of the TPLF takeover in – of Dessie and Kombolcha. Continued fighting only prolongs the humanitarian crisis that is afflicting far too many people in Ethiopia today. All parties – all parties – must stop military operations and begin ceasefire negotiations without preconditions.

Many of you also saw that Ambassador Feltman delivered remarks at the U.S. Institute for Peace yesterday on Ethiopia, where he made some of these same points.

We are not only engaged in diplomacy ourselves, but we are working with international partners to address the crisis in Ethiopia, including through action with the UN, the African Union, other relevant partners and bodies as well.

You are correct that Ambassador Feltman will be traveling to Ethiopia on November 4th and November 5th. He will be traveling there because we, as I said before, are increasingly troubled by the expansion of combat operations and intercommunal violence in parts of Ethiopia, and we are closely monitoring the situation. We call on all Ethiopians to commit to peace and resolution of grievances through dialogue. And Ambassador Feltman in his travels there will have an opportunity to continue the discussions that have been ongoing, including with the Ethiopian Government for some time now.

In terms of any follow-on travel, we have confirmed that he's traveling to Ethiopia tomorrow, November 4th. I don't have any additional travel to announce at this time, but, of course, we'll keep you posted if his plans do change.

Let me go on to Sudan because this is also an area that falls under Ambassador Feltman's remit, and of course, thereto, we have been working concertedly over the past week-plus, and over the weekend we saw a remarkable demonstration of the aspirations of the Sudanese people. We applaud the millions of Sudanese who came out on October 30th. They came out to defend the country's revolution to make clear that their democratic aspirations have not been abated. They were clear that Sudan's democratic transition must continue.

We join them. We call for the civilian-led transitional government established under the 2019 Constitutional Declaration to be restored. We are steadfast in standing with Sudan's people on their path of freedom, peace, and justice. We do regret the loss of life that has occurred in recent days, and we stand in solidarity with the family and friends of those who were killed, those who have been wounded. And we join the Sudanese people in calling for justice and accountability for violations and abuses of human rights.

Matt, you were referred to a joint statement that came out just a few minutes ago. This was a joint statement by the Quad for Sudan. To translate, that is a grouping of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I would like to call your attention to really the crux of the statement. These four countries, the United States included, came together to make clear that, quote, "We call for the full and immediate restoration of its" – Sudan's – "civilian-led transitional government institutions. We call upon all parties to strive for cooperation and unity in reaching this critical objective." It goes on to say, "In that vein we encourage the release of all those detained in connection with the recent events and the lifting of the state of emergency."

As you know, in both Rome and Glasgow, the Secretary had an opportunity to meet with a number of his counterparts. We met with foreign minister – with the Saudi foreign minister. We met with the Emirati foreign minister. We met with others who have a stake in a stable, democratic civilian-led Sudan, and this was the message we've heard. So it is not just the United States calling for the immediate restoration of the civilian-led government in Sudan. It is much of the international community that is coming together. In this case, that includes the United Kingdom, but it includes some of Sudan's

regional neighbors and partners, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

We are not alone in this. We are very much united with our allies, with our partners around the world on the imperative of a swift return to democratic governance, a swift return to the civilian-led transition in Sudan, and we will continue to work with our partners to bring that about.

We also know even as we push this forward that failure to do so, failure to restore a civilian-led government in Sudan will only further isolate Sudan from the international community. We've already talked about the suspension of our own emergency support funding – some \$700 million that were suspended in the immediate aftermath of the military takeover last week, but beyond that more than 4 billion in international assistance from bilateral partners and international financial institutions, and at least 19 billion in international debt relief is already at risk.

We and, as I said before, the broader international community are committed to supporting the Sudanese people and their legitimate aspirations for freedom, for peace, and for justice as well.

**QUESTION:** But Ned, just on these two countries in – specifically, the administration – and just in terms of the administration and not the Saudis, the Emiratis, or anyone else, but just this administration, you guys have been warning both of these countries for months now about against – leaders in these countries against taking these actions. You had a parade of officials – a mini parade of officials go through both, including Samantha Power, including Ambassador Feltman himself who was in Khartoum just hours before this coup happened. You have now suspended 700 million in assistance to Sudan. You have kicked AGOA or are about to kick Ethiopia out of the African Growth and Opportunity Act, and they don't seem to be listening. Is there any – do you have any concern that your message is not being heeded or that you're being ignored?

**MR. PRICE:** Matt, obviously, I don't want to group Sudan and Ethiopia and treat them as one and the same. These are very distinct cases.

**QUESTION:** I don't want you to treat them the same, but they happen to be right next to each other and they happen to be the Horn of Africa which is the portfolio of Ambassador Feltman.

**MR. PRICE:** Well, and it's precisely why Ambassador Feltman was in Sudan in the first place. He has been a frequent visitor to Sudan in recent weeks to work on a number of issues, including the GERD, but also our concern for the viability of the civilian-led, transitional government given some of the indications that the international community had seen in the weeks and the days preceding the military takeover that something was afoot there.

So again, I don't want you to confuse – I don't want you to think this relationship is causal. He was there because – because the world —

**QUESTION:** No, no, no. I am not blaming it on him. I'm wondering – no, I'm not saying it's your fault or his fault or whoever; I'm just asking you if you are concerned that the message that you have been delivering to both – in both of these countries over the course of the last several months hasn't been listened to.

**MR. PRICE:** These are difficult challenges. These are difficult challenges, again, to take each separately because these are separate challenges.

In Sudan, the pace of the democratic transition has been a source of frustration for some. The fact that Ambassador Feltman has been such regular visitor there, had been such a regular visitor, is indicative of some of the challenges that the international community recognized the civilian-led transitional government was encountering. We have been there. Ambassador Feltman has been there.

We've spoken out. We have engaged in private diplomacy to indicate our support for the civilian-led transitional government.

Now of course, the military, as we saw the other week, had other plans in mind. But it is notable that you have seen the international community, including some of Sudan's most important regional neighbors swiftly condemn these anti-democratic actions, call for the immediate restoration of the civilian-led transitional government, and have made clear in no uncertain terms where they stand. And they stand with the United States, they stand with the international community, in making clear that the military's takeover must not be allowed to stand.

Now of course, Ethiopia is a separate challenge. This is something that we have been hard at work on from the earliest days of this administration. The violence, of course, predates this administration. Tomorrow I believe, November 4th, marks one year of conflict in Tigray. It's one year of devastating implications for the people of Tigray. In recent months, in recent weeks, we've seen the violence escalate. We've seen the violence spread to other regions. But here too, we have been working very closely with our partners, including those in the African Union and UN, to make clear to all of the parties – the Ethiopian Government, the TPLF, Eritrea – that these hostilities must come to an end and the path forward lies in diplomacy, the path forward lies in negotiations that should start immediately and without preconditions to put an end to the violence, but importantly, to ensure that the people of Ethiopia, the people of Tigray, have access to the humanitarian supplies, the humanitarian assistance that they so desperately need.

And when it comes to that humanitarian assistance, no country has done more than the United States to provide the people of Ethiopia with these life-saving assistance and supplies. We'll continue to do that, but it is also why, as we made clear yesterday, that any effort to hinder humanitarian assistance, to hinder the delivery of humanitarian aid will be met with a significant response in using all appropriate tools. And yesterday, we spoke of another tool that may be called upon on January 1st if we do not see a change in conduct when it comes to human rights abuses and the provision of humanitarian aid and access.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, on Sudan, did you invite Egypt to sign on the statement, and what was the response? And why they are not (inaudible)?

**MR. PRICE:** So this was a statement that put forward by the Quad for Sudan, and the Quad for Sudan includes us, it includes our British partners, our Emirati partners, and our Saudi partners. Sudan is an issue that we have discussed with a number of countries in the region and well beyond. We have been in contact with our counterparts in Egypt as well, knowing that the more we speak and act with one voice the more our message – the clearer our message will be to those in Sudan, our affirmative message that we stand with the Sudanese people, including the millions who took to the streets over the last weekend – who took to the streets peacefully, I should emphasize – but also to General Burhan and those behind this military takeover that their actions will not be tolerated, that the international community will not stand by unless they return Sudan to civilian rule and its transitional government.

The military does not have the ability to select Sudan's civilian leaders. That is very clear. The 2019 transitional constitution is very clear on that front, and that's what we'll continue to stand by.

**QUESTION:** But why Egypt didn't sign on this statement?

**MR PRICE:** You'll have to ask the Egyptians.

**QUESTION:** Did you ask them to sign?

**MR PRICE:** You'll have to ask the Egyptians for a – for their position on this. What I can tell you is this was put forward by the Quad for Sudan. The Quad for Sudan includes us, it includes our British partners, our Emirati partners, and our Saudi partners. There are a number of countries who – around the world who are in complete and total agreement with the United States and with these countries, with other countries, that the military's takeover is unacceptable and that it must be immediately reversed.

Again, this was a statement by the Quad for Sudan. You have heard other countries speak out. You have heard other countries make that message very clear, but I'm not here to speak for other countries; I'm here to speak for the United States.

Yes, Francesco.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) has there been any direct engagement from the administration – Ambassador Feltman or anyone else – with the militaries, with General Burhan, in the last days? And do you sense that there is some path, some openness to going back to the status quo and – from the military right now? Do you have some openness? Do you see some now, some openness?

**MR PRICE:** So I will say that there has been engagement from individuals in this building. Of course, we read out Secretary Blinken's discussion with Prime Minister Hamdok. There has been engagement from others in this building to the Sudanese military to make very clear where the United States, where the international community stands. I wouldn't want to characterize those discussions, but we have left no ambiguity whatsoever about what the international community is very clear that needs to happen, and that is a swift restoration of the civilian-led transitional government.

We've been very clear about the potential implications and costs if this military takeover is not reversed. We have already taken action to that end in terms of suspending the \$700 million in bilateral assistance, and as I said before, there are billions upon billions at stake in terms of debt relief, in terms of financing from international lending institutions if the Sudanese military is unwilling to relent. But this is something that we are working at day in, day out with our – with Sudanese interlocutors but also with partners in the region and well beyond.

Said.

**QUESTION:** A follow-up on Francesco's point. Could you explain to us the Israeli role with the Sudanese? Because there was a delegation that visited with Burhan, General Burhan and so on, and today – just now, as a matter of fact – an Israeli website, Walla!, claims that you guys have asked Israel to help and sort of reverse the coup – have you done that? Are you in touch with the Israelis to basically convince the Sudanese that they should back that or Burhan should backtrack?

**MR PRICE:** We have been in touch at very senior levels with very senior interlocutors throughout the region and beyond, and that includes with Israel.

**QUESTION:** Right, but – Israel – includes Israel?

**MR PRICE:** That includes with Israel. But again, I'm going to leave that – those diplomatic discussions in diplomatic channels. But we have discussed this with virtually everyone with a stake in a democratic, stable, peaceful Sudan, and that is just about everyone in the region and many countries well beyond the region.

Simon.

**QUESTION:** I wanted just to drill down specifically on – there’s talk of Prime Minister Hamdok being restored to his position. Is that sufficient for the international acceptance that you were kind of talking about?

And you mentioned the protesters in Sudan on Saturday. A lot of those people out on the streets, they’re – rather than calling for the status quo ante, they are actually saying these coup leaders have breached the trust of this transition and the military should fully withdraw from Sudanese politics. Is that a realistic aim? And would it be sufficient just to return to where things were before?

**MR PRICE:** What we are calling for and what you’ve seen our partners call for, including in the context of the Quad statement that came out today, is a restoration of the 2019 constitutional declaration. And what that established was a civilian-led government, a civilian-led government that worked in partnership with the Sudanese military. I’m not going to offer a roadmap from here about what that restoration might look like in practice. What we are focused on is a restoration of that underlying framework, the 2019 constitutional declaration. That in turn will dictate what is and what is not acceptable because it is a document that is Sudanese in origin and it is – has been endorsed and has been the blueprint for the past several years. That’s what we continue to stand by; that’s what the Sudanese people continue to stand by, including with the massive demonstrations – peaceful demonstrations – that we saw in Sudan over the weekend.

Anything else on Sudan? Yes, Abbie.

**QUESTION:** On Ethiopia.

**MR PRICE:** On Ethiopia. Sudan, anything? Sure, Nazira.

**QUESTION:** Afghanistan.

**MR PRICE:** Afghanistan? Let’s – we’ll come back to that. Great, Ethiopia.

**QUESTION:** Given the escalating levels of violence in Ethiopia, is there any change to the status of the U.S. embassy or any consideration of authorized departure?

**MR PRICE:** So, as I’ve said, the safety, security of American citizens in Ethiopia is our – is among our highest priorities. We are always looking at the security situation to determine what is appropriate given the conditions on the ground. Our embassy in Addis remains open. It remains operational. As you may know, on November 3rd, today, we did update the travel advisory for Ethiopia to Level Four. What that means is we are advising U.S. citizens do not travel to Ethiopia. We are recommending that U.S. citizens in Ethiopia consider departing now using commercial options that remain available. We understand that commercial activity continues, commercial air traffic continues in and out of Addis. Those options remain available and we are urging American citizens to look into those options.

On November 2nd, yesterday, we released a security alert to U.S. citizens advising them that U.S. embassy personnel are currently restricted from traveling outside the city limits of Addis Ababa. The security alert also strongly suggests that U.S. citizens seriously reconsider travel to Ethiopia and those who are in Ethiopia consider making preparations to leave. So, of course, the security situation has evolved even over the past 24 hours, and today we did issue that Level Four travel advisory urging Americans to depart the country now using commercial options.

Beyond the messaging that our embassy in Addis is putting forward, we are also reaching out to the diaspora community here in the United States and around the world to ensure that – to ensure wide distribution of these messages when it comes to U.S. citizens who may be in Ethiopia. We will continue to provide the latest and the best information we have to the American citizen community in

Ethiopia going forward.

**QUESTION:** On Ethiopia.

**QUESTION:** Can I just —

**MR PRICE:** Sure. Ethiopia?

**QUESTION:** Wait, wait, hold on a second. Didn't you guys go to authorized departure for families and nonessential – non-emergency personnel last week, like on Wednesday?

**MR PRICE:** We'll double-check, but obviously we do make these public. I don't believe that's out there, but we did issue a Level Four travel advisory today.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I want to just ask: You mentioned the United Nations and African Union. What do you think they could do to help the crisis in Ethiopia? Would the U.S. support a Security Council meeting on Ethiopia or is the U.S. supporting one? And – or what can neighboring countries do? You mentioned Eritrea. Are there others? What would you have those organizations do?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to Eritrea and the role that Eritrean forces have been playing in Ethiopia, we've been very clear for some time about the urgent need for Eritrean forces to withdraw from Ethiopia. They have been contributing to the violence, contributing to the instability, contributing to the increasing humanitarian emergency that has afflicted far too many Ethiopians in Tigray and in regions beyond Tigray at this point.

We have – when it comes to Ethiopia more broadly, we've been working in lockstep with the African Union well before the recent violence escalated. The African Union has an important role to play in this; the United Nations has an important role to play in this. When we were in New York City for the UN General Assembly in September, there were a number of discussions on the increasing threats to peace and stability and security in Ethiopia. And again, we're exploring all options that may be appropriate given the actions, given inaction of the various parties in Ethiopia.

Above all, we are calling on the Ethiopian Government, we are calling on the TPLF, we are calling on Eritrean forces to withdraw. We are calling on all parties to engage in dialogue, to use restraint, to end hostilities, and to ensure civilians and their rights are protected. We have a number of tools at our disposal, both positive and negative incentives for various parties. We've put some of those on the table, we've utilized some of those, and we will continue to calibrate our response based on what we see, based on what we don't see in the days and the weeks going forward.

**QUESTION:** Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Iran. Anything else on Ethiopia? Iran.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, Iran just announced that they – the negotiations in Vienna will resume in – on November 29. Can you confirm that you will be there not directly, but indirectly to be part of those negotiations?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we understand that the European External Action Service, of course, has been coordinating with the Iranians on their stated intent to resume negotiations before the end of this month. This appears to have just taken place. But we do welcome the EU's announcement that they have coordinated with all participants and that talks on a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA will resume for a 7th round on Monday, November 29th.

Special Envoy Malley will, again, lead U.S. participation in these talks. We've said this many times

before, but we believe it remains possible to quickly reach and implement an understanding on a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA by closing the relatively small number of issues that remained outstanding at the end of June when the 6th round concluded.

We believe that if the Iranians are serious, we can manage to do that in relatively short order. But we've also been clear, including as this pause has dragged on for some time, that this window of opportunity will not be open forever and that – especially, if Iran continues to take provocative nuclear steps. Together with the IAEA, we've expressed our concern about a number of those steps in recent days and recent weeks.

So we certainly hope that when the Iranian delegation returns to Vienna later this month, they do so ready to negotiate, they do so ready to negotiate quickly and in good faith as well.

Said.

**QUESTION:** On the Palestinian issue.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Very quickly, Ned. There's been a letter signed by 200 members of – Republican members of Congress. There's a great deal of push around town from pressure groups and so on for you guys not to go through the reopening of the consulate. Can you put this issue to rest and state the American commitment or the State Department's commitment to re-opening the Jerusalem consulate?

**MR PRICE:** Said, we have been very clear about this in May. We were very clear in October. We don't have anything new to offer.

**QUESTION:** All right. So the consulate will reopen at one point?

**MR PRICE:** We've been very clear about our intentions. You've heard this from the Secretary a number of times now.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. A couple more issues. There's also been a report by the United Nations that says that home demolitions, Palestinian home demolitions by the Israeli occupation forces, increased by 21 percent. Do you have any comment on that?

**MR PRICE:** We've also been clear on this issue.

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** We believe it is critical for the parties to refrain from unilateral action that exacerbate tensions and that undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution. That certainly includes home demolitions.

**QUESTION:** And lastly, your favorite topic: settlements. I know that you guys gave a very strong statement and so on, but then the Israelis, they come around and in fact the prime minister's office, they claim that you are not going to do anything; you're not going to pressure Israel to – you will – that will be the extent of it, just the statement that is strongly – it's not even condemning it, but strongly opposing the settlement process. Now, I know Mr. Sullivan has met or is meeting in Israel with – on Iran, but also on construction. Can you update us on the latest, or your latest position on this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have stated our position on this in recent days. Our position has not changed. You heard me discuss our position on steps, unilateral steps, that exacerbate tensions and that put a negotiated two-state solution further out of reach. We continue to believe that settlement activity falls



in that category.

**QUESTION:** Hold on. Can we just – last week there was a – I realize you weren't here, but there was a delegation or at least one guy from Israel who came to explain or to give you further explanation about the designations of the Palestinian – six Palestinian NGOs as terrorist organizations. Other than saying that you met with him and you received his information, can you say if you've gone over it and what you make of the information that he presented and whether you agree with the designations?

**MR PRICE:** I said last week that we look forward to receiving the delegation, we look forward to hearing additional details underlying these designations. There were discussions last week. We appreciated the opportunity to hear directly from our Israeli partners on this. But beyond that, I wouldn't want to go into the details of it.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Well, so does that mean that you have no position at all on the designations?

**MR PRICE:** It means that I'm not going to go into discussions that were private and that may have included —

**QUESTION:** No, no. All right. Forget about the discussions. Do you have – do you have an opinion one way or the other on the Israeli designation of these six NGOs as terrorist organizations?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have an update for you. We've been very clear about —

**QUESTION:** So you don't?

**MR PRICE:** We've been very clear about the importance of a vibrant civil society around the world.

**QUESTION:** Fair enough.

**MR PRICE:** The United States will continue to support that in each and every context. But I don't have an update for you regarding —

**QUESTION:** I get it, but they – but you do understand that's an extremely broad answer to an extremely specific question about —

**MR PRICE:** Your specific question implicates private diplomatic discussions that may well have —

**QUESTION:** No, it doesn't.

**MR PRICE:** — included classified information as well.

**QUESTION:** I want to know if the U.S. has a – look, a lot of your allies in Europe have come out and taken a stance about these designations. Why don't you? Are you just not ready to yet? Will you never?

**MR PRICE:** We are – Matt, I don't want to say never. What I will say is that we just don't have an update to offer for you now.

**QUESTION:** All right.

**QUESTION:** Ned, Secretary Blinken has met in Glasgow with the Lebanese prime minister and with the UAE foreign minister on Lebanon to reconcile between Lebanon and the UAE countries. What did

he – was he able to achieve anything on this? And what are you working on specifically?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to Lebanon and its relations with its Gulf neighbors, we urge that all diplomatic channels remain open between the parties to ensure meaningful dialogue on the pressing issues facing Lebanon. You're right that we had an opportunity yesterday in Glasgow to meet with Prime Minister Mikati. We had an opportunity yesterday to meet with the Emirati foreign minister. We had an opportunity the day before that to meet with the Saudi foreign minister. And in each and every one of those discussions, as indicated by the readouts and the tweets that we released, there was a discussion of Lebanon, and the crux of that discussion was the challenges, the significant challenges, including the economic challenges and hardships that Lebanon faces. And the United States continues to work with our partners, including our Saudi partners, our Emirati partners, in this case our French partners who have also played a significant role here, and in close coordination with Prime Minister Mikati and the Lebanese Government to see to it that we can do all we can to support the Lebanese people, to support their humanitarian needs and their growing humanitarian needs in light of the economic challenges that Lebanon faces. So again, we'd refer you to these – to our Gulf partners to explain and to speak to their positions, but our position is that diplomatic channels should remain open if we are to seek to improve the humanitarian conditions of the Lebanese people, seek to improve the economic and broader challenges that Lebanon faces today.

**QUESTION:** Just a quick follow-up on this. You know how this crisis exploded. There was basically a statement by the minister of information before he became minister where he said that the war in Yemen was nihilistic or futile, or something like that, and the Houthis were defending themselves. Do you agree or disagree with the premise of his statement? Do you call for his resignation, and do you feel that this was blown way out of proportion, for instance?

**MR PRICE:** We aren't going to offer a position on his employment. What we can say – what I can say – is that the notion that the Houthis have been anything but a destabilizing force and a force that has inflicted additional hardship on the people of Yemen – that is not an idea that we recognize. We have been very clear in condemning the Houthis' assault, including their ongoing assault on Marib, other parts of Yemen as well. The Houthis, despite their claims to the contrary, have been a primary cause of the hardship that the people of Yemen face today. There have been credible proposals put on the table, proposals that the Republic of Yemen Government, proposals that Saudi authorities have also been behind that – on which the Houthis have so far been unwilling to engage.

So I will leave it to the Lebanese Government to speak to the status of any ministers that may or may not be within the coalition, but when it comes to Houthi activity, when it comes to Houthi conduct, we've been very clear about where the United States stands.

Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up —

**QUESTION:** Do you call for his resignation or do you support his resignation to solve the problem?

**MR PRICE:** We believe that diplomatic relations, that channels of communication between Lebanon and its partners should remain open. We support steps that help advance that.

Kylie.

**QUESTION:** I just want to go back to Iran. Sorry to return to something we already discussed, but we're just processing this news. So I'm just wondering, when these talks resume at the end of November, is it the U.S. understanding that they're going to resume where they left off or that you guys are going to have to go back to ground zero given there's new Iranian leadership?

**MR PRICE:** We've been very clear that the talks, if they are to succeed, if we are to close the remaining areas of disagreement, they should start precisely where the sixth round of talks left off. As you alluded to yourself, this announcement is just emanating today, so we're not in a position to offer too much beyond that. But we have been unambiguous when it comes to our position that there was tremendous progress achieved in rounds one through six of these talks in Vienna. It would be neither productive nor wise to take up from any other position from where we left off in June at the conclusion of the sixth round.

**QUESTION:** And just one more question on that. So I know you guys have said there's no exact timeline for when parties can no longer return to the deal or it'll be useless, but Rob Malley said I think earlier – or last month that there's no chronological clock, it's a technological clock at some time. So how far do the Iranians have to go technically for the deal to no longer be useful in the eyes of the U.S.?

**MR PRICE:** What we don't want to do is to provide the Iranians or anyone else with a blueprint as to how they may push the envelope. We've been quite clear – Rob Malley has made this quite clear, Secretary Blinken has made this clear, the President has made this clear – we still believe there is a window in which we can achieve a mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. We still believe that's viable; we still believe that is in our national interest, precisely because it would once again impose permanent and verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear program and it would foreclose Iran's ability to ever acquire a nuclear weapon. But we've also made the point that at some point, Iran's – the advancements Iran has made, the know-how that Iran has garnered throughout this process will make a return to the JCPOA as it was written and finalized in 2015 and implemented in 2016 – not worth it as a proposition for the United States and our partners. We are not there yet. Rob has made the point, as you pointed out, that these are assessments based on our understanding of a number of factors: our understanding of what the Iranians are – have been doing in the interim, our understanding of what the so called breakout time may be – that is to say, the time it would take Iran to produce the fissile material needed for a nuclear weapon if they chose to pursue one.

We are continuing with our partners – with our partners in the P5+1, with our allies and partners in the Middle East and beyond – to compare notes on Iran's status, on Iran's progress. And we will make a determination based on what is in our national interests and what's in the national security interests of our allies and partners.

**QUESTION:** But Ned, this meeting is going to happen just four or five days after the Board of Governors, the BOG meeting at the IAEA. There had been a push ahead of today's announcement to get the board of – the governors to actually censure Iran or to bring a resolution of – if not condemnation, of pretty much extreme disapproval for their activities that have been going on outside of the deal and in violation of other commitments that they've made to the IAEA. Is that something you guys are prepared to forego now? Will you seek to censure them at the Board of Governors before the indirect talks began in Vienna?

**MR PRICE:** So I don't want to get ahead of the Board of Governors. What I can say is that we have the full – we have full confidence in the IAEA. We have full confidence in Director General Grossi of the IAEA —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but this doesn't have to do with the actual IAEA. This has to do with the Board of Governors, which is something that you're on even though you're no longer in the deal. It's something that – and if you ask the director general, as you do, I know, he says, "This isn't up to me. This is up to the members." So it is up to the members to decide whether they're going to bring a resolution to censure Iran. And this meeting is going to happen on – I think on the 24th or the 25th, which is four or five days before the – now we understand the Vienna talks are going to begin. So is the U.S.

interested in pursuing a resolution of condemnation or censure ahead of the resumption?

**MR PRICE:** I was speaking to our full faith and confidence in the IAEA because they too, as you know, have produced reports on Iran's activities in recent months. We have expressed our concern at those reports. We have made clear that Iran's continued nuclear escalations are unconstructive, that they are inconsistent with the stated goal that Iran has put forward of seeking to return to mutual compliance with the JCPOA. We've also been very clear that Iran's nuclear provocations and escalations won't provide Iran with any additional negotiating leverage when talks resume.

But as you know, the Board of Governors is set to meet. I don't want to get ahead of the Board of Governors, but we've made very clear where we stand on those escalations and our concern with them.

Nazira?

**QUESTON:** Thank you very much Ned. That's a good opportunity. I have a few question, but may be a short answer. Number one, do you have any update toward the Taliban government? And the second question, what is the status of the Afghan Embassy in Washington, D.C.? And the third question, the passport agency in Kabul issuing passport, are these recognized by the United Nation, er, the United States? Sorry. And the last question, the P-2, SIV visa. Some people still in Afghanistan left behind. They try to leave Afghanistan, but they are difficulty. The P2 visa, how long is going to take? Does the State Department started the processing? Because some people, they went to the third country, but still they have a lot of difficulty.

**MR. PRICE:** Thank you for those. Let me see if I can address all of them. You asked about SIVs and P2s and the processing. Let me actually take a step back and provide an update there on our efforts to facilitate the departure of those to whom we have a special commitment. And that, of course, includes American citizens. That includes lawful permanent residents. That includes Afghans who have worked for and with us over the years. As of today, we have assisted in the departure of 377 U.S. citizens and 279 lawful permanent residents. That's in addition to a number of Afghans to whom we have a special commitment. There have been two additional flights, two flights yesterday. Again, our goal is to routinize these operations, so that those who wish to leave Afghanistan have additional options to do so. The United States will continue to directly support the efforts of American citizens; of lawful permanent residents; of Afghans to whom we have a special commitment to do that, again, if they so choose.

That gets us to your question regarding the production of passports. We welcome the production and provision of travel documents. We know that travel documents are an important – in many cases a prerequisite to travel, including across borders. We know this is important for – we've heard from the Taliban that it's important that people be documented. We know from our partners in the region as well the priority they place on ensuring that those who transit through their countries have appropriate travel documents, and that is why we do welcome the production of passports.

We are continuing to process SIV applicants, Special Immigrant Visa applicants, at all stages of the application process. When it comes to SIV holders, those who have completed the process, we have been able to work with a number of them to facilitate their departure from Afghanistan if they have chosen to do so. But again, for everyone at every single stage of the process, we are continuing to support them. And for those who are beyond a certain stage in the process, we are looking at processing alternatives, knowing that we are no longer able to provide consular access and consular support on the ground in Kabul, although we do have a team on the ground in Doha that – where we are working many of these issues as well.

When it comes to the Afghan government, we've been watching very closely their conduct. Because

the point we've always made is that it is not a question of what we hear from them; it is a question of what we see them do. And this goes back to some of the very issues we were speaking to before. The United States, but also our allies and our partners around the world, have set forth a series of expectations that we need to see from the Taliban, that we would need to see from any future Afghan government. And among those expectations are freedom of movement and safe passage for those who do wish to leave Afghanistan, to go back to your question; but also the protection of human rights, including for women and girls, ethnic minorities, and others in Afghanistan; the facilitation of humanitarian aid, humanitarian access, not standing in the way of much-needed supplies and assistance for the people of Afghanistan.

And on that score, the United States, as you may know, just a couple days ago announced an additional \$174 million in humanitarian assistance, bringing our total humanitarian assistance in 2021 to some \$474 million, as I recall, some \$4.2 billion since 2001.

So we will continue to watch very closely as the Taliban does or does not live up to its commitments, and we've also been very clear that we want to see a future government in Afghanistan that is inclusive, that represents the will of the people of Afghanistan – and again, that importantly upholds the rights of all of Afghanistan's citizens.

Missy.

**QUESTION:** Afghan embassy? Last one.

**MR PRICE:** I –

**QUESTION:** What's the status of the Afghan embassy in Washington?

**MR PRICE:** I don't believe there's been any change to that status. Missy.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I'd like to ask you about the NSO Group, the entity designation. What can you say about what the State Department or the U.S. Government knows about Americans or people with U.S. numbers being hacked or being targeted for hacking as part of the NSO or the other firm – I believe it's called Candiru? And there was a report about – a report from Israel saying that the Biden administration gave the Israeli Government only an hour advance notice of this designation. Is that true? And it sort of gets to the question I'm hoping you can address: What in – what does – what can you say about the Israeli Government's knowledge of the activities that NSO was conducting, including against people who the United States has advocated for in terms of political activists and human rights defenders, and all of that? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Sure. So broadly speaking, let me just level set and make sure everyone is following the issue you referred to. This is that today the U.S. Government added four entities – four foreign companies, I should say – to the Department of Commerce's entity list for engaging in activities contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States. This follows an October 2021 interim final rule published by the Department of Commerce establishing controls of certain items that can be used for malicious cyber activities. The four entities are located in Israel, Russia, and Singapore.

When it comes to the two companies that you mention, the NSO Group and Candiru, they were added to the entity list because investigative information has shown that these companies developed and supplied spyware to foreign governments that used tools to maliciously target government officials, journalists, businesspeople, activists, academics, and embassy workers. NSO Group developed and

supplied this tool – so Pegasus, as it's known – to governments that used it to maliciously target government officials, journalists, businesspeople, activists, academics, and embassy personnel.

It's important to note that we are not taking actions against any countries in which the four entities are located or the governments themselves. This is about the conduct of these private companies.

When it comes to the notifications that were involved in this action, look, I don't want to speak to or discuss private diplomatic conversations other than to note that, as is the case with all announcements of this kind, partner governments are notified in advance and that was the case here.

**QUESTION:** Okay, just – the first question was: Do you know – can you say whether or not the U.S. Government has knowledge that Americans, including allegedly Rob Malley, were targeted by NSO?

**MR PRICE:** I think you would understand why we just wouldn't entertain that question from here. But as I said before, investigative information had led the U.S. Government to conclude that these private entities should be listed under the Department of Commerce Entity List and we did confirm and announce that today.

**QUESTION:** What punitive measures are we likely to see against Israel? Will there be any punitive measures?

**MR PRICE:** So there are punitive measures against these companies and the inclusion of these companies on the Entity List is itself a powerful tool. The Entity List is used by the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security to restrict the export, re-export, and in-country transfer of items subject to the Export Administration Regulations to persons, and that includes to individuals, to organizations, to companies reasonably believed to be involved, have been involved, or pose a significant risk to being or becoming involved in activities contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States. So it does impose additional restrictions on these entities, yes.

**QUESTION:** Just to follow up, you say that this is not – obviously, is not imposed on a country, but NSO Group has export licenses granted by the Israeli military. You've got a really close ally that has granted licenses to this company. Do you expect them to take action in response to these – the investigative findings that you've got here, and have you shared those with Israel or the Israeli military?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, Israel of course is a steadfast friend, steadfast partner. In that vein, we have raised this conduct with – of these companies with the Government of Israel and we look forward to further discussions with the Government of Israel about ensuring that these companies' products are not used to target human rights defenders, journalists, and others who should be protected.

**QUESTION:** But if you ask Russia to take action against entities in their country that are carrying out ransomware and cyberattacks on the U.S., why wouldn't you ask Israel to do the same thing?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think in this case, you're referring to criminals. Private criminal actors in Russia. And we have been very clear that every responsible country has an obligation to take action against criminals operating within their territory.

In this case, we are talking about conduct of private companies that we see as contrary to our national security interests. We have had conversations with our Israeli partners about the conduct of the NSO Group. We will continue to have those conversations in private to make clear our concerns. Yes.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) ..question from Brazil. Brazil has announced new goals and commitments on the climate issues (inaudible) in the COP. Could this new announcement can help to improve the relations between Brazil and the U.S. and advance partnerships and create new partnerships, or the

U.S. are waiting more bold movements and effective results from Brazil to advance?

**MR PRICE:** Thank you. So in the runup to COP26, including in the Climate Summit that the President convened some weeks ago and since, we have seen a number of bold commitments from countries around the world. The United States in our own commitments by announcing that we would reduce our emissions by – between 50 and 52 percent by 2030, our goal was not only to help stave off the existential threat of climate change, but to have a catalytic impact and to galvanize action on the part of governments around the world.

We know that countries that are among the world's leading emitters, the United States certainly falls in that category, Brazil certainly falls in that category. We have a special responsibility to do what we can, again, to combat the climate crisis, but also to demonstrate leadership and to demonstrate action. So commitments are important. Follow-through is also important.

I suspect that as COP26 continues for the next week and a half or so, we will hear additional commitments from countries around the world, knowing that this is what the President has called the decisive decade. The action that we take now or the inaction that we see now will be determinative in terms of our ability or not to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius, the level at which scientists have told us is absolutely imperative if we are to stave off the worst effects of climate change.

So we welcome announcements from countries around the world. We continue to urge our partners to raise their climate ambition, knowing that only by doing so will we be able to make good on the commitments that were put forward in Paris some years ago now, but even more importantly, to stave off the worst effects of climate change, knowing that this is the decisive decade.

**QUESTION:** One more question about Afghanistan, please?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Mr. Blinken mentioned that President Ghani has been agreed with him to hand over the power to the Taliban government without fight. But when Ghani escapes, everything got change. If it was agreed before that Taliban come to the power, then what is the different – I don't know, you got my —

**MR PRICE:** I do. I do. So this is something that we have spoken to. Secretary Blinken has spoken to this. Our former Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad has also spoken to this. But in the days prior to the collapse of the Afghan Government that was precipitated by President Ghani's decision to flee the country, we were engaged in intense diplomacy with our Afghan partners, with the Ghani government, but also with the Taliban on a means by which to stave off what we feared could be massive violence if the Taliban's military offensive continued.

And so there was – there were discussions, and there was a framework in place that we believe could have transitioned power to a government that included the Taliban, but was also inclusive and representative of the Afghan people. To us, that would have been a means by which to protect some of the important gains over the past 20 years – including for Afghanistan's people, its women, its minorities – while staving off the potential for violence.

Now, of course, with the fall of the Afghan Government, with the steady advances of the Taliban, that diplomacy, those discussions became for naught. But again, our emphasis on seeing to it that any future Afghan Government respects the rights of its people, is representative of the will of its people, our emphasis on that has not abated at all. It continues to be a guiding principle for our engagement with the Taliban. It continues to be a guiding principle in our discussions with allies and partners. And

you've heard that same message put forward from our allies and partners to the Taliban as well.

We'll take a final quick question.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much.

**QUESTION:** On Turkey, officials have reportedly say Turkey brought the S-400 missile batteries to Incirlik Air Base, where the U.S. and NATO – and NATO forces are. Can you confirm that, and what's your comment on it?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry. I didn't hear the first part of your question that Turkey —

**QUESTION:** Brought the S-400 missile system to the —

**QUESTION:** Deployed.

**MR PRICE:** Ah, got it. Got it. Look, we've been quite clear on our position regarding the S-400 and Turkey. As you know, President Biden and President Erdogan has – had an opportunity within the past couple of days in Rome to have a bilateral discussion. President Biden reaffirmed our defense partnership and Turkey's importance as a NATO Ally. But in that meeting, the President also noted concerns over Turkey's possession of the Russian S-400 missile system. So we've made our concerns with this system very clear. We've made the implications of that possession of the S-400 very clear as well, including in the context of the F-35 program.

**QUESTION:** Okay, and Ned, just – can I correct something that I said, just for transparency?

**MR PRICE:** This is a welcome change.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, yeah. (Laughter.) So it was – sorry, I said – I think I said in a question earlier that Addis – that Embassy Addis had gone on – it's Khartoum that was —

**MR PRICE:** Ah.

**QUESTION:** — went to authorized departure last Wednesday.

**MR PRICE:** That's correct. That's correct.

**QUESTION:** Not Addis.

**MR PRICE:** That's correct.

**QUESTION:** Sorry.

**MR PRICE:** Okay. Thank you very much, everyone.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:45 p.m.)

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## [Department Press Briefing – November 8, 2021](#)

*11/08/2021 08:03 PM EST*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

2:16 p.m. EST

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Okay. I will beg your indulgence at the top. We have a few items to get through, and by a few, I mean slightly more than a few.

First, starting today, foreign national air travelers to the United States will be required, with only limited exceptions, to be fully vaccinated and to provide proof of vaccination status prior to boarding an airplane to the United States. The new international air travel policy is stringent. It is consistent across the globe. And it is guided by public health. This new global travel system replaces the existing country-by-country restrictions, putting in place a consistent approach worldwide. There is no need as of today for foreign national travelers who have been in one of the 33 countries with restrictions to obtain national interest exceptions, in order to travel to the United States.

When it comes to testing, fully vaccinated air travelers, age 2 and over, continue to be required to show proof of vaccination and documentation of a negative COVID test, viral COVID test, taken within three days of the flight's departure to the United States before boarding. That includes all travelers – U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and foreign nationals alike.

To further strengthen protections, unvaccinated travelers, whether they are U.S. citizens, whether they are LPRs, or the small number of accepted unvaccinated foreign nationals, now need to show documentation of a negative COVID – viral COVID test, taken within one day of the flight's departure to the United States. Again, this goes into effect today, and we know there is a welcome for it around the world.

Next, today the Department of State, through the Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program, announced a reward offer of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of any individual or individuals who hold key leadership positions in the Sodinokibi and REvil ransomware variant transnational organized crime group. The depart is also offering a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to the arrest and/or the conviction of any individual conspiring to participate in or attempting to participate in a Sodinokibi/REvil ransomware incident.

Since its first known ransomware incident in April of 2019, this group has allegedly victimized more than 1,000 entities in multiple industry sectors. That includes in private businesses, law enforcement agencies, government agencies, and educational and medical institutions. This announcement complements today's coordinated counter-ransomware actions from the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the Department of the Treasury. The United States remains committed to protecting all ransomware victims around the world from the exploitation of cyber criminals; and we look to nations

who harbor ransomware criminals to bring to justice for businesses and organizations victimized by ransomware incidents.

Next, we are concerned with disturbing images and reports emanating from the Belarus/Poland border this weekend. The United States strongly condemns the Lukashenka regime's political exploitation and coercion of vulnerable people, and the regime's callous and inhumane facilitation of irregular migration flows across its borders. We call on the regime to immediately halt its campaign of orchestrating and coercing irregular migrant flows across its borders into Europe. As long as the regime in Belarus refuses to respect its international obligations and commitments, undermines the peace and security of Europe, and continues to repress and abuse people seeking nothing more than to live in freedom, we will continue to pressure Lukashenka and will not lessen our calls for accountability. The United States will continue to stand by Poland, and all of our partners in Europe, who have been threatened by Belarus's unacceptable actions.

Next, today marks the one-year anniversary since Burma held elections. We previously noted, from independent observers, that the November 8th elections last year, despite some concerns, were credible and reaffirmed the commitment of the Burmese people to democracy. The military's coup on February 1st of this year and ongoing violent crackdown, however, have undermined human rights and fundamental freedoms, suppressed the will of the people, and reversed a decade of progress towards a genuine democracy that the people of Burma clearly demand.

Today, I join the Secretary in honoring the people of Burma who strive to restore the path to democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law in their country, including the more than 1,300 innocent people who have lost their lives in that struggle. The United States is committed to promoting justice and accountability for these and other abuses. We also reiterate our call for the military regime to immediately cease violence, release all those unjustly detained, and return Burma's path to a genuine and inclusive democracy.

Next, the United States is deeply concerned about the deteriorating health of PRC citizen journalist Ms. Zhang Zhan. According to multiple reports citing her relatives' comments, Ms. Zhang is near death. In December of 2020, Beijing authorities sentenced Ms. Zhang to four years in prison on charges associated with her journalism on COVID-19 in Wuhan. The United States, along with other diplomatic missions – we have repeatedly expressed our serious concerns about the arbitrary nature of her detention and her mistreatment during it. We reiterate our call to the PRC for her immediate and unconditional release and for Beijing to respect a free press and the right of people to express themselves freely.

Today Secretary Blinken met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry at the opening of the U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue, the first bilateral dialogue held since 2015. The Secretary and the foreign minister welcome the opportunity to deepen the strong partnership between the United States and Egypt. I assume many of you heard their comments and saw their comments, earlier today. In addition to individuals from the Department of State, U.S. participants in the dialogue include those from USAID, Department of Defense, and senior Egyptian officials representing different cabinet ministries.

The dialogue provides a valuable opportunity to exchange views on key regional security issues. That includes developments in Sudan, Libya, Syria, and the broader region as well. U.S. and Egyptian officials will discuss ongoing efforts to restore the civilian-led transitional government and prevent violence in Sudan.

We also will have conversation on human rights. President Biden has committed to putting human rights at the center of our foreign policy, and we look forward to a constructive discussion on that front, including on civil and political rights, freedom of expression, and Egypt's recently announced

national human rights strategy.

We also discussed President Biden's support for increased economic cooperation in Egypt's water security, which was reaffirmed by Secretary Blinken when he met with President Sisi earlier this year in Cairo, and our efforts to encourage negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Our interagency team and Egyptian delegation will together explore ways to deepen bilateral cooperation on judicial, security, educational, and cultural issues. This strategic dialogue is an opportunity to advance each of these areas of collaboration to improve the lives of both Americans and Egyptians.

And with all that said, I am happy to turn to your questions.

**QUESTION:** That's it?

**MR PRICE:** That's it.

**QUESTION:** Oh, I was expecting —

**MR PRICE:** Saved a minute or two for questions.

**QUESTION:** I was expecting another hour or so.

**MR PRICE:** It's busy times.

**QUESTION:** Let me — I have a couple things, but I'll make them extremely brief and won't get too much into detail. One, on your opening on Belarus, is there — there isn't anything new, though, in terms of sanctions or actions that you're taking today, is there? (Inaudible.)

**MR PRICE:** We're not announcing any new actions today. As you know, Matt, we have announced a series of policy steps that in some cases we have taken together with our partners and our allies in Europe as well.

**QUESTION:** All right. Okay. Secondly — and I'm not expecting much on this — but did — you have seen — obviously you've seen these reports coming from — I don't know what you — cyber investigators that the NSO, the Israeli company NSO, it hacked some of the phones of the Palestinian — of members of the Palestinian NGOs that were designated as terrorist groups. I'm wondering what you make of those allegations.

**MR PRICE:** I've seen those reports. I don't have a response to them. What I can tell you is to reiterate that we had a constructive discussion with an Israeli delegation that was visiting last week. The delegation provided a verbal briefing on information that they had on certain groups. They also provided written materials. We've provided those written materials to our counterparts in the administration. We're going to take a very close look at them as we —

**QUESTION:** All right, but you haven't — but you haven't yet reached any kind of conclusion based on the information they've provided, and you don't have anything — or do you — to say about these allegations, the hacking allegations?

**MR PRICE:** We intend, and we are, together with our partners throughout the interagency, to take a very close look at the information that was provided to us in written form, to cross-reference that information with what we may have in our own holdings, and from that we'll form an informed judgment.

**QUESTION:** And then lastly, on the Egypt, in his discussions with Foreign Minister Shoukry, did the Secretary raise specific cases that you – human rights cases that you guys are concerned about? And did he provide a – I don't know – a roadmap, for lack of a better word, for what the Egyptians must do or need to do to get the 130 million, that's been withheld, restored?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the human rights discussion is actually ongoing right now. I believe it started at 1:45 or perhaps just a little bit thereafter, so I don't have a readout to provide. We may have some additional – that clock is an hour fast.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**MR PRICE:** We need to correct that. Obviously, has not accounted for falling back here.

But I would expect that the human rights discussion will have some specificity attached to it, and if we have more details to read out, we will.

**QUESTION:** But in terms of the withheld – the money that's being withheld, did they get into details about what must be done to free it up?

**MR PRICE:** Well – so, Matt, as we discussed – I believe it was in September when we talked about the FMF decision – we have conveyed to Egypt's leaders specific steps we've urged them to take. We've made —

**QUESTION:** Which are?

**MR PRICE:** Of course, these steps are conveyed privately, but also very clearly, and we will leave them to those private discussions.

**QUESTION:** A follow-up (inaudible)?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** In the Secretary's remarks with Mr. Shoukry, we heard a lot of efforts to kind of move forward, to talk about economic ties, to talk about security ties in the region. And Secretary Blinken seemed to say that he appreciated Egypt's human rights blueprint that they'd put forward. So, is that the correct understanding? Are the two countries moving forward in their relations, despite the previous hang-up of the human rights issue?

**MR PRICE:** Well, our relationship with Egypt is a multifaceted one. Egypt is a valuable partner across many fronts. That is why the Strategic Dialogue that is occurring both today and tomorrow will cover a broad range of issues. We've talked about and they will talk about regional security issues. They will talk about specific countries and developments of concern in Sudan, in Ethiopia. As you mentioned, they will talk about our economic ties. They will talk about energy issues as well. They'll talk about issues like artifacts as also on the agenda.

But yes, human rights is certainly on the agenda. And as I mentioned just a moment ago, the human rights discussion is ongoing right now. Human rights has always been on the table when we've met with our Egyptian counterparts. When we went to Cairo, Secretary Blinken had a conversation with President Sisi on this very topic. Every time he has spoken with his Egyptian counterpart, Foreign Minister Shoukry, he has also raised human rights.

So, we have made very clear to the Egyptians our concerns. We have also welcomed certain steps they have taken, including this human rights strategy that you referred to. We will continue to make

clear where we find our areas of concern to be, and we will continue to welcome progress that we see going forward.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can we go to Ethiopia? Can you tell us if Special Envoy Feltman is still in Ethiopia, is traveling in the region, if he's back from Ethiopia? What are the results of his multiple engagements over the weekend? Do you have any sense that he is making progress there? And, also, is he having any engagement with the TPLF or the – or Oromo Liberation Army, or you're not talking to them?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. To your question, the temporal reference is important. I think the last time we were in this room, Special Envoy Feltman was in Ethiopia. He has since left Ethiopia to return. Let me come back to that and unpack that a little bit.

Before I do, let me just reiterate that we remain fully engaged in efforts to move all sides towards an immediate cessation of hostilities. All of those in need, regardless of ethnicity, should have immediate access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance. We call for an immediate end to human rights abuses and violations being committed against civilians. Our embassy in Addis Ababa remains open under the leadership of our ambassador. Special Envoy Feltman does remain in the region, where he is working to further our diplomatic efforts, and we urge all parties to end restraint – to use restraint, excuse me, to end hostilities, to respect human rights, and to protect civilians on the path towards an immediate cessation of hostilities.

Let me make a couple other points before I talk about our diplomacy. As you know, our embassy went to ordered departure recently. We are urging U.S. citizens in Ethiopia to depart the country, using commercially available options. We've been saying this for several days now. We understand that commercial options remain available in Addis. The embassy is in a position to help the American citizen community in Ethiopia secure their departure from the country. We understand there is adequate space available, capacity available, on these flights. And, in the past several days, there have been more than a dozen flights leaving the airport in Addis.

We are providing a range of services to the American citizen community in Addis. We are prioritizing that even as we have gone on ordered departure to reduce our footprint from our embassy in Addis.

We, importantly, can even provide a repatriation loan for U.S. citizens, who cannot afford at this time to purchase a U.S. commercial – a commercial ticket to the United States. U.S. citizens in Ethiopia who are interested in pursuing these options, and we encourage all of them to do so, should contact the embassy. There is an email address available on the embassy website.

We are, as I said, engaged in concerted diplomacy to urge all parties to end the hostilities immediately. We have called on the Ethiopian Government and the TPLF and the OLA to enter into negotiations without preconditions towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities, and for Eritrean forces to withdraw immediately and permanently from Ethiopia.

Now, when it comes to Ambassador Feltman's activity in the region, he returned to Ethiopia today, from Kenya – and I'll come to that – to continue to urgently press the parties to de-escalate the conflict and negotiate, as I said before, a cessation of hostilities.

He continues to raise our concern about the risk of intercommunal violence, and that is a concern that we've raised repeatedly with Ethiopian authorities and regional authorities in recent days. But following his meeting – meetings on his current trip, we believe there is a small window of opening to work with the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa, former President Obasanjo, whom he will see again tonight in Addis, where Ambassador Feltman has returned, to further joint efforts to peacefully resolve

the conflict in Ethiopia. We are working with international partners to address the crisis in Ethiopia, including through action with the UN, the AU, and other relevant partners and bodies.

You all may have seen some of the statements that have emanated from the region in recent days, in recent hours. Of course, the UN Security Council, which will hold an open session on Ethiopia today, released a statement. And as Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield said, the council spoke with one voice, calling for an end to the violence and a cessation of hostilities. You may also have seen that President Kenyatta, with whom Ambassador Feltman has met in Nairobi in recent days, issued a similar statement, calling for dialogue and urging a few points. President Kenyatta made many of the same points that we have been making: All hostilities must cease. A political solution is the only solution. There should be no incitement – no incitement to violence. Instead, we must work to de-escalate tensions and hostilities. He noted the fact that we must address the humanitarian situation with some urgency, and the parties to the conflict must allow humanitarian access, which has been restricted for many of those in need for far too long; and of course, the imperative of respecting human rights for all and by all.

And so, the actors, the forces in Ethiopia have heard a consistent message emanating from the United States, emanating from other countries in the region, emanating from the UN Security Council. Of course, the conflict in Ethiopia predates this administration. Unfortunately, it was last week that we marked a somber milestone: one full year of violence in Tigray. And since the earliest days of this administration, President Biden, Secretary Blinken have prioritized our diplomacy to find a way out of this violence. It has involved not only the special envoy, but Secretary Blinken in his repeated engagements, the National Security Advisor, Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman, Assistant Secretary Phee – all of them have been very much engaged in this.

We have held – and Special Envoy Feltman, in his seven or so months on the job, have held over – has held over 300 engagements with the AU, with the UN, with the EU, with regional neighbors as well. This diplomacy has been concerted. It has been intense. If you just look at the schedule that Ambassador Feltman has maintained over the past few days where he has shuttled back and forth between Ethiopia and Kenya – as I mentioned before, as of today he is now back in Ethiopia, he is back in Addis.

We will have more to read out when his trip concludes, or at least this chapter of his trip concludes. As we've made clear, last week on November 4th, he met in Ethiopia with a number of Ethiopian officials and regional officials. He met with African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki. He met with Ethiopian Minister of Defense Belay, Minister of Finance Ahmed Shide, Deputy Prime Minister Hassen. He met with Prime Minister Abiy the following day, on November 5th. And, over the weekend, he met with President Kenyatta in Nairobi to consult on Ethiopia.

As we've said, we certainly value the leadership that President Kenyatta has demonstrated, and we appreciate the constructive visit that Special Envoy Feltman had to Nairobi from where he has just traveled, back to Addis.

When it comes to the TPLF, we have engaged with the TPLF, as well. We are engaging with the parties to try and put them on a path to a cessation of hostilities, which is our priority now and going forward.

**QUESTION:** That was a long one.

**QUESTION:** Ned, you can say your diplomacy has been concerted and intense, but can you say it's been successful?

**MR PRICE:** Matt —

**QUESTION:** There, or Sudan, or Lebanon, or Yemen?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, it is —

**QUESTION:** Can you – I’m not one to blame the U.S. for all the world’s ills —

**MR PRICE:** For —

**QUESTION:** — but you’re the one who’s just come out and given a five-minute list of all the meetings that have been going on. And has the situation gotten better or worse —

**MR PRICE:** Well, I —

**QUESTION:** — since this administration took office and began —

**MR PRICE:** I —

**QUESTION:** — this intense diplomacy?

**QUESTION:** I was just asking where it was now.

**MR PRICE:** That’s right.

**QUESTION:** Well, exactly. But —

**MR PRICE:** I —

**QUESTION:** It wasn’t the question. You decided to – so has it been successful?

**MR PRICE:** I was asked about his activities —

**QUESTION:** Fair enough. And has the concerted —

**MR PRICE:** — so I thought it was prudent to answer the question and talk about —

**QUESTION:** Has the administration’s concerted and intense diplomacy in the —

**MR PRICE:** Has this —

**QUESTION:** Has —

**MR PRICE:** Has this administration’s concerted diplomacy solved a problem that predates this administration?

**QUESTION:** No, it – that doesn’t matter. I’m just asking you —

**MR PRICE:** It actually does matter, Matt.

**QUESTION:** No, it matters. I know you’ve been in office for eight months —

**MR PRICE:** Matt, what matters —

**QUESTION:** — and you’re talking about how important this is —

**MR PRICE:** What matters – what —



**QUESTION:** — and how much effort and time and money —

**MR PRICE:** What matters, Matt —

**QUESTION:** — you've put into it, and I just want to know: Can you say that it's successful or not?

**MR PRICE:** What matters, Matt, is that we have been engaged on this. We, as I said before, see a window of opportunity here. The United States is engaged. We are working with Ethiopian authorities as well as with the countries in the region. Why don't we come back to this —

**QUESTION:** Sure.

**MR PRICE:** — in the coming days when this diplomacy will have been ongoing, and we can point to progress.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** It is not in the DNA of this administration to sit on the sidelines, or worse, to take actions or engage in rhetoric that may only inflame tensions. So, it is very much in our DNA to be engaged, to be engaged constructively, to work with our international partners to try and put an end to the suffering, to the violence, to the humanitarian emergency that has afflicted the people of Tigray and other regions of Ethiopia.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Can you talk about Iraq and the assassination attempt? What are your initial findings in terms of who may have been responsible — there's an obvious — an obvious neighbor that has sponsored militia attacks before — and how that might affect other diplomatic —

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes — go ahead.

**QUESTION:** And will there be another U.S. response — will there be a U.S. response to —

**MR PRICE:** When it comes to the culpability, there is an Iraqi investigation that's underway. We are going to defer to the Iraqis for the progress of that investigation. We have made very clear, Secretary Blinken has made very clear, President Biden has made very clear in his statements that the United States stands ready to assist in any and every way we can with the Iraqi investigation should they request our assistance.

But broadly, and to come back to your question, we are outraged, and we strongly condemn the attack on Iraq's prime minister. He, the prime minister, Prime Minister Kadhim, represents not only the head of government, but he represents the state of Iraq. And he is the commander-in-chief of Iraq's security forces, and therefore we believe that this was an attack not only on him, but also on the sovereignty and stability of the Iraqi state. As I said before, the President has issued a very clear instruction to his national security team that we are to provide every form of appropriate assistance that our Iraqi partners may need in this. As you know, Secretary Blinken had an opportunity to speak yesterday with Prime Minister Kadhim. He reiterated the same message. He condemned the attack, he noted his relief that the prime minister was unharmed in this, and he also underscored the importance we place on our partnership with the Government of Iraq and pledge to support the Iraqi security forces as they investigate this.

**QUESTION:** Well, if it — I mean, how can the United States, after pouring decades of support for the legitimate government and legitimate elections in Iraq — how can the United States stand back and not

take some kind of action if you find and if the Iraqis find who might be responsible?

**MR PRICE:** I didn't say we wouldn't. I said we are going to defer to the Iraqi investigation, which is ongoing. As you know, we reserve the right in coordination with our partners – in this case, the Government of Iraq – to respond to aggression at a time and place, and with the means of our choosing. But again, before we speak about a response, we will let the Iraqi investigation proceed. We will continue to consult closely with our Iraqi partners. If they determine that they have any needs that their own capacities and capabilities leave unmet, we are happy to provide that assistance and together we will chart the next steps.

**QUESTION:** One more thing. If it does turn out that Iran is responsible, would this impact other negotiations or other tracks with Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I'm not going to engage in a hypothetical about who may or may not be responsible. You are correct that we've seen a number of attacks that have been – that have had links to Iran-backed groups. But when it comes to this attack, we're going to let the investigation play out.

Please.

**QUESTION:** Regarding the Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink's upcoming travel to Seoul, there has been reporting that he will be meeting with South Korean presidential candidates. Is that true?

**MR PRICE:** We issued a Media Note on this. As you know, Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink is in Seoul right now. He is meeting with government counterparts. He will then travel to Tokyo, where he also will meet with counterparts. We'll have readouts of those engagements, I suspect, when his travel ends.

**QUESTION:** And what is he – is the secretary planning – if the secretary's planning to discuss with the Korean Government during his visit? Are there any topics that you know of, and will the end of war declaration be on table?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would suspect that the threat that is posed by the DPRK's missile and ballistic – ballistic missile and nuclear program will certainly be on the table, as will our strategy to advance the prospects for the complete and total denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula will also be a topic of discussion as well. But our relationship with the ROK, our treaty ally, is broad and it's deep. So, that there will be a number of issues that they discuss together.

**QUESTION:** Just a follow-up question on that. Mr. Sullivan said that the U.S. and Korea have different perspectives on the end of war declaration. Will there be dialogue to narrow the difference during his visit?

**MR PRICE:** We see eye-to-eye with our South Korean counterparts that achieving a complete denuclearization and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and diplomacy is the best and the most effective course. We will continue to seek engagement with the DPRK as part of what we have called a calibrated and practical approach, in order to make tangible progress that increases the security not only for the United States but also for our regional allies. And of course, that includes the ROK and Japan as well.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, can I go back to Ethiopia? Will Ambassador Feltman meet with Prime Minister Abiy during this current stop while he's there? And then there's also reports that Tigrayan residents in Addis are being targeted for mass arrest. Is the State Department aware of these reports, and do you have any comment?

**MR PRICE:** When it comes to Ambassador Feltman's travel, and his current stay in Addis, we'll update you as we're able with additional meetings. As I mentioned, he is meeting with the AU's representative for the Horn of Africa, former President Obasanjo, today, but we will update you as additional meetings come into the – are confirmed.

We have seen reports that those with Tigrayan ethnicity are coming under – are being harassed or worse. Of course, those reports are concerning. It is part of the reason why we have called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, knowing that the potential for inter-communal violence remains high. We are deeply concerned about the potential for escalating inter-communal violence. It is why we are engaged with a number of actors, a number of officials in the Ethiopian Government – why we have engaged with the TPLF, why we are working at this very concerted.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** All right, Ned. I have a few follow-ups, first on Iraq and then on Egypt and Sudan.

On Iraq, many experts believe that this attack or attempted assassination on the prime minister's life has the modus operandi of the pro-Iran militias. Do you believe, does the State Department believe, that these militias can work independently and operate independently, without a green light from Tehran?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I don't want to get ahead of the Iraqi investigation. What is true is that we have seen a number of aggressive actions conducted by Iran-backed groups, including in Iraq. But when it comes to this attack, I wouldn't want to characterize where the investigation – what the investigation has uncovered yet or what it may uncover in the days to come. We will stay in close touch with our Iraqi partners on that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So, you can confirm that they used drones, and the only militias that have drones are the one who trained and supplied by Iran.

**MR PRICE:** Certainly, everything that I have seen speaks to the use of a drone. We have also expressed our concerns with the proliferation of drone technology – some of it Iranian UAV – capabilities. in the region. Again, without speaking to what happened over the weekend, this has been a persistent, prominent concern of ours. As you know, it was just several days ago that we announced additional policy tools to pursue those who have been responsible for proliferating some of this UAV technology in the region, some of which is of Iranian origin.

**QUESTION:** On Egypt, you said that one of the topics of discussion is regional security. Sudan is one of them. Do you see the Egyptian position identical to the U.S.? Where do you differ? Where do you agree? And why we didn't see Egypt on the signatory of the Quad statement that you issued last —

**MR PRICE:** So, I will leave it to Cairo to explain their position on Sudan. What I will say is that regional security and specific – and developments in certain countries will be on the agenda, and that includes what has transpired in Sudan on October 25<sup>th</sup>, and the days since. They will – Secretary Blinken and his Egyptian counterpart will discuss ongoing efforts to restore the civilian-led transitional government and to prevent violence in Sudan.

A lot has been made of the Quad statement that was issued last week. It was an important statement because it did carry the signatures of the United States, the United Kingdom, of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, calling for a restoration of the civilian-led transitional government. The Quad for Sudan is, as you – as the name would suggest – a collection of four countries in the Sudanese context.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, it could've been five and then you'd call it Quint on Sudan.

**QUESTION:** It could be five or six, even.

**QUESTION:** There was no Quad on Sudan before.

**MR PRICE:** There was a —

**QUESTION:** You guys just invented it. It could've been the septet or an octet.

**MR PRICE:** There was a Quad for a Sudan statement last week, and a very powerful one at that.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Had the Quad on Sudan ever issued a statement before?

**MR PRICE:** I would have to go back and look.

**QUESTION:** Okay, just to follow up as well —

**QUESTION:** I don't think it existed before. So, it could've been a Quint.

**MR PRICE:** Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** An assistant to the secretary general of the Arab League said that a solution to the crisis in Sudan is imminent. Are you aware of any development that could indicate, actually, that would be ending the crisis soon?

**MR PRICE:** Look, we — as I have said already in the context of Ethiopia — but Ambassador Feltman and the team here, including Secretary Blinken, who has had engagements both with Prime Minister Hamdok and General Burhan in recent days — we are working to see a resolution to this. And in our minds, there is only one resolution — one appropriate resolution — and that is the restoration of the civilian-led transitional government. So, we are working on that. We are doing that across multiple diplomatic fronts and through multiple diplomatic channels. I think it's best not to characterize the progress there. But again, in our mind, there is only one appropriate resolution to this, and that's the restoration of the civilian-led government.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, one last question. I don't get the chance to ask you questions.

**MR PRICE:** Of course. Of course.

**QUESTION:** So, one last question on Egypt and Ethiopia as well: You said one of the discussions was about the dam, which was a sticking point between the three countries. Two of them now are going through strife or turmoil, or civil war, if you want. So what's going to happen to that, considering that what's happening in Ethiopia and in Sudan — does this adversely affect this negotiation, obviously? And you worry about it, that it might go completely out of hand.

**MR PRICE:** Well, developments vis-à-vis the GERD and developments in these countries won't affect the bottom line, and that is that we will continue to support a collaborative and constructive efforts by these three countries to reach an enduring arrangement on the dam. Obviously, this is an issue that is of high importance to all three countries, given their reliance on the Nile River waters, and we'll continue to engage with these countries to find a solution that's acceptable to the three of them.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** I had a question on Myanmar. Danny Fenster's case last week came up in court. He was denied bail and a new charge brought against him – that coincided with the trip of Governor Richardson to Myanmar, and he's subsequently told press that the State Department told him not to raise Fenster's case with the Burmese Government, in these meetings that he had. I'm wondering: Why would you ask him not to raise that? And do you not think that Governor Richardson would have – could have some impact on the case where you guys – your diplomacy so far hasn't been able to get him freed?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I wouldn't want to characterize any private discussions that were had with Governor Richardson. As you know, he traveled to Burma not as an emissary, not as a representative of the United States Government, but as a private citizen. This is an effort – this was an effort that was not sponsored by or on behalf of the United States Government. Now, of course we hope that his trip over the longer term does contribute to improved humanitarian access. That, of course, is in our interest. It's in everyone's interest, as well.

When it comes to the case of Danny Fenster, look, we have made very clear where we stand on this. We remain deeply concerned over his continued detention. We recognize it as just another sad reminder of the continuing human rights and humanitarian crisis facing the country. We do so today on the one-year anniversary of the Burmese elections that indicated a degree of promise that the military junta has attempted to extinguish, even though the people of Burma have made clear that their democratic aspirations, their demands for human rights and basic freedoms will not be extinguished. We have continued to press the junta for Danny's release. We will do that until he is able to return home to his family. Consular officers have routinely met and have spoken with Danny. They last did so by phone late last month on October 31st. This case is an absolute priority for the department, and it will be until Danny is able to return to his family.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** I just want to go back to Sudan, about these statements from Burhan this morning regional time. He said that he will not walk back the October 25th steps that he took, and he will not be part of any government that comes out of a deal, a negotiated deal. Do you think that this is an approach that you can support, the no Burhan, no Hamdok for the future?

**MR PRICE:** Again, our bottom line is – and the bottom line of the international community – and we have heard a number of countries, a number of international institutions, a number of international bodies speak with one voice on that. And that is that there needs to be a restoration of the civilian-led transitional government. There needs to be a restoration of what it is that the military sought to topple.

This is – these are – what is most important is that these are not our objectives. These are the aspirations of the Sudanese people. We have seen the Sudanese people take to the streets to march peacefully throughout Khartoum and other cities and towns across Sudan. Millions of Sudanese have done so, and they have done so to clearly underscore where it is that – and what it is that they feel needs to happen. There is no ambiguity about what the people of Sudan want, and there should be no ambiguity about where the United States, where our allies and partners stand on this as well.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up on that real quickly, because the Secretary said that the U.S. shared that interest with the Egyptians, but there are reports that the Egyptians supported this military takeover. So, can you square that?

**MR PRICE:** What the Secretary said in his opening remarks and as – what I said in the topper as well – is that we will discuss with our Egyptian partners the need to restore the civilian-led transitional government in Sudan. Again, I'm going to allow the Egyptians to characterize the nuance of their position, but certainly this will be a topic of discussion with our Egyptian counterparts. There is a

widespread, shared consensus that the civilian-led transitional government in Sudan needs to be restored and needs to be restored immediately.

Jenny.

**QUESTION:** The family of Trevor Reed just put out a statement saying they have a report that Trevor has started a hunger strike. Does State have any comment, and when was the last time embassy officials were granted access to him?

**MR PRICE:** So, I've seen those reports, but due to privacy considerations, I'm not in a position to comment on them. When it comes to Trevor Reed, Ambassador Sullivan last visited Trevor Reed on September 22nd. We are continuing to seek contact with Trevor, as we monitor his case closely. I suspect that the ambassador will have another opportunity to visit Trevor and, of course, Paul Whelan going forward.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) COP26, there was an agreement at the end of last week by 40-plus countries to phase out the use of coal. Why didn't the Biden administration sign that agreement?

**MR PRICE:** It – we have made very clear where it is that we stand when it comes to coal and when it comes to our use of coal domestically and around the world. I think the important point is that statements are declarations, and they're important, but they can't be seen as an end in and of themselves. They have to be backed up by action. And we are and have been moving forward on a just energy transition. In fact, President Biden's first specific climate pledge was decarbonizing the U.S. energy supply by 2035.

So, no one should underestimate how serious we are. No one should underestimate the ways in which we not have – we have not only raised our own climate ambition with our own ambitious targets, but also the ways in which we've galvanized actions by countries around the world to seek to meet the needs of this decisive decade if we are to arrive at —

(Interruption.)

**QUESTION:** I apologize.

**MR PRICE:** Not a problem – if we are to arrive at a means by which to prevent global warming from not exceeding the 1.5 degrees Celsius mark.

**QUESTION:** But as the third-largest user of coal, I mean, wouldn't it help to galvanize some more action, if the U.S. did sign on to this pledge? And regardless of the pledge, are you willing to say whether or not the administration thinks it can phase out coal by a certain date?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have pushed, in a number of ways, to transition away from some of the most harmful emitters of greenhouse gases. When it comes to coal, we pushed for and won an agreement at the G7 last summer to support, a quote, "transition away from unabated coal capacity," and to achieve an overwhelmingly decarbonized power system in the 2030s. We did push hard for language like that at the G20 last week – or the other week, I should say – and will continue to do so. Again, we have been very clear in terms of where we stand on our own climate targets, on our own climate ambitions, and that includes with regards to coal.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On Cuba. Yesterday Jake Sullivan said that the circumstances had changed in the island.

What does he mean? Is the U.S. mulling new sanctions? Is anything else to sanction?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think what the National Security Advisor was referring to is that events in Cuba, certainly the events of July 11<sup>th</sup>, the events subsequent to July 11th, they have weighed heavily on our approach. And we have not been shy in speaking about and calling out the human rights abuses, the repression, the arbitrary detentions that have taken place in Cuba, since July 11th. And our policy, both before July 11th and certainly since, has focused on support for the Cuban people and accountability for the Cuban officials who have been responsible for some of the human rights abuses that we have seen.

We are – the world is expecting protests in the coming days as well, as the Cuban people have made clear that they will once again peacefully march in the streets to make clear their aspirations for democracy, human rights, civil liberties, and political rights. We have centered our efforts in Cuba, when it comes to Cuba, on this question of the rights of the Cuban people, and steps that we can take to advance the cause of democracy on the island. And we have sought, in doing so, to impose tangible and significant consequences in connection with the abuses that I mentioned before. And we are prepared to continue doing so should the repression, should the human rights abuses, should the abuses of the Cuban regime not cease.

**QUESTION:** Ned, am I correct in saying that Tom West is doing his first trip as – in his new formal position? And if I am, can you give us any details about it?

**MR PRICE:** That is correct. So, Tom West is currently in Brussels. He had an opportunity to meet with the NAC in Brussels. He also engaged in a press call earlier this morning.

**QUESTION:** Oh, he did? Okay.

**MR PRICE:** He did. And he provided some detail on his travel.

**QUESTION:** Then we don't need to —

**MR PRICE:** I'll just very quickly make the point that he will go to London, as well. He will go to Pakistan, to Russia, to India. Together with our partners, he will continue to make clear the expectations that we have of the Taliban and of any future Afghanistan government.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but he's not going to Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** There are no plans to do that.

**QUESTION:** And he's not going to Doha?

**MR PRICE:** He did not speak to plans to go to Doha today. But he's going to London as well as to Pakistan, Russia, and India.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Can I quickly ask on Haiti? Is there any update on the hostage missionaries there? Reuters reported on Friday that the U.S. had seen proof of life for some of them. Can you confirm that report?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to confirm that, and I'm not in a position to confirm that chiefly because the resolution of these cases oftentimes relies on this activity taking place out of public sight, out of public view. And that is exactly the way we've been engaging with the organization, the

missionary organization at the center of this. It's how we've been engaging with our Haitian counterparts, including the Haitian National Police, the most senior Haitian authorities as well, including with the Canadian Government, given that one of the hostages is a Canadian citizen. So, our embassy in Port-au-Prince, our senior officials here, have continued to be very focused on this. But I just don't have an update to offer publicly.

Okay. Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:06 p.m.)

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## [Deputy Secretary Wendy R. Sherman At a Press Availability](#)

11/17/2021 05:45 PM EST

Wendy R. Sherman, Deputy Secretary of State

Washington, D.C.

Dean Acheson Room

**DEPUTY SECRETARY SHERMAN:** Hi there. Thank you for your patience; greatly appreciate it. So, good afternoon. Thank you for being here. I'm Wendy Sherman, the deputy secretary of state and the host of today's trilateral. Republic of Korea First Vice Foreign Minister Choi, Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Mori, and I just concluded our second constructive trilateral meeting at our level since President Biden took office. We held our first wide-ranging trilateral meeting at the vice ministerial level in Tokyo in July, and it was an honor to welcome my counterparts and friends to Washington today.

I want to note at the outset that, as has been the case for some time, there are some bilateral differences between Japan and the Republic of Korea that are continuing to be resolved, and one of those differences which is unrelated to today's meeting has led to the change in format for today's press availability.

Nonetheless, we had a very constructive trilateral meeting today, which demonstrates exactly why the trilateral format with the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea is so important and powerful. America's deep and enduring relationships with our allies and partners are one of our greatest strengths. For decades, our alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea have been central to promoting peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Now we are deepening our trilateral cooperation, collaboration, and partnership to address the most pressing challenges of the 21st century. We are working together to address the climate crisis – investing in clean energy, clean transportation, and resilient infrastructure in our own countries and across the Indo-Pacific – because we know we can go further, faster by acting together.

We are working together to end the COVID-19 pandemic, including by donating millions of vaccine doses bilaterally and through COVAX to third countries in need. And we are working together to build back better from the pandemic in our own countries and around the world, including creating jobs and improving our national security by building more secure and resilient supply chains.

Today's trilateral meeting was friendly, constructive, substantive, and lasted more than three hours. Vice Foreign Minister Mori, First Vice Foreign Minister Choi, and I covered a wide range of economic, security, and regional issues, including our mutual commitment to advancing our shared democratic values and upholding human rights. We discussed our three countries' commitment to maintaining an inclusive, free, peaceful, stable, and open Indo-Pacific region, and our opposition to activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order. We discussed the importance

of respecting international law in the Indo-Pacific, including maintaining freedom of navigation in overflight in the South China Sea and the East Sea, and of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

We reiterated our countries' support for ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN-led regional architecture. The United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea all recognize the important economic and security role played by ASEAN nations, including in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, and we are committed to working in partnership with ASEAN.

We also discussed our shared commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. As we have said publicly, the United States does not harbor hostile intent toward the DPRK. We believe that diplomacy and dialogue are essential to achieving the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and establishing a permanent peace.

I want to thank First Vice Foreign Minister Choi and Vice Foreign Minister Mori again for traveling to Washington for this important trilateral meeting, so we can continue to make progress on these and many other issues. I very much look forward to our third trilateral in the new year.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

**MR ICE:** For our first question, we'll go to Nike Ching of Voice of America.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much. Madam Deputy Secretary Sherman, South Korean high-ranking officials have said that U.S. and South Korea have reached agreement on end-of-war declaration. Could you please provide more details? Also, do you have anything or is there a plan to break the stalemate and include North Koreans back to the negotiation table?

If I may, the following is on behalf of other coworkers who are not here: At the recent CSIS event, ROK's First Vice Foreign Minister Choi described China as a strategic partner for the ROK, and he underscored that ROK trade volume with China is larger than ROK's trade volume with the U.S. and Japan combined. So, question is: Could you please shed some light on what discussions you have with Korean and Japanese officials, regarding dealing with potential crisis in the Taiwan Strait? Would their economic relationship with China prevent them from allying with the United States? Thank you very much.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY SHERMAN:** So, everyone, I think, is supposed to have one question, and so I don't want you to set an example that is bad for your colleagues but let me briefly answer you. On the issue around end-of-war statement, I'm very satisfied, the United States is very satisfied with the consultations we are having both with the Republic of Korea and with Japan, and with other allies and partners, on the best way forward to ensure the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. And I look forward to those continued consultations.

Regarding the People's Republic of China, we, of course, discussed all kinds of matters today, including our relationship with the People's Republic of China. I think you're all well aware that President Biden just held a virtual meeting with President Xi Jinping of China. And I think that we are all agreed that there are areas in which we are cooperating with the PRC, there are areas where we will compete and compete vigorously, and there are areas where we will challenge the PRC when our interests diverge and when we think there are risks to peace and security, and prosperity for the world. What I think is very important is that the United States, Korea, and Japan are of one mind in our work together to ensure global prosperity, peace, and security for citizens in every country.

**MR ICE:** For our next question, we're going to go to Hiroshi Tajima of *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY SHERMAN:** And if – yeah, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I ask this on behalf of Japanese media. My name is Tajima of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. In recent months, North Korea has repeatedly launched missiles, posing a threat to regional security. How do you plan to deal with easing tensions while striving for denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, specifically through the lens of cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan? I'd also like to ask for your thought on South Korea's proposal of formal declaration of the end of the Korean War. Do you agree or disagree to have the declaration at this timing? Lastly, in light of the virtual U.S.-China summit, I'd like to ask how the three nations plan to cooperate with each other trilaterally on policy toward China, particularly on jointly upholding the rules-based international order. Thank you.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY SHERMAN:** So, there is no question that Japan, South Korea, and the United States all agree that we need to stay compliant with UN Security Council resolutions that impose sanctions on North Korea for launching missiles that it should not. We look at each of these instances. We coordinate and consult with each other and make sure that we are taking the appropriate action. There is no sense whatsoever that we will do anything but apply sanctions, make statements, join with others when North Korea takes actions that violate those resolutions and create risks for our nations and for nations around the world.

On end of war, I've already made a statement to one of your journalistic colleagues that we are having good consultations amongst us and with other allies and partners, and we will continue to do so.

And regarding the People's Republic of China, we have had deep and ongoing coordination and consultation, appreciating that we all have different kinds of relationships. But we are all strong democratic nations that believe in the rule of law. We believe in the rules-based international order, which allowed countries to rise, including China. And so, we believe that the PRC should live by that rules-based international order. And we will continue to work together collectively to keep those rules in place.

**MR ICE:** And for our last question, we'll go to Hyun-Young Park of Joongang Ilbo.

**QUESTION:** Hello, I'm Hyun-Young Park with Joongang Ilbo. I'll have to ask you – I'll have to phrase a different question. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said last month that we may have somewhat different perspectives on the precise sequence or timing or conditions for different steps on the end-of-war declaration discussions between U.S. and South Korea. Vice Minister Choi, upon his arrival to D.C. last Sunday, said that he expected a good result from discussions with the U.S. on the end-of-war declaration proposal, in the not-too-distant future. So, we have this different sentiment from both sides.

So, my question is: Did the U.S. and South Korea resolve their somewhat different perspectives on the sequence, timing, or conditions? If so, what would be the background that U.S. came to the conclusion that this is a viable proposition at this point? Will you be announcing something soon?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY SHERMAN:** So, what I have said and will repeat is that we are having ongoing consultations and coordination with the Republic of – Republic of Korea and Japan and other interested allies and partners. And I think that whenever we all consult and coordinate with each other, we always come out with a good result that ensures the interests of each of our countries and the overall interest of the world in peace and security.

**MR ICE:** And with that, we have reached the end of our press briefing today. I'd like to thank Deputy Secretary Sherman for being here with us. Thank you so much, ma'am.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY SHERMAN:** Thank you very much. Thank you all and have a good rest of the day. Thank you.

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## [Previewing the U.S.-EU Dialogue on China](#)

*12/01/2021 05:37 PM EST*

Office of the Spokesperson

Via Teleconference

**MODERATOR:** Thank you so much, Operator, and I'd like to welcome everyone to this afternoon's on-background briefing. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Just as a reminder here at the top, this briefing today is on background with senior State Department officials who will be discussing the upcoming U.S.-EU dialogue on China. The contents of this briefing this afternoon, again, are on background, and they're going to be embargoed until the end of the call. Okay.

For your information but not for reporting purposes, I am going to let you know who your briefers are today. We have on the line with us and . We're going to start off with some opening remarks from our briefers and then we will turn to your questions. Okay.

And with that, I'd like to go ahead and turn it over to to kick us off.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Great. Thanks, , and thanks to all of you for taking the time. Tomorrow, Deputy Secretary Sherman and Secretary General of the European External Action Service Stefano Sannino will lead the second high-level meeting of the U.S.-EU dialogue on China since Secretary Blinken and EU High Representative and Vice President Josep Borrell relaunched the framework in March of this year.

This first – or the first high-level meeting jointly led by Deputy Secretary Sherman and Secretary General Sannino took place in May in Brussels, and that was the first stop on Deputy Secretary Sherman's first trip as deputy secretary. The dialogue provides an important opportunity for the United States and the EU to engage on a broad range of topics through a designated working group launched at the first high-level dialogue in May. Those groups cover six topics: reciprocity, including economic issues; resilience; human rights; security; multilateralism; and areas for constructive engagement with China, such as climate change. Each of these groups has met at least once since May.

As President Biden has said, Europe is a natural partner for the United States because we're committed to the same global order based on democratic norms and institutions. This is why the administration has sought from its first days to rebuild, revitalize, and re-energize the transatlantic relationship, and particularly our partnership with the EU.

On practically every issue we work on at the State Department and in practically every region of the world, we are working closely with the EU and our European allies and partners to strengthen the rules-based international order and promote our shared values, including democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This includes our approach to the PRC and our engagement and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.

On Thursday, U.S.-EU discussions will focus on key areas for our cooperation, including on economic and technology issues, human rights, multilateralism, disinformation, security, and how we pursue results-oriented cooperation with the PRC where our interests align. A joint statement will be released at the conclusion of the session, and we expect the statement to be robust and cover a range of topics far broader and more detailed than the first joint statement released in May. This reflects the increasingly convergent U.S. and EU outlooks on the PRC and its increasingly concerning behavior. And it demonstrates the effectiveness of our approach to rebuild our alliances and partnerships as we compete with the PRC.

On Friday, Deputy Secretary Sherman and Secretary General Sannino will hold high-level consultations on the Indo-Pacific. This was a key deliverable of Secretary Blinken's meeting with the EU High Representative Borrell in October and underscores President Biden's clear message of U.S. support for European engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Secretary General Sannino will brief the deputy secretary on implementation of the EU's recently released Indo-Pacific strategy and Deputy Secretary Sherman will preview the United States forthcoming Indo-Pacific strategy.

They will discuss areas of cooperation and synergies between the strategies. We will release a joint statement at the conclusion of the session. The deputy secretary and secretary general will also participate in a virtual public event hosted by the Brookings Institution at 2:30 p.m. on Friday to discuss the dialogues on China and consultations on the Indo-Pacific, and the deep cooperation between the United States and the EU on these and a wide range of other issues.

As Secretary Blinken has said, our relationship with the PRC will be the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century. We know we must engage the PRC from a position of strength. That requires working with allies and partners multilaterally and in bilateral frameworks like the discussion this week, because our combined weight is much harder for the PRC to ignore. The complexity of our respective relationships with the PRC only underscores the importance of our continued consultation and coordination. That is the purpose of the U.S.-EU dialogue on China, both the high-level meetings and the ongoing continuous work between our two teams.

I'll now turn it over to my colleague to give some additional context on the State Department's efforts on China under Secretary Blinken. , over to you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Thanks, , thanks, . Look, I know everyone on the call is generally familiar with our – with the administration's policy towards the PRC. What I'd like to focus on are really the portions of it that center here at the State Department in support of the President's China policy, so I'll just lead off by mentioning quickly a few of the highlights. I think all of you are aware that Secretary Blinken has participated in at least half a dozen calls and meetings with senior PRC officials, including most recently the President's November 15th virtual meeting with Xi Jinping.

One thing that may not be as apparent is that the deputy secretary within the department has been asked by Secretary Blinken to take a special focus on both PRC issues and the Indo-Pacific region. So what I'd like to do is go through a few of her engagements, of which the U.S.-EU-China dialogue is a central one.

Following the – you'll recall the Anchorage meetings back in March, when Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Sullivan met with Yang Jiechi. That was really when the deputy secretary began a fairly deliberate drumbeat of travel and engagements aimed largely to build support among our allies and partners. She followed up on the Secretary's commitment to relaunch this dialogue that we're having this week, and that was during her first stop of her first overseas trip. She also did a lot of work earlier this year on travel to Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, and the theme of those trips was really reaffirming our commitment to ASEAN centrality.

She had a very direct conversation in Phnom Penh with Prime Minister Hun Sen, where she had a very frank discussion about our concerns regarding the PRC's military presence and the construction of facilities at Ream Naval Base. And I think our core message there was the importance of maintaining an independent and balanced foreign policy, in accordance with Cambodia's own national interests.

By July, the deputy had taken her second overseas trip, and that was a trip focused largely on alliance management and some of our other key partners in the East Asia region. She went to Tokyo, to Korea. She also visited our democratic strategic partner Mongolia, and made the only trip to the PRC by a senior official from State that was focused – I mean, Secretary Kerry has been there, but this was focused on a broad agenda, not just an issue-specific visit.

And I'm sure many of you will recall there was some theatrical rhetoric from the PRC side surrounding the visit, but the part that I wanted to talk about a bit today we haven't really gone into much detail about before, and that was the agreement that she reached at the time with her Chinese counterparts to create working groups between the United States and the PRC on a number of issues that are maybe not at the strategic level, but they're quite consequential in the bilateral relationship, and these include issues such as coercive exit bans on our American citizens, access for U.S. journalists to the PRC.

And these working groups, they generally took the form of our embassy counterparts in Beijing – these are our colleagues from the State Department working with the foreign ministry. And they have been, I would say, professional in their character. And we have had some progress on small but important and persistent concerns in recent months. And I think this reality kind of reflects our overall theory of the case, which is that managing an intensely competitive and even more competitive U.S.-China relationship does require diplomatic pressure release valves, both at the senior levels – which is why this President was focused on guard rails, building guard rails in his discussion with Xi Jinping – and then through these working groups which are focused on more practical issues.

So I'll highlight just a little bit more on what we've done in the working groups, and then I'll come back at the end to talk a bit more about how we're organized in the department on our policy towards the PRC.

I mentioned coercive exit bans and arbitrary detention, which are two very strong concerns we have had with the PRC. We have discussed these issues not just in the working groups, in all channels. And up to the Secretary, I know his view is that no human being should be a bargaining chip. He feels that very strongly, and many of us in the building are working on finding ways to both increase the deterrent to countries that adopt these practices and then, practically speaking, advocate for their release.

I mentioned the deputy secretary discussed this in Tianjin. She actually raised the cases of every American citizen who is arbitrarily detained or subject to an exit ban by name, and she also met with the families of each of these individuals. I don't want to get into the names, just for privacy reasons, but what I can say is that through the working groups we have had some success in securing the release of a small number of American citizens who were subject to coercive exit bans in recent months.

The second broad area I wanted to touch on – and I think some of you are probably aware of the media access agreement that we reached recently – the genesis of this really was when the deputy went to Tianjin, she had a virtual meeting with our U.S. journalists. And in that meeting she heard – these were U.S. journalists who were based in the PRC, in the mainland. And there were also a couple of calls with several of your organizations back here. And in those meetings she heard directly about the experiences they undergo in the PRC, the harassment they face, the hostile environment for a free press. I mean, all topics you're familiar with.

But I think both she and the Secretary, after hearing these concerns and after talking with the senior editorial leadership at a number of U.S. publications, they really committed to prioritize through the working groups whatever improvements we could make under the framework of media reciprocity. And we did reach agreement in November on a small step, which will allow us to – we secured the resumption of issuance of visas for U.S. journalists for the first time since 2020. It's an agreement that's framed reciprocally, so we'll also resume issuing to PRC journalists who seek to come here.

But the other part of the agreement was aimed at stabilizing our press corps in China by extending – convincing the Chinese to reciprocally extend the duration of status, the duration of their visas to 12 months so they had more confidence they could come and go when they wanted to.

So I mentioned I wanted to end with just a brief note of how we're organized in the department. At the Secretary's request, Deputy Secretary Sherman has also initiated a biweekly PRC strategy group, which is basically a grouping that brings together the department's senior officials involved on China, in an effort to elevate and synchronize and coordinate our engagement across the board, including with allies and partners. And so I think it's in that spirit that tomorrow's meetings with the EU will be, I think, a real tangible manifestation of some of the work that's going on here.

So with that, I'll turn it back to and I appreciate any questions you guys have. Over.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you, , and thank you, . Operator, at this point, would you please go ahead and repeat our – the instructions for getting into the question queue.

**OPERATOR:** Yes, certainly. Ladies and gentlemen, if you do wish to ask a question, please press 1 and then 0 on your telephone keypad. You can withdraw your question at any time by repeating the 1-0 command. And if using a speaker phone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, to ask a question, please press 1-0 at this time.

**MODERATOR:** Great. Thank you, Operator. We have our first question. Let's go to the line of Kylie Atwood. Kylie.

**OPERATOR:** Kylie, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, and everyone. Thank you for doing this. I think my question is best suited for , because you mentioned the Ream Naval Base. And I was curious, given that the U.S. has been very explicit about its concerns with regard to China's military presence at that base, has there been any progress in getting Cambodia to rid the – to rid that base of PRC involvement?

And then just broadly speaking, can you touch on concerns over Chinese projects abroad that could be viewed as military or basing projects overseas?

And sorry, I have one more question that is from my colleague. I am curious about the Olympics, if a diplomatic boycott will be discussed with allies during this U.S.-EU China meeting. Thank you very much.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yes, thanks, Kylie. Look, on Cambodia, I mean, I think it's really true both for Cambodia and for other areas where we have concerns about PRC military and basing activities. I think what is fair to say is that the countries who are involved, including Cambodia, have a very clear sense from this administration of our concerns. And we've also tried to be very honest about the need for countries to consider the implications for their own ability to have independent foreign – and balanced foreign policies if they are overexposed to PRC malign influence of any type, and basing is one form of it.



On the Olympics, I don't have anything to say beyond what the President said just before Thanksgiving. I mean, he's been honest that he's considering the issue, but I don't have anything beyond that.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you. And I would go ahead and reiterate if folks do have a question, you can dial 1 then 0 to get into the question queue. We don't have anybody in the queue at the moment, so we will stand by just for a moment. Please go ahead and get your questions together and come into the queue. We'll just stand by for a moment.

Great. Let's go to the line of Simon Lewis at Reuters.

**QUESTION:** Hi, and —

**OPERATOR:** And Mr. —

**QUESTION:** Yeah, can you hear me?

**MODERATOR:** We can hear you, Simon. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Okay. The — so firstly, just a couple of things. Firstly, you mentioned that the statement coming out from this meeting on Thursday is going to be some kind of robust — the word was “robust” statement on China. I wonder if you could give a bit more detail on what kind of — what kind of thing that — the statement might be talking about, and is there — can we expect anything else other than a robust statement?

And secondly, I wondered whether Myanmar/Burma is going to come up in this meeting. Obviously there's issues with the oil and gas projects that U.S. companies and also French companies are involved in. Is that something that you guys are talking about in regard to how China is — how potentially sanctioning that project because it leaves things open for China? Is that something that could be on the agenda in this meeting, or anything else related to the crisis in Myanmar? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Great. I'm happy to cover the first question and then I can turn it over to touch on the second.

In terms of the statement, I would just say that this statement will reflect obviously the work that has been done by all of the working groups since the last meeting in May, and really just a broadening of our cooperation with the EU on PRC-related issues, which reflects the increasing convergence in terms of our analysis of the challenge that the PRC poses and our desire to work together based on our shared values in order to develop complementary if not common approaches to that challenge. And so I would just look for it to be more broad-based and reflective of the work that has occurred in those working groups as well as, of course, the actual dialogue that will occur tomorrow.

, maybe I can hand it over to you for the second question.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yes. Simon, can you just repeat the second part of that for me?

**OPERATOR:** Give me a moment as I retrieve his line here. And please go ahead, Simon.

**QUESTION:** Hi, yeah. So yeah, the question was on whether Myanmar at any — in any way sort of calibrating response to the crisis in Myanmar between the U.S. and the EU is going to be on the agenda in this meeting given China's role there, and specifically on sanctions that might impact the oil and gas sector in the country and whether that's something that will come up in this — in these — this meeting.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yeah. Look, I mean, we've had pretty extensive discussions with both Beijing in bilateral channels and then with our allies and partners on various aspects of the Burma issue. I mean, I don't want to get into kind of the substance of what we're going to do before we do it, so I would point you more towards the statement as our outcome on this. But I would say in general terms, we have ongoing dialogue – and this is not the only channel through which we discussed that issue with either Beijing or the EU.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. And let's go to the line of Courtney McBride.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. , you mentioned progress on small but important issues over recent months, and I'm just wondering: Are there other avenues for progress, perhaps on additional small items or on larger issues that build on those past efforts?

And to follow up on Kylie's second question, are there particular regions, countries, or types of projects by Beijing overseas that are generating the greatest concern for or advocacy by the U.S.? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yeah, sure. Well, look, I think other areas where there's – I would say interests align with Beijing would include most recently on energy security. You saw the announcement on releases from the strategic petroleum reserves. That's one area where we've been able to work together. And obviously Special Envoy Kerry's joint statement on climate is another.

And in terms of the regions and types of projects, I mean, really I think the reason we're highlighting in this briefing the military basing is because that that is, I think, the single greatest potential concern. So we have been focused quite a bit on that issue, both within the U.S. Government and with allies and partners in those countries where that issue plays out.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go the line of Rosiland Jordan.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Thanks, . Thanks, everyone, for doing this call. Two questions. One, timing: When do we expect to see any press or public viewing of events connected to this dialogue? And two, a more substantial question: What will be the discussion on how to provide a counterbalance to Chinese economic and political influence in both Latin America and in sub-Saharan Africa? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Sure. So in terms of the public component of the visit, the event on Friday afternoon at Brookings will be the main public component, in addition to the statements which you will see released over the course of the visit. We may be able to provide more specific timing, but I'll leave that there now and let comment if he'd like.

And then, , I don't know if you want to talk about the economic coercion piece.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Yeah. I mean, we've been doing quite a bit of work on not just economic coercion but various aspects of countering PRC disinformation. There are a range of problematic PRC behaviors and policies that play out in the various domains. And so I think what I would say on that is that we have done quite a bit within the department to change both the structure and the focus of our efforts over the – and not just under this administration, but in recent years, we've actually created a program of regional China officers. We now have, I think, 18, and they are in – they're based overseas. They work with our country teams to help assess the challenge and strengthen our advocacy. We work through the channels we're discussing here – allies, partners, multilateral, et cetera.

So it's an increasing focus of our work. But beyond that, I don't really have anything specific to say

about Latin America or sub-Saharan Africa right now, though.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** And maybe I can just add that it's important to note that the U.S.-EU China – dialogue on China is one area where we talk about these issues, but certainly pushing back against economic coercion by the PRC specifically and others was a topic of the Trade and Technology Council ministerial that happened earlier this fall in Pittsburgh. And we have engaged in robust discussions with the EU on a variety of issues that are related.

But I would say as well I expect that there will be conversations around Build Back Better World and the EU's Global Gateway program, which are designed to provide an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative. Of course, we also talk intensely about issues such as investment screening, supply chain resilience, and any number of other issues in the economic context, both in the TTC and then analogously in the dialogue on China. So that's certainly an area where we have robust conversations ongoing transatlantically.

**MODERATOR:** I think we have time for just one more question. Rosiland, the notice to the press did go out regarding the conversation that Deputy Secretary Sherman and Secretary General Sannino will have on Friday. That's going to be at 2:30, so there – that notice to the press is out.

At this point, let's go to the line of Nike Ching.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) I would like to ask about South China Sea dispute, and I would like to know whether or not a more frequent joint freedom of navigation between the U.S. and EU in the Indo-Pacific region, including South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, is something that has been discussed. And if I could get your take on that, that'll be great.

Separately, Indonesia is traditionally not too involved in the South China Sea dispute, but recent media reports indicate an unusual protest from China against Indonesia for oil and natural gas drilling in disputed maritime territory. I want to know if have any comment on that. Thank you so much.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO:** Sure. Well, look, I think on the issues you mentioned there's obviously a growing concern, I think on both sides of the Atlantic, about PRC's asserted activities, gray zone activities, in both the South and East China Sea contexts and in the cross-strait context. And so I think we've had pretty fruitful discussions both with the EU and a number of our European partners on how we see the challenge. I also think that, as events in Lithuania remind us, the EU and many EU members, as well as other Europeans, have been focused quite a bit on the economic coercion aspects of the PRC response to Lithuania's decision to open a Taiwan trade office. So these issues I think are very much current in our conversations in the transatlantic context and I suspect they'll continue to be so long as the underlying problems remain.

**MODERATOR:** I believe we have time for just one more question. Let's quickly go to the line of Sylvie Lanteaume.

**QUESTION:** Hello.

**MODERATOR:** Yes, we can hear you, Sylvie. Go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Okay, thank you. Can you tell me what you expect from the EU in terms of trade with China? And also, is there a convergence of view on Taiwan?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE:** Sure. So I would say that the primary forum for discussion of trade issues is the Trade and Technology Council rather than the U.S.-EU dialogue on China, but we have certainly consulted with the EU on our approach to trade issues with the PRC as

well as on the CAI, which, as you know, is currently on hold, and more importantly, our shared concerns in terms of state-owned enterprises, in terms of level playing field issues broadly, and economic coercion that we see from the PRC.

On Taiwan, I would say that certainly what we have seen over the last couple of months has certainly been concern on both sides of the Atlantic regarding the steps that Taiwan and Lithuania have taken to deepen their cooperation, particularly through Taiwan's opening of the representative office in Vilnius and Lithuania's plans to open a reciprocal office in Taipei, and certainly Taiwan will be a topic of discussion in the dialogue tomorrow.

**MODERATOR:** And with that, we're out of time. I would like to quickly thank once again everyone for dialing in and participating with us today. I'd especially like to thank our two senior State Department officials who were our briefers. Again, that's and . Once again, as a reminder, this briefing was on background to senior State Department officials, and with that, the briefing is concluded and the embargo is lifted. Have a great rest of your day.

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**To:** Good ander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** December 7, 2021 5:08 PM (UTC-05:00)

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## [Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya On the Upcoming Summit for Democracy](#)

12/07/2021 04:43 PM EST

Uzra Zeya, Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights

Washington, D.C.

Press Briefing Room

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. As I think everyone knows, National Security Advisor Sullivan will be at the White House within the hour to offer some context and some readout on the President's engagement earlier today with President Putin of the Russian Federation, so I encourage you all to tune into that.

In the meantime, we are especially fortunate and pleased to have with us today our Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Uzra Zeya. She is here with us today because we are on the precipice of the Summit for Democracy, something we're very excited about and something Under Secretary Zeya has spent many hours, along with many others, putting together over the course of many weeks and months here.

So with that, I'll turn it over to the under secretary. She will have some opening remarks, and then she looks forward to taking your questions.

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Thanks so much, Ned. Good afternoon, everyone. It's wonderful to be back at the podium and see some familiar faces.

This week, President Biden will host over 100 world leaders in a virtual Summit for Democracy. They'll be joined by hundreds more members of civil society, including journalists, activists, law makers, the private sector, philanthropies to focus the world's attention on what the President has called "the challenge of our time" – reversing the ongoing global democratic recession.

This is the largest gathering of its kind. More than half of the UN member states will gather virtually, democracies of all shapes and sizes, established and emerging, bringing together the rich diversity, creativity, and problem-solving that the world needs right now to ensure democracies deliver for their people.

We approach this week with both humility and confidence. Humility in that we want to listen and learn and don't shy away from our shortcomings; confidence in our constant striving for a more perfect union and our certainty that, working together, democracies can and will deliver for the world's citizens, regardless of the raw deal that autocrats and authoritarians try to sell.

Make no mistake, we're at a moment of democratic reckoning, when the greatest challenges we face cross borders, regions, and domains of expertise. It's no secret that democracies around the world

are facing increasing challenges from new and novel threats. Countries in virtually every region of the world have experienced degrees of democratic backsliding. More than 350 reporters around the world are sitting in jail just for doing their jobs. The internet is being weaponized to spread misinformation and enable authoritarian leaders' surveillance of their own people. And so-called "news deserts" are taking the place of free, independent media. This all has to change, and this week's summit is a galvanizing moment for the world to reinvigorate its efforts to ensure that democracies are resilient, inclusive, governed by and for the people, and deliver in ways that make lives better.

Let me preview for you some of what will happen this week and what you'll hear from the administration on its commitments at home and abroad.

Our first event tomorrow – or "Day Zero" of the summit – is on media freedom and sustainability, bright and early at 6am EDT with Secretary Blinken and co-hosted with the Netherlands. Appropriately for this group, kicking off with this event recognizes the indispensable role independent media plays in strengthening democracies. Tomorrow's program also features events highlighting the crucial role of women and young people's voices, energy, and ideas in building 21st century democracies that reflect their aspirations. Finally, starting tomorrow and throughout the summit, you'll hear often about the double-edged sword technological development presents as both a means to advance democratic renewal but also a tool of autocrats who seek to repress and silence their people.

Day One, Thursday, December 9th, will feature a closed-door event for government leaders and then move to open sessions around various themes such as democracies building back better from COVID and working together to fight 21st century corruption with 21st century tools.

On Day Two, Friday, December 10th, we'll welcome discussion on protecting human rights both through norms and standards development, but importantly also by supporting and protecting human rights defenders and journalists on the front lines who put their lives at risk every day. We'll also hear more about tech and democracy during day two.

Throughout all of this, as we've said from the start, civil society voices, including women and young people, play a prominent role. We welcome them at the panel discussions, as well as their important side events. In fact, Secretary Blinken and the department's leadership are participating in dozens of side events at various levels this week.

I kicked off my summit week yesterday with a truly inspiring conversation with civil society leaders from difficult environments, and it brought home to me again why we're doing a Summit for Democracy. Because it matters. American leadership matters. It matters that over 100 leaders will come together this week and advance solutions, not just identify problems. And it's truly an honor for me to be here with you today to show the world one of the pillars of democracy – government engagement with an open and free press.

Thank you. And with that, I am happy to take your questions.

**MR PRICE:** Mr. Lee.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Hi. And thanks for doing this.

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Hi.

**QUESTION:** I have a question that's not – well, it's kind of – it is related to this, but it's also a little bit different. Having been present at the creation more – almost two – more than two decades ago now of the Community of Democracies in Warsaw, what has happened to that? Has it just gone the way

of the dodo bird? Is that no – is the Community of Democracies no longer a thing?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** No, Matt. The Community of Democracies still exists, and I think it's a good example of the existing mechanisms that we hope this Summit for Democracy effort will complement. We are not seeking to create a permanent secretariat or a new organization, per se. You can consider this week's December 9th and 10th event a kickoff for what we hope will be a Year of Action through 2022, culminating in – public health conditions permitting – an in-person gathering of the participating leaders with the President to take stock of progress and show that we are delivering in these three core areas of focus for the summit.

**QUESTION:** Okay. But as far as —

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** So the Community continues to exist.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** The United States takes part in it. We're not seeking to supplant that effort.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Nick.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Uzra. Nick Wadhams from Bloomberg. Can you talk about some of the concerns that other countries are maybe uneasy with this summit because they're of a sense that they may be asked to take sides? Obviously, China and Russia are not invited. There are some countries, particularly in the Asia Pacific, that feel like they're a little bit in between a rock and a hard place. So how does the – how do you address the concern that the administration with this summit is essentially asking countries to make a choice between the U.S. and China or democracies versus autocracies?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Well, to be clear, this summit is not about taking sides. It's not meant to be divisive or adversarial. It really is all about an affirmative agenda with fellow democracies to lead by example, to learn from one another, to demonstrate how and why democracies are working to deliver for their people.

I think it's important to note that data shows that free and democratic societies have healthier citizens, less violent conflict, and more prosperous communities. And we, as a government, promote adherence to democratic norms internationally so that people around the world can benefit from democracy, not just the people in the United States or the people of one region or one group.

So it's really about the affirmative agenda in the three core areas of effort, also progress on supporting free and independent media, anti-corruption, free and fair elections. It's a robust agenda but one that I think is going to be judged by concrete, meaningful, and hopefully collective action.

**MR PRICE:** Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you, just because there has been some criticism about the inclusion of the Philippines and Pakistan and others who've been criticized by the State Department in its own Human Rights Report? And separately, was there a deliberate decision not to include any monarchies? Because some fairly open Arab countries have complained as well that they're not invited, even though they are much more open than some of the others I've just mentioned.

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Thank you. In terms of the strategy and the approach as far as

participants, the United States reached out to a regionally diverse set of democracies who we assessed whose progress and commitments would advance a more just and peaceful world. Our goal was to be as inclusive as possible within logistical constraints and also to ensure that all relevant views and viewpoints could be represented.

And on this point, I want to note that this is not just a virtual gathering of governments. It's multistakeholder. You'll see very strong representation of civil society, of the private sector, of – as I mentioned in my remarks – local leaders, law makers from all over the world.

But in the long run, to be clear, we want to engage any and all countries who have a genuine willingness in making commitments, in making progress on the overarching summit goals. So this is an agenda that is not limited to the countries participating in the summit. It's truly part of President Biden's exhortation to all of us to work to center our democratic values and our human rights and our foreign policy, and that applies to all U.S. embassies all over the world.

**QUESTION:** And on the Philippines specifically?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** With respect to the Philippines, this is – I would just underscore to you a couple of points. The Philippines is a longstanding ally of the United States, and their commitment to democracy is an integral element of our partnership. It's a multiparty constitutional republic which conducted largely free and fair midterm elections in May 2019 and, as we all know, is preparing to hold national elections in 2022. So we're committed as a government to helping the Philippines strengthen its democratic resilience, and we regularly raise the importance of protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in our bilateral engagements. And we see the summit as part of that effort.

**MR PRICE:** Simon.

**QUESTION:** So we've heard a little bit about there's – this is a virtual summit and then next year there's an in-person summit, right, and one of the things that we've heard from civil society is that it would be good to – you're getting countries to make commitments and it would be good if there's at least a threat or a risk of people being disinvited from the summit in a year's time. I wonder if you could clarify whether that is something that could happen if a country makes a commitment and then shows no effort in pursuing that.

And sort of related to that, what is the kind of mechanism for holding countries to the commitments that they make? Are you relying purely on civil society and journalists to do that, or is there some kind of formal mechanism that could be introduced here?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Right. I think you raised a very important point that will really animate the 2022 Year of Action to follow this summit. So civil society participation I think is critical in terms of integrating the views of diverse international actors who are at the front line of this issue set, but also, we look to civil society to help hold us – the United States – and other governments accountable to meeting the commitments that will be made public in a very open and transparent fashion on December 9th and 10th. So there is the process of accountability.

I think there's also the prospect of civil society helping us identify potentially new commitments. With a number of the commitments that the United States is going to put on the table and other partners, we really look to engage civil society not only at this week's events but in the Year of Action to follow on how we can make them more meaningful, more effective in making progress towards the three overarching goals.

**QUESTION:** But can they be disinvited? If they're here now, are they definitely going to be here next



year?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** I mean, I'm not going to get into hypotheticals about 2022, but certainly the interval period between these two events, the virtual and hopefully the in-person, really gives us, I think, a rare opportunity to translate into action commitments that are going to be put on the table. So this is not a one-off event, but it's really an ongoing engagement process that we hope will culminate in an in-person summit with new platforms and coalitions working together meaningfully on these core issues.

**MR PRICE:** There's time for a couple more. Francesco.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Just to follow up on Simon's question, what are we expecting to have on Friday at the end of the summit? Is it a roadmap, a plan of actions with detailed commitments by every country that will be followed on during the year? What is it? How will you judge what every country will do over the next year?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Certainly we look to all of you, the media, but also civil society to judge and assess what's put forward. You will have multiple governments, including the United States, putting forth concrete commitments for progress in these areas. And again, just to recap on the United States side, what you'll see is a focus on bolstering free and independent media; fighting corruption; defending free and fair elections; strengthening civic capacity, including the political leadership of women, girls, and marginalized groups; and harnessing technology for democratic renewal. These will be both in terms of policy prescriptions as well as new assistance platforms that generate more resources to champions in need in these areas.

I think you're going to see from a number of other governments taking part other meaningful commitments in these areas, and possibly new ones. So the concept is to be open and transparent in putting these out in the public domain and to really use the Year of Action to hone them and to elicit what we hope will be more collaboration, more mutually reinforcing action towards these common goals.

**QUESTION:** And was what every country was ready to put on the table one of the factors for them to being invited or not?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** I think the approach that we took was an open and inclusive engagement approach, where we shared what we're planning to do and basically welcomed and invited participating governments to come to the table specifically this Thursday and Friday with – ready to share their ideas, their programs, and projects in these areas.

So I'd sum up by saying stay tuned, but I think you will find there is going to be a robust set of commitments and common actions that are – that we hope will make this the galvanizing opportunity that I noted at the outset.

**MR PRICE:** Please.

**QUESTION:** How do you explain that the three countries in the Northern Triangle in Central America have not been invited – I am talking about Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras – even (inaudible) like a key region in the immigration efforts by the Biden administration? Is the U.S. losing confidence in the push for democracy in these countries?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Well, I think with respect to the Northern Triangle countries, as you know, the administration has made substantial and very important commitments with respect to supporting governance, supporting democratic progress, fighting corruption, and advancing the rule of

law. I think we would have hoped to see a number of these countries join the summit. We welcome progress in some of these key areas that might make that possible, but our focus this week is really working with the governments who have shown their readiness to come forward and make commitments in these areas. And then I think, as I mentioned at the outset, we're really ready to work with any and all governments who want to make commitments or join in efforts that we'll be putting on the table very soon.

**QUESTION:** So you're saying that they didn't make enough progress in the last months?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Well, I mean, I think with respect to some of these countries, there are a number of concerns with respect to the direction of rule of law and governance and anti-corruption efforts. So we certainly encourage more. We have vibrant relations with all of these countries that you mentioned. But in the end, the invitation to join us at the summit, it's not a mark of approval, nor is non-invitation from the summit a sign of disapproval from the United States. We're ready to engage any and all governments who are prepared to work with us on this agenda, and it's going to be a very open and transparent gathering that most of you will be able to observe and comment on, and we will follow up later in the year and through the coming year to try to make these commitments part of a collective, meaningful effort.

**MR PRICE:** Time for one brief, final question.

**QUESTION:** Thank you from South Korea. During the summit, is the U.S. planning to talk about Beijing Olympics and diplomatic boycott with other allies, such as South Korea or Japan?

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** With respect to the Olympics, I believe my colleague the spokesman made our position quite clear. So the summit is not directed against any country, nor is it focused on any one country. Our position, I think, is quite transparent. We've shared it with partners around the world, and now with the public at large, and I think it speaks for itself.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you very much, Under Secretary Zeya. Appreciate your time.

**UNDER SECRETARY ZEYA:** Thank you. Thanks, everyone.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

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## [Department Press Briefing with Spokesperson Ned Price – December 8, 2021](#)

*12/08/2021 05:51 PM EST*

Office of the Spokesperson

2:11 p.m. EST

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Good to see everyone. I have a few things at the top.

First, today, I join Secretary Blinken, Under Secretary Fernandez, and Senior Bureau Official Matt Murray in congratulating the winners of the 2021 Secretary of State's Award for Corporate Excellence, or ACE. Earlier today, the Secretary announced this year's six ACE winners and two alternates – U.S. companies that exemplify American values and international best practices in their operations overseas.

In the category of Economic Inclusion, this year's ACE winners were Purnaa, for empowering survivors of trafficking and discrimination in Nepal, as well as Mastercard India, for supporting and revamping India's first-ever Rural Women's Chamber of Commerce. The Secretary also recognized alternate winner Whirlpool Slovakia for materially improving the lives of the Roma community.

In the category of Health Security, the ACE winners were Zipline for its work deploying delivery drones that have distributed a quarter million COVID-19 vaccine doses to remote areas of Ghana, as well as 3M Singapore for drastically ramping up production of N95 respirators to combat COVID-19.

Finally, the Secretary honored three U.S. companies in the ACE Climate Innovation category. Australis Aquaculture has pioneered climate-smart ocean farming in Vietnam's marine tropics, Patagonia has advanced initiatives in Argentina to promote nature-based climate solutions, and alternate winner Aerosol has undertaken important research in Slovenia on measuring and combating black carbon.

Congratulations from the department to all the 2021 ACE winners which demonstrate a strong commitment to advancing key global priorities and improving the communities in which they operate.

Also today, Secretary Blinken announced the second cohort of the State Department's international Anticorruption Champions. These 12 individuals have demonstrated leadership, courage, and impact in preventing, exposing, and combating corruption around the world.

As we have witnessed too many times, corruption erodes public trust in government and democratic institutions, it deepens poverty and inequity, and it stifles opportunity and economic growth. That is why President Biden designated the fight against corruption as a core U.S. national security priority, and why addressing and combating corruption is a central theme of the Summit for Democracy.

We recognize that in our interconnected global system, no country can effectively fight corruption

alone. We are honored to work alongside anti-corruption champions, like those recognized today, to defeat corruption.

And finally today, the State Department is pleased to announce the winners of the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund small grants competition. The CDAF is an annual grant opportunity for the U.S. Government – for U.S. Government-sponsored or funded exchange program alumni teams from across the United States to apply the skills, knowledge and networks they have gained through their exchange program experiences. The State Department is funding 47 U.S. alumni-led public service projects from over 23 states and territories addressing challenges faced by communities in the United States and around the world. Winning projects include programs seeking to increase international exchanges at HBCUs, building community among under-represented Hawaiian youth through art, and combating misinformation through a global virtual media literacy campaign.

We look forward to sharing the progress of these alumni as they implement their innovative projects in cities and towns across the United States, with international partners abroad, and on digital platforms. You can follow our updates at #CDAF on Twitter for updates.

And with that, I would be happy to take your questions. Francesco.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I would like to start with Iran. The EU has announced that the seventh round, which started last week in Vienna, will resume tomorrow. Does that mean that Rob Malley is going back to Vienna and will be there from tomorrow? Is he waiting for a eighth round? What are your expectation for the days ahead?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you noted, Francesco, the European External Action Service has announced that the seventh round of talks will resume tomorrow in Vienna. We understand there will be a day of meetings before the heads of delegations need to attend other events, and so Special Envoy Malley and his interagency delegation will plan to join the talks over the weekend.

Our priority, as we said and what we've been focused on, is less the temporal aspect – when the talks will resume – and more the substance, more the question of how the talks will resume. And it is still our contention that the talks need to resume with Iran returning to Vienna prepared to negotiate in good faith, prepared to pick up from where the sixth round of talks left off, prepared to build on the progress, the significant progress in some areas that the P5+1 was able to achieve with Iran over the course of those six rounds.

We have a good base from which to operate, and it is certainly our hope that Iran will return willing and able to operate from that base to see to it, to test the proposition as to whether we can in fact achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** Is that the last chance for Iran to prove they're willing to do that or —

**MR PRICE:** Well, we've addressed this on a number of occasions. Yesterday, the Secretary spoke to this again. I believe the phraseology he used yesterday is the runway is getting very, very short for negotiations.

Now there is a difference between a short runway and a nonexistent runway. We continue to believe that a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA is possible. That is why we are returning for the next iteration of talks, the continuation of the seventh round in Vienna. We are returning, and we continue to believe that the possibility for diplomacy towards a mutual return to compliance is a viable option because we also know that it is the most durable and the best option to permanently and verifiably do what we seek to do, what our European allies seek to do, what our partners in the P5+1 – namely Russia and China – seek to do, and that is to verifiably and permanently prevent Iran from

ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

So we are going to go back ready to negotiate indirectly, as it were, with Iran, to seek to build on that progress, to see to it if we can in fact achieve a mutual return to compliance, knowing that diplomacy towards that end is the best option for us, it's the best option for our P5+1 partners, and we certainly hope that Iran returns to Vienna recognizing the – recognizing what a mutual return to compliance would bring, would convey for the Iranian people as well.

Lara.

**QUESTION:** Have you gotten any indication or has this department gotten any indication in the last week that Iran is prepared to return in a position that's closer to what the previous negotiations had yielded? Or is this more of a we're going back to see what everybody decided at their capitals and we're – don't really have any indication of which way the wind is going to blow at this point?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as I think you know, Lara, the Iranians have made quite clear their reluctance to engage directly with the United States. We've said on multiple occasions that there are a number of complications and challenges in the context of these talks in Vienna. One of them is the indirect nature of these talks. We do think they would be much more efficient and that we could achieve additional progress perhaps on a – at a quicker pace if we were able to engage in direct negotiations with the Iranians, but right now that's not in the cards.

So in Vienna and in other contexts, we are reliant on our partners in the P5+1 context who do have direct conversations with their Iranian counterparts. Our European partners and others have in recent days read out their conversations with senior Iranian counterparts. Those discussions are ongoing. I wouldn't want to characterize what we've heard, what they've conveyed to us, what they may be hearing from the Iranians or not.

But again, we continue to believe that the door to a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA remains open. We will continue to negotiate as long as we think that's the case and as long as we think that a return to the JCPOA conveys advantages over the alternatives. And right now, we think it does. The way Rob Malley puts this, it is not so much a temporal clock. It's not a clock as you might think of it. It's also a technological clock. It's based on the advancements that Iran is very clearly making in its nuclear program. And Iran has made no secret of what – of some of what it is doing or what it seeks to do. And so we are watching that very closely. We know our European partners are watching that very closely. We know Russia and China are watching that very closely. And we know the IAEA is watching that very closely.

So as we take into account all of these inputs, what we're hearing from our allies and partners, what we are hearing from the IAEA, what we are seeing ourselves, what the Iranians are saying, what the Iranians are doing, these are all factoring into our calculus when it comes to the posture we take vis-à-vis Vienna, and ultimately the posture we take vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear program.

**QUESTION:** No, I wasn't trying to imply that there was a direct negotiation between the United States and Iran.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** I was just more interested in whether – as Rob and his team heads back to Vienna, whether there is any indication maybe from allies, maybe from other P5 members as to whether the ball might actually move forward or if this is just – they're going in blind?

**MR PRICE:** Look, we said this in advance of the seventh round, and I think it's true in advance of —

**QUESTION:** The seven —

**MR PRICE:** — the 7.5 —

**QUESTION:** Yes. (Laughter.)

**MR PRICE:** — that we should know in pretty short order if the Iranians are going and returning to negotiate in good faith. So I don't think you will see a long lag between the resumption of this round and when the United States and our allies and partners are in a position to judge whether the Iranians have returned in a position and with a willingness to engage in substantive negotiations.

Yes, Daphne.

**QUESTION:** Do you have an estimate of how long these talks will last this round?

**MR PRICE:** I don't, and I don't for a couple reasons, but primarily it will be a function of what we see and what we hear from the Iranians. The last phase of round seven was quite quick, and it was quite quick because it was clear to us, it was clear to our European allies, it was clear to the EU, it was clear to Russia and China that Iran had not come with a seriousness of purpose. And what we will be looking for as soon as these talks resume – and again, there are going to be some preliminary elements and our team's going to return over the weekend – what we will be looking for is that seriousness of purpose. And it's not the sort of thing that will take weeks to judge. We will know in pretty short order whether the Iranians have returned with a different mindset, with a different approach.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Don't you already know that?

**QUESTION:** Can you —

**MR PRICE:** No, because they haven't returned.

**QUESTION:** Well, yeah, but they – they did return. They came back —

**MR PRICE:** And —

**QUESTION:** — and you decided they weren't serious, and now you're giving them one more chance to be serious?

**MR PRICE:** We are giving diplomacy – diplomacy towards a mutual return to compliance – another chance because it's in our interests. It remains in our interests, above all the other alternatives, to seek a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. But, Matt, I mean, to your point, it will not always be in our interest to seek a return to the JCPOA. Eventually we may conclude that either the Iranians aren't serious and won't be serious going forward, or the technological clock will have run out and the advancements that the Iranians are making no bones about making will outweigh the advantages that a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA would convey.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** You mentioned 7.5 round of talks. Is that an official term?

**MR PRICE:** I think I just made that up.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** But we can quote you on that? (Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** Also, can you preview anything ahead of Secretary Blinken's meeting with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz tomorrow? Is that all about Iran, mostly about Iran? And the timing of that I assume is not anything to do with the Iranian – the talks beginning again?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Benny Gantz, Defense Minister Gantz, is not Secretary Blinken's direct counterpart, and so the – Defense Minister Gantz will also be meeting with his direct counterparts at the Pentagon, and I think you'll hear more from the Pentagon about those discussions. But clearly, every opportunity we have to meet with senior Israeli officials and important figures in the Israeli political system is one we're seeking to take advantage of. There is a lot on the bilateral agenda. There is a lot on the regional agenda. And so I fully expect regional security issues, including what we're seeing with Iran and, as we've said before, the alternatives that we might be forced to pursue if Iran shows to us, shows to our allies and partners that it's not willing to return in a substantive, a genuine, a constructive way to Vienna – I imagine, too, those alternatives will be a topic of discussion with Defense Minister Gantz.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Can I switch to Russia?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** So President Biden said earlier today that he hoped to announce that there will be meetings between the U.S., quote, "at least four major NATO Allies and Russia" to discuss the future of Russia's concerns relative to NATO writ large, and whether they can work out accommodations when it comes to bringing down the temperature on the eastern front. What is the State Department's involvement in those meetings? Who are the four major NATO Allies? And is the U.S. prepared to make concessions to Russia on NATO, and what do you say to criticism that that legitimizes Russia's position on NATO?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the President, as you heard earlier this morning, did say he'd have – we would have more to say, the administration would have more to say later this week. So I don't want to get ahead of where we are, but let me make a few general points.

You heard from – you've heard from the President in his public statements, you've heard from the National Security Advisor, you heard from the Secretary of State when he spoke after the teleconference yesterday that we continue to believe that diplomacy and de-escalation is the only responsible way to end and to resolve what could be a serious crisis. We are concerned – we are profoundly concerned by what we have seen, but it is not yet a foregone conclusion that we will see actual conflict. And so we are doing, and determined to do, everything we can diplomatically to see to it that these tensions are de-escalated and that our concerns and those of our Ukrainian partners, of our NATO Allies as well, are mitigated and addressed.

And we continue to believe that we can do that most effectively by returning to dialogue through diplomatic avenues, namely the full implementation of the Minsk agreement and – the Minsk agreements, I should say. And so we are working in close consultation with our allies and partners in pursuit of ways we can de-escalate, ways we can see to it that the parties fully implement Minsk on the path to de-escalation. We're also working with our interagency and other partners around the globe for a full set of contingencies, including preparing, as you've heard, specific and robust responses to Russian escalation should it continue and should these responses be required.



So we are consulting internally, we are consulting with our partners across Europe, with NATO members, with our key Indo-Pacific allies on the way forward to do a couple of things. Number one, to ensure that we have – that we're operating from the same sheet of music, that we have a common understanding of Russia's plans, but also to see to it that we have a common understanding of what would need to happen if Russia does not desist in its aggressive acts and if its military incursion does in fact go forward.

And in fact, as part of that, the Secretary earlier today had a conversation with the NATO secretary general. We'll have a readout of that call, but this, of course, follows the President's call yesterday after his discussion with President Putin, with our NATO Allies; it follows Secretary Blinken's discussion the day before with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, and, of course, President Biden will be speaking again with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine tomorrow.

And so what you've heard from the President is that if Russia chooses to pursue this path of confrontation, we and our allies are prepared – and we've heard this loud and clear, including in the NATO ministerial last week – to impose significant and severe economic harm on the Russian economy using these economic measures that we heretofore have intentionally chosen not to pursue. That includes those strong economic measures, but you also heard from Jake Sullivan yesterday. It also includes additional defensive material to Ukraine, of course above and beyond what we are already providing to our partners in Kyiv, as well as fortifying our NATO Allies on the eastern flank with additional capabilities in response to any military incursion.

As we've said, the Secretary has had a number of opportunities now to speak with key allies and key partners, including in a collective setting last week in NATO, and it was very clear to us that our allies and partners share our deep concern but also our stalwart resolve if Moscow chooses to go ahead with this military activity. And so it is our task, as you heard from the White House, as was noted in the readout, as the President alluded to this morning, to coordinate in lockstep with our allies and with Ukraine and other partners as the situation develops on the ground to ensure, on the one hand, that the deterrent measures we have put on the table send a very clear signal to Moscow regarding what would befall the Russian Federation were this to go forward, but also to do everything we can to help facilitate that diplomacy in any way we can.

And chiefly, that diplomacy in the form of full implementation of the Minsk agreements – that's what we think right now remains the most effective, the best way to de-escalate tensions and to see to it that the measures we have spoken to, the measures that we have heard our European and NATO Allies are committed to, that they need not be implemented. That, ultimately, is our goal, to see to it that this contingency planning, which is very real and very robust, remains contingency planning and that it does not need to be implemented.

**QUESTION:** Your comment, though, on the —

**QUESTION:** Ned, if you keep – if you keep talking you might actually break a filibuster record for the Senate floor.

**QUESTION:** Nice. Your comment on the same sheet of music, though, suggests that there is divergence among the allies. Where is that – is there not lockstep on the sanctions measures to take? Is there not lockstep on the understanding of when these would be triggered?

**MR PRICE:** No, I was attempting to convey the opposite, in fact. We went to the NATO ministerial last week as part of the latest iteration of this department's efforts to ensure that our NATO Allies, Ukraine, and others were on the same page in terms of the information and intelligence that we have on the military buildup, but also to preview and to ensure that there was broad consensus about the need for these high-impact economic measures that we are very clearly willing and able to implement,

and what we heard from our NATO Allies last week is that there is a shared resolve. There is a shared and collective recognition that were Moscow not to change course, if Moscow did go ahead with a military invasion, that there would be collective action, that it would not only be the United States prepared and ready to take such measures, but we would also have support and see similar actions from our NATO Allies as well.

**QUESTION:** Do another Russia one?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** And then I have another question, too, after that. On Russia, the Russians are proposing lifting all restrictions on the embassies, and I wonder if that's something you guys would consider. I assume that means they want their dachas back.

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have made progress, as you have heard, on these issues in recent days. There have been discussions in recent weeks. Those have achieved some degree of process – progress, excuse me – and I understand that those discussions are set to resume.

The point in the context of the regional dynamic in terms of what we're seeing now vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine is a similar point to the bilateral context, and that is that we want channels of communication. We want and need the ability to have open and frank and candid dialogue with the Russian Federation. It's precisely why President Biden took part in a summit meeting with President Putin in Switzerland in June. It's exactly why the President took part in a video teleconference with President Putin yesterday. But clearly not every issue, whether it is embassy staffing, whether it is about Russia's aggression, whether it is an issue related to cyber, whether it is strategic stability, can be handled at the presidential level, and that's why we have embassies.

That's why we have the State Department, to continue the work of diplomacy on a day-to-day basis so that these issues can be handled when appropriate on a routine basis. And so we need that in the context of Russia just as we need that with most other countries around the world, because we do have serious issues that are on the table. We do have serious work that needs to be done. And so we want a fully functioning embassy in Moscow. We fully understand the Russian desire to have a fully functioning embassy here in Washington. And we prioritize that. We value these open lines of communication and dialogue, but there has to be reciprocity. And I think what the Russians have shown in recent months is that they have been unwilling – heretofore, at least – to allow us to have a fully functioning embassy in Moscow.

And so our – the steps that we have taken are based on the principle of reciprocity. We certainly hope that we can reinforce these diplomatic channels so that we can reinforce the dialogue, reinforce the communication that needs to take place between the United States and the Russian Federation on the basis of our national interests, because there are quite a few national interests at stake here.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, my other question is on China. This – the Uyghur Forced Labor Protection Act is about to pass in the House. Senator Rubio is accusing the Biden administration of lobbying against it. I'm wondering if that's accurate. And if so, if you do oppose it, why?

**MR PRICE:** I am glad you asked, because there has been some misimpression out there. We do not oppose this. We are not lobbying against it. And in fact, I think if you look at our record, you will see the actions that we have taken over the course – not of days, not of weeks, but of months – on the issue of forced labor, on the broader set of human rights abuses that are taking place in Xinjiang.

This administration has, I would argue in our first 11 – 10, 11 months in office, perhaps done more than any administration, and has really galvanized the international community to put a spotlight on

what is taking place in Xinjiang. And you can just, for the most recent example, look at the announcement we made on Monday regarding our posture towards the Beijing Olympics.

But going back to really the earliest weeks of this administration, and you look at the financial sanctions, including the multilateral sanctions, the visa restrictions, the export restrictions, the withhold release orders, the business advisory, the releases we have put out, being as transparent as we can about the goods that are being produced by child labor, or forced labor, including those emanating from Xinjiang, the UN side events, the joint statements, the other steps that we have taken really to make clear that these practices are abhorrent, these practices are nothing that the United States, any other country, or any private sector entity should be in any way supporting directly or indirectly.

And this goes back to a discussion we had on Monday. We continue to use the tools available to us as a government to send that signal very clearly, to hold to account those who are responsible for these abuses, but also to provide other elements of society – including the private sector – with the information that they need so that they do not even unwittingly support directly or indirectly in any way the practices that are ongoing in Xinjiang, including those with regard to forced labor.

These are – when we – in the context of American companies, these are good American companies. They have no intention and no desire, certainly, to in any way contribute to this. And so it is in large part our charge to put out as much information as we can, to shine a spotlight as bright as we can on what is taking place there.

And so no, we certainly don't oppose this legislation, and we look forward to working with Congress on additional ways that we can shine a spotlight, hold to account those responsible, and put an end to these reprehensible practices.

**QUESTION:** So just to put a fine point on it, there's nothing in this legislation that you disagree with or that you would like changed?

**MR PRICE:** We don't oppose it.

**QUESTION:** You have no issue with any part of it?

**MR PRICE:** We do not oppose this legislation.

**QUESTION:** No, I'm – yeah, I know, generally. But is there any specific element of it that you would like to see changed? Or are you okay with – if it passed as written right now, you're fine with it?

**MR PRICE:** We do not and are not opposing it. I understand it hasn't passed because of issues that are internal to the Congress.

**QUESTION:** Are we talking about —

**QUESTION:** Okay. But not – but the administration doesn't have any issue with any part of the bill?

**MR PRICE:** We do not oppose this legislation.

**QUESTION:** That's different, Ned, than what I'm asking you.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I am telling you – I am telling you —

**QUESTION:** You can say – you can say we don't oppose this legislation, but we would like a waiver authority in it that would allow us to exempt anything that we want from it.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I am telling you there —

**QUESTION:** And you would still – it would still be accurate to say that you don't oppose the legislation.

**MR PRICE:** There is nothing – there is nothing —

**QUESTION:** There is nothing in the legislation, as it is written now, that you would disagree with?

**MR PRICE:** There is nothing in this legislation that would cause us to oppose it.

**QUESTION:** Okay. All right. Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I want to ask you about the —

**MR PRICE:** Sorry, was there a follow-up? Sorry.

**QUESTION:** On China?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Just real quickly, since the U.S. announced a diplomatic boycott, Australia, the UK, and Canada have also made announcements. Could I just get your reaction to that? And I know, just separately – I know previously you've said it's the sovereign decision of each nation whether they do a diplomatic boycott or not. But on other issues, you've talked about how actions are more impactful or statements are more impactful when other countries join the U.S., so are you hopeful that you'll see more countries also announce boycotts?

**MR PRICE:** Well, certainly we've noted other countries that have announced similar approaches to the Beijing Olympics. What we have said all along, and you just – you captured the sentiment, is that these are sovereign decisions. And we made our decision based on the human rights abuses, the atrocities, crimes against humanity, the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang. We have heard similar statements emanate from several close allies, but as we have said for months now, what we have been doing and what we did going into Monday when we made our announcement is work closely with allies and partners around the world to establish a shared set of concerns.

And so there has been and there was a good deal of activity on that front. And I think I will leave it to certain governments to speak to why they took the steps they've taken or, as additional governments announce their positions, why they are taking those. But separate and apart from any decisions that countries announce regarding their approach to the Beijing Olympics, we have seen a tremendous amount of convergence, global convergence, regarding what is going on in Xinjiang and the concerns that the global community has. You need only look at the communique that was issued from the G7 Leaders' Summit in the UK earlier this year to note the really strong language – and I think it's paragraph 54 that talks about the concerns that are the concerns that are shared by some of our closest allies in that context.

There have been other multilateral settings, where countries around the world have come together to condemn these abuses, crimes against humanity, these atrocities, the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang. And much of that is a result of the work that the United States has done, again, to shine a spotlight, to hold to account, to make sure that we're all operating from the same set of information.

**QUESTION:** And just a quick follow-up. We've seen athletes, whether it's through social media or through interviews, make political statements in the past. Do you have any concerns if a U.S. athlete

at the Olympic Games makes some kind of gesture or makes some kind of statement, that their safety or security could be in jeopardy by – or some kind of retaliation by the Chinese Government while they're in Beijing?

**MR PRICE:** Well, a couple things on that. Freedom of expression, the ability of individuals to voice their opinions, whether they are shared by the host government or not, that is something that is universal. That is a principle that should apply equally in the PRC as it does in the United States. And so we will be looking to PRC authorities to afford the same level of protection, to treat our athletes with the same level of dignity and respect that all other athletes are accorded in – at the Beijing Olympics. As we discussed the other day, we also will have a fully functioning embassy on the ground, and we will have personnel, as we always do in major events and as we always do around the world, to support our athletes, to provide the essential American citizen services that any American can expect wherever we do have a diplomatic relationship.

And so of course that will be the case, but freedom of expression and the expectation that governments around the world, including the PRC in the context of the upcoming Olympics, respect that – that is something that not only we subscribe to, but also our allies and partners do as well.

**QUESTION:** A quick follow-up. Are you seeking or do you expect a common stance on this at the G7 next weekend in Liverpool?

**MR PRICE:** A common stance on —

**QUESTION:** On this, on the diplomatic boycott.

**MR PRICE:** I don't know that it's on the agenda. Again, these are sovereign decisions that each country, each government will need to make.

Anything else on China? Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Yeah, back to the corporate sponsors for a second. I understand your point that you've given the companies all the information they need and your point I think you made a couple of days ago that it's up to – it's not the government's job necessarily to tell the companies what to do. So I'm just wondering, if the U.S. is trying to send a message with this diplomatic boycott and at the same time you have sort of some of the biggest corporate power in the country not taking a stand on the same exact issue, are you concerned at all that that message that you're trying to send is getting a little bit muddled?

**MR PRICE:** Just as each country will need to make a sovereign decision about its approach to the Olympics, each company will need to make a private decision about its approach to the Beijing Olympics. It is not our place to dictate precisely what American companies should do. It is our place to ensure that American companies and multinational companies and others have at their fingertips a full set of information, have the full facts, and a complete accounting as to what is transpiring in Xinjiang and the concerns that we have, and they will in turn make their decisions based on that.

Again, these are good American companies. I have – none of us have any – are under any illusion that an American company would knowingly or would even put them in a situation – put themselves in a situation of unknowingly or unwittingly aiding or abetting the practices that are ongoing in Xinjiang. And so we are – we have set out to provide that full set of information, that full set of facts so that American companies can make those decisions on the basis of that and can do so effectively.

**QUESTION:** Ned, you guys fine companies all the time for violating sanctions in which they knowingly or unknowingly contribute to conditions such as what's going on there. That's not – and it's not true

that it's not your place to dictate what American companies can – you do it all the time.

**MR PRICE:** The question was put in —

**QUESTION:** If I'm company X, can I do business in North Korea right now? No.

**MR PRICE:** The —

**QUESTION:** Can I do business in Iran right now? No. You – it's just simply not true that you don't ever tell private companies what they can and can't do.

**MR PRICE:** There are cases, of course, Matt, that are in extremis. Those are cases that are in extremis. The —

**QUESTION:** Well, some people would argue that what's going on in Xinjiang is in extremis, right?

**MR PRICE:** And we have taken extraordinary steps since the earliest days of this administration to hold to account to —

**QUESTION:** I'm not criticizing what you're doing. I'm just saying that I – that it doesn't make any sense for you to say that you don't – you can't or never have or never will tell private companies where they can do business or not because you do it all the time.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I was speaking specifically in this context —

**QUESTION:** All right.

**MR PRICE:** — and the question was put to me in that context.

Yes. Lalit.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask about the helicopter crash in Tamil Nadu in which the India chief of defense staff was killed. Do you have anything on that, and do you – are you offering any kind of assistance in the investigations to the Indian Government?

**MR PRICE:** I do, and I believe the Secretary has spoken to this. I believe you have or soon will hear from the deputy secretary as well. But we are deeply saddened to hear of the death of Indian Chief of Defense Staff General Bipin Rawat, his wife, and 11 others in a tragic helicopter crash in India today.

General Rawat was a valued partner. He was a strong proponent of the U.S.-India defense partnership. He helped to deepen the strategic partnership between our two countries. He was pivotal to that relationship, and that's why our thoughts go out to the general's family, to the families of all those on board this flight, and of course the people of India on the loss that they have suffered today.

**QUESTION:** So Secretary has spoken to his counterpart in India?

**MR PRICE:** As soon as we have a call to read out, we will. I know there have been a number of conversations at different levels, but if we have a call to read out, we will do that.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ethiopia. The WFP has suspended food distributions in Ethiopia's Kombolcha and Dessie after looting of supplies, reportedly by elements of Tigrayan forces that staff was unable to stop due to intimidation, including being held at gunpoint. And three WFP trucks were also commandeered this

week. Do you have a reaction to that? And these incidents have happened despite repeated calls from the U.S. for humanitarian aid to be allowed to flow. At what point do you take punitive action? And then just as an aside, do you have any travel for Special Envoy Feltman to preview?

**MR PRICE:** So to the last part of your question, Special Envoy Feltman will depart tomorrow for the UAE, for Turkey, as well as Egypt, and he'll meet with counterparts there to discuss what it is that the international community seeks when it comes to Ethiopia. And that is chiefly a negotiated resolution to the conflict, because we know that that conflict threatens the peace and security in the Horn of Africa.

We've said before that there's no military solution to the conflict in Ethiopia. Our goal in all of this – and this is the goal that Special Envoy Feltman is leaving to pursue – is to support diplomacy as the first, last, and the only option to achieve a cessation of hostilities, as the only option to end the human rights abuses that have been ongoing and to engage the party – engage the parties so that they in turn engage in negotiations without preconditions, and importantly, to permit the unhindered humanitarian access for Tigray, for other parts of northern Ethiopia and broadly, to start a national – inclusive national dialogue as well.

When it comes to humanitarian access, we understand that some food trucks have moved, but they have not done so at remotely the volume the United Nations has said is needed to address the humanitarian catastrophe in Tigray. We believe the Government of Ethiopia must allow unhindered access for life-saving humanitarian assistance to reach all those in need in Tigray and across Ethiopia, and that's regardless of ethnicity. Moving trucks with relief supplies is just one step of many that's necessary to help the millions of people who are in dire need of aid, and we have repeatedly and urgently called for all parties to allow and to facilitate that level of unhindered humanitarian access.

**QUESTION:** You've said that many times. Do you feel that the parties to the conflict are heeding those calls? Have you seen any progress on that, I mean, especially given the events this week – the intimidation of humanitarian staff and the looting?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as I said, we have seen the movement of some trucks, but we need to see more, and it is not so much what we need to see. It is what the people of Tigray, of northern Ethiopia themselves need, given the dire humanitarian situation that they're in. So that is why Special Envoy Feltman and others in this building and across the interagency are remaining focused on this.

We know that the humanitarian catastrophe that is ongoing now in Tigray and northern Ethiopia, it is an absolute priority, and it is part and parcel of the conflict, of the situation that we are seeking to, in conjunction with our partners in the African Union, with other regional partners, to find a way out of. And we continue to believe that the way out of this conflict is through a negotiated resolution, and we continue to encourage the parties to engage in negotiations without preconditions to that end.

On the one hand, we are encouraging, but there also – on the other hand, we do have a set of sticks, and we have talked about those punitive measures that we have employed against some actors in this conflict. The executive order that we announced some weeks ago remains viable. It is an order that we can use to target those beyond the Eritreans, whom we've already targeted under this authority.

You've heard from senior administration officials that we are certainly willing if the parties are unwilling to make progress themselves. But right now, what we're focused on is trying to support that diplomacy, calling, urging, doing everything we can to see to it that there's additional humanitarian access in Tigray and northern Ethiopia.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Did President Biden raise the case of Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed in his call with Putin

yesterday? And if so, was there any progress on that front?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would need to refer you to the White House to speak to the specifics of the call, but we have continued to call on Russia to open consular access for Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed and to improve the poor prison conditions they are currently enduring in Russia. We further call on Russia to swiftly release these individuals, and we know that Russia must extend the same guarantees of safety and transparent protection under the rule of law to all American citizens living in Russia that America extends to Russians living in the United States.

Thank you all very much.

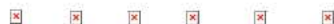
**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:58 p.m.)

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**From:** U.S. Department of State  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Senior Administration Official on U.S. Diplomatic Engagement Regarding Our Ongoing Commitment to Ukraine's Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Independence  
**To:** Goodander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
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[\*\*Senior Administration Official on U.S. Diplomatic Engagement Regarding Our Ongoing Commitment to Ukraine's Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Independence\*\*](#)

*12/17/2021 01:01 PM EST*

Office of the Spokesperson

Via Teleconference

**MODERATOR:** Thank you, Operator, and I'd like to welcome everyone to this morning's on-background briefing. It's good to have you with us.

Just as a reminder here at the top, this briefing today is on background with a senior administration official who will discuss U.S. diplomatic engagement regarding our ongoing commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. To reiterate, the contents of this briefing this morning are on background and they are embargoed until the end of the call.

For your information but not for reporting purposes, I'm going to let you know who our briefer is today. We have on the line with us . In your reporting, you can refer to our briefer as a senior administration official. We will start off with some opening remarks from , and then we can take just a few of your questions.

And with that, I'd like to go ahead and turn it over to .

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** Thanks very much, , and thanks, colleagues, for being with us this morning.

As you know, we remain gravely concerned with the large and unprovoked Russian buildup on Ukraine's borders. We are working intensively with our allies and partners on this issue. We are also concerned about Russia's increasingly harsh rhetoric and pushing a false narrative that Ukraine is somehow seeking to provoke a conflict with Russia. I'd like to be clear: This situation is the responsibility of the Russian Federation. There is no aggressive action on the part of the Ukrainians.

We have been clear with Russia and with our allies and partners that we support diplomacy as a way to de-escalate, ease tensions, and end this aggression against Ukraine. That said, if diplomacy fails, as the G7 said on December 12, as the North Atlantic Council said yesterday in its statement, there will be – if there is any further aggression against Ukraine, that will have massive consequences and will carry a high price.

With regard to the diplomacy, in addition to the stops in Kyiv and Moscow that Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Karen Donfried made earlier in this week, she was also in Brussels yesterday talking to both the EU and our NATO Allies, and that resulted in the statement that you saw yesterday.

National Security Advisor Sullivan spoke with Russian Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Ushakov yesterday as well and has spoken to Ukrainian National Security Advisor Yermak.

We are focused on, as I said, seeing how the United States might be able to support implementation of the Minsk agreements and support Normandy allies France and Germany in their efforts there. Just to underscore, the Normandy Format remains the essential format for the Minsk negotiations, but the U.S. is prepared to use our bilateral channels to Moscow and to Kyiv to support if we can.

We are particularly interested as the Normandy powers are in seeing a Christmas ceasefire and a prisoner exchange. That's something that's under discussion. And we are also – as you know, we received some concrete proposals from the Russians when Assistant Secretary Donfried was in Moscow. We have shared those with our allies.

As we have said, we are prepared to discuss them. That said, there are some things in those documents that the Russians know will be unacceptable, and they know that. But there are other things that we are prepared to work with and that merit some discussion. That said, we will do this with our allies and partners. Nothing about European security without Europeans in the room.

So let me pause there and take any questions that you have.

**MODERATOR:** Operator, would you please repeat the instructions for getting into the question queue?

**OPERATOR:** Once again, press 1 then 0 on your telephone keypad if you have a question. And please do not speak until your line is open.

**MODERATOR:** With that, let's go to our first question. We'll go the line of Nick Wadhams.

**OPERATOR:** Nick, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, . Thanks very much. Can you give us a sense for what in the Russian proposals are unacceptable? Is it essentially the reversion of NATO back to 1997?

And then can you also tell us whether the U.S. is considering kicking Russia out of SWIFT and also would expect Germany to cut or delay the opening of Nord Stream 2 if Russia goes ahead with an invasion? Thanks.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** Oh, well, thanks for that. Let me start by saying that we don't see – unlike the Russian Federation, we don't see any advantage to conducting these negotiations in public, neither the conversations that we're having with our allies and partners nor the conversations we will collectively have with Russia. We believe that if there is a chance for diplomacy to work that it has to be done in a confidential manner.

As we have said with our allies and partners, we are in the process of preparing the severe consequences that would result if Russia decides to take the path of further aggression. I would say that these largely are composed of economic and financial measures, and we are prepared to consider a number of things that we have not considered in the past, and the results will be very profound on the Russian Federation, but I'm not going to go into details.

With regard to Nord Stream 2, you have seen the agreement that the U.S. and Germany concluded with regard to the security impacts on Ukraine and on European security as Nord Stream 2 goes forward and agreements and understandings that we have between us with regard to support for Ukraine and the future of that pipeline, including the reference to suspending it if there is further aggression. We have had good conversations with the new German Government and they have made

some very strong statements of their own with regard to Nord Stream 2 and with regard to their ongoing support for the agreement that we have with them.

With regard to the Russian proposal, again, I'm not going to negotiate it here in public, but I will say a couple of foundational things here, which you'll see reflected also in the North Atlantic Council statements, in the EU statements, in the statements of our individual allies. Any dialogue with Russia has got to proceed on the basis of reciprocity. We and our allies have plenty of concerns about Russia's dangerous and threatening behavior, and those will have to be raised in any conversation that we have.

Also, any negotiation/discussion that we have will have to be based on the core principles and foundational documents of European security and be done together with the Europeans. There will be no talks on European security without our European allies and partners participating, and we will not compromise on key principles on which European security is built, including, as the President has said repeatedly and as he said directly to President Putin, that all countries have the right to decide their own future and their own foreign policy free from outside interference. And that goes for Ukraine and it also goes for NATO Allies and the alliance itself with regard to how it provides a collective defense for its members.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to the line of Christina Ruffini.

**OPERATOR:** Christina, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, can you hear me?

**MODERATOR:** We can hear you, Christina.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much. My colleague stole a bunch of my questions; however, I'd like to follow up on something you said, . You said, "We're prepared to consider a number of things we've not considered in the past, and the results will be very profound on the Russian Federation." I know you're not going to go into details, but can you give us some sort of category of what you mean? Is that a kinetic response, is that an economic response, a combination of both, or is it something that I'm not mentioning and thinking of?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** I think that we've been pretty clear that the package of measures that we're working on – and the EU has said the same thing – would include severe economic and financial consequences, political consequences, et cetera.

**MODERATOR:** And let's go to the line of Michael Crowley.

**OPERATOR:** One moment here. Michael Crowley, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, can you hear me?

**MODERATOR:** We can hear you, Michael.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** We've got you now.

**QUESTION:** Great, thanks. Okay. Thank you. Thanks for doing this. You mentioned economic consequences and political consequences. Just on the question of military assistance to the Ukrainians, some members of Congress have been urging that the U.S. send more military assistance now as a deterrent to a possible invasion. I just wonder if you could address that. Is that something you're considering? What's your response to members of Congress (inaudible) get armed up a little

better now as a deterrent?

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** So thanks, Michael. We have provided just this year alone more than \$450 million in security assistance to Ukraine, and a good amount of that package is continuing to flow. You know the kinds of things that we've provided in the defensive lethal category. We are also in intensive dialogue with the Ukrainians at all levels, including DOD and EUCOM, with regard to their needs. So we will continue to keep those lines open as necessary and as we see what the Ukrainian requirements are.

I would also say that a number of allies are also contributing and we're in conversation with our allies about needs as well and coordinating closely.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to the line now of Barbara Usher.

**OPERATOR:** Barbara, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**MODERATOR:** Barbara, are you on mute?

**OPERATOR:** Looks like Barbara must have pressed the wrong key to get out of queue.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Let's go ahead and go to the line of Will Mauldin.

**OPERATOR:** Will, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much for doing this. Just wanted to ask a follow-up on something you said about the format for any major talks with Russia as Moscow has requested. You referred to the Normandy partners, France and Germany. Are those the partners that would participate in such talks or would it be something broader at NATO or the OSCE?

And then also wanted to ask: In order to have such major talks, high-level talks with Moscow, would they need to de-escalate? Would they need to remove troops and materiel from the border, and would you expect them to do that? Thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** Thanks. So we are – sorry. Is somebody – yeah, okay.

So we are consulting with allies and partners now, including at NATO, on the issue of formats and how to address the menu of issues of interest to Russia, as well as the menu of issues of interest to us. As you noted, what you see in these Russian documents includes a whole laundry list of things. Some of these issues in the past have been discussed in the NATO-Russia Council when they pertain to issues of transparency and deconfliction between Russia and NATO. Some of these issues that they are talking about are of larger concern to all 57 members of the OSCE, which notably includes Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Russia's neighbors. And some of them are in the category of straight arms – nuclear arms control, which we've traditionally done in U.S.-Russia format, including with tight coordination with NATO.

So we are looking at how to do this in a way that the right countries are at the table and that when we are talking about European security issues, that everybody whose interests are affected is part of that, and we will be getting back to the Russians sometime next week with a more concrete proposal on that after we've had a chance to consult with the allies.

But again, we will have also, I would guess, quite a list of our own concerns about Russia's posture and behavior that we will want to bring to the table as well. So this has got to be done on the basis of reciprocity, nothing about them without them with regard to our European allies and partners, and as I said, we've got a list here from the Russians that encompasses many of the formats that we've used

in the past. So we have to figure out how we rack and stack that, and we will get that to them with a concrete proposal sometime next week.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go back to the line of Barbara Usher, please.

**OPERATOR:** Barbara, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I dropped off the call by mistake, so you may have already answered this, and perhaps you have even with other questions. But I just wondered if you could say anything more about your assessment of what you think the Russians are up to. We've been hearing that you had – or the administration had not determined whether President Putin had decided yet to invade. From what you're saying, it sounds like now that you have a process going, perhaps you feel that that threat has decreased, but I don't know. What's your assessment about what the Russians are up to? Thank you.

**SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL:** Thanks, Barbara. First just to say that I managed to drop the question on de-escalation, so let me address that first.

Obviously, the Russians are in an increasingly threatening posture with regard to Ukraine and with regard to neighbors and the NATO Alliance itself. And obviously, if and as we get into diplomatic conversations, which we hope we will be able to do, they stand a far better chance of being successful if they are accompanied by de-escalation, and it's going to be very hard to get partners and allies to engage with the kind of intimidation that is going on now. So we're making clear to the Russians, as we have from the beginning and as we did in the President's conversation with President Putin and with – and National Security Advisor Sullivan's conversation with Ushakov and Secretary Blinken's conversation with Foreign Minister Lavrov, that de-escalation is absolutely essential.

You asked what the Russians are up to. I will let the Russians speak for themselves with regard to what they're up to. We believe, the President believes, our allies believe that if there are concerns – and we have concerns on our side, they clearly have concerns on their side – they are best discussed diplomatically in the Normandy format, in these other formats that we have. And that is what we are proposing, and that is a far better path not only for Ukraine and all of us but for the Russian Federation itself.

I mean, let's remember that Russia has one of the highest COVID levels in the world. The Russian people don't need a war with Ukraine. They don't need their sons coming home in body bags. They don't need another foreign adventure. What they need is better health care, build back better, roads, schools, economic opportunity. And that's what the polling is showing in Russia. So we hope that President Putin will take this opportunity for diplomacy and will also listen to the needs of his own people.

I think on that note we've probably covered it. What do you think, ?

**MODERATOR:** I think you've done very well, . I really appreciate it. And with that, folks, we are out of time this morning. I would like to thank everyone for dialing in and for your questions. I'd like to give special thanks to our briefer for being with us today. Thank you, . And just a reminder to everyone that this briefing this morning is on background with a senior administration official. And with that, this briefing is ended and the embargo is lifted. Have a good rest of your day.

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## **[Acting Assistant Secretary Lempert's Travel to Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank](#)**

12/20/2021 04:53 PM EST

### Office of the Spokesperson

Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Yael Lempert will travel to Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank December 19-22. While in Jordan, Acting Assistant Secretary Lempert will meet with senior government officials, including Minister of Water and Irrigation Mohammed Al-Najjar and Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Nasser Shraideh.

Acting Assistant Secretary Lempert will then travel to Israel and the West Bank. While in Israel, she will meet with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and other senior Israeli government officials, and join National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's trip. Additionally, Acting Assistant Secretary Lempert will travel to Ramallah where she will meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and senior Palestinian officials.

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## [Department Press Briefing – December 20, 2021](#)

*12/20/2021 06:17 PM EST*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, D.C.

2:12 p.m. EST

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Sorry for the false start on the two-minute warning. My fault entirely. We have a few things at the top and then look forward to taking your questions.

So first, today I'd like to note Secretary Blinken's designation of Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to serve concurrently as the U.S. special coordinator for Tibetan issues.

Special Coordinator Zeya will coordinate U.S. efforts to advance the human rights of Tibetans, including freedom of religion or belief; increase access to the region; protect the environment and sustainably manage water resources of the Tibetan plateau; and address the humanitarian needs of Tibetan refugees and Tibetan diaspora communities, many of whom continue to face threats, including in the United States.

The United States is committed to supporting the aspirations of Tibetans to safeguard their distinct identity.

We congratulate the people – next – excuse me. We congratulate the people of Chile on the exemplary December 19th democratic presidential runoff election and President-elect Gabriel Boric for his decisive victory. The United States and Chile are longstanding partners with shared democratic values. We look forward to working with the incoming Boric administration to continue our active collaboration on human rights and democracy, economic prosperity, climate issues, COVID-19, science, migration, and development, among other urgent matters.

And finally, we're disappointed by the verdicts issued today by Egypt's State Security Court in the trials of Alaa Abdel Fattah, Mohamed El-Baquer, and Mohammed "Oxygen" Ibrahim. Journalists, human rights defenders, and others seeking to peacefully exercise their freedom of expression should be able to do so without facing criminal penalties, intimidation, harassment, or any other form of reprisal. We have emphasized to the Egyptian government that our bilateral relationship will be strengthened by improving respect for human rights, and we will continue to engage the Egyptian government to promote freedom of expression and other universal human rights.

With that, I'm happy to take your questions. Francesco.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) Just to follow up on Egypt, have you directly talked to the Egyptian government about this after the court decision? And are you making this or a reversal of this decision part of the conditions for the aid that was conditioned to human rights respect?



**MR PRICE:** Well, as I said a moment ago, we have made very clear that our relationship will be improved with progress in human rights broadly, and we have also made very clear to the Egyptian government specific concerns we have in various cases. I'm not in a position to read out those private conversations.

What I can tell you broadly, however, is that in just about every senior-level engagement with the Egyptian government, human rights is a topic of discussion. That was certainly the case when Secretary Blinken met with President Sisi. It was certainly the case when President Biden spoke to President Sisi. It was certainly the case when Secretary Blinken has spoken to his Egyptian counterpart.

These are issues that we consistently raise with Egypt, noting that we share a mutual desire to strengthen the bilateral relationship. We've been able to do that in some areas and we'd like to be able to do more, and a priority of ours will continue to be human rights in the Egyptian context.

**QUESTION:** If I can —

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Is it on the same topic, or —

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**QUESTION:** Oh, okay, thanks. The U.S. had already raised with Cairo the issue of human rights and had withheld a small portion of military aid. Will you consider suspension of further aid over this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, the point is that our bilateral relationship can be improved if we see progress on human rights. We have made that very clear, including today, including before with the announcement of the FMF funding. But we've also made that very clear in private, and we have discussed human rights in the abstract in private, but we've also discussed specific cases. And so even though we are not going to go into specific cases from the podium, the Egyptian government is very aware of the concerns we have both broadly and specifically.

**QUESTION:** Ned, just to follow on this very point, now, you said that you made it very clear to Egypt that your relationship will be strengthened by adhering to human rights and so on. Conversely, do you see that relationship sort of losing strength or not becoming as strong, as friendly if they don't adhere to these human rights values that you espouse?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, we think that we can improve upon the relationship if we see progress in human rights. We have an important relationship, an important partnership with Egypt. It is a partnership that has important security elements, important political elements, important regional elements. Egypt has been a constructive influence for the region, and you only need look at the brief conflict over the summer between Israel and Gaza, to see the constructive role that Egypt has played in that context.

And so, we certainly value our partnership with Egypt and that is why we have placed this emphasis on trying to see if we can strengthen that relationship even further. And there are a number of areas where we seek to do that and human rights is certainly one area where we will be looking to see just how much we can strengthen and enhance this partnership.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask about Ukraine and Russia?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** So, on Friday and again today, I think Jake Sullivan spoke to his counterpart. You said that you are ready to engage in diplomacy. Is there any path forward you're considering more concretely about this engagement? Is there something that in the Russian response may give you the idea of what will be the next steps? And, also, simultaneously, do you believe that there is a de-escalation on the Russian side at the border or not at all?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you heard from one of our administration colleagues on Friday who went into some detail about this, but Russia, as we have said and as everyone knows, has put on the table its concerns with – its stated concerns with American and with NATO activities. We are going to put on the table our concerns with Russian activities that we believe are harmful to our collective interests and our collective values – collective with our European allies and partners.

The White House today noted in the readout of National Security Advisor Sullivan's call with his counterpart, Mr. Ushakov, that we are prepared to engage diplomatically through multiple channels, and that includes through the NATO-Russia Council, through the OSCE, and also, if appropriate, bilaterally.

We have made clear through all of this that any dialogue – and dialogue is what we're after, diplomacy is what we're after. But any dialogue, any diplomacy has to be based on the principles of reciprocity; it has to address our concerns about Russia's actions; and importantly, it has to take place in full coordination with our allies and partners in Europe. Nothing about them without them. There will be no talks with Russia on European security without our European allies and partners.

The point we have repeatedly made is that we are having this discussion in the context of Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, but in some ways, this is bigger than any one country. It's bigger than any two countries if you want to look at it through the lens of Russia and Ukraine. This is about one of the foundational principles of the international order, and that is that no country, however large, however powerful, however much military might, whether a country has nuclear weapons or not, no country has the right to dictate borders, to bully smaller countries, to intimidate, to coerce, to pursue their own interests.

That is not something that the United States, that is not something that our partners, our allies will stand for, whether that is in the context of Europe, whether it's in the context of the Indo-Pacific, whether it's in the context of anywhere in between. That has to be one of the foundational principles of the international order, the order that has in some ways propelled security and prosperity and promise for the past 70 years. If we allow that principle to be eroded in this context, we allow it to be degraded going forward, and that's not something we wish to see happen. It's not something we will allow to see happen.

**QUESTION:** So, there's no agreement for now on the format on how – what this dialogue could (inaudible)?

**MR PRICE:** We have made very clear that we are prepared to engage diplomatically through multiple channels, but we don't have any announcements at this time. Obviously, the Russians have put their concerns on the table. We have our own concerns. And if we have additional details about how we're going to engage on that, we'll share those at the appropriate time.

**QUESTION:** And any de-escalation at the border?

**MR PRICE:** I don't think we've seen anything that would allay our concerns.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Afghanistan?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Aid groups, the international community, lawmakers are all intensifying their calls on the Biden administration to take action to help Afghanistan as millions are in need of food and medicine. Does the United States agree with the urgency of the situation, and if it does, what, if any, action will it take to help mitigate the crisis?

**MR PRICE:** We absolutely do. We absolutely believe there is an urgent humanitarian situation in Afghanistan at the moment. This is not something that is entirely unique to the present. This is something that was pre-existing before the withdrawal of American military forces, but it's also something that has become more acute. And it's become more acute for a number of reasons: years of war, the ongoing drought, the – an economy that over the course of years and even a couple of decades has – had become dependent on international assistance. And of course, our concern is growing even more acute as we are now in the winter months. And our concern for the welfare and the wellbeing of the Afghan people is further pronounced.

I'll make a couple of points on this. First, when it comes to humanitarian assistance, the United States is the global leader in providing humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. We have provided since August \$208 million alone; we've provided nearly 475 million over the course of this year. We have taken other steps as a government to do what we can to facilitate the provision of additional humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. The Department of the Treasury, for example, has issued general licenses to offer a degree of reassurance to other countries and entities that – to essentially signal that we support the provision of humanitarian aid to the Afghan people.

We are working with various UN bodies, including the UNDP, to find creative ways that we can infuse not only humanitarian aid but also liquidity into the Afghan economy. As you know, our Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West was recently in Pakistan, where he attended a meeting of the OIC. And the OIC recently announced in the context of that meeting the establishment of a trust fund, which will provide another important tool to provide money to the people of Afghanistan.

We supported the release recently of \$280 million from the so-called ARTF, the fund that the World Bank administered. When it comes to our public health response, especially when it comes to COVID, just within the past few days we have announced an offer of 1 million additional doses of vaccine through COVAX for Afghanistan. That brings our total donation to 4.3 million doses for the people of Afghanistan.

But we also recognize that even as we will continue to be the world's humanitarian leader for the Afghan people, that this is not something the United States can do alone. And so that is why we've been working with multinational, multilateral international bodies, but also with other countries to make the point that the international community, as a whole, needs to step up when it comes to what it is prepared to provide for the Afghan people. The United States has attempted to do that in a number of ways, including by demonstrating our leadership and underscoring our action on this. We have seen generous donations, seen generous offers from some countries, but there are other countries – including countries very nearby, regional countries – that can and should do more for the Afghan people, the region, and beyond.

We all have a stake in an Afghanistan that is stable and secure, but also a country where the humanitarian needs of its – of the Afghan people are being addressed. That is what we're seeking to do. If there are additional ways that we can support that, whether it is through our own humanitarian

efforts, whether it's by galvanizing action on the part of other countries or other bodies, we will do that. We have done that. But our work here is ongoing.

**QUESTION:** Which nearby countries would you like to see more from?

**MR PRICE:** I don't think it is helpful for the cause of the humanitarian plight of the Afghan people for me specifically to call out countries by name, but I think there are some perhaps fairly obvious countries in the region that have the ability and the stake in seeing an Afghanistan that is stable and secure, an Afghanistan where the people and their humanitarian needs are being addressed.

Courtney.

**QUESTION:** Staying on Afghanistan, the Secretary is set to meet with some Afghan refugees today. I'm just curious, what is the status of the department's efforts to help the tens of thousands of SIV principal applicants and their families that are remaining in the country, particularly as the humanitarian situation deteriorates? I know we now have a protecting power in the country. I mean, is that – is that accelerating efforts to bring people out?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, our efforts to relocate not only American citizens and lawful permanent residents, but also Afghans at risk, have been ongoing. We made very clear when the military mission came to an end at the end of August that our commitment to these groups would be enduring, and I think it should be clear that we have made good on that commitment. We have, as you know, since August 31st, directly assisted the departure of 479 U.S. citizens and 450 lawful permanent residents. There are now fewer than a dozen Americans in Afghanistan with whom we're in contact who are prepared and ready to depart. There are about 150 additional Americans with whom we're in contact who are not, for one reason or another, prepared to depart.

We have continued as well to do what we can to support Afghans to whom we have a special commitment, and that includes those who fall within the category of the SIVs. We are undertaking efforts to relocate those with visa foils in their passport. We also from there are prioritizing those with foil-less visas. We are looking at alternatives to processing for the larger cohort within this category knowing that, even though our presence on the ground in Afghanistan is no more, we are doing what we can from other posts and looking at creative solutions to continue our efforts to safely relocate those individuals who wish to depart the country.

We issued a pretty comprehensive update on our relocation efforts – I believe it was early last week. We made the point and we have made the point that, in addition to the Americans, to the lawful permanent residents, our efforts have facilitated the departure of a couple thousand additional individuals from Afghanistan. And again, that is not a mission that has any expiration date attached to it. We made that point in August, we made that point in September, and now that we're in December and approaching 2022, I think that point is – we have made very clear.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Marcin Wrona, TVN Discovery from Poland. Ned, on Friday, the parliament in Poland passed a law which will force Discovery, which is one of the biggest American investments in the country, out of Poland. But on the other hand, as I understand, President Duda made a commitment to a group of U.S. investors that he would veto the law. So, what is your understanding of this situation? What are your plans, your next steps?

**MR. PRICE:** Well, we had an opportunity to address this on Friday. But what we said then and where we are now is this: We are deeply troubled by the passage in Poland of the law you referenced, a law that would gravely weaken media freedom there. We encourage President Duda to reaffirm his past

statements in support of freedom of expression, the sanctity of contracts, and the shared values that underpin our relationship. And we strongly encourage him, we strongly encourage President Duda to act on these values in regard to this legislation, because if it becomes law in its current form, it could severely affect media freedom and the foreign investment climate in Poland.

You noted that TVN is owned by a parent company, an American parent company, Discovery, and of course we like to see our companies treated fairly around the world, but this is bigger than any one company. This is also about media freedom; it is about the media space in Poland. And if allowed to go into force in its current form, our concern is that this legislation would severely impinge on that. That's something we would not like to see happen. There are many things that cement our bilateral relationship with Poland – shared values, is one of them, and certainly, we don't want to see one of those shared values undermined or diluted in any way.

**QUESTION:** How would this impact the Polish-American relations, if it's implemented?

**MR. PRICE:** Well, again, I don't think it's helpful for us to entertain a hypothetical, and because we – precisely because we hope it remains a hypothetical. We hope that President Duda will, in fact, act on his prior statements – his prior statements on media freedom, the sanctity of contracts, and of course, his belief in the shared values that really underpin our relationship.

So again, we would like for this to be a hypothetical. We would like to see this legislation not enter into force.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. The first meeting of states party to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is scheduled for next March. There was a Japanese media report that just came out saying the U.S. has made a request to the Japanese government through diplomatic channels to not attend this meeting as an observer. I'd just like to ask if you can confirm this.

And also, I know the U.S. is not a party to this treaty, but could you just explain what the U.S. stance is on the treaty and also towards Japan?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. So, I'll make a couple points. We certainly understand and we share the desire to advance our collective nuclear disarmament goals. But we don't support the treaty, the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. And we categorically reject any claim that it would contribute to the goal that is the stated goal that's at the heart of the treaty.

The U.S. position on this issue has spanned administrations. It is shared by all other nuclear weapons possessor states and our NATO Allies as well. We stand ready to work with all countries on tangible and verifiable measures to reduce strategic risks, and to enable real progress when it comes to our shared nuclear disarmament goal.

We don't question at all the motivations, the intent, of supporters of the treaty. We just don't believe that the treaty would aid in meeting the underlying objectives that those behind it seek to achieve.

**QUESTION:** And did the United States ask Japan not to attend?

**MR PRICE:** I can speak to our position on this. I just don't have anything to say to any private discussions we may have with allies on this.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Please, Said.

**QUESTION:** Yes, thank you. A couple questions. Actually, the same question I asked Jalina on Friday, and she was kind enough to respond to me, but I'm still unclear. I mean, why all this vagueness on the consulate? Why the vagueness? I mean, the Israelis swear up and down that you guys have backtracked and so on. Could you make it very clear that the United States is committed to reopening of the consulate in Jerusalem?

**MR PRICE:** Said, we're not trying to be vague, but you're asking for updates, and we just don't have an update to provide.

**QUESTION:** No, but I'm not – I'm asking: Are you still committed to the reopening of the consulate?

**MR PRICE:** We just do not have an update to provide. You have —

**QUESTION:** What does that mean? Because you used to say without any – without hesitation that you are reopening the consulate. Are you or are you not? I mean, either you fish or you cut bait.

**MR PRICE:** We've spoken to this. You've heard from the Secretary on this on a couple of occasions now. It's just that we don't have an update to offer.

**QUESTION:** So, can we take this to be an affirming of your commitment to reopen the consulate?

**MR PRICE:** I would take this to mean that we just don't have an update as to where we are on those plans.

**QUESTION:** All right. So let me ask – let me go to another issue. On the removal of the seventh family, an Israeli journalist just posted that it's been put off till January. But why can't you tell the Israelis that according to the ICC or international law the removal of a population or any part thereof is a war crime? You agreed to the —

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** The move – the forced movement of a population is a war crime. You just spoke that you adhere to the principles of borders and so on about Ukraine. I mean, we hope that you also hold that principle to be true in occupied Palestine.

**MR PRICE:** We've consistently said, and our Israeli partners know that we're following the Sheikh Jarrah case very, very carefully. We have also been very clear about our concerns. We remain concerned about the potential eviction of Palestinian families, many of whom have lived in these homes for generations. We've said that publicly. We've said that privately. We've done so in both contexts repeatedly.

**QUESTION:** Let me ask you one last question. Jerusalem church leaders say that radical Israeli groups are trying to force Palestinian Christians out of the areas in which they have inhabited for literally hundreds of years and so on. And I was talking to a Palestinian Christian leader last week, just last week, and he talked about all the harassment, all the difficulties that they face every day. Do you have any position on this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we're aware of the statements you referred to. We call on all parties to engage in peaceful dialogue and to promote freedom of religion or belief for all people in Israel, including members of religious minority groups.

Sir.

**QUESTION:** To put a nail on Yemen, a couple days ago, the *Wall Street Journal* citing Western official said the Houthis wanted the Iranian – their – the ambassador to them out of the country, in a sign of maybe heightened tensions. He has left on an Iraqi plane out of the country. Could you comment on that or confirm it?

And then what's the latest on the situation in Yemen from a U.S. perspective? I mean, there's a special envoy. Just as we were walking in, I think, I read a report that the Arab coalition struck the Sanaa airport citing threats and targeting military – or against military targets. Could you just give us an update on that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to the first element of your question, we do hope that the departure of the Iranian ambassador from Yemen – we hope it is a sign that Yemenis understand the profoundly destabilizing role that Iran has been playing in their country for some time now. Iran's support for armed groups threatens international and regional security. It threatens our forces, our diplomatic personnel, and our partners in the region and elsewhere. We as an administration are committed to countering the destabilizing influence and role that Iran is playing throughout the region, including with its support to proxies and other elements in Yemen.

We welcome direct talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran. We hope this dialogue will contribute to a de-escalation of tensions. Both countries have a potential constructive role to play in helping to ensure regional security, but of course, we'd refer you to those respective governments for updates on the situation.

When it comes to the broader situation in Yemen, as you know, this is something that Special Envoy Tim Lenderking and his team have been focused on ever since he was named to the role. It was one of the first major foreign policy announcements, and I believe President Biden himself named Tim Lenderking when President Biden was here in the first days of the administration. What we know is that the Houthi offensive continues to pose a serious obstacle to peace efforts. It is also exacerbating the humanitarian conditions on the ground. Yemen has long been home to one of if not the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes, and the ongoing military offensive on the part of the Houthis is only, unfortunately, contributing to that.

We welcome the efforts of the Security Council recently to condemn and to press for an end to this offensive. There have been recent sanctions against Houthi military officials associated with the Marib offensive and other Houthi attacks. This, I believe, was the largest package of UN sanctions since the beginning of the war.

As I said before, we are committed to helping advance a durable resolution that improves the lives of Yemenis and creates a space for them to collectively determine their own future. And to that end, our support for the Saudi-led offensive operations in Yemen, it ended in February, including relevant arms sales. We have suspended, as you know, proposed sales of certain air-to-ground munitions, but we are committed to continuing to provide to Saudi Arabia – support to Saudi Arabia to improve its ability to defend its territory against these threats, and even in recent days our Saudi partners have continued to come under threat from attacks emanating from Yemen.

As of recent days, there had been nearly 400 cross-border attacks since the beginning of the war. It endangers our – they endanger our Saudi partners, but they also put in harm's way more than 70,000 U.S. citizens who are residing in Saudi Arabia. And so, of course, it's something we continue to work with our Saudi partners to address as we continue to engage diplomatically to see if we can find a durable solution to the conflict in Yemen.

**QUESTION:** And if I may, shifting a bit, another area there's a special envoy for: In Ethiopia,

Ambassador Feltman was there I guess, what, a few weeks ago now. Situation seems to continue to unravel. What are you guys seeing there? Any changes on the outlook? Any success in the mediation efforts on the part of Washington?

**MR PRICE:** Well, in terms of what we seek to achieve, we continue to seek an immediate cessation of hostilities, an end to ongoing human rights abuses and violations, unhindered humanitarian access to Tigray and other parts of northern Ethiopia, and a negotiated resolution to the conflict, which not only puts at risk those throughout the country but also poses a threat to regional security in the Horn of Africa. We know that there is not a military solution to this conflict. We – and to that end, we support diplomacy as the first, the last, really the only option to resolve the ongoing conflict. We reiterate our call for the Ethiopian government to start a credible, inclusive national dialogue.

Now, of course, today we're aware of reports of Tigrayan withdrawal from some regions in northern Ethiopia. We have long, as you know, urged a cessation of hostilities, including the return of TPLF forces to Tigray. We have long urged that humanitarian access I spoke to. We have long urged an end to human rights abuses and violations and for a negotiated resolution to the conflict. So, in fact, if we do see a movement of Tigrayan forces back into Tigray, that is something we would welcome. It's something we've called for. And we hope it opens the door to broader diplomacy.

**QUESTION:** Could I ask about Julian Assange, please? I think it was on the 10th of this month a London court or a British court lifted the ban on his transfer to the United States. Do you expect him to be transferred anytime soon?

**MR PRICE:** I would need to refer you to the Department of Justice when it comes to extradition cases. We just don't weigh in on the specifics here.

Francesco. Sure.

**QUESTION:** So, the Secretary said – I think that was in Stockholm and it was 20 years – days ago – not 20 years but 20 days ago he said that the U.S. wouldn't allow Iran to continue building their nuclear program while dragging their feet on talks, and it seems to me that's exactly what you guys think it's continuing: nothing happening on the negotiation front and Iran continuing to develop its nuclear program. So, how long can you just say that without changing your stance and continuing – allowing, actually, them to do so?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Francesco, you heard from one of my colleagues on Friday a summary of what we experienced in the second act of the seventh round, if you will. As my colleague said, at the time there was some modest progress. I believe the way he put it was that it was better than it might have been, but it was worse than it should have been. And so that leaves us in a fairly uncertain posture when it – fairly uncertain position as to whether we can achieve what we have sincerely and steadfastly sought to do for a number of months now, and that is to test whether we can achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

As you heard, though, there has been – there was some progress in the most recent element of the second round. We, of course, noted the announcement between Iran and the IAEA of the arrangement to restore elements of transparency to the IAEA monitoring program on the ground in Iran, to reinstall the cameras at Karaj. That's an important step. It's a welcome step. But again, we are clear-eyed about this, because this was a step that never should have been necessary in the first place.

The second element of modest progress that you heard about from my colleague is that we now have a common understanding of what the text will be that will serve as the basis for negotiations on nuclear issues. And he went on to make the point that we don't yet have the text, but we have an outline or we have an agenda for discussions of that text when they resume.



So that's all positive. That's all good and well. But in many ways, that really only takes us to where we were as of June, and so we're, as he put it, I believe, curbing our enthusiasm for where we are and where we might go. There's still a lot of work to do.

At the same time, and this was the point of your question, all of this is still taking place in an atmosphere of provocation, what we have seen from the Iranians, and an atmosphere in which time is running out because of – owing in part to these provocations and advancements in Iran's nuclear program. It's the accelerating pace of that program. We have said this on many times. We – and you repeated it in your question, we can't accept a situation in which Iran is dragging its feet at the negotiating table but accelerating the pace of its nuclear program back home.

What we experienced, what the team experienced on the ground in Vienna until the talks adjourned late last week, it was progress, but it wasn't at a pace that was sufficient to get us to where we need if we are to render the JCPOA as a viable vehicle going forward. If the pace of diplomacy on the one hand continues to lag far behind or continues to lag at all behind the pace of diplomacy on the other, the JCPOA, as you heard from the E3, will be an empty shell. As you heard from my colleague, it will be a corpse that cannot be revived.

Obviously, we don't want to see either of those happen. We still continue to believe we still have a window of opportunity in which a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA would be the best option for us, it would be the best option for the other members of the P5+1, it would be the best option for the international community because it would still accomplish what we need it to do in terms of verifiably preventing Iran from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

But we've talked about this clock. We've talked about the calendar. We've made the point consistently that it's not chronological so much as it is technological and technical. And so, we're taking a very close look at the pace of Iran's nuclear program, we're taking a close look at what a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA would mean in terms of the protections and guarantees.

And so, as we continue to watch what Iran does and what Iran says publicly, privately in the context of these indirect negotiations in Vienna, we'll make a judgment based on that as to whether the JCPOA remains in our interest. And all along, we are not wasting any time in thinking about those alternatives, and we're doing more than thinking about alternatives. We're actively discussing those alternatives to this variety of diplomacy. That is to say, this diplomacy focused on a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. We're discussing alternatives to that with other members of the P5+1, with other partners in the region and beyond.

**QUESTION:** Could you explain the sanctions and lifting of sanctions that were imposed after the United States withdrew from the deal in May 2018? I know your colleague spoke about this, but could you —

**MR PRICE:** Well, it's —

**QUESTION:** Could you probably elaborate on this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, there's not too much to elaborate on. It's actually quite simple. We are prepared, as we have said, to lift sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA. The Iranians know that. It is something that the P5+1 knows. It's something that we have been quite clear about. It is essentially the formula that was deemed appropriate in 2015, when the deal was consummated, in 2016 when it was implemented by the P5+1 and Iran. It essentially says we're prepared to lift sanctions inconsistent with the JCPOA, as long as Iran places itself back within the strict confines, the strict nuclear confines of the JCPOA in terms of the stringent verification and monitoring, in terms of the other restrictions that the JCPOA places on Iran's nuclear program.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Please.

**QUESTION:** On that front, also last week, a colleague of yours from the White House told reporters that the U.S. expects or anticipates attacks to increase in the coming weeks on – in the context of Syria and Iraq, presumably by Iranian-backed forces or militias. Do you share that assessment?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we certainly – I would hate – and from here, I'm not going to prognosticate what we might see from Iranian proxies. What I will say and what I will reflect on is what we have seen.

The undeniable fact is that in 2018, the – we were promised by the previous administration a decision to walk away from the JCPOA that would result in a so-called better deal, that would cow Iran and its proxies, that would leave the United States in a stronger position and so much more. And across every one of those promises, we've actually seen the opposite take place.

Of course, there was no better deal to be had, during the last administration. We're still trying to determine if we can achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, if we can get Iran back into the JCPOA and the restrictions that it places on Iran's nuclear program. We have seen the attacks by proxies in the region not decrease, but in fact, increase. And we have seen these groups become unfortunately emboldened with consequences that have been deadly for our partners in the region and attacks that have implicated our interests as well.

And so, across all of our concerns with Iran whether it's its nuclear program, whether it's support for terrorism, whether it's support for proxies, whether it is destabilizing influence in the region, I think it is fair to say that every single one of our concerns has become more pronounced since 2018. And so, as our first priority, we are still seeking to determine whether the JCPOA is a viable vehicle for achieving that top priority: putting Iran's nuclear program back in a box. And it's our top priority because a nuclear-armed Iran, of course, is unacceptable. It is something that President Biden has committed he will never allow to happen.

But we also know that Iran with a nuclear weapon would be an Iran that would act with even more impunity across all of these categories. So right now, that is why we are urgently seeing – seeking to see whether we can achieve that mutual return to compliance, just as we are working with allies, working with partners, to take on the broader array of Iran's destabilizing activities throughout the region.

**QUESTION:** But you guys have said that these discussions, the Vienna talks, are about the – Iran's nuclear program and that it's not tied to their other – the malign activities or behavior in the region. So, what makes you think that reaching a deal, if one is able to be reached, is going to help decrease these attacks on U.S. interests or forces – look, I mean, let's call a spade a spade. They want the U.S. out of the region completely.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would say a couple things. One, it's a point I made before: We know that Iran with a nuclear weapon or closer to a nuclear weapon would be an Iran that would act with even more impunity, an Iran that would be even more emboldened. We have seen Iran emboldened since 2018. We've seen its proxies emboldened since 2018. We've seen the tragic and deadly consequences of that. And so conversely, an Iran that is – whose nuclear program is once again back in a box, we think that would redound positively on the broader set of challenges that we face with Iran.

But secondly, we are not sitting on our hands when it comes to the broader activities, malign activities that Iran is undertaking. We are working in various ways, some of them public, with allies and partners around the world, including those in the region, to counter these. But we've also made the point that



even as we're focused in Vienna on the nuclear program we want to address, see if we can address diplomatically with Iran and our allies and partners to build on the JCPOA, to see if we can talk about something that addresses those broader set of concerns. That's still something we seek to do, even as we are very much in the midst of seeing if we can achieve that mutual return to compliance when it comes to the nuclear program.

All right. Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 2:57 p.m.)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability](#)

*12/21/2021 04:37 PM EST*

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Washington, D.C.

Press Briefing Room

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Good afternoon, everyone. Good to see you all.

I suspect that most of you are looking forward to what will be a well-deserved break. It's been quite a year.

When I walked into the State Department on my first day as Secretary, we had COVID-19 lockdowns around the world.

Less than 1 percent of the United States was vaccinated, compared to more than 60 percent today.

We were dealing with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The climate crisis was accelerating.

Our relationships with our allies and partners were badly strained.

And many questioned whether America would – or even could – lead again.

A few guiding premises animated our work this year.

One is that American engagement – American leadership – matters.

The world doesn't organize itself.

When we're not engaged, when we don't lead, then one of two things happens: either some other country tries to take our place, but probably not in a way that advances our interests and values, or no one does, and then you get chaos.

Either way, it doesn't serve the American people.

Another premise is that finding new ways to cooperate and coordinate with other countries is more important than ever, because none of the really big challenges that we face and that affect the lives of Americans – from COVID to climate to the disruptive impact of new technologies – can be solved by any one country working alone. Not even the United States.

So much of our work this year has been about rebuilding the foundations of American foreign policy.

That started with restoring and revitalizing our network of alliances and partnerships – and reengaging the multilateral system, where so much of the day-in, day-out work of diplomacy takes place.

Since January 20th, we've reinvigorated our engagement with key allies, with NATO, the European Union, the United Nations, the OECD, the G7, the G20, ASEAN. We created AUKUS; we elevated the Quad with two leader-level summits; we launched the Build Back Better World global infrastructure initiative.

We're much more aligned with our allies and partners now than we were a year ago on nearly every issue, including Russia's aggression toward Ukraine and its neighbors, Iran's nuclear program, and China's efforts to challenge the rules-based international order.

And I can attest from my dozens of face-to-face meetings with counterparts in every region of the world that they're glad – frankly, relieved – that the United States is once again engaged and once again leading.

At the start of the year, we said that we would lead the global effort to end the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since then, we've donated more than 330 million vaccine doses to more than 110 countries, on our way to 1.2 billion donated doses next year.

That's more than the rest of the world combined.

We've led the world in funding COVAX, the global partnership that distributes safe vaccines equitably around the world.

And just this morning, I announced another \$580 million in COVID relief funding, to provide life-saving health and humanitarian assistance to places where the suffering is acute.

That brings total U.S. assistance to nearly \$20 billion.

And it's not just the amount of our assistance but how we've done it – rooted in science, based on need, with international and regional institutions, and with no political strings attached.

We've done all this because – as we see happening right now, with the rise of the Omicron variant – none of us will be safe until all of us are safe.

We still have a long way to go to beat the pandemic.

But let's not lose sight of the fact that we've come very far, the world, the United States this past year – with American leadership – in building the foundation for a more effective global COVID-19 response and saving lives.

We'll keep working toward the goal President Biden set in September at the global COVID summit that he convened: vaccinating 70 percent of the world by next fall.

And we'll keep leading the push for greater global health security, to better prevent, detect, and respond to future pandemics.

We said we'd restore American leadership in the climate crisis.

Well, on day one, we rejoined the Paris Agreement.

We raised global ambitions to reduce emissions through major investments in climate finance – including quadrupling our own funding.

After a year of dogged diplomacy, countries accounting for 65 percent of the world's GDP are committed to targets that will keep global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

We led the global pledge to cut methane emissions by 30 percent and helped spearhead the effort to end and reverse deforestation by the end of the decade.

More than 100 countries have joined both of those pledges.

And we secured commitments by many of the world's major economies to move away from financing fossil fuel projects abroad.

We said we would take on issues that affected American workers and families.

That starts with COVID and climate, but it doesn't end there.

Thanks to American leadership, the logjams at our ports and the shortages of critical goods are easing.

We brought 136 countries together to secure a Global Minimum Tax to end the race to the bottom on corporate tax rates, prevent corporations from shifting jobs overseas, and generating billions of dollars to invest here at home.

We're shaping the governance of new technologies, so that they serve democracies, instead of undermining them.

And as with everything else, we're doing it with our allies and partners, including through the U.S.-European Union Trade and Technology Council, which we launched this year.

President Biden pledged to end America's longest war. This summer, we made good on that promise, bringing Operation Resolute Support to a close and leading an international coalition to evacuate more than 120,000 people from Afghanistan.

We knew this would be challenging. It was. And there are lessons from the evacuation and relocation that we're learning for the future.

But this is also the first time in 20 years that no U.S. troops are spending the holidays in Afghanistan, and we're not sending a third generation of American soldiers to fight and die there.

The last time I was in this briefing room, I faced some appropriate questions about our ability to continue to facilitate the departure of American citizens and others to whom we have a special commitment.

In the months since, we've made good on that promise, including our pledge to help any U.S. citizen who wants to leave. Since September 1, we've helped nearly 500 Americans depart Afghanistan. That's virtually every blue passport holder who remained in Afghanistan after August 31st who has said they wanted to depart and was ready to do so – and we'll keep at it.

We'll also keep working to address the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan – through our aid, as the single largest provider of assistance to the people of Afghanistan, as well as through our diplomacy.

Finally, we invested in the State Department – to make it an even stronger, more effective, more agile, more diverse institution that can deliver for the American people in what is an increasingly complex and competitive world.

We're building our capacity to lead in areas of diplomacy that will matter more and more to our people in the years ahead, like global health, like climate, like technology, like economics.

And as we do, we'll never take our eye off the ball when it comes to strategic competition, upholding our democratic values and human rights, working for peace.

We launched a sweeping modernization agenda, including our intent to establish a new Cybersecurity and Digital Policy Bureau and Special Envoy for Critical and Emerging Technology, to help us make sure that the digital revolution serves our people, protects our interests, boosts our competitiveness, and upholds our values. New resources to enable the largest hiring increase in a decade and a significant increase in our IT budget; Foreign Service positions dedicated to economic and climate issues; and new initiatives to win the competition for talent and advance diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility.

This year, we also appointed the State Department's first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, because our diplomatic corps should reflect our nation's full diversity, talent, and experience.

And across everything we do, our number-one priority is the safety and well-being of our people.

Later today, I'll visit the Executive Medical Center at Johns Hopkins, where some of our colleagues who've suffered from anomalous health incidents are getting treatment.

All of us at the State Department and across the U.S. Government are intently focused on getting to the bottom of what and who is causing these incidents, caring for those who've been affected, protecting our people.

Critical to the success of our foreign policy are the investments we're making in ourselves here at home – in education, infrastructure, research and development, and health.

Domestic renewal fuels our competitiveness and it elevates America's standing in the world.

Put it all together, and there is no question that we're stronger now than we were 11 months ago.

We're stronger in the world. We're stronger at home. We're on stronger footing when it comes to COVID, climate, and other urgent challenges.

And we're in a stronger geopolitical position to deal with countries like China and Russia, as they seek to undermine the international system that we've built and led – a system that has made the world freer, more prosperous, more secure, more connected, and has allowed our country and people to thrive.

We've got a profound stake in upholding that system, in standing up for the rule of law, for democratic values and human rights, a level playing field that gives everyone a fair chance to compete and to succeed.

And we'll continue to drive that positive vision – with our allies and partners right alongside us.

Just about all the work that I've named here today will continue in 2022: ending this pandemic and strengthening global health security; making sure the standards, hardware, and policies for new technology secure our competitive edge and improve the lives and livelihoods of our people while keeping them safe and our democracy strong; defending and strengthening the rules-based order against those who would tear it down; building a State Department ready to lead on 21st-century challenges.

We're much better positioned to make strong progress on those challenges than we were when we began, because we're building on the foundation we laid this year.

And I'm proud and grateful to all the diplomats and development experts who've worked so hard to make that happen and who represent the very best our country has to offer.

This year, we said goodbye to two giants of American diplomacy – George Shultz and Colin Powell. They both loved the State Department. The State Department loved them.

They both believed in the power of diplomacy.

And they both knew that the State Department doesn't exist to deal with problems elsewhere, to focus out there on the rest of the world — but rather to deliver for the American people, to solve the challenges that affect their lives, to create opportunities that will make their futures brighter.

Those are beliefs that we wholeheartedly embrace in this administration. And I know they're shared across our political aisle. So I want to thank Congress for confirming a large slate of our nominees over the weekend. No administration in American history has had fewer confirmed ambassadors and senior officials than ours. And we need our full team on the field right away to protect our interests and our people.

It has been an honor to serve the American people this year as part of our outstanding diplomatic workforce. It's also been an honor to travel with many of you here in this room, to take your questions up here at this podium from time to time. Thank you for your dedicated, persistent work to keep the American people and people around the world informed about what we do here and to hold us to account.

So I hope you all have a very healthy, restorative break. I wish you all a very happy New Year. I look forward to getting to work next year. But meanwhile, I'm happy to take some questions.

**MR PRICE:** Michele.

**QUESTION:** Now you've had a few months to reflect on what went wrong in Afghanistan, and I wonder what regrets you have about how you handled the diplomacy surrounding it and what concerns you have – whether you've lost credibility among your allies in the way that it ended and what you intend to do to head off a humanitarian catastrophe there given that the U.S. still has a lot of Afghanistan's money frozen in bank accounts here.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** When it comes to regrets, to looking back, there'll be a lot of time for that in the years ahead. Right now, we're focused on what we're doing, what we need to do, on action to move our foreign policy forward, to move our national security forward, to deal with the challenges that are in front of us.

Now, I also ordered a review of our Afghanistan policy and the implementation of that policy, starting in 2020 and going through the relocation and evacuation. As I think you know, one of our most respected now retired diplomats, Dan Smith, will be leading that effort, and I look forward to learning what he and his team learn in terms of the lessons to take from that experience. Others are also rightly looking at the last 20 years of our policy in Afghanistan to try to draw lessons from that – what went right, what went wrong, and how we take that going forward.

But to your point, what I am focused on right now is the situation in Afghanistan, including the humanitarian situation. We continue to be the largest single provider of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. We've issued multiple now general licenses to make sure that other countries, institutions, can feel free to move forward with their assistance and not be concerned about the



application or implementation of sanctions against them.

We've participated in the release of about \$280 million recently in the Afghan Trust Fund monies that are there. And we are looking intensely at ways to put more liquidity into the Afghan economy, to get more money into people's pockets, and doing that with international institutions, with other countries and partners, trying to put in place the right mechanisms to do that in a way that doesn't directly benefit the Taliban but does go directly to the people.

We're very conscious of the fact that there is an incredibly difficult humanitarian situation right now, one that could get worse as winter sets in. And so that's an area of intense focus for us working closely with allies and partners. We're also, of course, focused on ensuring that the Taliban make good on the expectations of the international community when it comes to continuing to allow people who wish to leave Afghanistan to do so, when it comes to upholding the rights of all Afghan citizens but notably women and girls and minorities, when it comes to not engaging in reprisals, when it comes to making good on their commitments to counter terrorism coming from Afghanistan.

So all of those things are front and center on our agenda. We're working them virtually every day with international partners around the world.

**MR PRICE:** Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. Russia is increasing its demands on NATO. Today, the defense minister is saying that U.S. mercenaries are plotting a provocation in the Donbas, which some would say could be a pretext for some sort of invasion. The question is: Since the President talked to President Putin, it seems as though the buildup is continuing, the threats are continuing from Vladimir Putin. So at this point, how do you counter the Russian aggression? Are you concerned about something that would be less than a military invasion, in some sort of a grey area where it might be more difficult? What would the U.S. response to that be in the Donbas for instance?

And there are reports that the U.S. and the UK are on high alert for a potential Russian cyber attack on critical infrastructure in Ukraine, which has happened in previous years during the holiday season to either weaken the Zelenskyy government as a predicate before an invasion or as an alternative to a military or economic attack, which would be harder to retaliate against.

So the bottom line is: How is diplomacy going to deal with this increasing Russian threat which doesn't seem to be minimized at all by the talks, by the presidential talks, and a threat —

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Andrea, we're engaged in diplomacy and deterrence at the same time. These two things go hand in hand. As you know, just to step back for a second, President Biden when he first met with President Putin in Geneva some months ago – and you were there – said to President Putin that our strong preference is for a more predictable and stable relationship between Russia and the United States, but if Russia continues to engage in reckless or aggressive actions we will respond and we'll respond strongly.

Since then we've seen this buildup again around Ukraine that is of deep concern not just to us but to allies and partners in Europe and beyond. And we've seen plans that Russia has to commit renewed acts of aggression against Ukraine that it could implement on very short order.

And so we've done two things. We have worked in very close coordination with allies and partners not only to show the shared concern but to put in place what would be a very meaningful and massive response if Russia commits renewed acts of aggressions.

We've seen, and I think you've seen, statements coming out of NATO, the European Union, the G7, all

making clear that there would be massive consequences. That's the language used: "massive consequences" for Russia if it engaged – engages in further acts of aggression against Ukraine.

At the same time, President Biden has made clear that there is a much better path, and that is diplomacy. And we're committed to engaging in that if Russia is too. And to that end, the President spoke to President Putin, as you know, a couple of weeks ago by video conference. There were follow-on conversations, notably between the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Russian counterpart.

And as the White House noted yesterday, we have said and Russia has also said that we're prepared to engage diplomatically through multiple channels, the existing Strategic Stability Dialogue that we have with Russia between Russia and the United States, through the NATO-Russia Council on issues of particular concern to NATO, and through the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that has as its members among others all of our European allies and partners Ukraine, the United States, and Russia.

And I think you'll see relatively early in the new year engagements in all of those areas to see if we can advance the differences diplomatically. Russia has said – and it put out some papers on this – that it has grievances, demands, concerns. Well, so does the United States and all of our European partners about Russia's conduct, the actions it's taken. All of that will be on the table. And if we can make our way forward diplomatically, that is far preferable.

The last thing I'll say on this is that in all of this we are in absolute solidarity, coordination, consultation with allies and partners. We are doing nothing about them – without them. All of this is being done together. And we'll see which direction President Putin will take.

**QUESTION:** Isn't one of his demands though —

**MR PRICE:** We're going to move around a little.

**QUESTION:** — to not deploy troops in any of the NATO countries?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** There are some very obvious nonstarters in things that the Russians have put on the table. There may be other issues that are appropriate for discussion and conversation, just as there are things that we would put on the table that Russia needs to respond to.

But look, the President's been extremely clear for many, many years about some basic principles that no one is moving back on: the principle that one country does not have the right to change by force the borders of another; that one country does not have the right to dictate the policies of another or to tell that country with whom it may associate; one country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history. And those principles are inviolate. They're very clear. The President's held them for a long time. That's not going to change.

**MR PRICE:** Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Just to go off of that, you've just reiterated that the United States is prepared to engage diplomatically with Russia in multiple different venues, different channels. We've been hearing that over the last few days. I wonder if a meeting between President Biden and President Putin is one of those options that the Biden administration would consider and if there would be any preconditions that Russia would have to take before another meeting between President Biden and President Putin.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, of course, the presidents have met twice – once face-to-face in person in Geneva and then just a couple of weeks ago by video conference. And the next steps on

the diplomatic track, as I said, are through the Strategic Stability Dialogue that we've already established that is between Russia and the United States, the NATO-Russia Council, and the OSCE. And let's see if and where any of these conversations go, whether we can actually make progress diplomatically.

At the same time, when it comes to Ukraine itself, we've said – we've long said – that the best way to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine and to restore to Ukraine the border that it's entitled to is through the so-called Minsk process, the agreements that Russia and Ukraine reached many years ago now to resolve the – these differences peacefully. And there we're very much prepared to try to facilitate that, to act in support of what France and Germany are doing with Russia and Ukraine in what's called the Normandy format.

So we're working on all of those lines. Whether that leads to at some point or another a meeting between the President and President Putin, I leave that for another day. But no plans to do that now.

I think we have to see if, in the first instance, there's any progress diplomatically. We also want to see Russia de-escalate, to move forces back from the border with Ukraine, to take down the tension. It's much more appropriate to have a conversation in those circumstances than it is when escalation is happening, not de-escalation.

**MR PRICE:** Will.

**QUESTION:** Thank you and happy winter solstice to you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask about the Indo-Pacific, if I may. The Build Back Better program seems to have melted down in Congress. It's unclear whether bits of that will be put back together next year, and this administration has presented domestic renewal as almost a precondition for competing and – with and presumably confronting China, if need be. So where does that leave your foreign policy, the fact that that has gone a bit by the wayside?

And what do you hope to achieve with allies and partners in the region next year? Your Southeast Asia trip was cut short. And then what do you hope to achieve with the Quad or other countries in the region?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thanks. I'll preface this by saying I don't do politics. I don't do domestic politics, but what I can say is this, because it's what I've heard around the world: First, countries around the world have seen the investments that we've already made and that are on the books, including a historic investment in infrastructure, something that goes directly to our competitiveness; including the recovery from COVID and the support that was provided to the American people in that instance; and they also see what remains on the agenda ahead.

But that does speak powerfully already to people around the world, and I think the President's commitment to reinvest in education, in research and development, in infrastructure resonates. In each of these areas we used to lead the world. We've fallen way, way back, and the President wants to change that. And I think as we continue to work on that, building on what's already been done, that will resonate.

And yes, it's true that it does make a difference if we're able to get things done, to demonstrate, as the President said, that democracy can actually deliver. That's not only important for people here at home, it is important for our standing around the world, and he's already shown powerful examples of that. Let's see where we get in the year ahead.

In the Indo-Pacific, we've had extensive and extended engagement almost from the start of the year right through to last week, including with the trip that a number of you were on, but not just me – the President, of course, engaging with ASEAN, elevating the Quad Leaders' Summit, having as his first visitors the leaders of Japan and South Korea, and so on. The Vice President's trip to Singapore and Vietnam; virtually every senior official in this department and other relevant departments, including the Commerce Department, the Treasury Department, engaging with allies and partners in the region, and that will continue.

When I was there just this past week in Indonesia, in Malaysia, coming off of the G7 meetings in Liverpool, one of the things I was able to do was lay out our vision for the region, the basic approach we're taking to the Indo-Pacific. A lot more of that's going to get fleshed out in the weeks and months ahead, but at least in the responses that I got, it seemed to resonate. So we're – the foundation is there, we're going to be building on it.

And speaking of Build Back Better, we have Build Back Better World, which is a program that was announced at the G7 by the President and our G7 partners to make significant investments in infrastructure, including in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific but as a race to the top, not a race to the bottom, an affirmative vision of what those investments can and should be, making sure that as they're made, countries don't assume a huge debt burden that they can't afford, that we make sure that projects are done to the highest standards with respect for the environment; for workers, that we actually transfer knowledge and skills as we're doing it, that we allow local workers to build things and don't import our own.

And we are now working to rally not only partners and allies to this, but also, and importantly, the private sector. That's our comparative advantage. That's what we really bring to the table – the ability to be a catalyst for private sector investment. And these projects are going to focus on things that also help us deal with the climate crisis in terms of green technology, green infrastructure, also building a stronger health security system throughout the region and beyond, as well as dealing with infrastructure for new technology.

So all of that got, at least from what I heard, a very strong reception in Southeast Asia. And again, what I also heard – but you have to check with your own sources – genuine satisfaction that the United States, across the board, was showing up, was re-engaged, and had a real vision for the region. We are a Pacific country. We are a Pacific power. It matters to us. So much of the future is going to be there. Fifty percent of the world's population is already there. Some of the most dynamic economies, certainly pre-COVID, bouncing back now as we continue to work through COVID. We see the future in the region. And our policy, our resources, our focus are being directed accordingly.

**MR PRICE:** We have time for one more question. Francesco.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary. On Iran, you've been saying for the past weeks that the runway is getting shorter and shorter, that you won't let Iran drag its feet at the negotiation table while developing its nuclear program, but can you be a little bit more specific? Are you ready to wait until January, February, March, or beyond? And doesn't that weaken your position to keep saying those things while not giving a deadline to Iran? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thanks. I'm not going to put a time limit on it or give you the number of meters remaining on the runway, except to say yes, it is getting very, very, very short. And being able to recover the benefits – the full benefits of the JCPOA by returning to compliance with it is getting increasingly problematic by the advances that Iran makes every single day in its nuclear program.

Now, we are where we are because of what I consider to be one of the worst decisions made in American foreign policy in the last decade, and that was getting out of the Iran nuclear agreement, the

JCPOA – an agreement that had put Iran’s nuclear program in a box. And in getting out of that agreement, we were promised that it would be replaced by a stronger one, and, at the same time, maximum pressure being exerted against Iran would curb its malicious activities throughout the region. And instead, of course, we’ve seen just the opposite. There hasn’t been a new and improved agreement. To the contrary, Iran has broken loose from the constraints imposed on it by the JCPOA, and at the same time, it continues to act aggressively in country after country in the region.

So that’s the reality of what we’re dealing with, but we are dealing with it. We will deal with it. We continue to have a strong interest in seeing if we can put the nuclear program back into the box that it was in. But if we can’t do that because Iran will not engage in good faith, then we are actively looking at alternatives and options.

And what will not endure is Iran playing for time at the negotiating table by not engaging in good faith and with speed, while, at the same time, continuing to build up its program. That is not a sustainable proposition, and it simply won’t be.

Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** And to all, a very Happy New Year.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Happy Holidays.

**QUESTION:** Happy Holidays to you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Happy Holidays. Thanks.

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## [Department Press Briefing – January 11, 2022](#)

01/11/2022 07:56 PM EST

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Very sorry for the delay, but as you can see, we have a special guest joining us today for the second time, at least in this current iteration. She is no stranger to all of you. Victoria Nuland, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, will offer some opening remarks, take some questions, and then we will proceed with our regularly scheduled programming.

So Under Secretary Nuland, over to you.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Thank you. Good afternoon, everybody. Sorry to be a little late. It's great to be back in this room, and working for Ned.

This is, as you all know, a very important week. We have three sets of diplomatic talks ongoing: the U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue yesterday; the NATO-Russia Council meeting tomorrow, both of which are led for us by Deputy Secretary Sherman; and the Permanent Council meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on Thursday – all of this in an effort to resolve through diplomacy the crisis that Russia has created for Ukraine, for European security, and for global stability.

So before I go into some of the diplomatic substance, let's remember how we got here.

It is Russia that created this crisis out of whole cloth.

It is Russia that has amassed 100,000 troops on Ukraine's borders.

It is Russia that has prepared internal sabotage, destabilization, and false flag options for Ukraine.

And it is Russia that has spewed disinformation and lies about Ukraine, about the United States, and about NATO to justify its own actions.

At a time when COVID is running rampant again across Russia, as it is in other places, and where only half the population is vaccinated, the Kremlin has to justify to the Russian people why it is stoking a potentially very bloody and costly conflict for Russia, rather than focusing on its own citizens' health and on Russia's own significant challenges in building back better. No one needs a conflict now, least of all Russia.

As the Secretary did last week, let me set the record straight on a couple of other points as well.

First, Ukraine is not the aggressor in this situation. It is Russia that invaded Ukraine in 2014, that forcibly occupied Crimea, and that continues to wage war on Ukrainian territory. Ukraine has made

clear that it has no intention of threatening Russia in any way. It only wants a peaceful, democratic, European future for its people. And the United States remains unwavering in our support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

Second, NATO poses no threat to Russia either – unless, of course, Russia chose to pose a threat to NATO. NATO is a defensive alliance whose sole purpose is to protect its members. Decisions regarding NATO membership are up to each individual applicant country and the 30 NATO Allies. No one else has a voice or a veto in those decisions.

Third, diplomacy is the best option to restore stability and security for Ukraine, for Europe, and for Russia itself.

And fourth, the United States will not make any decisions about Europe without Europe, about Ukraine without Ukraine, or about NATO without NATO.

In that context, we're consulting intensively with our allies and partners. The White House put out a fact sheet on some of these engagements today. As you saw, President Biden has spoken to 16 European leaders. Secretary Blinken has done more than two dozen calls and meetings with foreign leaders and ministers, Deputy Secretary Sherman has met with the North Atlantic Council and the EU – just today made dozens of calls, as have I, as has Assistant Secretary Donfried and other members of the international – of the interagency community.

Now on to the diplomacy. In the Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russia yesterday, as Deputy Secretary Sherman made clear in her own press engagement yesterday, we have demonstrated our commitment to diplomacy by putting preliminary ideas on the table, including with regard to military transparency, risk reduction measures, and exercises. And as you know, the United States has long been interested in discussing arms control with the Russians, including both strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons. And we reiterated those interests in having deeper discussions on these topics when we met with Russia's – Russia yesterday in Geneva.

We've also made clear that genuine progress can only take place in a climate of de-escalation, not escalation, and on the basis of true reciprocity. That requires Russia to stay at the table and take concrete steps to reduce tensions.

So as the deputy secretary said yesterday in Geneva, Russia now has a stark choice to make: whether to take the path of diplomacy and dialogue or instead seek confrontation and the massive consequences that that will bring.

If the Russian Government further invades Ukraine, further destabilizes Ukraine, we are ready and aligned with our allies and our partners to impose severe costs. We will respond with massive economic measures, including those that have not been used before, and will inflict very significant costs on Russia's economy and its financial system.

But let me emphasize again our preference is diplomacy.

As the Secretary has said on numerous occasions, we've done this before. I've personally been engaged in this before. Even in some of the times of greatest tension, the United States, our allies, and our partners have worked with Russia to reach understandings together.

We've negotiated multiple instruments that have formed the bedrock of peace and security, including the Helsinki Accords, the INF Treaty, and other arms control agreements. We're working together now to try to bring Iran back into compliance with the JCPOA. And, of course, we created the OSCE together, where we will be meeting on Thursday.

Again, we did these things on the basis of reciprocity and through painstaking, careful diplomacy, in full consultation and coordination with our allies and with every country whose interests were affected. This is the way forward. This is what needs to happen now.

I'm happy to take your questions.

**MR PRICE:** Matt.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Hi, Toria. Welcome back to the briefing room.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Hello, Matt.

**QUESTION:** So I have a question about this, the mantra we've heard over and over again – massive consequences, severe costs, this kind of thing. But I'm just wondering: How solid, how confident are you in this – in the solidification, in the solidness —

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Solidity?

**QUESTION:** — in the solidity of the Western – of Western unity on this? Particularly given the fact that you and Amos Hochstein were up on the Hill yesterday essentially begging Democratic senators not to go along with Nord Stream 2 sanctions because you think that it'll – it will shelve or it'll reduce the German – Germany's desire to do anything. So how solid is this alliance of – for massive consequences and severe costs?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Matt, we are very confident in the consultations that we've been having with our allies and partners. We've been working at this for some two and a half months at every level, from the President on down. We have, as I discussed in very broad strokes and will only discuss them in broad strokes, a common understanding of the kind of intensive financial measures we'll need to take, and also now in the context of export restrictions that will have a painful impact on Russia.

Now, as we've done in the past, the U.S. may take one set of measures and Europe and other allies may take parallel steps that are not exactly the same but also painful to Russia because we have different economic exposure. But we are very confident that we are coming together around a very painful package, but we don't want to have to use it, as you know.

**QUESTION:** So you're okay with putting sanctions on NS2AG?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** What we have said is that the agreement that we did with Germany in July makes absolutely clear what will happen —

**QUESTION:** Let me put it in a different way: Are you concerned that Germany might not go along with whatever you're hoping you'll get in place should it become necessary if there are sanctions imposed on Nord Stream 2 – on AG?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** We are concerned now that what is being discussed on the Hill will have no impact on Nord Stream 2. What we are doing now is working with the Germans, working with the EU to slow their consideration of implementation of the pipeline. This German Government has taken significant steps to do that, and they've also reconfirmed the agreement we had with the previous government with regard to what happens to Nord Stream 2 – namely, it's suspended if Russia aggresses against Ukraine.

**MR PRICE:** Laura.



**QUESTION:** Thank you. Hi, Toria.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Hey.

**QUESTION:** Regarding Nord Stream 2 but also other discussions that Secretary Blinken is having on the Hill today, can you read out a little bit of what the message to the lawmakers is today? Is it the same as what you have reiterated for us here and now?

And then also I'm wondering a little bit about what the administration's position is on NATO enlargement in practice. You've made very clear that the United States continues to agree with the principle of other member – or other states joining NATO, but I'm wondering if you can be a little more specific about whether or not this administration supports other states in practice coming into the alliance. Thank you.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Well, first to say the Secretary has a number of engagements on the Hill. It'll shock you to know that not all of them are about Russia-Ukraine. Some of them are about other subjects that we're working on with members. But he's also meeting with a group who is considering traveling to Ukraine in a bipartisan fashion. So he will go through with them all aspects of the policy and make sure that they're up to date, both on the diplomacy, but also on the costs and on our engagements with the Ukrainians, which have been extremely rich and full, as you know, and ask them to carry messages of preparedness and of unity, and as they go in this bipartisan manner, to underscore the American people's commitment across the aisle to their sovereignty and territorial integrity. So that's number one.

With regard to NATO's "Open Door," as you know, I've been involved in this for more than 30 years, including helping to support and usher into the Alliance some of the Allies that joined after 1997. It is a bedrock principle of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its founding charter from 1949 that its door stays open to any European country who could meet NATO's high standards. So we have a number who have joined. We have a number who want to join and are working hard with NATO to meet those standards. Those include Georgia, Ukraine, et cetera. So it is absolutely essential not only that we live up to that principle that we've had for almost 70 years, but – or longer than 70 years, but also that the countries that aspire to join NATO do the hard work that's necessary to be ready.

**QUESTION:** Just to drill down a little bit, I do understand that you agree and continue to support the right and the "Open Door" policy in principle, but I'm wondering, say of Finland said, "We would like to join," would the United States support Finland joining? Would the United States support Sweden joining? Would the United States – I'm not trying to make this just about Ukraine and Georgia today.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** I think across the five administrations that I have served we have always said to Finland and Sweden: Anytime you want to talk to us about membership, we are — ready to do that. But again, Finland and Sweden would also have to be measured against NATO's high standards. Obviously, they are long time established, stable democracies. So that conversation would be slightly different than it is with countries that are making the transition to democratic systems and dealing with intensive problems of corruption and economic reform and democratic stability, et cetera.

**MR PRICE:** Andrea, then Daphne.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, Toria. In the context of what you said about the need to see Russia's reactions and whether they were in a posture of de-escalation, how do you view the reported live fire exercises by several thousand troops very close to the Ukraine border today? And I'd like to also ask you about another issue elsewhere in the world, if I may.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** So we've obviously seen those reports. I don't have them validated, but we've seen them. That obviously goes in exactly the opposite direction. When we talk about de-escalation, we talk about getting that mass number of troops off the Ukrainian border; we talk about serious engagement at the table; we talk about getting rid of destabilizing equipment as well around Ukraine's borders, and ending the massive disinformation and the plans with regard to internal destabilization.

**QUESTION:** And if I may, since you're here, if I could impose upon you with your broad reach, and since the Secretary is on the Hill talking about a lot of different issues, the North Korean missile launch which, according to our South Korean allies and other experts, was at Mach 10, which makes it hypersonic, and which apparently, according to also the South Korean defense ministry, had a maneuverable re-entry vehicle, making it, according to experts who we've spoken to, hard to track, hard to defend against.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** So I'm going to —

**QUESTION:** What do you think — this is the second in just one week from Kim Jong-un.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Yeah. I'm going to leave to Ned when he follows to share what we can —

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** — from intelligence about what we believe happened and didn't happen. But obviously it takes us in the wrong direction. As you know, the United States has been saying, since this administration came in, that we are open to dialogue with North Korea, that we are open to talking about COVID and humanitarian support, and instead they're firing off missiles. So this is dangerous and it's —

**QUESTION:** Are there any direct talks that we don't know about?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Say again?

**QUESTION:** Are there any direct talks that perhaps we don't know about?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** I don't have anything to share on that, Andrea.

**QUESTION:** In addition to the live fire exercises today, Kremlin Spokesman Peskov said there was no real cause for optimism after the talks on Monday. Does this change the U.S. view at all of how the talks went, and does this give indication to the U.S. that Russia has no intention of easing the military presence?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Well, that's obviously disappointing to hear that from the Kremlin. I hadn't seen that report before coming down here. As I said, we believe that the exchange of views that we had with the Russian side was constructive and worth doing, and we want to see those talks continue, and we're prepared to do that.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Michel.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. There are voices in town that say that instead of waiting for Russia to invade Ukraine, why don't you send weapons to Ukraine to defend themselves. And if you have any

update on Vienna talks on Iran.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Michel, I know that you know from Ned that we have this year alone supplied Ukraine with some \$450 million worth of defensive lethal support in all kinds of categories that they need for their preparedness now. And as the President has said, we are continuing to provide that support as they need it. But the problem is this Russian provocation, which is causing them to be increasingly insecure.

**MR PRICE:** Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for doing this. Secretary Blinken was pretty clear over the weekend that you guys aren't expecting major breakthroughs. We've heard from Secretary – Deputy Secretary Sherman that this was useful but not necessarily exact forward progress here. What would the U.S. deem success at the end of this week of diplomacy?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Well, we've said all along – and the Secretary said this and Deputy Secretary Sherman said it yesterday – that the kinds of issues that they have put on the table and the kinds of issues that we've put on the table – some of them I announced earlier, including military transparencies, et cetera, but particularly our concerns about their intermediate-range missiles, their concerns that they've put on the table in these two treaties about nuclear weaponry – can't be negotiated overnight. They take painstakingly hard diplomacy. So this first round was an exchange of views, and we are open and welcoming of continuing to talk. But if we want to make real progress, it's going to take that kind of hard work, and it's going to take some time.

**QUESTION:** So is success getting another date on the calendar for follow-up discussions?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** I don't think in diplomacy you measure success in inches; you measure it in outcome. And again, it is almost impossible for a single round with issues this intense to settle everything, let alone sometimes anything. So we had to exchange positions; we had to understand each other. And then we have to get down to the hard work, and we are ready to do that. The question is: Is the Kremlin?

**QUESTION:** And can I just ask one more question about Russia?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** I'm curious if the United States has a timeframe for how long you think Russia can financially back the placement of troops along the Russia-Ukrainian border, or if they have no timeline and they're willing to put any amount of resources into maintaining that aggression.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Well, Kylie, I'm going to let the Russians speak for themselves, but you make a very, very important point, which the Russian people should be paying attention to. These kind of deployments, hundred thousand troops out of barracks and on the Ukrainian border are extremely expensive, as is the deployment of this kind of weaponry in the cold winter, when the wealth of Russia, were I a Russian citizen, I would want to see applied to the healthcare system, to the education system, to the roads, the same kinds of conversations that we're having here in the United States, rather than hemorrhaging money on a created crisis and putting their own military out there in the snow.

**QUESTION:** Thanks.

**MR PRICE:** Time for a final question or two. Yes, sir. Please.

**QUESTION:** Victoria, thank you. My audience is in Ukraine, and the most important thing for them that previously the level of the expectation was very high. So right now, after Geneva talks, on the eve of other negotiations, do you see even the slightest sight of the de-escalation? You talked about this atmosphere of the de-escalation which we need so very much. So do you see right now even the slightest sight?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Well, again, in light of the news we've heard today, we haven't seen the kinds of steps that we need to see in terms of Russian de-escalation. And as we've said, as these talks continue, they will not be successful unless we can do this in an atmosphere of de-escalation. Ukraine should not have this sword of Damocles hanging over it. What I would like to say to the Ukrainian people and to Ukrainian leadership is that national unity is absolutely essential at this moment and to make the case continually, as you've always made to us, that your independence, your sovereignty, is about your European aspirations. And we understand that completely, but it's important to be united now in the context of what's going on.

**MR PRICE:** Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Good to see you behind the podium. My question to you as – you said that you've worked with – back in 1997 and so on you've seen the entry of countries and so on into NATO, so you know quite well. Why shouldn't Russia feel threatened and affronted by Ukraine or any other bordering country joining NATO? I mean, NATO is not exactly a country club. It is a military alliance. It has proudly Russia in its crosshair. So why shouldn't they fear the joining of Ukraine?

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Said, I'll say it again: Ukraine is – sorry. Try this again. I will say this again: NATO is a defensive alliance. It is about defending its members against any potential attack. It is not in the attack business itself. We also have these longstanding relationships between NATO and Russia which I was part of building back in the '90s and in the early aught years. And the hope was that Russia and NATO would increasingly be doing a lot of European security together, rather than seeing each other as enemies. But Russia chose not to go in that direction.

And again, NATO is about defending its members. In fact, NATO never even had any forces on its eastern edge because we didn't feel the need to have troops close to Russia until Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 and led NATO members to be concerned that they might keep going into NATO territory. So it is Russia that created this situation that brings us closer to their borders. It's not something that we wanted to do.

Thanks, everybody.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you, Toria.

**UNDER SECRETARY NULAND:** Great to see you all.

**MR PRICE:** That's it, Matt? You're leaving?

**QUESTION:** No, no, I'll be right back.

**QUESTION:** Hey, where is he going?

**QUESTION:** (Off-mike.)

**MR PRICE:** I've learned not to, especially with him. Let me get through a couple pieces of business at the top, and then happy to take your questions.

First, today the United States Agency for International Development announced the United States Government's initial 2022 contribution of more than \$308 million for humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan.

This new funding brings total U.S. humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and to the Afghan refugees in the region to nearly \$782 million since October 2020 alone.

President Biden has been clear that humanitarian assistance will continue to flow directly to the people of Afghanistan, and the United States remains the single largest provider of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan.

This assistance includes food and nutrition assistance; support for health care facilities and mobile health teams; winterization programs that includes the provision of emergency cash grants, shelter kits, heaters, blankets, and warm clothing; and logistics and transportation support to ensure that aid workers and critical relief supplies can make it to the hardest areas to reach.

This new contribution from the United States will provide lifesaving aid for the most vulnerable Afghans, and that includes women and girls, minority populations, and people with disabilities.

In addition, the UN launched its Afghanistan humanitarian response plan with the world's largest humanitarian funding appeal ever.

The United States remains committed to helping the people of Afghanistan. However, for this assistance to be the most effective, all aid workers, especially women, must be permitted to operate independently and securely and be able to reach women and girls without impediments.

The United States continues to urge the Taliban to allow unhindered humanitarian access, safe conditions for humanitarian aid workers, independent provision of assistance to all vulnerable people, and freedom of movement for aid workers of all genders.

We will continue to work to alleviate the suffering of the Afghan people and call on other donors to continue to contribute to this international response.

Together, we can deliver critical assistance directly to the people of Afghanistan.

Next, we welcome the release of the weekend – of the weekend – we welcome the release this weekend of activists Ramy Kamel and Ramy Shaath from pre-trial detention in Egypt, and we encourage the Government of Egypt to continue additional releases of long-term detainees. The United States will continue to engage with Egypt on human rights issues and to emphasize to the Egyptian Government that our bilateral relationship will be strengthened by improving respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

And finally, the United States notes the January 9th decision by Somalia's National Consultative Council to complete the country's long-overdue parliamentary elections by February 25th of this year. We call on all of Somalia's national and federal member state leaders to adhere to the newly agreed timeline and correct the procedural irregularities that have marred the process to date.

Somalia's elections are more than a year behind schedule, and February 8th will mark the one-year anniversary of the expiration of the president's term. The United States is prepared to draw on relevant tools, potentially including visa restrictions, to respond to further delays or actions that undermine the integrity of the process.

With that, happy to take any remaining questions. Daphne.

**QUESTION:** Can I start with Ethiopia?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** An air strike in Tigray on Monday killed at least 17 people, mostly women, and wounded dozens, aid workers have said. This was the same day that Biden spoke with Prime Minister Abiy and urged a stop to the air strikes. Did Abiy offer any commitments to stopping air strikes during the call? And with civilians being killed in these, what will the U.S. do to ensure that the air strikes stop?

**MR PRICE:** Let me make a couple points on that. First, as you noted, the President did have an opportunity to speak to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy yesterday, on January 10th. The President did raise specifically concerns about recent airstrikes causing civilian casualties and other human rights violations. We have consistently called out violations of human rights by all parties to this conflict, and we will continue to do that in all of our engagements at the most senior levels and including in our public statements.

We also believe, and you've seen us resort to measures to this effect, that there must be accountability. We supported a move for example by the Human Rights Council last month to establish an independent commission of experts for Ethiopia. We believe fundamentally, and this has really been at the core of our approach to the conflict in northern Ethiopia over the course of this administration, that the best way to end the human rights abuses, to end the violence, the conflict, the widespread suffering, the humanitarian strife, is to bring this war to a close. And that is what we have been so focused on.

We are pursuing robust diplomacy. Yesterday's leader-level call was an element of that. Ambassador Special Envoy Feltman and now Special Envoy Satterfield are deeply engaged in this, have been deeply engaged in this, working very closely with former President Obasanjo, working with other regional leaders, working with the AU as a whole, to bring about an end to this conflict.

We do believe the current situation offers an opportunity for both sides to demonstrate good faith and to demonstrate that progress is on the horizon. They can halt combat operations, they can come to the negotiating table – again, all in furtherance of what is our overarching, overriding goal, and that's bringing this conflict to a close.

Andrea. Oh, sorry.

**QUESTION:** Sorry. On the airstrikes, did Abiy make any commitments in the call with Biden?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have read out our side of the call. I just offered some additional detail. I will leave it to the Ethiopians to read out what the prime minister said.

**QUESTION:** Could it be to the White House?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry?

**QUESTION:** Or maybe to the White House?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I suspect the White House will be in the same position of leaving it to the prime minister to speak to what precisely he said, but we can be – you can be very confident that President Biden raised these concerns. There was no ambiguity about the fact that we do have serious concerns, including regarding what has transpired in recent days.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Could you follow up about North Korea and the reaction to what has been described as a hypersonic missile which landed in the Sea of Japan but which did have a maneuverable re-entry vehicle?

**MR PRICE:** Well, you heard from INDOPACOM overnight. You've also probably seen the language that has emanated from the State Department. We have made very clear that we condemn this latest ballistic missile launch. INDOPACOM put forward a statement overnight that made clear our assessment that the launch did not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory or to our allies. But the launch clearly does highlight the destabilizing impact of the DPRK's illicit weapons programs. It violates multiple UN Security Council resolutions. It poses a threat to the DPRK's neighbors and to the broader international community.

This is precisely why we have for some time, including in recent days, been consulting very closely with allies and partners. You may have seen that our ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, spoke on this topic yesterday from New York. We're consulting closely with our allies and partners on this. As you know, our commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea and Japan is ironclad. And when it comes to North Korea, we continue to call on the DPRK to refrain from further provocations and, importantly, to engage in sustained and – sustained and substantive dialogue, what we have been open to and in fact calling for for some time now.

We have not – the DPRK has not responded to these overtures, but we continue to believe that dialogue, we continue to believe that diplomacy, is the best path forward. And we're going to continue to plot out that course with our allies, to work in lockstep with our allies and our partners, and we will be ready if the DPRK demonstrates that it is willing to engage in such diplomacy.

**QUESTION:** Well, this launch got approximately 425 miles into the Sea of Japan, but we have consistently underestimated the rapidity of Kim's advances. Do you agree with the FAA decision for the unusual ground halt for a somewhat – slightly under 15 minutes of West Coast air traffic minutes after this launch?

**MR PRICE:** So I won't speak to any precautionary measures that the FAA might take. I understand that they put out a statement to this effect that they did this out of an abundance of caution. As you alluded to, full operations resumed within 15 minutes, and the FAA is reviewing the process around this ground stop.

**QUESTION:** And do you think since the DPRK, as you've just acknowledged, have not responded to our overtures, is there another tack that we should be taking to try to get through, with perhaps removing any preconditions or changing the climate of our overtures?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I want to be very clear: there are no preconditions. We think that diplomacy is and dialogue is a viable option right now. It is, we think, incumbent on the DPRK to cease these provocations, to demonstrate that they too are interested in and hopefully serious about this dialogue. And if they are, they will find a willing counterpart in the United States and our allies as well to engage in this dialogue.

**QUESTION:** Can I follow up on that, Ned?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, just to follow up on that last question, is there any kind of clock for the U.S. as far as determining when to change course when it comes to the DPRK? Yesterday's joint statement by Ambassador Thomas-Green — she mentioned every time they fire a missile they make advancements. So is there a clock similar to how you mention a clock with negotiations with Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Well, these are fundamentally in some ways different challenges. One of these countries has a nuclear weapons program, and the other does not. And we – when it comes to the other, our goal is and our commitment is to keeping it that way.

When it comes to North Korea, we've spoken repeatedly now about the concern we have for its nuclear weapons program, for its ballistic missiles program, for the threat that these programs pose potentially to international peace and security. And even as we have put out these overtures, these offers to engage in dialogue and diplomacy with the North Koreans, with the DPRK, we have continued to consult very closely with our treaty allies, the ROK and Japan. We have continued to speak very closely with other partners both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, and we continue to engage with the UN. And just yesterday, as I mentioned, there were consultations on this at the UN. Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield is continuing down that path.

So yes, we have a number of tools in our arsenal. We will continue to call on those tools to hold to account the DPRK for its violations, for example, of UN Security Council resolutions, the threat it poses to international peace and security, and the broader set of challenges that we face from the DPRK. But of course, I wouldn't want to preview anything at this stage.

Lara.

**QUESTION:** Ned, are you sure that North – that Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapons program? I mean, just because they don't have a bomb or haven't exploded one doesn't mean they don't have a program. Are you sure that they – are you sure that they don't?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I will leave it to the IAEA that continues to have inspections and – but let me just make one other broader point. This is precisely why we want the JCPOA, a return to full compliance with the JCPOA, because it has the most stringent verification and monitoring program ever negotiated. That would be something we would do well to have right now.

Lara.

**QUESTION:** Ned, since we're talking about JCPOA and Vienna talks, do you have any update on the talks? Are you getting closer to a deal?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have a specific update. As you know, this round is ongoing. We've spoken to the modest progress that we have seen in recent days. Of course, that progress needs to be more than modest if we are going to be in a position to salvage the JCPOA and to ensure that the nonproliferation benefits that the JCPOA conveys aren't diminished, watered down, eliminated by the advancements that Iran has made in its nuclear program.

And that, I think, brings us to where we are today, and it's worth spending just a moment on how we got here. I alluded to it with Matt, but it is deeply unfortunate that because of an ill-considered or perhaps unconsidered decision by the previous administration that this administration came into office without these stringent verification and monitoring protocols that were in place and that according to the State Department, according to our Intelligence Community, and according to the IAEA international weapons inspectors, a deal that was working to permanently and verifiably prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

**QUESTION:** But Ned, during this week did you feel any change in Iran's position?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have any updates to offer. We've spoken of the modest progress that we've seen since the resumption of the eighth round. But we've also spoken of the urgency and the need for progress to take place at a pace that is – that not only is on par with but that outpaces the significant



advancements that Iran has been able to make in its nuclear program since the last administration abandoned the JCPOA.

**QUESTION:** Sorry. Do you really think the previous administration's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA is unconsidered?

**MR PRICE:** Certainly ill-considered.

**QUESTION:** Well, but they didn't – it was certainly considered. Remember, it took some time before it actually happened, so I don't think you can say – it's your opinion that it's ill-considered and that may or may not be true, but unconsidered?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I – Matt, it's not an opinion to say that —

**QUESTION:** No, no —

**MR PRICE:** No, but it —

**QUESTION:** It is – it's perfectly fine for you to say that you think that it was ill-considered, but to say that it was unconsidered —

**MR PRICE:** Well —

**QUESTION:** — seems a bit much.

**MR PRICE:** Let me just – let me touch on something you said. It is not an opinion to remind you and everyone that we were promised a better deal. Remember the so-called – the promise of the so-called better deal? Of course, that never materialized; that never came close. And in fact, quite the opposite was true. Ever since the last administration left the JCPOA, Iran has been able to gallop forward with its nuclear promise. We were promised that Iran's proxies would be cowed, that Iran would be cowed into submission by the so-called maximum pressure program. Quite the opposite is true. And we continue to see reminders that Iran's proxies have not been subdued, and in fact, quite the opposite.

We were told that we'd be in a better position to take on the full set of challenges that Iran poses, whether its ballistic missiles, whether it is support to terrorism, whether it's human rights violations. How exactly were we supposed to do that when it was the United States and not Iran that was isolated as a result of the decision to abandon a deal and a protocol that was working. That's just the starting point that we had to accept on January 20th of this year. It was an unfortunate starting point, but that's the starting point from which we've been working.

Lara.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I want to go back to two things that Toria said a few minutes ago. One, she said that Secretary Blinken was on the Hill talking about issues even beyond Russia and Ukraine. Presumably, that includes Nord Stream 2 and North Korea. Can you confirm that? What was his message on both of those issues, each of those issues, and is there anything else that he was briefing the Hill on?

And then secondly, kind of more broadly, she – at the end of what – her comment, she said that we haven't seen the kind of de-escalation we want from Russia. I'm just wondering how you would advise we read that. Is that some kind of warning that a tripwire is about to be crossed? Or what kind of – is this just another reiteration of the fact that they haven't pulled back yet? Like, is there some kind of red line that – or warning that the United States is trying to issue at this point?

**MR PRICE:** I did not take that as a warning; I took it as an observation. It was an observation that we just have not seen the type of de-escalation that we think is necessary if there is to be meaningful progress in the context of the diplomacy and dialogue that's taking place between the Russian Federation, the United States, our allies and our partners. That's just a fact. Yesterday at the SSD, the Strategic Stability Dialogue, it was about putting ideas on the table. It was not about reaching breakthroughs or coming to any firm agreements. We've been very clear that we will do that only in consultation and only together with our allies and partners. And that's part of the reason why there is a meeting of the NRC tomorrow; there's a meeting of the OSCE permanent Council on Thursday.

So these will be opportunities for the Russians to put their stated concerns on the table, opportunities for the United States and our allies and partners, including Ukraine in the context of the OSCE, to put our concerns, our collective concerns on the table. We can do that now, but if we are going to have meaningful progress towards these reciprocal measures that would redound positively on our collective security – our meaning the collective security of the transatlantic community – we will need to see de-escalation. That can't take place in an environment of escalation. And that is why the under secretary was just observing that we haven't yet seen that.

**QUESTION:** And what kind of de-escalation are you looking for? Is it removal of troops? Is it stopping the live fire? Is it removal of helicopters? All the above? More?

**MR PRICE:** I would say yes.

**QUESTION:** Like what more?

**MR PRICE:** The fact is – and we talked about this yesterday. Several months ago, there were not 100,000 troops on Ukraine's borders. Several months ago, there were not these large-scale live fire exercises. Several months ago, there were not maneuvers with heavy weaponry, with helicopters, the other reports that we've seen in recent weeks and even recent days. All of this the Russians have done in recent months. They have done so in a manner that was clearly not an attempt to be furtive or stealthy. It's hard to be stealthy when you're moving 100,000 forces along internationally recognized borders. That underscores and undergirds our concern, and the fact that this was done and is being done in an effort to intimidate, in an effort to coerce.

And our concern – and Under Secretary Nuland made a reference to this when she spoke about the potential for a false-flag operation – our concern that the Russians will again resort to the playbook they've resorted to in the past, including in 2014, when they did something very similar. And they amassed troops along Ukraine's borders, they offered specious explanations and justifications that ultimately, they pointed to a pretextual purported provocation. They said that the Ukrainians had done this, that, or the other and that's why they needed to cross the border. That is our concern here. I should say it's one of our concerns here, that the Russians will resort to what was, what has been their playbook and may still be their playbook.

So yes, de-escalation to us would mean many of those things, if not all of those things. It would mean troops returning to their barracks. It would mean transparency around any legitimate exercises that were to take place on Russian soil. We'll be looking for all of those things in the days and weeks ahead if we are in a position to make meaningful progress.

**QUESTION:** And I'm sorry, the meetings on the Hill by the Secretary. Understand Afghanistan was also on the agenda.

**MR PRICE:** Look, I will leave it to members to speak to these engagements if they want. The point I will make is that we are committed to consulting with members and Hill offices, as the Secretary likes

to say, not only on the landing but on the takeoff and in between. And this is a good reminder we can get you some I think really good metrics that speak to the scope and scale of our engagement with Capitol Hill over the past 11 or 12 months here. But we have made coordination and consultation and dialogue with the Hill an absolute priority. We know the important role that the Hill has to play when it comes to oversight, when it comes to foreign policy, and we're committed to that.

**QUESTION:** I'd love to know the content as opposed to just the scope and scale.

**MR PRICE:** I'm sure you would. I'm sure you would.

**QUESTION:** Can you just enlighten us as to what the date for the status quo ante that you want the Russians to go back to is? Does it go back to 2014, or is Crimea a lost cause for you now? Would you – do you – does de-escalation mean that they have to relinquish control of Crimea?

**MR PRICE:** Crimea – look, we're certainly not saying —

**QUESTION:** Does it mean that they have to go back to 2008, 2007, or – and leave Abkhazia and South Ossetia? What – where is this – where does this de-escalation point start from?

**MR PRICE:** So Matt, I'm not in a position right here to give you a firm date. But I will tell you that we have been talking about this since about mid-November, for going on two months.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Okay. So you're basically saying go back to where things were in early November, right? In terms of your troop presence.

**MR PRICE:** We are saying that —

**QUESTION:** Which also means that —

**MR PRICE:** — de-escalation in this context would call for Russian troops to return to their barracks, for these exercises to either be explained or to come to a halt, for this heavy weaponry to return to its regular storage locations. But we are also committed to doing everything we can to support a diplomatic resolution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. And obviously, of course, Ukraine has demonstrated a commitment to finding a peaceful end to the war. We stand ready to support those efforts, including, as we've heard —

**QUESTION:** Okay. Well, what's the administration doing to back up its demand that Russia get out of Crimea, and to say that the annexation – quote/unquote “annexation” – of Crimea is illegitimate? What are you doing about that? Or is that just not an issue in this current situation?

**MR PRICE:** The attempted annexation of Crimea is something that we have responded to since 2014, and there are sanctions in place, and there will be sanctions in place, and there will be measures to hold the Russian Federation to account for its aggression as long as that aggression persists.

Tracy.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan, it's almost six months now since the Taliban took over. You just now spoke of the many millions of dollars that the United States is sending in humanitarian aid to the people. But the reports that we get out of Afghanistan are deeply dire, and increasingly so, with hundreds of thousands of people starving or on the brink of starvation. What is your best explanation for why that aid is not reaching the people? Is it your refusal to deal with the Taliban? Is it what you mentioned earlier, the Taliban's impeding access of some aid workers? Could you give us an explanation of why that aid isn't helping?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. Let me first start what it is not – with what it is not. It is not because of anything the United States is doing or is not doing when it comes to our support for the humanitarian needs of the Afghan people. What it is is the result of a number of things. It is the result of recent near-term conditions; a drought; winter, of course, now; but also, more to the point, the longer-term trends and conditions that we've seen ossify over the course of nearly two decades. And the United States and our partners, we were very clear with the Taliban before they – before the fall of the previous government in Kabul that any attempt to overtake the country by force would only worsen what was already a humanitarian emergency.

The conditions, the humanitarian challenges we're seeing now, they did not start a month ago, they did not start two months ago, they did not start with the fall of the previous government. Some of these are structural. As you know, the international community previously provided the lion's share of the public expenditures of the Afghan Government. The international community previously provided billions and billions of dollars each year for the humanitarian needs of the Afghan people. That latter part is still true. The international community is providing and the UN today, as you heard, has started a pledge campaign to raise some \$5 billion, including about \$4.5 billion for the people of Afghanistan and about half a billion dollars for refugees in the region.

Now, the United States, as I mentioned before, has been the world's leader in providing that humanitarian assistance, more than three quarters of a billion dollars since October of 2020 alone. But we've also encouraged other countries to step up. That remains the case. Other countries, including those in the region, including some of those that may share a border with Afghanistan or that may be in close proximity to Afghanistan, we need to see countries around the world step up, just as the UN called for today, to demonstrate their commitment to the humanitarian needs of the Afghan people. It is not in anyone's interest, whether you are a country that is thousands of miles away like the United States or you're a country that shares a border with Afghanistan, to see deprivation, to see instability, to see hardship within and among the people of Afghanistan.

We've done more than that, however, beyond our humanitarian leadership, beyond our galvanizing call to action. As you know, the Treasury Department has issued both general and specific licenses to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan to send a very clear signal that not only is the United States Government not standing in the way, that we are doing everything we can to call on the international community to do what it can to help the people of Afghanistan. Recently, we supported the release of the so-called ARTF funds of the World Bank, the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Funds, a couple hundred million dollars, for the people of Afghanistan. As we've alluded to before, we're looking at other ways, including in conjunction with the UN, that we might be able to support the people of Afghanistan – importantly, in a way that doesn't flow through the coffers of the Taliban.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask about Afghanistan?

**QUESTION:** Do you have —

**QUESTION:** Go ahead.

**MR PRICE:** Do you have a follow-up?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Do you have metrics to show, though – you like to talk about metrics – to show that money or aid, I mean, is getting to the people? I mean, how do you measure that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it is —

**QUESTION:** Substantiate.

**MR PRICE:** As you know, it is more complex in the context of Afghanistan because it cannot flow through the coffers of the Taliban. And so the United States and our partners, we're reliant on our – primarily on our NGO partners on the ground to dispense with these humanitarian funds. We are regularly in contact with these humanitarian partners. They continue to operate on the ground. They continue to implement programs from winterization to health care to nutrition to education. And so we are regularly in touch with them and they are in a position to offer reports on that progress.

Kylie.

**QUESTION:** We are hearing that the evacuation flights are still grounded. It's been about a month now. We're also hearing there are about 80 Americans still in Afghanistan who would like to leave. So when was the last evacuation flight that left Afghanistan? And is it – are those two things accurate, that they're still grounded and there are about 80 Americans who want to leave?

**MR PRICE:** Well, let me just give you some context. As you know, we made clear prior to August 31st that our commitment to U.S. citizens, to lawful permanent residents, to Afghans to whom we have a special commitment would not end on any date certain and not on August 31st. And since August 31st, 479 – we have directly assisted the departure of 479 U.S. citizens and 450 lawful permanent residents. There are others whose departure we have indirectly helped or supported in various ways. We are working currently with a few dozen U.S. citizens and their families who have identified themselves as prepared to depart and who have the necessary travel documents to do so. We believe at this point that, in addition to those few dozen U.S. citizens and their families, there is a relatively small number, probably fewer than 200 – again, with all the caveats that apply to these numbers fluctuating – but we're in touch with about 150 other U.S. citizens who don't want to leave Afghanistan at this point or otherwise not ready to depart.

We have worked very closely, as you know, with our partners, including the Qataris, on these relocation efforts. We have a team here at the Department of State that is dedicated to this mission around the clock. And again, our commitment to any American citizen who may or may not be ready, who may or may not wish to leave is that if he or she and their family wish to leave and they're ready to leave, we will be there to assist them.

**QUESTION:** Sorry, when was the last evacuation flight?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have that available now. But again, our commitment to Americans is sacrosanct and we're continuing to work very closely not only with them but also with our partners, including the Qataris, with whom we've worked on these relocation flights.

**QUESTION:** Is it problematic that these evacuation flights have been halted for so long?

**MR PRICE:** Again, I think you can look at our track record, and the fact that we have relocated more than 900 U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, not to mention a significant number of other Afghans who meet the criteria for relocation I think speaks to not only the commitment but also the ability that we have to relocate Americans and those to whom we have a commitment.

**QUESTION:** Can you give a number for the Afghans?

**MR PRICE:** It was – as of a couple weeks ago, it was in the ballpark of a couple thousand.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Switching gears to the Palestinian issue, Ned, there are Israeli reports that they are headed towards evicting more Palestinians or evicting Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah and

from Silwan, despite your repeated calls on the Israelis not to do so. What can you do to sort of persuade them not to actually go on and go ahead with this action?

**MR PRICE:** Said, on the general issue, we've been very clear that it is critical for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions or might otherwise undercut efforts to —

**QUESTION:** But Ned, in all fairness, the Palestinian — yeah, but the Palestinian Authority did not evict any Israelis. I mean, this is really just — it's an action by the Israelis.

**MR PRICE:** But if you let me finish — if you'll let me finish, we have been very clear that it's incumbent on both Israelis — on Israel and the Palestinian Authority to refrain from unilateral steps. In this case, we have been clear that steps that exacerbate tensions and undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution includes — would include the eviction of families from homes in East Jerusalem in which these families have lived for generations in some cases. We've been very clear about that.

**QUESTION:** But obviously the Israelis are not listening to you. What would you do to make them — to sort of persuade them that they should not do this?

**MR PRICE:** Said, we continue to discuss this with our Israeli partners. We've been very clear in our public statements as well, but there are ongoing discussions about this.

**QUESTION:** Very quickly, a federal judge last Friday ruled that a law targeting the PLO being unconstitutional. Does that — would that lead you to sort of reopen the PLO office here in Washington? Could that lead to the opening of the office —

**MR PRICE:** For any question — well, for any questions about litigation or the implications of litigation, including the *Fuld* litigation, I would need to refer you to the Department of Justice. When it comes to the Palestinian office, I just don't have an update to offer at this time, but you've heard us say that as a general matter this administration is committed to and actively engaged with the Palestinians. Over the course of the last few months, we've had numerous high-level meetings with Palestinian officials. Of course, Secretary Blinken was in Ramallah mid-last year; Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield and Under Secretary Nuland were there in November as well. Our assistant — Acting Assistant Secretary Yael Lempert accompanied National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and met with senior Palestinian officials in December.

Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** If I may return to Ukraine very shortly, tomorrow during NATO-Russia Council we will definitely hear one more time the demand that Ukraine will never become a member of NATO. There were a lot of statements, for example from Deputy Secretary Sherman, who told that we will not allow anyone to slam closed NATO "Open Door" policy. But could you clarify the American position? Does it mean that this issue is undiscussable, is totally off the table, or it might be discussed tomorrow during the council?

**MR PRICE:** The point of dialogue is that, of course, any country is able to put on the table a concern that that country may have. But the point of dialogue is for the other countries to be very clear, and we have been very clear that NATO's "Open Door" policy for us is not something and for the Alliance is not something that is on the table. It is a fundamental pillar of the North Atlantic charter. It is a fundamental pillar of what it is to be the defensive alliance that is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

So yes, it is in that sense specific to NATO, but — and we talked about this yesterday as well — it's

also bigger than NATO. It's bigger than any alliance; it's bigger than any collection of countries. It's about the basic fundamental tenet that no country can dictate the foreign policy, the decisions, the aspirations of any other country. No country can override international borders. No country should be in a position to threaten, to intimidate, to coerce any other country. And so that is the basic principle that Russia's so-called demands have brought into sharp relief.

Daphne.

**QUESTION:** On Kazakhstan. Kazakh President Tokayev says the CSTO mission is going to start winding down, and that it has helped put down an attempted coup-d'état. What is your assessment of that explanation, and does it satisfy the concerns the U.S. had about the deployment of the troops?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we do welcome the reports of calm in the city of Almaty that we've heard in recent hours and over the course of the past day. We also welcome President Tokayev's announcement that the CSTO collective peacekeeping forces have completed their mission. Until that process is completed and until the CSTO peacekeeping forces are withdrawn, we'll continue to call upon all collective security treaty organization, collective peacekeeping forces to respect international human rights and to uphold their commitment to promptly depart Kazakhstan, as the Government of Kazakhstan has requested.

We – with Kazakhstan's constitutional institutions in place, we are hopeful the situation can be resolved peacefully.

Final question, yes.

**QUESTION:** On Afghanistan, there are reports – *Foreign Policy* reported that the Taliban have begun to replace diplomats who refuse Taliban rule, threatening them of violence and such things. So are you aware of these reports, and how do you comment?

**MR PRICE:** I will – I'm not in a position to confirm these reports when it comes to the makeup of the – any sort of Taliban delegation. I would need to – I don't have a comment on that. But what we have said repeatedly and what the international community has made clear is that it is incumbent on the Taliban to form and to put together a potential future government that is inclusive, that is representative not only of the Afghan people, but that is responsive to the needs of the Afghan people. And we've spoken to the scale and the scope of those needs. They're tremendous, and that is why it's especially important that in order for the Taliban to earn the legitimacy that they seek, that their – that any future government of Afghanistan is inclusive, is representative of the people of Afghanistan, and is responsive to their needs. And that's what we, together with our allies and partners, will be watching very closely.

**QUESTION:** So then are you considering restarting the assistance plan? And are you going to nominate an ambassador?

**MR PRICE:** So I don't have an update for you on any nominations that may be forthcoming. When it comes to the assistance that was suspended in the aftermath of the October 25th actions that the military undertook, we're determining the best course and looking at how we can most effectively support the democratic aspirations of the people of Sudan. It's very clear from their actions over recent months that the people of Sudan still believe in the democratic revolution that swept over the country. Their aspirations for democracy, for human rights, for dignity, and for self-determination remains, and the United States will continue to be a partner to them in those aspirations.

**QUESTION:** One final question, if I may.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Also, there are reports that Biden administration expressed reservation over the EastMed pipeline. Can you confirm that?

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry, reservations over —

**QUESTION:** EastMed pipeline.

**MR PRICE:** I don't have a reaction to that. If we have anything to share, we will.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:49 p.m.)

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**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy Before Their Meeting  
**To:** Good ander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** January 19, 2022 9:52 AM (UTC-05:00)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy Before Their Meeting](#)

01/19/2022 09:34 AM EST

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Kyiv, Ukraine

Office of the President of Ukraine

**PRESIDENT ZELENSKYY:** (Via translator) I would like to first thank you and your colleagues for your visit. Your visit is very important to us, your visit personally. This underscores once again the strong support for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty from the United States.

I want to say that we appreciate our ongoing contacts, including with you, telephone contacts, support contacts, contacts between you and the minister of foreign affairs, and in general high-level contacts – by the White House, by President Biden's representatives, with the office of the president, and by Mr. Sullivan with Andriy Yermak, and between us at the level of presidents – constant contacts. And there are really a lot of them.

This indicates not just words, but concrete support. What is the result of such support? And this is something I would also like to thank you personally, President Biden and the United States administration for at the beginning of our conversation – for your support, military assistance to Ukraine, for increasing this assistance, for the assistance that is already being provided by the United States, and – I am confident – will continue in the future.

This support speaks not only about our strategic plans for Ukraine's accession to the Alliance, but most importantly, I think, about the level of our army, the provisions for our army. Yes, the budget of Ukraine – we allocate the maximum funds in all the years of independence of our state – the maximum money to support our army. But at the same time we understand: to take very fast steps to modernize the army – we need help here, especially help in such times, difficult times – I think these times can be called difficult.

I think the agenda of our conversation is first and foremost about security matters. I would also like to raise some economic issues that depend on the security situation. And so I started, and I want to give the floor to you, and then let's move on to the agenda. I think we generally have the same agenda, but we still want to discuss some things in detail, because your intelligence is excellent, but you are far overseas, and we are here, and I think we know some things a little bit deeper about our state.

Welcome again.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, Mr. President, thank you so much for receiving us and receiving me again today. It's very good to see you again. I am tempted to say the last thing that you need is

another visitor, because I think Kyiv may be the most popular destination in the world right now.

But I did want to return, and in fact President Biden asked me to do so. And he really asked me to do so for three reasons. First, to reaffirm to you, to your colleagues, and to all of our Ukrainian friends the support that the United States has for Ukraine, and to affirm that now as ever it is up to Ukrainians and no one else to decide their own future and the future of this country. The Ukrainian people chose a democratic and European path in 1991. They took to the Maidan to defend that choice in 2013. And unfortunately, ever since you've faced relentless aggression from Moscow. Russia invaded territory in the Crimea, ginned up a conflict in eastern Ukraine, and has systematically sought to undermine and divide Ukraine's democracy.

Today there are some 100,000 Russian soldiers near Ukraine's borders, and in that sense the threat to Ukraine is unprecedented. So the President asked me to underscore once again our commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity, to its sovereignty, to its independence. And I know that's a message that you've heard not just from us, but from so many partners throughout Europe, including just in the last couple of days.

Second, the President wanted me to come and have the opportunity to speak directly with you, with all of our colleagues here about the week of intensive diplomacy that we just engaged in and completed with Russia, and to consult and coordinate on the next steps, including my meeting on Friday with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.

Across all of our engagements, we have made clear the clear preference for finding a diplomatic resolution to the conflict and to de-escalate the situation. That is the clear preference. It's also the most responsible thing that any of us can do.

At the same time, we've made it very clear to Moscow that if it chooses to renew aggression against Ukraine, it will mean that it will face very severe consequences – and again, that's coming not just from the United States but from countries across Europe and beyond.

Meetings like this one, Mr. President, and the consultations that I'll have tomorrow in Berlin with some of our other European partners are aimed at assuring that we are speaking clearly and with one voice to Moscow. And that brings me to the third and final point that the President wants me to focus on and asked me to focus on, and that is: Our strength depends on preserving our unity, and that includes unity within Ukraine. I think one of Moscow's longstanding goals has been to try to sow divisions between and within countries, and quite simply we cannot and will not let them do that.

So our message to all of our friends here and to all of Ukraine's global leaders, to its citizens alike, is to stick together and to hold on to that unity, to strengthen it. It's never been more important, particularly as the country faces the possibility of renewed Russian aggression. Together, as you've shown in recent years, there is no obstacle that Ukrainians together, with the support of so many friends around the world, including the United States – no obstacle that you cannot overcome, and I wanted to reaffirm that as well. So thank you again, Mr. President, for receiving us today.

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**From:** U.S. Department of State  
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**To:** Goodander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
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## [Senior State Department Official On the JCPOA Talks](#)

01/31/2022 07:51 PM EST

Via Teleconference

**MODERATOR:** Thanks very much. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining the call. With a break in the talks in Vienna, we wanted to take an opportunity for you to hear from one of our colleagues regarding the current status of things as they stand in relation to a potential mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. What you hear on this call can be attributed to a senior State Department official. We'll embargo the contents of this call until its conclusion.

Just for your background and not for reporting purposes, we have with us today. But this will be on background, attributed to a senior State Department official and embargoed until its conclusion. So with that, I will turn it over to my colleague. Please, go ahead.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you, and thanks again to all of you for joining us. It's been a while. The good news for us is that it means when we are back with you, it means the team is back in D.C., and I think this was – it's been such a long time, it's good for everyone to be back home for – even if it's just for a short while.

I'm sure you've heard a lot recently about people saying that this is the endgame, time for political decisions, that we were – one of my colleagues said that we are now in the ballpark. And I want to sort of deconstruct what all that means.

First, as a matter of timing, we are in the final stretch because, as we've said now for some time, this can't go on forever because of Iran's nuclear advances. This is not a prediction. It's not a threat. It's not an artificial deadline. It's just a requirement that we've conveyed indirectly to Iran and to all our P5+1 partners for some time, which is that given the pace of Iran's advances, its nuclear advances, we only have a handful of weeks left to get a deal, after which point it will unfortunately be no longer possible to return to the JCPOA and to recapture the nonproliferation benefits that the deal provided for us. So again, not an artificial deadline, not an ultimatum, but just a statement of fact that the Iranians have been aware of now for some time that we are reaching the final moment, after which we will no longer be in a position to come back to the JCPOA because it will no longer hold the value that we negotiated for. So that's one reason why we say that this – we're entering into the final – the endgame.

The second reason is substantive. We've been at this now for roughly 10 months, and the last – the last time we were in Vienna, the negotiations in January were among the most intensive that we've had to date. And we made progress narrowing down the list of differences to just the key priorities on all sides. And that's why now is a time for political decisions. Now is the time to decide whether – for Iran to decide whether it's prepared to make those decisions necessary for a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

So that's the reason why negotiators have returned to – for consultations with their leadership to figure out whether they're prepared to make the tough political decisions that have to be made now if we want to be in a position to secure that mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA. In other words, we will know sooner rather than later whether we are back in the – the U.S. is back in the JCPOA and Iran is back in fully implementing its obligations under the JCPOA, or whether we're going to have to face a different reality, a reality of mounting tensions and crisis.

I think it's been clear now for – since President Biden has been in office what the U.S. strong preference is and what we have devoted our efforts to over the past 10 months or so, and that's full return to the JCPOA. And that's because that would advance core U.S. national interests, it would end the current nuclear nonproliferation crisis, it would create an opportunity to depressurize the broader regional crisis. In other words, it would get us out of the situation that we inherited from the prior administration's catastrophic error of withdrawing from the JCPOA, which left us with an unconstrained Iran nuclear program and inadequate if not wholly unsatisfactory tools to address it.

So that would be one option, which would also in our view serve regional and international interests. I think you've all seen the strong support for the return to the JCPOA from our Gulf partners, including a joint statement that we and the GCC put out in November, and you've also seen – and we mentioned it in our last call – the growing list of seniormost former Israeli officials, in particular security leaders, who now regret the JCPOA withdrawal and call it a terrible mistake.

That's our preferred path. We know that it is very possible that Iran chooses not to go down that path, and we are ready to deal with that contingency. We hope that's not the decision that Iran makes, but we are prepared to deal with either one of them.

I think that's the message that all of the P5+1 have heard. I think they all are united on this notion that we have little time left, that tough decisions need to be made, and now's the time to make them. It's the message that our European partners in particular left the Iranian delegation in Vienna with last Friday, and it's our understanding that it's the message that President Macron conveyed to President Raisi when they spoke over the weekend, that there is an opportunity, that it is a significant opportunity, but there is also urgency. And if we all don't move with that urgency, that opportunity will very soon disappear.

Before I turn it over to questions, I want to say a word about the other issue, which is our absolute priority, which is the release of our four citizens who are unjustly detained in Iran. I think you must know that we had a very intensive, discussions, with some of the – always with the families of the hostages, and we had the opportunity to meet with Barry Rosen. It was an honor to meet him and an honor to thank him for the effort that he's been making to shine a spotlight on the outrageous detention of our citizens and of citizens from other countries. And we have – we are negotiating on the release of the detainees separately from the JCPOA, but as we've said, it is very hard for us to imagine a return to the JCPOA while four innocent Americans are behind bars or are detained in Iran.

For that, we would want to stress on this that any news, any information on what's happening in the negotiations, in the talks over the release of the detainees, should come – will come – from this administration, from the State Department, from the White House. And I would urge journalists and others in particular not to pay credence to what they may see from other sources, in particular Iranian sources, which have been in the unfortunate habit of adding to the cruelty that is being inflicted on the families of the hostages, the cruelty of putting out false information and sometimes raising expectations. We're focused on this issue. We will do everything in our power to get the detainees out. But any news will come officially from us, and at this point, we have no news to report other than that we're continuing those discussions with the urgency and priority that they require. Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Great, thanks. Operator, would you mind repeating the instructions for asking a

question?

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to ask a question, please press 1 then 0 on your telephone keypad. You may withdraw your question at any time by repeating the 1-0 command. If you are using a speakerphone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, if you have a question, you may press 1 then 0 at this time.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you very much. We will start with the line of Andrea Mitchell, please.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much for doing this briefing. Can you be specific in terms of right now, absent an agreement, how close Iran is, as far as you're concerned, to breakout? Is it a matter of weeks? Less than a month? What are your concerns about the IAEA not having full visibility for as long as a year to some of the cameras, not being able to see that footage? And how much progress they're also making on missiles and perhaps on warheads as well? So overall what's your concerns about – in terms of the different elements of Iran's plan, or program, I should say? And what do you think is the likelihood of them agreeing to something that would deal with those contingencies, would roll them back? What do you need to see in order for a response from Iran to be acceptable?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So thank you, Andrea. Let me try to take this piece by piece. So everything you've said is actually – that's exactly – those are the reasons why we think it is in our core national security interest to revive the JCPOA, for us and Iran to be back in compliance, because in the absence of that deal and as a result of the previous administration's withdrawal, Iran is shortening the breakout timeline – and I'll come back to that in a second – in ways that are extremely dangerous, and without the visibility that the IAEA had, the unprecedented access that had been negotiated for the IAEA through the JCPOA. So we are in the situation. It's very unfortunate. We shouldn't be in this situation. We're doing everything we can to get back to where we should have been absent that withdrawal.

Back on the breakout timeline, there obviously is information that I can't share. I will just refer you to what various think tanks have put out. And I think it's fair to say that when it comes to their capacity to have enough fissile material in which it – at weapons grade for a bomb, we're talking about weeks, not months. That's different from the timeline for weaponization, for having a bomb.

But we are very focused, as was the JCPOA, on ensuring that they can't, that they don't, reach the – that threshold in terms of breakout timeline on the enrichment side. And that's what the JCPOA was very focused on, and we will continue to focus on that. And we hope with a return to the JCPOA, we know with a return to the JCPOA, that if the constraints are what we had in 2016 – and we should have the same constraints that we're insisting on this time – we would get back to a breakout timeline that is one that we could – we could accept and that would give us the opportunity to have the kind of reassurance that we need that Iran is not going to seek an undetected breakout.

In terms of the IAEA visibility, same thing. We obviously are not in a position we'd like – and it is one of the core achievements of the JCPOA – and so we are demanding, as are all the P5+1, a return to the kind of IAEA access that existed back in 2016 and that was negotiated. So there's no mystery. We're trying to get Iran to go back to the requirements and a constraint that it had accepted in 2016.

As to the question about how much progress they're making on missiles, we've spoken about that separately. And of course, it's a huge concern for us and for our partners in the region and for others. It is not a subject of these negotiations, but we have other tools to deal with it. We'll continue to use those tools. And of course, we hope that – more than hope – it is our objective to get at some point a discussion, a regional discussion that will deal with all these other issues, all of the security

issues, the security concerns, and the threats that Iran presents as a result of its missile and other programs.

So how likely? When you say how likely is it that the deal – that a deal could address those contingencies, the purpose of getting back into the deal is to deal – is to address the nuclear contingency that you mentioned, the issues of enrichment breakout time and the issue of IAEA access, the question of what centrifuges Iran could operate. All of that was at the heart of the JCPOA. All of that was why the JCPOA was such an important deal to preserve and why the withdrawal was such a catastrophic mistake. That's what we're trying to restore.

If Iran is interested in and sees an interest in coming back to the JCPOA, we will achieve those — we will re-establish those constraints, and in return, of course, Iran would get the sanctions relief that it bargained for back in 2015.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Francesco Fontemaggi.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks, . What would you say are the main last sticking points to an agreement in Vienna? Iran said today it was still around removal of sanctions and guarantees that the U.S. will not withdraw. What would you say on your side?

And then one more is there was an opening last week from Iran about direct talks that you have been asking – do you think – is there a chance that the next round is a direct one, or you are not there yet? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So I apologize in advance because this will be my answer to any specific questions about the negotiations, is that we make it a matter of principle that we won't negotiate in public, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. So of course, to try to identify sticking points – what I will – is difficult. What I will say is that I think we are at the point where some of the core – the most critical political decisions have to be made by all sides. President Biden has said clearly we are prepared to get back into the JCPOA and to make the political decisions necessary to achieve that goal, and we're hoping that Iran will do the same.

On the issue of direct talks, we're not – this is not a matter of seeking – asking Iran to do us a favor with direct talks. If Iran doesn't want to talk to us, that is, of course, their decision. Our point is, not as a favor to the U.S. or as a favor to Iran but as a favor to the process, if our goal is to reach an understanding quickly – which is what we need to do – and to avoid misunderstandings and to avoid miscommunication and to make sure that both sides know exactly what they're getting into, the optimal way to do that in any negotiation is for the parties that have the most at stake to meet directly. That's been our view from the outset. We're prepared to meet with Iran if they are prepared to meet with us. We're not – we can't compel Iran, but we can say that we think that it would be very much in the interest of the process.

And again, I think that's a point on which the P5+1, the Europeans, Russia, and China are absolutely in unison in believing that it would make the most sense for Iran and the U.S. to meet directly. We have not met directly yet. We have no indication that's going to be the case when we reconvene. All I would say is – say in conclusion is that, again, given how little time is left, given how critical the decisions that need to be are, it would be deeply unfortunate – and I'm using a diplomatic term – if that opportunity were lost in part because there had not been the opportunity, the ability, for Iran and the United States to have a direct conversation. That would be extremely regrettable.

Again, not our decision. It would be up to Iran to make its own choice, but it would be very hard to

explain, if we faced a crisis, to those who will suffer from the crisis that the reason for that, the reason we weren't able to get the deal, the reason that Iran could not get the sanctions relief that it wants, was at least in part because Iran was not prepared to sit down with the U.S. and try to overcome the remaining hurdles.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Kylie Atwood.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Appreciate it. I am – I have two questions. I know you aren't going to get into the nitty-gritty of where things stand right now, but I'm just wondering: Is there a pathway to salvaging the deal that has been laid down in the Vienna talks thus far that the U.S. is willing and ready to accept? And is that what you are talking about with Biden administration officials this week in Washington?

And then my second question is you spoke to the U.S. being prepared to deal with either situation, whether the Iran deal is salvaged or it's not. And I'm wondering if you can be a little bit more explicit about what types of moves the U.S. would consider taking if the deal isn't salvaged. Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So Kylie, on your first question, again, I think we have been clear from the outset that we're prepared to do what it would take in terms of lifting those sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA to come back into the deal. So those – that's a decision that President Biden and Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Sullivan and other cabinet officials made some time ago. So this is not a difficult call in that respect. I think we just need to know whether Iran is prepared to make those decisions. I think, as we've said, if they are, they have on the U.S. side a party that is prepared to make the difficult decisions as well. So we will find out when the talks resume.

We've gotten into, in the past, in some of these conversations the issue of what would happen if there's no deal. I think it's a future that is not hard to divine. Obviously, Iran's nuclear program in that situation would not be constrained. It would continue at the alarming pace that it has – that the Iranian leadership has undertaken for some time. And we would have to fortify our response, and that means more pressure – economic, diplomatic, and otherwise. And as I said earlier, that's not a future that we aspire to, but it's one that we're ready to – a path that we're ready to go down if that's the decision that Iran makes. And we will use the tools that we have to ensure that our interests are preserved and that Iran cannot acquire a nuclear weapon.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to Karen DeYoung.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you. You just said that decisions by the United States in terms of what sanctions you are prepared to lift were made a long time ago, and yet you've also said in this conversation that political decisions have to be made by all sides. At the same time, Iran said today that it has given the United States a written statement that it expects a response to. What are the political decisions that have to be made on the U.S. and P5+1/P4+1 side? So what – have they given you a written document? And what – when you say decisions have to be made by all sides, what decisions have to be made here?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So Karen, I'm not aware of what written document they may be referring to. There are obviously a lot of exchanges of documents that take place in Vienna, so I'm not sure exactly. I've not seen that statement by the Iranians, so I'm not sure what they are – what they may be alluding to.



Again, your question is kind of a different way to ask the prior question about what we think, where we are in the negotiations, which I don't want to – I'm not going to address outside of the negotiating room. I'd say the decisions that need to be made by the U.S. in order to come back to the deal have been made. We are prepared to go back into the deal. It doesn't mean that every detail of the negotiation has been resolved from our side, but we are prepared to make those tough choices.

And again, we believe that Iran has to make a fundamental choice whether – if it wants to get back in the deal with the U.S. back in the deal and then back into full compliance. It's a decision that they should make relatively soon for the reasons that I outlined above, and we hope that we'll be able to when we resume to quickly reach and then implement that deal. And as I said, the U.S. – and I think I could speak for the Europeans as well – are prepared to do what it takes to be back in – well, the E3 never were out of compliance, but for us to be back in compliance with the deal and for Iran to receive the benefits that it was promised under that deal.

**MODERATOR:** Robin Wright, please.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thanks. Thanks, , for doing this. Can you help us understand the evolution of Iran's position? It played hardball, as we all know, at the beginning. Has it – did it kind of soften with that posturing? Has it been demonstrably more flexible in ways that are hopeful?

And secondly, on the process itself, there have always been two parts to it. One was the substance of the deal, and the second was the sequencing; in other words, who does what when and who goes first. Can you help us understand? Is the sequencing not even been dealt with? Are you just dealing with the first part?

And since the IAEA has not had visibility in key facilities like Karaj, which manufactures centrifuges now for a year, how concerned are you about a sneakout versus a breakout in which Iran is creating alternatives by taking things that haven't – centrifuges that haven't been captured on camera and moving them to a place so it has a fallback if it wants to do something after the IAEA gets back?

And finally, can you help us understand why two key team members of your team have left?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Okay, let me start with your first question. I don't want to get into speculation as to what happened on the Iranian side. I think it is fair to say that when they came back, when the first meeting we had with – when the new government was in – sent its team to Vienna, it was a very tough round in which everyone – again, I think I'm – I think it was shared by all of the P5+1 that what we heard from Iran was inconsistent with all of the discussions that had taken place since March and April, but also inconsistent with what any logical return to the JCPOA would entail.

Since then, I think as we've said, we are back in a serious, businesslike negotiation in which, again, there are still significant gaps, so I don't want to in any way understate those. But we are in a position where the conversations are, as I said, businesslike and where we can see a path to a deal if those decisions are made and if it's done quickly.

So Robin, of course, everything has been discussed. And obviously, sequencing has been discussed, and I think I've said on prior calls that we don't think that that's going to be the real obstacle to reaching a deal. We don't think that the question of who goes first is going to be an insuperable obstacle as long as there's a sequence agreed and enough confidence by both sides that the steps that the other side – that each side – that the steps that the other side needs to take will be taken. I think that's not something that should stand in the way of reaching an understanding.

Yes, of course we are concerned by the loss of visibility by the IAEA. At the same time, any understanding, if we were to reach an understanding of our return to the JCPOA and Iran resuming full implementation, the IAEA would have to do what is called a baselining to make sure that it has a picture of the state of Iran's nuclear program. And we have confidence that – and we've discussed this with Director General Grossi – that they would have the tools to meet that requirement. So yes, and the more time goes by, the more difficult it is; and there will come a time, if there is continued lack of visibility, where it will become extraordinarily difficult. But right now, we believe we can still – the IAEA can still do the work it needs to do so that we know the state of Iran's nuclear program.

Finally, on your question about personnel, I think you all know one of my two deputies, Richard Nephew, is moving to another job in the State Department. I want to say I think Richard was and is an exceptional colleague and somebody who will – wherever he will end up in the department will do extraordinary work. And so it's obviously with regret that we see him moving on to some other position, but that's not unusual a year or two into – a year into a new administration. And Jarrett Blanc, who has been the other deputy, is still here and continuing in those – in his prior responsibilities.

A lot of the stories that have been said about the team are simply misinformed. The team presents a wide range of policy options and arguments to the senior-most leadership of our government, but at the end of the day, the team simply implements – the Iran team implements the policies that the President, Secretary of State, the national security advisors, and others in the Cabinet have decided on. This is not a matter of person; it's a matter of what the policy of the administration is. And that's the policy that's being conducted, and so it's not a matter of personal differences. It's a matter of a policy that the administration has settled on and that everyone serving the administration is pursuing.

**MODERATOR:** Take a final question or two. David Sanger.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Great. Thank you, , for doing this. You'll remember that in 2015 – and it bled into 2016 – the actual implementation of the deal took a while to happen. You actually had an implementation day by which time all of the excess uranium beyond the limits of the 2015 deal were shipped out to Russia and certain pieces of equipment were dismantled and so forth.

Assuming for a minute that the decisions – political decisions come together, and we understand that may or may not happen, do you now have confidence that you have a schedule in place that would provide a public, visible reduction in the nuclear material back to the 2015 levels, that would be confirmable by the IAEA, visible to everybody, we'd see the shipments and so forth much as we did in 2015?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So David, we would not come back into deal without the confidence and the verification by the IAEA about – that Iran had met all of its requirements under the deal, and that's not something I think that is really in dispute in these talks. I don't think that's an issue on which – that Iran would object to. At least that would come as a surprise.

So whatever – when a deal – if and when a deal – and you're right to say that it's sort of a big "if." But if and when a deal is reached, of course, each side will have to undertake its obligations. And on Iran's side, it has always been understood that the – in terms of the – its disposition of its enriched uranium, that would have to be verified by the IAEA, and so we don't expect anything different.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to the line of Guita Aryan.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Hi, . I want to try one question one more time in probably another way. Has the U.S. offered or presented its final offer to the Iranian side with regards to sanctions removal or is there room for some maneuver?

And I have a question also about the possible exchange of prisoners. Is it – I'm looking for my colleague's question here. During the indirect talks with regards to the possible exchange, has Iran raised its demand for the release of Iranians who are under prosecution or imprisonment in the U.S. for federal offenses? And what is your position on whether dropping charges or granting early releases for those Iranians – is it acceptable as part of a future prisoner swap?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you. Let me start with the last one first. It's a very sensitive negotiation. It's one in which the lives of our fellow citizens are at stake, so I really don't want to get into any details about what we are – what is being under discussion. For us, this is an absolute priority to get the four back home and we will not do anything that could complicate either the return or the treatment that they are undergoing while in Iran.

On your other question, if I understood you, you said has the U.S. presented its final offer about what it would do on sanctions relief. Let me make a broader point. This is a negotiation, as I said earlier, with very high stakes for national security, for all the reasons that I gave. And again, it's not an issue that we should be dealing with, but unfortunately, we've been met with this hand and so we have to deal with it, and we're dealing with it as best we can to protect our core national security interests.

So this – we're not looking to create theatrics or cinematic moments. Rather, along with the E3 and in consultation with our other P5+1 partners, we – what we want to do is clarify for Iran what we think are the outstanding issues, and to identify them and to identify areas where we think there's – what the compromises could look like.

So that's what we're doing, trying to communicate to Iran at the same time that there's time pressure not created by us, and not arbitrarily introduced by us, but created by Iran's nuclear steps and Iran's so far refusal to slow them and – slow them down or halt them.

So again, just to repeat, not going to negotiate in public, we're not going to say what we have – what we suggested and what Iran has suggested on its end, but simply to say this is not – we're not into this to create drama. We're here to get the best outcome possible for U.S. national security interests. We hope Iran would agree to that, so that it – so that we could come back into the JCPOA, and that Iran will be back in full compliance. If that's not the case, we're ready to deal with the alternative.

**MODERATOR:** We'll conclude with the line of Barak Ravid.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Hi, . Thank you very much for doing this.

First question, I want to follow up on what you said on direct talks, possible direct talks with Iran. And from what you said, it seemed that your assessment is that if there are direct talks, you can get the deal, so that this is one of the last things you need in order to get the deal, that if you just sit together in the same room with the Iranians, you can get a deal. Is this actually what you're saying?

And the other question is for a few weeks now, you're saying that there are only a few weeks left for negotiations, and you also said that the way for the Iranians to put more time on the clock was to slow down their nuclear program. Did you see any slowdown in the Iranian nuclear program in the last – in recent days or weeks?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So on your first question, I don't think – I think you, Barak, significantly overread what I said and then misread what I said. I certainly didn't say that if we had direct talks we can get into the deal. What I said was this is a complicated negotiation with room for a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of misinterpretation and miscommunication. And we think it would be facilitated by direct talks and accelerated by direct talks, absolutely no guarantee that if we sat down together, that's not – that's not a magical solution. It may – we still may find ourselves at an impasse. What I said was it would be regrettable if, looking back, one of the reasons – one of the reasons why we were not able to reach a deal would be because of the inability to sit down and try to overcome the remaining hurdles.

Again, not saying that if we did that, we'd reach a deal; not saying that if we don't do that, we can't reach a deal. Saying that it doesn't make sense if you want to put all of the – if you want to do everything possible to see if you could reach a deal, a deal that both sides would accept, that you would not agree to sit down together. But again, we're not – obviously, we're not begging for a meeting. That's – if there's no meeting, there's no meeting. We just think that it would be the logical step to take if in fact we are determined to do everything possible to get back into deal. And it is a position that I think all of the P5+1 has echoed, because all of them believe that it's simply common sense that in a negotiation, parties with a very important – perhaps the central stakes in this negotiation should sit down and try to see what potential solutions are. But if that's not the case, we'll try to reach a deal without that.

On your second point, I would say this – and we've said this many times: At the current pace, at Iran's current pace, we only have very few weeks to reach a deal. You've said that we've said that now for some weeks, so do the math. There are many fewer weeks left now than there were when we first said it.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you very much to our senior State Department official, and thanks very much to everyone for joining the call. Appreciate your time, and the embargo is now lifted.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you.

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**From:** U.S. Department of State  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press En Route Melbourne, Australia  
**To:** Goodander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** February 8, 2022 11:22 PM (UTC-05:00)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press En Route Melbourne, Australia](#)

02/08/2022 11:14 PM EST

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Very good. First of all, this is an important moment because it's the final leg of our four-leg trip, so I know you're all feeling good about that.

**QUESTION:** Yes.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** All right. In all seriousness, look, there is obviously a tremendous amount of focus on what's happening in Europe, in particular Russia's ongoing buildup of forces near Ukraine. And that remains front and center in what we're doing and indeed what I continue to do even as we're heading to Australia.

I've been on the phone during a chunk of this trip talking to various counterparts with some focus on Russia-Ukraine. I spent some time talking to the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan as well. And this is part of, as we've tabulated, with foreign counterparts something like 200-plus engagements just in recent weeks – phone calls, video conferences, in-person meetings, where we have been working to coordinate all of our partners in standing up to this Russian aggression directed toward Ukraine.

And as you all know, we have been engaged in a two-track strategy where we have, on the one hand, been pursuing diplomacy, by far the preferable course, the responsible course, but at the same time building up strong deterrence to dissuade Russia from taking aggressive action.

Having said that, the world is a big place. Our interests are global, and you all know very well the focus that we have put on the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific region. And we ended last year with a trip that some of you were on, and we have a sustained focus on this, and that's why we're heading to Australia.

We'll be first and foremost meeting with the Quad countries – Australia, Japan, India, the United States – following up on the leader level summit, the first ever that the President had, and pursuing the work that I think is vital to the interests of Americans but also people throughout the region and around the world. The Quad is becoming a powerful mechanism for delivering, helping to vaccinate a big part of the world and getting a lot of vaccines out there, strengthening maritime security to push back against aggression and coercion in the Indo-Pacific region, working together on emerging technologies and making sure that they can be used in positive ways not negative ways, and an increasingly broad and deep agenda.

At the same time, it's an opportunity to meet with our Australian partners, meetings as well with Japanese and Indian counterparts – all critical partners both in terms of the Quad but also individually.

And one of the other reasons I want to emphasize the work that we're doing with the Quad is it's very

representative of what we're doing in different ways around the world, which is building, energizing, driving different coalitions of countries focused on sometimes overlapping issues. We're doing that with established institutions like NATO or in Asia like ASEAN with our traditional alliances, but also with new groupings and coalitions of countries that can focus the strengths of different partners on issues that really, really matter, whether it's climate, whether it's COVID, whether it's emerging technologies. The Quad's one of the best examples of that.

I'll also have a chance in Australia to spend some time with some incredible technologists at the University of Melbourne, students as well. Parenthetically, my late stepfather went to the University of Melbourne, so this will be a little bit of a homecoming in that sense, too.

And then after Australia we're off, as you know, to Fiji. This is, I am told, the first time in nearly 40 years that a secretary of state has visited Fiji. There's a very good reason for that: we're a Pacific nation. The Pacific part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy is vitally important, and in the category of 90 percent of life is showing up or showing up; but more than showing up, I think you'll see some very concrete things come out of the visit to Fiji. I'm not going to get ahead of myself, but we'll have a few things to talk about when we get there. So I'm very much looking forward to that.

And then finally, of course, we end up in Hawaii, and there Japanese and Korean counterparts will come together. We've been spending a lot of time – Deputy Secretary Sherman and myself – on trilateral collaboration among the United States, Japan, and Republic of Korea. This is another opportunity to drive that forward. There is a very broad common agenda that we have, of course, starting with challenges posed by the DPRK but going well beyond that. This is an important moment to keep driving that forward.

We'll also have a chance to spend time with our INDOPACOM commander, Admiral Aquilino, to talk about the work that we're doing throughout the Indo-Pacific to advance stability, to advance security.

So we're covering quite literally as well as figuratively a lot of territory. I'm looking forward also to seeing some of our State Department colleagues who have a hardship assignment in Honolulu when we end the trip. So that's what we're doing. There's a lot that's going to be said at each stop. We'll have a chance to talk about specific issues that we're focused on.

Meanwhile – the last thing I'll say – even as we're doing this we will be on the phones, on the video conference with other countries and counterparts, back in Washington, given everything that's going on in Europe. And I expect, for example, to be speaking to French, Germans, British colleagues in the coming days, among many others. So I wanted to leave it at that.

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**From:** U.S. Department of State  
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**Sent:** February 12, 2022 11:22 AM (UTC-05:00)

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## [A Senior State Department Official On Our Diplomatic Presence in Ukraine](#)

02/12/2022 11:10 AM EST

Office of the Spokesperson

Via Teleconference

**MODERATOR:** Good morning, everyone, and thank you so much for joining today's background briefing. Today we will be joined by a senior administration official who will discuss the recent decision regarding the ordered departure at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, Ukraine. To reiterate, the contents of this briefing this morning are on background and they are embargoed until the end of the call.

For your information, however not for reporting purposes, I'd like to let you know that we are joined by . Please refer to the as the senior State Department official. We'll start with some opening remarks and afterwards we will resume to taking your questions.

, take it away.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you, . Good morning, pleased to be with you this morning, and really appreciate your attention to this important issue.

Last night on – late on February 11 in Washington, as you have seen, we directed most remaining embassy staff still located in Ukraine to depart the country immediately. And as you have seen in parallel with that direction, we have updated our Travel Advisory to note that change in the official U.S. Government posture and presence in the country, and to again reiterate that American citizens should leave immediately via commercial means or private vehicle.

As of Sunday, February 13, we are suspending consular services at Embassy Ukraine, so American citizens will not be able to secure routine support with passport issues, visa services, any of the other routine consular services that we customarily provide from our embassies.

As part of our enduring commitment to support our fellow citizens, we will continue to maintain some capacity to provide emergency consular services in Lviv. But I want to stress these will be emergency consular services, and routine services will only be available for American citizens who might be in Ukraine today, in neighboring countries at our diplomatic and consular facilities in those countries.

Now these developments mean for private American citizens that it isn't just time to leave Ukraine; it is past time for private citizens to leave Ukraine. We have no higher priority than the safety and security of our fellow citizens, including our fellow U.S. Government employees, and we do a great deal to provide support for our fellow citizens. But as you know, there are real limits to what we are able to do in a war zone. We fervently hope and continue to work intensively to try to ensure that Ukraine does not become a war zone, and as you saw Secretary Blinken working actively this morning to try to prevent that outcome with Foreign Minister Lavrov.

However, it appears increasingly likely that this is where this situation is headed, towards some kind of

active conflict. And that is why we are reducing our staff to a bare minimum while we still have the ability to get our official people out safely and in a predictable fashion.

Even while we are taking these steps to reduce our official footprint, we're of course continuing to support the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian people consistent with our strategic partnership with Ukraine and consistent with our principled support for Ukrainian sovereignty and its territorial integrity.

Security assistance continues to flow into the country with deliveries of ammunition yesterday and, I believe, scheduled for today. And so that continues moving in even as we bring our own people out and encourage private citizens to leave.

Let me say one other thing before I turn to your questions. I've spent a fair bit of time in war zones as an official American. They are inherently volatile, they're unpredictable, and they are extremely dangerous, by definition, as a war zone. And once a country or a region, in terms of a region within a country, becomes an active conflict zone, we will have very little ability, we have very little ability, to help our fellow citizens.

And so that is why you are continuing to see this constant drumbeat to encourage our American citizens to leave and to help them have realistic expectations about what the U.S. Government will and will not be able to do for them in a conflict. And you've seen colleagues from the White House reiterating that American citizens should not expect the U.S. military is going to come rescue them in Ukraine at the last minute. That's not going to be happening in this scenario and that's why it is past time for them to leave Ukraine.

So with that, I'm happy to take your questions.

**MODERATOR:** Let's start with the line of Christina Ruffini, please.

**OPERATOR:** Christina Ruffini, your line is open. Please, go ahead. Once again, Christina Ruffini, your line is open.

**QUESTION:** Yes, I'm speaking. Can you hear me? Hello?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Yes, I can hear you.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thank you. Thank you, everybody. I'm wondering if you can say, when did you notify Ukraine you would be evacuating the embassy? And can you give us any idea of how many embassy staff are going to stay behind in Lviv? Is the chargé going to relocate there as well? And is the number of Americans who've registered with the U.S. Government saying "hey, we're here, we're in Ukraine" still around 7,000, or is that increased in recent days? Thank you very much.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Sure. So as you would expect, we've been in constant contact and dialogue with the Ukrainian Government, with senior Ukrainian officials, about many facets of this unfolding crisis, but to include our own posture within the country. And we – those discussions, that dialogue with them, included discussions yesterday about our plans to further reduce our footprint in the country.

I want to emphasize – you used the term "evacuating" the embassy. We are not closing the embassy. We are not suspending operations of the embassy within the country. We are further reducing at this time the number of staff that we have in country to conduct only the most essential business at this time. We will have some staff relocating to Lviv. For reasons of security I'm not going to get into specific details of how many people we're going to have in Lviv and how many will be

staying in Kyiv at this time.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to Matt Lee, please.

**OPERATOR:** Matt Lee, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, good morning. Can you hear me?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Yes, I can, Matt.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Hi, . Listen, I know you don't want to get into the numbers, but can you just say – can you give us just an idea of the people who will stay in Kyiv? What are they going to be doing – not the numbers, but what actually will they be doing?

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Sure. So we're planning to try to maintain the core functions of our embassy as long as possible with a reduced number of people. So we are going to maintain staff sufficient to be able to continue working closely with the Ukrainian Government to be able to ensure we've got the best possible information for our senior leaders and the President about what's happening broadly in society, what the Ukrainian Government is telling us about how the situation is unfolding.

As I noted, we are going to maintain personnel so we can provide emergency consular services, and then we will have sufficient staff to provide the security and support and communications required to enable the team that remains behind to stay in touch with Washington, and to do so as safely as we can under the circumstances.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to Nick Schifrin.

**OPERATOR:** Nick Schifrin, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thanks very much. Good morning. I'm wondering if you would describe the diplomats and the consulate in Lviv as kind of a fallback, or if you would not be comfortable with that language.

And then a larger question because you're talking about the conversations with the Ukrainian Government – obviously, the Ukrainian Government has been very public about some of the disagreements that it's had with U.S. intelligence. From your perspective, can you characterize the nature of the conversation between U.S. officials and Ukrainian officials, and whether you believe that they're on the same page? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** So I wouldn't characterize the presence we will have in Lviv as a fallback. I would characterize it as ensuring that we can maintain our ability to perform core diplomatic functions in a period of great uncertainty where, in that space where Russia takes military action, I think prudence requires us to assume, to plan for, and prepare for a worse-case scenario. And a worse-case scenario would obviously involve substantial Russian attacks on the Ukrainian capital.

And Russia has a very capable military with substantial combat power, and should it choose to utilize a significant piece of that combat power against the Ukrainian capital, there's plenty of opportunities, even with restraint and respect for diplomatic facilities, for things to go wrong. So we are essentially diffusing our people to reduce the risk that – should this tip quickly into an active conflict – that we have reduced the risk to official personnel to the best of our ability under the circumstances.

With regard to our conversations with Ukrainian officials about this matter, they've been very professional, and the Ukrainians understand why we are taking these steps even if all of them don't

necessarily agree, as you noted, with our threat assessment and with our assessment of the extent to which potential conflict is imminent.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to Kylie Atwood, please.

**OPERATOR:** Kylie Atwood, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Good morning. Thank you for doing this call. A question about the embassy in Kyiv. What kind of actions are – excuse me – is the State Department taking now to assure safety of any documents there? Is there any document destruction that has begun?

And can you just be a little bit clearer? I mean, did you pick Lviv because it is on the western side of Ukraine, which would be further away from any potential impending fighting? Thank you.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Sure. So we in all of our diplomatic facilities constantly maintain a close eye on the classified equipment and classified information holdings that the embassy has in a period of – has actively in the embassy. And every embassy has guidelines to keep those holdings to the minimum required for normal operations. When we get into these kinds of situations we always, as a matter of course, reduce those holdings, reduce that volume of equipment appropriately to reflect the unpredictability of the situation. And just as we do in other circumstances, have done in other circumstances like this in the past, we're taking those appropriate, prudent steps as part of our contingency planning for those worst cases that I mentioned.

With regard to Lviv, we're shifting some people there in part because of its closer proximity to U.S. diplomatic and consular facilities in neighboring countries so we can maintain close coordination with colleagues in those neighboring countries and ensure that, should military action on the part of Russia begin, we can move those people safely should we decide to do so.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to Missy Ryan.

**OPERATOR:** Missy Ryan, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. I just wanted to ask, I know that you said that you and also Jake Sullivan said yesterday that the U.S. military is not going to be coming in to help Americans. But is the United States doing anything currently to organize departures for American citizens other than providing information about commercial routes out? Are you organizing buses or anything like that in the way that's happened in the past in order to facilitate the departure of folks from Ukraine? Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Sure, good question. We are not engaged in those activities, because up to this point in time there have been ample opportunities via normal commercial means, whether that's commercial flights, whether that's train service to neighboring countries, whether that's the ability to leave via private vehicle driving across neighboring – the border to neighboring countries.

All of those options have been available to American citizens, and very few of the American citizens who have been in touch with us in recent days have expressed an inability to physically get themselves out of the country. Those who have been contacting us have been looking for help getting new passports or securing visas for non-American resident – or non-American citizen family members that they may have. So it's been of that nature in terms of the service and support we've been providing.

We are not going to be in a position, again, as we unfortunately are seeing increasing signs that we're heading toward those worse-case scenarios even while we continue intensive efforts to prevent those from occurring. Nonetheless, we're not going to be in a position in those worse-case scenarios to be

organizing evacuation convoys for Americans. And that is, again, why we are reiterating to them that it is past time for them to leave.

**MODERATOR:** Let's go to Vivian Salama.

**OPERATOR:** Vivian Patami, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, . Thanks, everyone, for doing the call. I wanted to actually follow up on something that Nick and Kylie had asked, and then I'll ask another question, if possible.

Just with regard to the facility in Lviv, obviously we don't have a consulate, if I'm not mistaken, there. And so is this a facility that – a makeshift facility that you all created because of the need to move staff there? I mean, if you could explain a little bit more of sort of where they're going to be operating out of, and whether or not this was something that was established a while ago, or is it something established just in response to this crisis?

And my main question that I wanted to ask because I'm just a bit unclear: Are those who are being ordered to leave, are they coming back to D.C. or are they going to other countries? Is it a mixed bag? If you can kind of shed light on where they're going to actually be stationed in the interim until things go back to normal, I guess. Thanks.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Sure. So most of the personnel who are – who are departing Ukraine will be at least temporarily coming back to the States, where they will continue – many of them – to work on Ukraine. As this crisis continues to unfold, we've got an enormous amount of policy work, an enormous amount of operational coordination to support the many lines of effort the U.S. Government has underway. And so they'll be supplementing colleagues who are already assigned in Washington in performing a lot of that work.

Some of them may go to neighboring countries to support their colleagues in our embassies and consulates there, depending on how this situation unfolds. I can envision a number of scenarios in which our ongoing efforts to both support Americans who have managed to depart Ukraine, but also through our efforts to continue to provide assistance to the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian people, that's going to create additional work for those embassies and consulates, and we want to make sure we're staffed appropriately to conduct those activities.

With regard to the work we're going to be doing from Lviv, I want to be really upfront, straightforward here: It is not a facility. It is not something we have constructed, leased, planned for for a substantial period of time. Conceptually, this is much more like a group of people from the embassy temporarily working in another city, just as we would if we had a visit by senior U.S. Government officials or members of Congress or a trade show or some other activity that required a group of our people to temporarily work from another location. We – in normal times, we deploy our personnel to different parts of a country from – other than the capital city or the city in which we might have a consulate. And that's what we're doing here. We're just unfortunately having to do it in conditions that are frankly much more perilous for the Ukrainian people.

**MODERATOR:** Let's take a final question from Charlotte (inaudible).

**OPERATOR:** Charlotte, your line is open. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hi, thanks for doing this call. I was wondering if American citizens have been following your advice to leave Ukraine and if you know how many are remaining.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you. We don't keep track of how many American

citizens are located in any country consistent with our democratic values and principles. So we rely on American citizens to tell us when they are present in a particular country, and we have a couple of ways we try to get them to do that. But of course, they're free to advise us or not.

So very difficult for us to estimate at any given time how many American citizens are present in any country, and that includes Ukraine. A couple thousand American citizens have informed us in recent days that they are present in the country. We're in active contact with them to understand whether or not they are planning to leave. A percentage of them have indicated they wanted to leave. Some of those people have left already. Some of those people we have, again, provided services to to enable them to leave.

And there's another substantial part of that group that have said they're choosing to remain in Ukraine. And even while we strongly urge them to reconsider and advise them to leave because of the dangers that we foresee, we fully respect their right to make their own choices. And people have – there are many reasons why people might resist leaving, including if they're long-term residents of Ukraine.

But again, from our perspective, we are doing everything possible to underscore to American citizens the dangers of remaining in the country due to the unfolding crisis and the escalating crisis, and reiterating to them that our ability to help them through that crisis, during that crisis, is going to be extremely limited, and they cannot have any reasonable expectation that the U.S. Government is going to be able to rescue them if they find themselves in harm's way in a war zone.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you all again for joining today's background briefing. The briefing has concluded and the embargo is lifted. Have a great rest of your Saturday.

**SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL:** Thank you.

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**To:** Goodlander, Margaret V. (OAG)  
**Sent:** March 16, 2022 8:36 AM (UTC-04:00)

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## [Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Wolf Blitzer of The Situation Room on CNN](#)

*03/15/2022 09:51 PM EDT*

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State

Washington, D.C.

**QUESTION:** Let's discuss what's going on with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for joining us.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Hey, Wolf.

**QUESTION:** So I – as you well know, obviously, the President will attend this truly extraordinary meeting of all the NATO leaders next week in Brussels. Is this purely a show of NATO strength, NATO force, or will they take new concrete steps to stop the Russian aggression?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Wolf, it's a continuation of what we've been doing all along, which is bringing allies and partners together in support of Ukraine in very concrete ways, and to exert maximum pressure on Russia to stop the aggression that it's committing. And so the President has been in constant contact with his counterparts – from throughout Europe, NATO leaders, the European Union, et cetera, and around the world – but this is an important opportunity to have everyone in the same room, in the same place to continue to map out the strategy – the strategy that has, as I said, exerted incredible pressure on Russia as well as showing incredible support for Ukraine.

**QUESTION:** I assume all 30 leaders of NATO will be there. Just moments ago, President Zelenskyy signaled that Ukraine won't join NATO anytime soon, saying – and I'm quoting him now as saying: for years we have been hearing about how the door is supposedly open to NATO membership, but now we hear that we cannot enter, and it is true and it must be acknowledged.\* That's a quote from President Zelenskyy. Is that a direct concession to Putin?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** I don't think that's a concession. I think, first of all, it's a reflection of reality that even before this aggression by Russia, Ukraine was not going to get into NATO tomorrow. All the more reason why, as we've seen, when Putin was saying that their concerns about Ukraine centered on its admission to NATO, that was wrong; that was a lie. What this is about, what Putin's demonstrated it's about, is denying Ukraine its independent existence. But what we've done in support of Ukraine is to provide extraordinary security assistance that continues as we speak to make sure that Ukraine has the means to defend itself.

**QUESTION:** As the risk of miscalculation, though, grows, the UN secretary-general says that the prospect of nuclear – nuclear – conflict is now, and I'm quoting him now, "within the realm of possibility." How real is the risk of this spiraling into nuclear war?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, President Biden has been very clear that one thing is for sure, is that

we're going to avoid getting into any kind of conflict with Russia, and certainly avoiding anything that brings us to World War Three. Some of Russia's loose talk about its nuclear weapons is the height of irresponsibility and goes against everything that we've said, including that Russia has said over many years, about how a nuclear war is not winnable – something that was reaffirmed as recently as the meeting between President Biden and Putin back in – this summer in Geneva.

So we watch this very, very, very carefully. There's a lot of bad, loose talk and bluster. At the same time, I have to tell you we have real concerns that Russia could use a chemical – a weapon, another weapon of mass destruction. This is something we're very focused on. Unfortunately, we've seen them use or acquiesce to its use before in Syria, with Syria using these weapons, using them itself, trying to assassinate its opponents, including in the United Kingdom. So this is something we are very focused on.

**QUESTION:** Well, if they do use chemical weapons, what will the U.S. and the NATO Allies do?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** We've been very clear, including with Russia, with others, that there would be a very serious response not just from us, but from the international community. I'm not going to spell it out here, but the consequences would be severe.

**QUESTION:** Russia is also targeting civilians; they're attacking hospitals, schools. Why is the White House so far refusing to come right out and say what the Russian – what the Russians are doing right now, that that's a war crime?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** We are documenting everything we're seeing. We welcome the efforts that are being made, including investigations conducted by NGOs and institutions to look at this, to put everything together to determine whether the acts that Russia is engaged in would constitute a war crime. We're looking at whether there are deliberate attacks on civilians. There's certainly very credible reports and evidence of that, but what we're doing is putting it all together, documenting it, and the appropriate institutions will make that judgement.

**QUESTION:** The U.S. believes China has signaled some openness to providing military support to Russia. What's your message, Mr. Secretary, to China as it weighs how much support it will actually provide to Putin?

**SECRETAR BLINKEN:** Well, Wolf, there are two things. First, there is the rhetorical support, or at least the absence of clear rhetorical denunciation by China of what Russia is doing. And this flies in the face of everything that China purports to stand for, including the basic principles of the UN Charter, including the basic principle of respect for sovereignty of nations. And so the fact that China has not denounced what Russia is doing in and of itself speaks volumes. And it speaks volumes not only in Russia or in Ukraine; it speaks volumes in Europe and in other places around the world.

Second, we are concerned at the prospect of China providing material support to Russia or undermining the sanctions that we put in place with countries around the world, something that we've communicated directly to China, including just this – in the past 24 hours when the National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, met with his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi.

**QUESTION:** So if the Chinese do provide military support to the Russians, what will the U.S. do?

**SECRETAR BLINKEN:** Again, without going into specifics of what we'll do, we've made very clear that that's not something that we're going to take sitting down.

**QUESTION:** As you know, Putin is making truly outlandish and very, very offensive claims that he's de-Nazifying Ukraine. You and I both have family who survived the Holocaust; President Zelenskyy



does as well. Do you think the U.S. will look back on this time right now and wish the West had done more to stop Putin?

**SECRETAR BLINKEN:** Wolf, it's hard to project into the future. I can tell you a couple of things, though, that I'm confident of. First of all, there's going to be a Ukraine, an independent Ukraine, a lot longer than there's going to be Vladimir Putin. One way or the other, Ukraine will be there, and at some point Putin won't. The real question is how much death and destruction is wrought by Russia's aggression in the meantime, and that's what we're working as hard as we can to limit, to stop, to put an end to this war of choice that Russia is committing.

And we're doing that through the support we're providing to Ukraine every single day. We're doing that by the pressure we're exerting against Russia every single day. And my hope is that we can end this sooner rather than later so that that death and destruction doesn't continue. But I can tell you how this is going to end ultimately: It's going to end with an independent Ukraine, and at some point, it's going to end without Vladimir Putin.

**QUESTION:** So what's your message to Putin right now?

**SECRETAR BLINKEN:** Message to Putin is: end this war; stop this war that you're committing; end the aggression that is unjustified, unprovoked.

We've looked over many months at giving President Putin appropriate offramps to end this before the aggression, since the aggression started. Unfortunately, each and every time he's pressed the accelerator. It's time to stop with the accelerator. It's time to stop the war, stop the killing, stop the destruction – that's the message.

**QUESTION:** Sadly, he's showing at least so far no sign of that. But we will hope and pray. Secretary Blinken, thank you so much for joining us.

**SECRETAR BLINKEN:** Thanks, Wolf. Good to be with you.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 16, 2022](#)

*03/16/2022 05:34 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

Washington, D.C.

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon.

**QUESTION:** Hello.

**MR PRICE:** One element at the top, and then I look forward to your questions.

As the President said today, America stands with the forces of freedom in Ukraine.

To that end, we are leading the effort to isolate President Putin on the global stage while also simultaneously strengthening Ukraine's hand at the negotiating table. What's at stake here are the principles of freedom, the right to determine one's own future. A right that Ukrainians have shown the world they will fight to preserve.

In recent weeks, the United States has sent \$300 million in humanitarian aid – tens of thousands of tons of food and medicine for displaced families fleeing Russia's premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified war. U.S. humanitarian aid personnel are on the ground in the region assessing needs in real time.

And just as President Biden pledged we would, we have also surged security assistance to our Ukrainian partners so that they can defend themselves.

As Russia began its military buildup last year, the United States delivered \$650 million in military equipment to Ukraine, building on a growing security cooperation relationship dating back to 2014.

As the conflict started, we sped 350 million more in equipment to help bolster Ukraine's defenses.

Now, this week we are authorizing \$1 billion more of arms and equipment, including types already used successfully by Ukraine's security forces to defend their country against Russian aggression.

Today's announcement nearly doubles total security assistance to Ukraine since the beginning of the administration to more than \$2 billion, enabling us to surge additional needed assistance, including anti-aircraft, anti-tank, anti-armor systems as well as small arms and munitions used by Ukrainian security forces on the ground right now in their fight to defend their country.

Among the items included in this new package are 800 Stinger anti-aircraft systems; 2,000 Javelin, 1,000 light anti-armor weapons, and 6,000 AT-4 anti-armor systems; 100 Tactical Unmanned Aerial Systems; 100 grenade launchers, 500 rifles, 1,000 pistols, 400 machine guns, and 400 shotguns; in addition to over 200 million rounds of small arms ammunition and grenade launcher and mortar rounds;

and more.

In addition to the U.S.-produced short-range air defense systems the Ukrainians have been using to great effect, the United States has also identified and is helping the Ukrainians acquire from our partners and allies additional, longer-range systems on which Ukraine's forces are already trained, as well as additional munitions for those systems.

The United States continues to expedite the authorization and facilitation of additional assistance to Ukraine from our allies. At least 30 countries have provided security assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion began. In 2022, this year, the Department of State has authorized third-party transfers of defensive equipment from more than 14 countries, a number that continues to grow as allies and partners increase their support to Ukraine.

As the President said, this could be a long and difficult battle, but America will be steadfast. America will continue to answer the call. The United States, our allies and partners, we are united in supporting Ukraine in its time of need.

With that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. I actually – I have some Iran questions, but I guess we'll start with Ukraine because I think that's probably on the top of everyone's mind. When you speak about additional long-range systems that you – longer-range systems that the Ukrainians are already trained in, you're talking about the S-300s, or are you talking about – is it broader than just that? And —

**MR PRICE:** Well, so, Matt, what we are doing and what I referred to now is the fact that we are continuing to pursue solutions to help our Ukrainian partners acquire long-range anti-aircraft systems and the munitions they would need for those systems, and the President also alluded to this in his remarks today. I can't get into the full specifics of this, but we are continuing to work with our allies, with our partners to surge new assistance, and that includes Soviet or Russian-origin anti-aircraft systems and the necessary ammunition to employ them every day to Ukraine. Those are the systems on which they're already using, the systems on which they are already trained and have actually demonstrated great effect already.

We have said that we welcome assistance from countries around the world. As I mentioned a moment ago, more than 30 countries across the globe have provided defensive security assistance to Ukraine. The United States has – the Department of State, I should say, has authorized the provision of U.S.-origin equipment from at least 14 countries, but we know that —

**QUESTION:** Right, but —

**MR PRICE:** — many more are standing up.

**QUESTION:** But this isn't U.S.-origin?

**MR PRICE:** That's correct. That's correct.

**QUESTION:** So without getting into the actual nitty-gritty specifics of what systems they are and what countries, although it would be nice to know what countries you're in discussions with about this, what does the U.S., if anything, have to do to facilitate the transfer of such systems? And secondly, can you – I mean, are you close to reaching an agreement with any of the potential donor countries?

**MR PRICE:** What do we have to do to facilitate the transfer of non-U.S.-origin equipment?

**QUESTION:** Well, yeah, legally – correct.

**MR PRICE:** So first, for U.S.-origin equipment, of course there are waivers that are necessary given ITAR provisions and other applicable provisions. The Secretary has repeatedly, with more than 14 countries, authorized the provision of such U.S.-origin equipment to our Ukrainian partners, and we've done so on an extremely expedited basis, turning those around in the course of a day.

When it comes to working with countries that may have Russian-made, Soviet-origin equipment, obviously that is not equipment for which we would need to provide any sort of waiver or any sort of formal paperwork. What we are doing, however, is sharing our assessment of the security needs that our Ukrainian partners have – precisely the needs they have, the threat they are under, the types of fires and munitions that they are enduring from President Putin's forces, and working with them to determine what they may have in their inventories, to marry that with what we have in our inventories, with our knowledge, with their knowledge of what the Ukrainians already have, the training they already have, to determine the most effective package that will allow them to defend themselves.

**QUESTION:** Well, are you – can you say if you're close to an agreement with any – or is it —

**MR PRICE:** We are having these discussions every day. Thirty countries around the world have already provided security assistance to Ukraine, and we're having these discussions daily.

**QUESTION:** Okay, and then the last one is just that – and if a deal is struck, and I realize it's a hypothetical, so you probably won't answer, but let me try anyway – if you do get a country X or country Y, or both X and Y, to provide Ukraine with these systems, is – are you – is the U.S. prepared to make up for those? Because I mean presumably if country X and Y give those systems to Ukraine, the Russians most likely aren't going to want to sell them replacements, right?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I will —

**QUESTION:** So is the U.S. going to be, or any ally – are you in discussions to replace those systems that countries might give up?

**MR PRICE:** I always appreciate when you answer the question for me. I will note that that is a hypothetical. I will also note, however, that we have continued to provide forms of reassurance to our allies, including our allies on the eastern flank. The Department of Defense recently spoke of the two Patriot missile batteries that had been moved into Poland. We know that countries that are valiantly standing up, that are providing defensive weaponry from their own stocks, they too have their own security needs. When it comes to the NATO Alliance, certainly we will continue to stand by our NATO Allies to make certain that NATO has the power, the capability to defend itself.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Just a quick one. I have a – there are – I think there are drones in the package of new equipment. I wonder if you can confirm that there are these Switchblade drones are part of that, and any details you can give.

**MR PRICE:** I've seen quite a bit of reporting over the last 24 hours on that particular system. I think I understand why, when you see the video of it. Look, I can't confirm particular systems. The President did speak of, or we did speak of tactical unmanned aerial systems. We provided and are providing a hundred of those systems. The system that you referred to would be an anti-armor system. It is certainly consistent with the type of defensive weaponry that we're providing. But I'm just not in a position to speak to all the specific systems that may be included in that package.

**QUESTION:** Okay, then can we move onto the negotiations, discussions going on between the Ukrainians and the Russians?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** There are some signs, some noises coming from both sides that there might be some movement on that. I wondered if you had a view on the potential for an agreement there, and there's a discussion about an agreement that would see Ukraine kind of pledge neutrality, not join NATO, like a Sweden or Austria kind of neutrality, and then also have security guarantees from other countries. Could the U.S. be a guarantor of some kind of an agreement like that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we welcome the sentiments expressed that there is hope, that there is optimism for diplomatic progress. But what Ukraine needs now more than sentiments, more than hope, more than optimism, is de-escalation, is an end to the violence, is a tangible indication that President Putin is changing course. And that is something we have not yet seen. And just as I was coming down here, there are more horrifying reports of shelling, of destruction of what appear to be civilian sites across Ukraine, including in Mariupol.

We've made clear that we unequivocally support Ukraine's efforts to achieve peace, to bring an end to the mounting human suffering from President Putin's war of choice. Diplomacy is always going to be at the center of these efforts. But we remain clear-eyed, as do our Ukrainian partners, as you heard from President Zelenskyy, as you've heard from the foreign minister, as you've heard from others. It remains our position that Russia needs to halt its campaign of death, of destruction immediately. And we are working simultaneously to do all we can to give Ukraine the strongest hand it can have at the negotiating table, and we're doing that in a couple different ways.

We've already spoken to one of those ways at the top of this briefing when we detailed some of the security assistance that we're providing to Ukraine, \$2 billion over the past year, \$1 billion in the past week alone. That is certainly an important element of that. The other part of that effort to strengthen Ukraine's hand at the negotiating table is what the United States and our allies and partners have brought to bear on the Kremlin, on the Russian Federation, including its economy and its financial system.

We have placed unprecedented pressure on the Russian economy, on its financial system, and every day you see very tangible metrics of that. The stock market remains closed, will remain closed for at least the remainder of this week and potentially even longer, presumably in an effort to prevent capital flight. The ruble is virtually worthless; it is literally worth less than a penny. Russia is on the verge of default; its credit rating is at junk status. Hundreds of international companies are fleeing the Russian market. And we can go on and on.

Now, all of that is part and parcel of our effort to strengthen that Ukrainian position. So we see Ukraine day by day will have a stronger hand as these measures have even more effect on the Russian economy, on the Russian financial system, and as we, together with our allies and partners here, too, continue to provide Ukraine with the defensive security assistance that our Ukrainian partners need to defend themselves inside their own territory.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** I just wanted to dig on that a little further, Ned, because certain export controls exist on some of these systems that the two gentlemen mentioned. So is the State Department going to take the lead in talking to allies and easing those export controls, or maybe changing them altogether? And especially given Ukraine's desperate need, how can you work through those obstacles to maybe get them the aid that they need faster, especially with the export —

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think we have proven throughout the course of this conflict, and even before it, that we are not going to let any sort of technical barrier stand in our way. And I've already spoken to the

expedited procedures that we have used to approve the provision of U.S.-origin equipment to Ukraine. We have done that in many cases with less than 24 hours notice. The fact that – it was just a couple weeks ago that we announced an additional \$350 million in security assistance to Ukraine; within four or five days, more than 70 percent of that vast sum had already been delivered.

So I think that speaks to the fact that we are breaking through not only what might be otherwise burdensome bureaucratic processes and hoops, but we are doing so with alacrity here in this department. Our colleagues at the Department of Defense are doing the same. We know that our allies and partners around the world are doing the same on their end precisely because we recognize the urgency with which our Ukrainian partners need these defensive supplies.

So if there are procedures that we need to go through here at the Department or elsewhere within the government to see to it that appropriate and effective systems are provided to our Ukrainian partners, whether that is from our stocks, whether that is U.S.-origin materiel from the stocks of our allies and partners, or materiel that is non-U.S.-origin, that may even be Russian-made or Soviet origin, we will see to that.

Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** Yes. So Poland's Deputy Prime Minister Kaczyński, Jarosław Kaczyński, was in Kyiv yesterday along with leaders of Poland and Czechia and Slovenia. And he called for a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine with the involvement of NATO troops. So is that something that the U.S. would be willing to entertain?

And somewhat relatedly, President Zelenskyy yesterday said that he would like to see more leaders coming to visit him. Are there any chances of U.S. officials doing that?

**MR PRICE:** So on your first question, of course, it's not up to us to speak for NATO. What I can say is essentially what we have heard from the NATO secretary general, is that the Alliance of course is squarely focused on putting an end to this war, bringing this brutal aggression to a close. Just as NATO is, we are intently focused on doing the same. In the same vein, we want to avoid doing anything that would prolong this war or that would expand this war. And having American service members on Ukrainian territory, American pilots in Ukrainian airspace, NATO service members on Ukrainian soil, NATO pilots in Ukrainian airspace – of course that has the potential not to bring this war to a close but to expand it to something that is even larger and much more grave in terms of its implications.

In terms of U.S. officials visiting Ukraine, you'll know that it was just last week that Secretary Blinken met with his foreign minister counterpart, Foreign Minister Kuleba, on the Polish-Ukrainian border. They actually conducted part of that meeting on sovereign Ukrainian soil, the very sovereign – very sovereignty that Ukrainians are so valiantly and bravely and courageously standing up to defend.

**QUESTION:** Right, but that – it's a little bit different than going to Kyiv and meeting with Zelenskyy. Stepping across the – I mean, not that it wasn't a symbolic show of support or anything, but there are no plans to do similar to what the three European —

**MR PRICE:** The White House has announced plans for the President to go to Brussels. That is the only presidential travel I'm aware of at the moment.

**QUESTION:** Oh, yeah. I'm talking about – okay. Well, but I'm talking about lower than the President. I mean, and just to follow up on Simon's question earlier about this idea of neutrality and security guarantees, is this something – I realize that you said that what Ukraine needs right now – what they need immediately is de-escalation and a sign that Putin has changed his – changing course. But in the

more medium term, is this something that you guys are willing to consider? Because, frankly, I think a lot of us, including Ukraine, thought they already had security guarantees from the Budapest Memorandum. So is the U.S. ready to look at the Budapest-plus agreement that expands the number of guarantors?

**MR PRICE:** So this is – in terms of the diplomacy, this is not a question for us regarding what might lead to a ceasefire, a diminution of violence between Ukraine and Russia. This is ultimately a question for our Ukrainian partners to decide – to decide the terms of diplomacy, what they are willing to pursue, what they are not willing to pursue.

This is really at the heart of this conflict, this needless war of aggression that President Putin and his forces are waging. They are waging this war precisely because they sought to deprive Ukraine of its sovereign rights, its sovereign right to determine its own foreign policy, its sovereign right to determine its own Western orientation, its sovereign right to choose its own partners and alliances.

So as part and parcel of that, it is not for us to say the terms by which Ukraine and Russia may be in a position to reach an agreement that we all hope could diminish the violence. That is for Ukraine to decide. We will be standing by our Ukrainian partners, assisting them with the diplomacy as we know a number of our allies and partners around the world are doing. But these are questions for the sovereign state of Ukraine.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Just a follow-up on this question. More generally, is it good idea, is it wise idea, to sign something under the Russian shelling? And yes or no, if it end up signing some kind of agreement, could one expect that United States will be a part of this agreement?

**MR PRICE:** I missed the first part of your question. It is a —

**QUESTION:** Is it generally good idea, wise idea to sign a peace agreement during the shelling?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we continue to believe that there must be a diplomatic resolution to this war, and that is why we are standing with our Ukrainian partners as they continue to engage in diplomacy, why we've been consulting and coordinating so closely with our French allies, our German allies, our Turkish allies, our Israeli partners, and others who have been involved in various diplomatic efforts to try and bring this brutal war to a close.

But we know something else to be true, and that is that diplomacy will have the best chance of success not in the context of escalation but in the context of de-escalation. And to your point, we – and to what I said earlier – have not yet seen any indication that President Putin is willing to de-escalate. In fact, we have seen escalation after escalation. As the Secretary said yesterday, President Putin has continued to put his foot on the accelerator. It is time to put the brakes on this conflict. It is time to see a diminution of the violence. It is time to see de-escalation. It is time to see the Russians take steps that spare additional lives.

Let me go around.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Getting away from the specifics for a minute, I have slightly more of a philosophical question.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** You and others in the administration have repeatedly spoken about how united you and



your NATO Allies are. And my question is whether you think this is a permanent resolution of the differences and frictions that came up with NATO and the United States over the last four years or if this is sort of a unique convergence of events and there are still – will still be a lot more work to do in terms of the U.S. working with NATO.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I would make the point that any disagreements or disharmony between the United States and NATO came to a close in January of last year, long before this conflict. Secretary Blinken's first travel to the European continent, you probably recall, was to Brussels. He went to a NATO ministerial. If I recall, his second travel to the continent of Europe was to Brussels, where he attended a NATO ministerial just a few weeks later.

So we have demonstrated from the very first hours of this administration, when Secretary Blinken spoke to the NATO secretary general – and of course, the President has had conversations as well – the indispensability of the NATO Alliance and the fact that to us NATO's Article 5, the principle that an attack on one is an attack on all, is as sacrosanct today as it was 70-plus years ago when the NATO charter was signed.

Now, I think it is true that the Alliance, in the buildup and in the wake of Russia's aggression, is as united, as focused, and as purposeful as it has been since the end of the Cold War. It has really brought into focus the reason for being of the Alliance in the first place. I also think – and you can – I'll let countries speak for themselves, but this brings up once again the point that President Putin, through his actions, has in fact precipitated everything that he has sought to prevent. And a number of countries that just a few short months ago probably would have demurred if asked about any NATO aspirations have given different answers. Of course, I think that the value of NATO, its purpose, its reason for being today is as in focus as it ever has been.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** I know it's not your department per se, but – so today's call between Jake Sullivan and General Patrushev, is this not a – because this is the first – correct me if I'm wrong, but this is the first high-level contact since the beginning of the invasion. So is this not a positive signal or – that the sides are coming together? Or how are we supposed to interpret that?

**MR PRICE:** I wouldn't quite characterize it in quite those terms. I will speak – I won't speak for the White House; they will speak to their own engagements. What I can say is that the last time Secretary Blinken had been in contact with his counterpart was in the immediate aftermath of the potential meeting in Geneva coming down. And this was, of course, right in the midst of the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And I say that I might characterize this contact a bit differently because, as the White House laid out, the National Security Advisor outlined in very clear terms for his counterpart our commitment to continuing to impose costs on the Russian Federation, our commitment to continuing to support the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of our Ukrainian partners.

He also took advantage of the conversation to make very clear that there would be significant consequences and implications were the Russian Federation to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine. So I think this speaks to the fact that there are some very weighty, very consequential issues that are now on the table. There are some very weighty concerns that we have. And so we are going to – we are not going to pass up an opportunity to convey those concerns and to convey the potential implications if we think that direct contact is in our interest.

Paul.

**QUESTION:** Can I go to Iran?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** So where are we? The Iranians say there's two issues left, which presumably are that they want guarantees from the U.S. and they – against another policy change, and they want the IRGC to be cleared of being named a terrorist group. Can those issues be bridged, and do you expect them to be bridged soon? And secondly, can you – what do you think of the – Britain's ability to get back its hostages and the coincidental timing of them releasing Iranian funds?

**MR PRICE:** So to your first question, we do think the remaining issues can be bridged. We do think, and we – as we said before, we have made significant progress, we are close to a possible deal, but we're not there yet. From our end, we are not going to characterize the number or the nature of these remaining issues precisely because we are at a very delicate stage.

We want to do everything we can to see to it that a mutual – well, to determine if a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA is in the offing, and it would need to be in the offing in the short term. As we've said, there is little time remaining, given the nuclear advancements that Tehran has made, that over time would obviate the non-proliferation benefits that the JCPOA conveyed. So this is an issue that needs to be worked urgently. It is an issue that has had our urgent attention for some time now. We still continue to believe that a mutual return to compliance would be manifestly in our interests, and we are going to find out in the near term whether we're able to get there.

When it comes to the news you referred to today, let me just say that we welcome the news regarding British citizens Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori. We, of course, would refer you to our British counterparts for specific questions on their status. When it comes to our efforts, we continue to work night and day to secure the release of our wrongfully detained citizens, and that includes U.S.-UK citizen Morad Tahbaz.

Simply put, Iran is unjustly detaining innocent Americans and others, and Tehran should release them immediately. Securing their release is an utmost priority for this administration. We call upon Iran to make urgent progress toward the release of wrongfully detained U.S. citizens. I can tell you that Special Envoy Malley and Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Carstens, they have been regularly speaking with the families of our detainees. They'll continue to do so, particularly to pass along the status of any progress to bring their loved ones home. In fact, they spoke with the families of all four wrongfully detained U.S. citizens just yesterday.

**QUESTION:** Does the British release of funds to Iran make it more difficult for you to obtain the release of Americans without doing the same kind of gesture?

**MR PRICE:** Well, this was a sovereign UK decision. We were not a party to this decision. It doesn't change the fact that we are going to continue working night and day to do everything we can to bring our citizens home.

Yes, Rich.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. Also, this is my first time in the briefing this week, and I want to thank you for your thoughtful words yesterday; for the support of the State Department for our colleagues, for Ben, Pierre, and Sasha; and all the support that you've given us. And I know it means a lot to the bullpen, it means a lot to Fox, and it means a lot to me. So thank you for that.

**MR PRICE:** Rich, it's why we're here; to help citizens, help those in need. So we've – we welcome the good news; we hope to hear more of it.

**QUESTION:** Great, thank you. Moving on to an Iran question, there's a report in Axios that the

administration is considering removing the IRGC from the FTO list in return for a public commitment from Iran to de-escalate in the region. Is that something that you can confirm?

**MR PRICE:** It's not something I can speak to. It's not something I can speak to beyond the fact that there are two key issues at the heart of these negotiations. On the one hand, you have the nuclear commitments that Tehran would need to adhere to were it to resume full compliance with the JCPOA. On the other side of the ledger, you have the sanctions relief that the United States, working with our P5+1 partners, would be prepared to provide if we were to achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. So the issue of sanctions relief is really and has been at the heart of these negotiations, but we're just not going to speak to specifics at this stage.

**QUESTION:** Does the IRGC's missile launches near an American consulate change that calculation? And with that in mind, does the administration still think it would be appropriate for that to even be considered?

**MR PRICE:** What it underscores for us is the fact that Iran poses a threat to our allies, to our partners, in some cases to the United States, across a range of realms. The most urgent challenge we would face is a nuclear-armed Iran or an Iran that was on the very precipice of obtaining a nuclear weapon. Every challenge that we face and would face from Iran – whether that is its support for proxies, its support for terrorist groups, its ballistic missile program – all of those challenges would become all the more difficult to confront if Iran were in the possession of a nuclear weapon. Iran would be able to act with far greater impunity if it were in possession of a nuclear weapon.

So we are determined to continue to confront all of those threats working in tandem with our allies and partners, just as we are determined to take that central potential threat off the table – the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon. That is what we are seeking to do by testing the proposition that, through a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, we can reimpose the permanent, verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear program to see to it that Iran is never able to acquire a nuclear weapon.

**QUESTION:** Is the administration committed, if there is an agreement, to submitting an agreement to congressional review and waiting out the 30-day period before lifting any sanctions?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what I can say at this point, Rich, we obviously don't have an agreement of any sort, but we will carefully consider the facts and circumstances of any U.S. return to the JCPOA to determine the legal implications, including those under INARA. We're committed to ensuring the requirements of INARA are fully satisfied.

The President believes that a bipartisan approach across our foreign policy – and we've been heartened to see this on a number of issues recently, including on Ukraine, with a \$13.6 billion in appropriations, a large chunk of which we spoke to today – but we believe that a bipartisan approach to our foreign policy, including to Iran, is the strongest way to safeguard U.S. interests in the long term. And we have reached out at all levels to members of Congress and their staffs to discuss our approach to Iran. This very week, there have continued to be briefings on the Hill. Special Envoy Malley, Brett McGurk at the White House, others are deeply committed to this continued close engagement with Congress in a bipartisan manner during the negotiations and for whatever comes next.

**QUESTION:** But that sounds as though you're not committing to INARA review.

**MR PRICE:** It should sound as though we are committed to ensuring the requirements of INARA are fully satisfied.

**QUESTION:** But that doesn't mean that you're submitting it – I mean, that's not a pledge to submit it

to that – through that review process.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, as I said before, we don't have a deal.

**QUESTION:** Yes, okay.

**MR PRICE:** This is a hypothetical, but if and when there is any sort of agreement, we are committed to ensuring the requirements of INARA are fully satisfied.

**QUESTION:** Yesterday, you were a bit circumspect about Foreign Minister Lavrov's comments with the Iranian foreign minister at their meeting in Moscow in which he said – you talked – he suggested – his comments appeared to suggest at least that the last-minute Russian objections or their concerns about Ukraine sanctions essentially bleeding over into the JCPOA, that those were resolved. You said that you didn't think there was really ever an issue in the first place, but have you gotten any more clarity from – not directly from the Russians, presumably, but through anyone else that it is – this issue is, in fact, now resolved and the Russians won't blow a deal up?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what I will say is that we have spoken to a very small number of outstanding issues in addition to – call it what you will – I think Mr. Borrell called it external factors.

**QUESTION:** Right.

**MR PRICE:** So there have been external factors in addition to outstanding issues. Even if these external factors are fully resolved, and without speaking to them in detail, we've seen the comments from senior Russian officials that would seem to suggest that they are in a different place, have been in a different place over the past couple days, than they might have been a few days before that. Even if external factors are removed, we still have some ways to go until and unless we're able to —

**QUESTION:** Understood, but as far as – your understanding is that those external factors are now reduced or no longer there?

**MR PRICE:** These external factors were not about us in the first place, so it would not be our place to comment on whether they're resolved or not.

**QUESTION:** And then I think I can probably guess your answer to this question, but I just want to know, today is the day that you're supposed to – that the Secretary is supposed to make a determination as to whether to continue the protection for former Secretary Pompeo and Special Envoy Hook. Has he done that? And if he has, what did he decide?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Matt, we don't discuss the specifics of protective operations. As you know, Congress has approved authorities that allow the Department of State to protect former or retired senior department officials if the Secretary, in consultation with the Director of National Intelligence, determines that the official faces a credible threat from a foreign power or the agent of a foreign power arising specifically from duties that that former official pursued while employed by the Department of State.

And so under Section 7071 of the Appropriations Act, again, the Secretary, in consultation with the DNI, determines and then reports to congressional leadership and the appropriate congressional committees if a former or a retired senior State Department official would receive protection. We have up to \$30 million in appropriated funds to be made available if such a determination is made, but I think you can understand why we wouldn't speak publicly to whether we have made such a determination, as that would potentially pose a security issue.

**QUESTION:** Well, not only would it potentially pose a security issue, but it would also be problematic if you were to lift a FTO designation against the IRGC when they're – if you determine that the threats that they have made to those two men continue to exist.

**MR PRICE:** You heard from the National Security Advisor. It's a statement he issued I believe on January 9th, where he made crystal clear that any effort to harm a U.S. citizen, be it on U.S. soil, anywhere in the world, whether that person was a former official, current official of any party, it is something we would take extraordinarily seriously. There is nothing we take with more gravity than the protection, the safety of U.S. citizens. So I will leave it at that.

Yes, Simon.

**QUESTION:** I want to kind of come back to Ukraine, but specifically the meeting that the National Security Advisor held with his Chinese counterpart in Rome. Assistant Secretary Krittenbrink you said was there; he's now returned to Washington, I believe, and I guess had time to debrief you on that or debrief the Department on that. Is there anything more you can tell us about – we understand the message that was given in that meeting, that there are these concerns about China supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. But at the conclusion of the meeting or coming out of that meeting, what's your reading on what China's view is going forward on supporting Russia in Ukraine and whether they're giving material support?

**MR PRICE:** So it's not for us to characterize what the PRC view on this or any other issue may be or is. It is for us to characterize the messages that were conveyed very clearly in the course of our diplomacy. And as I indicated two days ago now, one of the reasons – probably the most important reason – we convene at high levels with our PRC counterparts is to ensure that those lines of communication remain open. This is probably the most consequential bilateral relationship on the face of the Earth. It is incumbent upon us as a responsible country to see to it that the competition that characterizes our relationship doesn't veer into the realm of conflict. And, of course, dialogue and discussion is part of that.

When it comes to the PRC's approach to Russia and Ukraine, a number of countries – the vast majority of the world's countries – have stood up with and for our Ukrainian partners. They have stood up against President Putin's aggression against Ukraine. We have yet to see those – that sort of unambiguous statement from the PRC or that sort of unambiguous support from the PRC, and we've made very clear to the PRC that we have significant concerns, and that any effort to compensate Russia for its financial losses, for the economic toll, or, of course, any effort to supply, to provide materiel for Russia's war effort – that would be met with significant costs not only from the United States but from our allies and partners around the world.

Those are the messages that were conveyed. It is not up to us to characterize any sort of PRC response.

**QUESTION:** Right. You said you've yet to see an unambiguous statement from the Chinese. Have you seen any signal or any indication since that meeting from the Chinese of what their position might – is there any change to their position?

**MR PRICE:** I will leave it to our PRC counterparts to speak to their position.

Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** I want to turn to Venezuela.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** After the trip to Caracas of a senior U.S. delegation to meet with government – with the government of President Nicolás Maduro, is the U.S. still recognizing Juan Guaidó as the interim president? Are you planning follow-up meetings with Maduro? And are you concerned that these kind of meetings weaken the Venezuelan opposition?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as we talked about a couple days ago, the visit to Venezuela focused on really two things, and that was securing the release of wrongful detainees and urging the Maduro regime to return to the negotiating table in Mexico with the democratic opposition's unitary platform to restore democracy in Venezuela. So far from undermining Juan Guaidó, it actually reinforced our support for Interim President Juan Guaidó and his call for a negotiated solution through the Mexico process. There, of course, has been no change in our recognition of Interim President Juan Guaidó's role. We will continue to work with him as such. We will continue to urge the resumption of negotiations through the Mexico City process.

**QUESTION:** But does it mean a recognition that who's in power is, like, Nicolás Maduro and not Juan Guaidó? Because the delegation didn't go to the house of Juan Guaidó, it went to meet Maduro officials.

**MR PRICE:** In one way, it was a recognition that it was the Maduro regime that was and continues to hold Americans unjustly against their will. It, of course, was not Juan Guaidó or the unitary platform that held and continues to hold, unjustly, American detainees. So if we seek the return of Americans who are held unjustly against their will, in that case we met with the party that was holding them.

Thank you all very much.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:01 p.m.)

1. The package includes 5,000 rifles and over 20 million rounds of small arms ammunition and grenade launcher and mortar rounds. [↑](#)

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## [Department Press Briefing – March 21, 2022](#)

*03/21/2022 07:02 PM EDT*

Ned Price, Department Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, D.C.

2:27 p.m. EDT

**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. Happy Monday. Sorry we're starting a couple minutes late here. I'll get to your questions, but two items at the top today.

This morning, as I know many of you all saw, at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum the Secretary announced that the State Department has, after rigorous factual and legal analysis, determined that members of the Burmese military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya. Since the Holocaust, the United States has concluded only seven other times that genocide was committed; this determination marks the eighth.

Burma's military has for decades committed unspeakable atrocities against Burma's population, and that includes ethnic and religious minorities and pro-democracy activists. In 2016 and 2017, Burma's military unleashed a wave of horrific violence in northern Rakhine State against predominantly Muslim Rohingya that, at the time, the United States concluded constituted ethnic cleansing. Since 2017, the Department and others have worked to investigate and document these atrocities.

The United States is committed to pursuing truth and justice for victims and accountability for those responsible for these atrocities and for other human rights violations and abuses across Burma. As the Secretary made clear, justice and accountability – whether via international or domestic courts – must be part of the pathway out of genocide in Burma. Our commitment includes support for international mechanisms like the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, IIMM, for which the Secretary announced a nearly \$1 million contribution to support its mandate to investigate, collect, preserve, and analyze evidence of the most egregious and serious international crimes in Burma since 2011.

Although this determination focuses on genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya, Burma's military has committed atrocities against members of other ethnic and religious minority groups across Burma for decades. Many of the military leaders involved in the genocidal campaign against Rohingya in 2016 and 2017, including the general who led it, are the same ones who overthrew Burma's democratically-elected government on February 1st of last year. And since the coup we have seen the Burmese military use many of the same tactics, only now the military is targeting anyone in Burma it sees as opposing or undermining its repressive rule. Shining a light on these atrocities is critical to ending the decades of impunity that has brought Burma to the crisis it is in today.

We call on the international community to do more to stop the Burmese military's violence, including by



ending the sale and transfer of arms, materiel, dual-use equipment, and technical assistance to the Burmese military regime and its representatives. We are working with our allies and partners to achieve this.

We reiterate our call for the Burmese military regime to end its use of violence, release all those unjustly detained, and engage in constructive dialogue with all parties to restore Burma's path to democracy.

Next and finally, the world continues to witness Russia's unrelenting and coldblooded bombardment of Ukraine, causing death and destruction. These strikes have destroyed civilian infrastructure, including a maternity hospital, apartment buildings, and an art school where 400 civilians were sheltering. And hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent men, women, and children have lost their lives in this needless carnage.

In the face of it, President Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine continue to show strength and courage in the country's fight against these Kremlin forces.

As Russia's forces continue to die needlessly in Ukraine and the economic costs of the war mount within Russia, President Zelenskyy has also made it very clear that he is open to a diplomatic solution that does not compromise the core principles at the heart of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine.

The effects of Putin's war of choice aren't restricted to Ukraine and Russia, however. This conflict has had ripple effects around the world. It calls into question security and prosperity for all of us on issues ranging from self-governance to human rights to energy and food security. That is why we cannot stand quiet. We must all stand up for what is right.

We support the people of Ukraine in their just cause: the defense of their country and their defense of their democracy. And as we have done since the beginning of this crisis, we will continue to support Ukraine's efforts to de-escalate through diplomacy in order to secure a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Russia's troops from Ukraine.

We know that diplomacy requires both sides to genuinely engage in good faith, but President Putin has made no indication that he is prepared to stop the onslaught. This war, we know, is not going according to Putin's plan. A quick victory has been stymied by Ukraine.

Whenever and however this war ends, the United States and the international community will, together with our partners in Ukraine, ensure that Putin's war of choice is a long-term strategic failure for the Kremlin.

With that, I am happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. I do have a question or two about Burma.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** But I'll let them – I – we need to get this Russia diplomacy stuff out of the way first, and that is: What, if anything, do you take from this démarche that the Kremlin – or that the Russian foreign ministry says that it delivered to Ambassador Sullivan today, which, according to them, warned that we're on the brink of severing diplomatic relations?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I will leave it to ask you to —

**QUESTION:** Ask me? (Laughter.)

**MR PRICE:** I will leave it to you to – (laughter) —

**QUESTION:** Well, let me expound on —

**MR PRICE:** I know you always have – you're always willing to postulate. But I will leave it to you to ask the Kremlin what message it was that they may have wished to relay.

I can tell you the message that was relayed by Ambassador Sullivan when he met with Russian Government officials. As you know, as a general matter, we don't speak to every single diplomatic communication, but I will say this: Ambassador Sullivan took advantage of this encounter to demand that the Russian Government follow international law, and basic human decency for that matter, and allow consular access to all U.S. citizen detainees in Russia, including those in pre-trial detention.

You've heard from us say in recent days that we have repeatedly made this ask, this request for consular access to American citizen detainees, and we have consistently and improperly been denied access for months. This is completely unacceptable. It is in direct contravention of Russia's international obligations under the Vienna Convention and under our bilateral agreement on consular access to detainees.

**QUESTION:** Okay. So he did not take this opportunity to raise the situation in Ukraine at all?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, we have a number of avenues where we can raise our concerns, including here in public. Again, I'm not going to read out the entirety of that session. But if you listen to the Russians, they had a message that they wanted to convey. We too have a message that Ambassador Sullivan was very direct in conveying.

When it comes to what we've heard from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as they have explained, they have given their version of events, I think it is worth repeating that Russia is carrying out an unprovoked and an unjustified war on Ukraine, and we are seeing, clearly, evidence that they are intentionally targeting civilians and committing indiscriminate attacks. President Biden's comments last week, the comments that were later echoed by Secretary Blinken and others, they speak to the horror of the brutality Russia has unleashed on an innocent neighbor, an innocent neighbor that posed absolutely no threat or security risk to Russia.

We warned Russia before the invasion began that, if they were to move forward with it, they would face severe consequences and unprecedented costs, unprecedented economic costs, financial costs, diplomatic isolation, strategic weakness on the world stage. And that's exactly what has happened. And the United States, along with our allies and partners, we will continue to raise those costs until and unless President Putin relents in this war of choice that he has – continues to perpetrate against Ukraine. His economic woes will grow, his financial woes will grow, his diplomatic isolation will only increase, and his strategic weakness on the world stage will only develop further over time.

We believe at the same time – and this is the very reason why Ambassador Sullivan was there today; it's the very reason why Jake Sullivan spoke to his counterpart, Mr. Patrushev, last week; it's the very reason we have deconfliction channels on a tactical level with Moscow – we believe it's important to maintain channels of communication with Russia. You've heard us say before that open dialogue, or the ability to engage in open dialogue, it's crucial, especially during times of tension, especially during times of conflict.

We have sought to maintain those open lines of communication. We have sought to maintain a diplomatic presence in Moscow. We have sought for the Russians to be able to continue to maintain a diplomatic presence here in the United States.

Now, the Russians, at just about every turn, have taken actions that call into question whether they too welcome these same open lines of communication. We find them important; we find them necessary. But I'll leave it to the Kremlin to speak to their thoughts.

**QUESTION:** Well, except that they did call him in, so I mean, they're obviously interested in communicating something. They say that they – the Foreign Ministry statement said that they summoned him because they wanted to complain about President Biden's comments that you just mentioned. Is it safe to assume that Ambassador Sullivan said that the U.S. stands by the comments of the President, the "war criminal" comments that the President made, and that the Secretary then repeated?

**MR PRICE:** I think it is safe to assume that Ambassador Sullivan, as he has consistently done, has made clear to his Russian interlocutors the costs that before the invasion would befall the Russian Federation if they went forward with this action —

**QUESTION:** No, no, no.

**MR PRICE:** — and since then, the fact that the costs will continue to climb until and unless President Putin relents.

**QUESTION:** But specifically, they said that the comments were inappropriate and not becoming of a person – you know what they said. So did he —

**MR PRICE:** It's awfully rich to hear a country speak about, quote/unquote, "inappropriate comments" when that same country is engaged in mass slaughter, including strikes and attacks that have resulted in civilian lives; strikes and attacks, barrages that have leveled civilian cities; an invasion of a hundred-plus thousand forces against a largely civilian population. That's awfully rich to hear that country speak about unacceptable comments.

**QUESTION:** Last one. Just on – his point, you said, was to talk about the treatment of the U.S. detainees. The three of them that we know most about – I don't know if there are others – but has there been any change in the case of Trevor Reed, Paul Whelan, or Brittney Griner?

**MR PRICE:** There has been no change in those cases, and that's part of the reason why Ambassador Sullivan took advantage of the encounter, took advantage of the opportunity to stress Russia's obligation, including under international law, including under its obligations under the Vienna Convention, to allow consular access to individuals like Paul Whelan, like Trevor Reed, like Brittney Griner. We have not yet been granted any consular access to Brittney Griner. It has been some months since we have been allowed to see —

**QUESTION:** Are you able to say if they offered him any assurances on the detainees?

**MR PRICE:** I have nothing to relay on that.

**QUESTION:** No? Thank you.

**QUESTION:** To clarify, the President called Putin a war criminal. As I recall, the Secretary says war crimes were committed. Did he actually call Putin a war criminal, the Secretary of State?

**MR PRICE:** The Secretary, when he was addressing all of you last week from this podium —

**QUESTION:** Right. He – I recall he said that war crimes were committed.

**MR PRICE:** He said, personally, that he agrees with the President.

**QUESTION:** So he is calling Putin a war criminal?

**MR PRICE:** Secretary Blinken echoed the same sentiment that the President conveyed a day earlier, that it is impossible as a human to witness what is transpiring, what has transpired in Ukraine, to look at the horrific imagery – a strike against a maternity hospital in Mariupol, not to mention attacks against civilian neighborhoods, schools, residential buildings, apartment buildings – and as a human, to come away from that feeling that war crimes have been committed. The President was speaking from the heart. Secretary Blinken was doing the same, echoing precisely what the President had said the day before.

Now, of course that doesn't obviate the fact that this building, as it always does, is conducting a rigorous analysis, collecting evidence, analyzing that evidence, sharing that information with international partners. And if, to – knowing that there is a legal definition of war crimes that has to be met as a matter of law and policy before this building can issue such a formal proclamation.

**QUESTION:** So the question is – I mean, you talked about diplomacy and the need and the necessity of maintaining open channels and so on. I mean, when you call someone a war criminal, that's really at a point of no return, so to speak, in terms of engaging them diplomatically. And so what is the next step? Probably severing relations or something like that?

**MR PRICE:** Said, it's rare that we negotiate or conduct this type of diplomacy with friends. It is this kind of diplomacy that we have supported, the Ukrainians are engaged in, our allies and partners are engaged in, for one reason and one reason alone: to save lives. It is a fact that the Russian Federation is the belligerent in this case that has invaded a country that posed no threat, that continues to have its forces on sovereign Ukrainian territory, that continues to assault Ukraine with bombs and missiles and artillery and gunfire, resulting in hundreds, if not thousands, of civilian casualties and untold more in terms of Ukrainians and Russians who have already lost their lives in this needless conflict.

So yes, as is President Zelenskyy, as is the Ukrainian Government, we are committed to seeing through the diplomatic path, recognizing that only through the path of diplomacy will we be able to save lives. Diplomacy oftentimes requires that you negotiate with those who you probably wouldn't describe as friends, those who may be unsavory, those who, as in this case, are responsible for violence and carnage. But we're doing that with one goal, and one goal in mind: to bring this war to an end and to save innocent life.

Paul.

**QUESTION:** I got a couple questions. One is, I didn't really understand something you said at the top, where you said President Zelenskyy made it clear that he's open to a democratic – diplomatic solution, that – and then you said that does not compromise the core principles at the heart of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine. So I – that didn't make sense. That sounds like you're supporting the Kremlin's principles. But anyway, if you could clear up what you were trying to say there.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Secondly, all these reports of the Russians forcibly – forcing people from Mariupol to Russia, which could be considered a war crime. Do you have any information that would confirm those reports?

**MR PRICE:** So on your second question, what remains true is that we continue to see evidence every day pointing to acts, actions, activities that may constitute war crimes. We are taking a very close,

very thorough look and examination of all of the information that is available to us to determine formally, as a formal matter, if war crimes have been committed. When it comes to the situation in Mariupol, we continue to call on the Russian Government to allow genuine safe passage so that civilians can depart cities and towns of Ukraine that are besieged by Russian forces and allow deliveries of humanitarian goods. In short, when it comes to Mariupol, when it comes to other cities that are under siege, we want the opportunity for civilians to go out, humanitarian supplies to go in. That is what is important to us.

The reality continues to be that while humanitarian goods are gathered and en route to the areas most in need, the convoys typically are not able to reach people in besieged cities. This is what appears to us to be blatant – excuse me – blatant manipulation and exacerbation of human suffering to serve nothing more than the Kremlin’s political ends. As the International Committee of the Red Cross stated, quote, “With no aid, the people in Mariupol are being suffocated.” We have seen growing reports of this type of abhorrent behavior, including intentional attacks of civilians, by Russian forces in Mariupol. These reports include, as I mentioned before, the attack on the maternity hospital, bombing a theater clearly marked as a shelter for children, reports that Russian forces are attempting to use hundreds of civilians at an intensive care hospital as human shields, while continuing to fire on Ukraine’s soldiers.

These brutal tactics demonstrate an utter indifference to human life, and they are appalling. The – this continues a horrific trend. Civilian deaths, we know, are multiplying, as is destruction of civilian infrastructure.

What seems to be the case – and you heard this from a number of officials, including our senior intelligence officials when they testified before Congress in recent days – that President Putin had in his mind a clear plan, a plan that would have him taking cities, major urban centers in a matter of days if not hours, tanks rolling into Kyiv shortly after they rolled across the border, only to have been stymied – only to have been stymied by the fierce resistance that Russian forces have continued to meet and to find that those plans for a quick territorial victory have been thwarted, as Russia’s forces now have remained stalled for more than three weeks.

**QUESTION:** You mentioned Mariupol. So these reports that people are actually being moved from there to Russia, do you have any evidence of that —

**MR PRICE:** We’ve seen those —

**QUESTION:** — that supports these reports?

**MR PRICE:** We’ve seen those reports. We are in the process of investigating them. We are in close consultation with our Ukrainian partners, with others who may be able to provide firsthand accounts of what is taking place on the ground. Of course, these reports are deeply concerning, and if true, they would be – amount to additional evidence of what would appear to be the mistreatment of civilians.

**QUESTION:** And in the first part I asked you to clarify: What are you saying about your support for a negotiated settlement à la Zelenskyy, but on whose principles?

**MR PRICE:** So the point I was making – I was trying to make, at least – is that this is a war that is in many ways bigger than Russia, it’s bigger than Ukraine, however – however important and however monumental the stakes are in this, in President Putin’s war against Ukraine. The key point is that there are principles that are at stake here that have universal applicability everywhere, whether in Europe, whether in the Indo-Pacific, anywhere in between. And those are the core principles that President Putin has sought to violate and flout and that our Ukrainian partners, backed by the international community, have sought to defend – the principle that each and every country has a sovereign right to

determine its own foreign policy, has a sovereign right to determine for itself with whom it will choose to associate in terms of its alliances, its partnerships, and what orientation it wishes to direct its gaze. In this case, Ukraine has chosen a democratic path, a path – a Western-looking path, and that is something that, clearly, President Putin was not willing to countenance.

**QUESTION:** But does that – does that mean that if under pressure of negotiation and war, that Zelenskyy gives up the previous desire to join NATO, if he even gives up control of his military, that the U.S. wouldn't go along with an agreement, a negotiated agreement?

**MR PRICE:** We are – we are there to support our Ukrainian partners, and this gets back precisely to those principles. It is a sovereign right, the sovereign responsibility of every country to determine for itself its foreign policy, with whom it chooses to associate, and to make decisions regarding its path forward. We are there to support President Zelenskyy. We're there to support the Ukrainian Government. We're there to support the Ukrainian people.

But more than that, what we are doing – even while we see at the moment very little indication that the Russian Federation is serious about genuine diplomacy – what we are doing is moving across multiple fronts to strengthen Ukraine's hand at the negotiating table. And we've done that in a number of different ways. As you've heard, in recent days, including last week when we went into some detail, we have provided an unprecedented amount of security assistance to our Ukrainian partners – \$2 billion since the course of this administration; \$800 million was announced last week; within the last week there's been a billion dollars total, providing our Ukrainian partners with precisely the systems and the capabilities and the assets that they will need and have been able to use to defend themselves effectively against this Russian aggression. So that's on the one hand.

On the other hand, we are imposing costs, just as we said we would, on the Russian Federation for this egregious violation of sovereignty, of Ukraine's territorial integrity, and you see those costs being borne by the Russian economy, its financial system, also its strategic standing in the world. It was just today that a very limited sector of the Russian stock market reopened. It had been closed for these three weeks now, presumably in an effort to forestall capital flight. You look at the value of the ruble, you look at interest rates, you look at the number of international companies that have decided to flee the Russian marketplace, not wanting to in any way be a part of President Putin's war of choice against his neighbor and, quite literally, making clear where they stand with their feet, leaving the Russian marketplace behind.

Paul. Peter.

**QUESTION:** President Biden just reiterated his warning about the danger of Russian cyber attacks. Do you have anything to add from the State Department on the nature of that threat, where the intelligence for that threat comes from?

And has the State Department or any other part of the administration issued a warning to Russia against committing cyber attacks of that nature, and was there a threat of consequences?

**MR PRICE:** So I understand that my colleague at the White House, Anne Neuberger, is speaking to this at the moment, so I'm going to largely defer to the White House to speak to it.

But to the second element of your question, as you know, we have had a number of opportunities to express in no uncertain terms to Russia the – our concerns regarding its use and its behavior in cyberspace. This was a principal topic of discussion during President Biden's meeting with President Putin in June in Geneva. There was a lot of attention, of course, at the time paid to the issue of ransomware. But we have made it very clear to the Russians that there would be a high price to pay if they were to use their capabilities to target critical infrastructure, to target sectors of strategic

importance. But it's not something we'd want to speak to from here.

Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Just related to that, other than the meeting with Ambassador Sullivan, has there been any other high-level contact between the administration and the Russian Government?

**MR PRICE:** Well, last week the White House read out Jake Sullivan's phone conversation with his counterpart, Mr. Patrushev. We do maintain channels of communication, including at the tactical level, and the Department of Defense has spoken to a channel of tactical de-confliction. We, of course, have our embassy in Moscow. Ambassador Sullivan, as I just mentioned, had an opportunity to convey our own message to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs today. So if we want to convey a message to Russia, we have multiple avenues to do so.

Alex.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. On the talks, you just said that there's very little indication that the Russians are taking them seriously. So does that mean that you don't think any progress has been made? Is there any sign of progress that you have seen? And if so, in which of those key areas?

**MR PRICE:** Well, Alex, I will, in the first instance, leave it to our Ukrainian partners to speak to progress or lack thereof, and I think you have – we have all heard statements from senior Ukrainian officials, including President Zelenskyy, that continue to cast doubt on Russia's intent in taking part in discussions which have taken place at a number of different levels but heretofore have not resulted in any concrete sign of de-escalation, has not resulted in any diminution of the violence, has not created any clear pathway out of this conflict just yet, at least. Of course, we continue to support dialogue and diplomacy between Ukraine and Russia, Ukraine with the support of the United States, Ukraine with the support of our partners and allies.

But more than sentiment and reactions coming out of the talks, what we are going to continue to look for is any indication that these talks are bearing fruit in some of the most important metrics. That is the diminution of violence, that is a withdrawal of forces, that is anything that would indicate that the Russians have any genuine interest in seeing a way out of this conflict, and that's not anything we've seen yet.

**QUESTION:** Are they briefing you on their talks after each round?

**MR PRICE:** So, as you know, the Secretary has spoken to his counterpart, Foreign Minister Kuleba, multiple times in the past week. We have been regularly apprised of the – of developments from these discussions from our Ukrainian partners. There are several close allies and partners of ours who are supporting talks and dialogue in different ways – our French allies, our German allies, our Turkish allies, our Israeli partners. We have also had an opportunity to hear from them directly in recent days regarding the progress or lack thereof in these various channels.

**QUESTION:** Can I – one final question, sorry. Do you have any confirmation that any of these top-level security officials have been arrested in Russia? There has been a report of at least the one FSB intelligence officer in charge of Ukraine.

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to confirm those reports. What I can say, though, is what has been clear to everyone with access to uncensored information – that is to say just about everyone outside of Russia's borders – we have seen signs of dissent within Russian society that have been high-profile and quite visible.

It is clear, to my earlier point, that President Putin has made a series of miscalculations. I already said before that he severely miscalculated if he thought that his forces could roll into Ukraine and could take the country by force, including its major cities and urban population centers, within a matter of hours and not face resistance. President Putin miscalculated if he thought that he wouldn't face the serious economic and financial repercussions that President Biden and the international community promised he would face, pledged that he would face if this invasion went forward. And he miscalculated if he thought that he could mount this type of large-scale invasion, have his forces bear the costs in terms of blood, in terms of treasure, and not face popular discontent back at home.

It's been very clear that this is not a war that the Russian people are uniformly behind. The Russian Government, the Kremlin has done everything it can to try to control information, to control the information environment to an even greater degree than the Kremlin previously did. But even despite this crackdown on channels of information, on protesters, with the arrests of more than 15,000 peaceful demonstrators, there are clear – there are still very clear indications that President Putin's war of choice does not have the full support of the Russian people.

And we see that dissent even knowing that the Russian people do not know the full cost of this war. The Russian people aren't being allowed to see that their sons, brothers, fathers are coming home in body bags, if the Russian Government is bothering to bring them home at all. They aren't seeing the true financial costs of this war. They aren't seeing the true toll of the international community's sanctions and other economic measures of this war. And surely they aren't seeing the strategic implications for Russia that the country will grapple with for quite a long time to come as a result of President Putin's aggression.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, news reports say that the U.S. may provide Ukraine with Soviet air defense systems it secretly acquired. Are these reports accurate? And did the State Department ask Turkey to provide Ukraine with their S-400 systems?

**MR PRICE:** So clearly, I'm not going to speak to news reports you've just referenced. What I will say is that —

**QUESTION:** Why not?

**MR PRICE:** — we are working to provide our Ukrainian partners with precisely the types of systems, including the surface-to-air systems, that they need to take on the threat from Russia that they are enduring.

When it comes to systems like the S-300, we are working to get this done to help Ukraine acquire long-range anti-aircraft systems and the munitions for those systems. We are continuing to work with our partners and our allies, as we've done well before this war began, to surge new assistance, including Soviet or post-Soviet Russian-made anti-aircraft systems and the necessary ammunition to employ them. These are the systems our Ukrainian partners are already trained on, the systems that they have used to good effect already.

Secretary Blinken has approved 14 of our partners to provide U.S.-origin equipment to Ukraine. More than 30 countries around the world have provided their own forms of security assistance. We are working, together with the Department of Defense and others, to do an inventory to source and, ultimately, to provide the equipment, whether it's U.S.-made or it is some other – of some other origin, to our Ukrainian partners so that they can have what they need.

**QUESTION:** What about Turkey? Could you —



**MR PRICE:** When it comes to Turkey, we thank Turkey for its commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, to its territorial integrity, as well as for Turkey's efforts to assist in Ukraine's time of need. We know that our Turkish allies, as I mentioned before, have been deeply engaged in these diplomatic efforts as well.

We will defer to the Government of Turkey to speak to the specifics of any assistance that it is providing to Ukraine. But every NATO Ally has stepped up in important ways, whether that is security assistance, humanitarian assistance, financial assistance, or economic assistance to Ukraine.

For our part, as I said before, we're continuing to surge security assistance to our Ukrainian partners. We are helping to acquire those longer-range anti-aircraft systems that President Zelenskyy has requested.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I have a quick question on Russia and China. From this podium you have said the U.S.-China relation is not binary. So when it comes to China-Russia relation, I wonder, do you view it as binary, black and white? Because from your previous remarks, it sounds like if China doesn't agree with the United States a hundred percent, then China is on the wrong side.

**MR PRICE:** No. Look, every country is going to have a unique relationship with Russia, and with the PRC, for that matter. The point we've made is that whether it's the PRC or any other country around the world, we aren't forcing our partners to choose between us and them. What we are doing in this case is putting a spotlight on the fact that whether – regardless of your partners and allies, what the Russian Federation has done is attempt to tear asunder the principles that have been at the center of unprecedented levels of stability, of security, and prosperity, born over the course of two world wars and a cold war.

And what Russia is doing is violating in a blatant and unmistakable way the same principles that countries like the PRC have long claimed to hold dear – the principle of state sovereignty. This is a refrain that we have consistently heard from the PRC, the importance, the emphasis – importance of, emphasis on sovereignty of all states. It is certainly a principle that we have sought to protect around the world, but our point has been that when these principles come under threat, countries around the world have an opportunity to demonstrate whether what they have said over the course of years or longer actually means anything, whether there was actually anything behind their pronouncements.

And so countries around the world will have to determine for themselves where they want to be when the history books are written, whether they want to be on the side of these very principles or whether they want to be on the side of naked aggression, of violence, of destruction. And we are asking countries to speak very clearly and to show the world once and for all where they stand.

**QUESTION:** The Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, yesterday told CBS that China and Russia has a trusted relationship. It's not a liability but asset to solve the current crisis, because he said condemnation may not solve the problem, but diplomacy might. Do you agree?

**MR PRICE:** Well, what we have said is that we welcome countries around the world to use the leverage that they have with Russia to bring this conflict to a close. It is undeniable that the People's Republic of China has significant leverage with Russia, perhaps more so than just about any other country around the world, so it stands to reason that the PRC could do more than most countries around the world to bring an end to this violence, this bloodshed, this destruction, and this war. But we have not seen that yet. We have heard from the PRC various statements, including the fact that what is happening is complicated. There is nothing that is complicated about a war, a needless war of aggression against a neighbor that posed absolutely no threat. There is nothing complicated about a

massive military campaign against a civilian population that entails missiles and bombs and artillery raining down on population centers, on cities, on towns, maternity wards, hospitals, residential buildings, neighborhoods. There is nothing complicated about that.

So it is the responsibility of every country around the world to make very clear where they stand. Now, what gives us concern is the fact that, as you alluded to, the partnership between the PRC and Russia has grown closer in recent years. It is a partnership that is predicated on a vision of the world that in many ways is at odds with the free and open vision that the United States and our allies and partners around the world have sought to create and protect, also the very system that has enabled much of China's economic growth in recent decades. Their vision, as opposed to ours, that is free and open – their vision is one that is increasingly repressive at home and one that is increasingly aggressive beyond its borders. If the PRC wants to show the world that it is – that it means what it says, that it stands behind the principles that it has claimed to stand behind for years and decades, now is an opportunity for them to do so.

**QUESTION:** But last week, during the phone call between the two presidents, China did explain what they did, like, humanitarian aids and also urge for peace talk. What more do you want to see from China?

**MR PRICE:** Well, the White House had an opportunity to speak to this on Friday. We will let the PRC speak to their impressions of that call. For us, it was an opportunity for the two presidents, as part of our emphasis on maintaining those open channels of communication, to speak directly in a way that was substantive, in a way that was detailed, and was candid. And President Biden had an opportunity to offer a pretty detailed review of how things have developed in President Putin's war against Ukraine, his assessment of the situation today. And President Biden, for our part, underscored that the United States continues support for a diplomatic resolution to this crisis.

Now, part of the conversation was based on the concerns we have, that countries around the world, including and perhaps most notably the PRC, may seek to provide a lifeline to Russia to provide economic support, financial support, to help it attempt to skirt the sanctions that have been imposed on it, the other economic measures that have been placed on it, or to provide weaponry for the battlefield effort – weapons or materiel for the battlefield effort that, very clearly, has not gone according to plan, and for which President Putin seems desperate to seek to change course.

And so it was an opportunity for President Biden to lay out very clearly those concerns, the implications of China's decisions, all the while knowing that China will – the People's Republic of China will make its own decisions. It was the task of President Biden, it's been the task of others in this administration to make very clear the implications of those decisions for the PRC.

**QUESTION:** But China said the (inaudible) assistance is disinformation. You don't believe that?

**MR PRICE:** We are watching very closely. We're watching very —

**QUESTION:** Lastly, I'm sorry, this weekend you tweeted – your tweet actually commemorate the 50 years anniversary of U.S.-Qatar relationship. I know Matt had asked it a couple of times – 50 years anniversary is a big day. So why U.S.-Qatar relationship deserve a shoutout from this building, while U.S.-China relationship doesn't, which is considered as the most important bilateral relationship in 21st century?

**MR PRICE:** There is no doubt that the bilateral relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China is the most consequential bilateral relationship not only that we have, but probably the most consequential bilateral relationship on the face of the Earth. That is why it is incumbent on us, as responsible stewards of this relationship, to do all we can to manage the

competition responsibly in a way that sees to it that competition doesn't veer into conflict. And we do that through a number of ways. Our public messaging is part of it, to the fact that President Biden and President Xi spoke for nearly two hours on Friday. It is a testament to the fact that there are various channels to communicate between our governments, and we'll continue to use those channels.

Nick.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. On Iran, *The Wall Street Journal* is reporting that delisting the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization is the last hurdle to rejoining – their rejoining the nuclear deal. Is that true?

And then a follow-up on that. On Friday the White House, and as you have said before, the IRGC's behavior in the region and beyond has gotten more aggressive in recent years. Do you expect that to change with the return to mutual compliance?

**MR PRICE:** So broadly speaking, you've heard us say this before, but we are not in the practice of negotiating in public. We're not going to respond to specific claims about what sanctions we may or may not be prepared to lift as part of a potential mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

I made the point last week that there are really two core issues, and always have been, in the course of this negotiation. On the one hand, you have the nuclear steps that Iran would be obligated to take if it were to resume full compliance with the JCPOA. Those are the steps that it would need to reimplement that would see to it that Iran is permanently and verifiably barred from obtaining a nuclear weapon. On the other hand, you have the sanctions relief that we would be prepared to undertake if we are able to achieve a mutual return to compliance.

What I'll say is that we are prepared to make difficult decisions to return Iran's nuclear program to its JCPOA limits. The fact is that, while the JCPOA was in full effect, while Iran was in full compliance with it, Iran's breakout time – that is to say, the time it would need to acquire the fissile material necessary for a nuclear weapon if it made the decision to weaponize – was significantly longer than it is today. When the JCPOA went into effect, it was a full year. You've heard from my colleagues that that breakout time is now measured in terms that are far less than a year. We want to see to it that that breakout time is elongated, and just as importantly, that Iran is verifiably and permanently barred from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Now, when it comes to the status of the talks, there has been significant progress in recent weeks, but I want to be clear that an agreement is neither imminent nor is it certain. And in fact, we are preparing equally for scenarios with and without a mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA. President Biden has made a commitment that Iran, under his watch, will not be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon, and that commitment is as true and sturdy in a world in which we have a JCPOA and one in which we don't.

**QUESTION:** Do you have an update on the – a return to Vienna?

**MR PRICE:** I don't. What I can say is that Rob Malley and his team are here. Typically in the past, we've noted that Iranian negotiators tend to take a break during the holiday of Nowruz, but I don't have any update to offer.

**QUESTION:** Another one on Iran. The Iranian-American UK citizen Morad Tahbaz – I wonder if you could give us an understanding – an update on your understanding of his current location, because – seems he's been returned to prison and it seems that he may be on hunger strike. So do you have anything on that? And if it's the case that he's back in prison, do you have a response to what seems to be Iran breaking that promise to furlough him?

**MR PRICE:** What I'll say, Simon, is that Iran, as we understand it, made a commitment to the UK to furlough dual U.S.-UK citizen Morad Tahbaz. This is someone who needs medical attention. We are not, as you heard us say last week, a party to this arrangement, but we join the UK in considering anything short of Morad's immediate furlough a violation of Iran's commitment. We are urgently consulting with the UK on appropriate responses. At the same time, we continue to work night and day on what is an absolute priority for us, and that is to secure the release of our wrongfully detained citizens, including dual-national Morad Tahbaz.

Simply put, Iran is unjustly detaining innocent Americans and others, and should release them immediately. Securing their release is in utmost priority for us. We call on Iran to make urgent progress towards the release of wrongfully detained U.S. citizens. This is something that Rob Malley, something that Roger Carstens – they have been regularly working on. As you heard me say last week, they spoke to the families of our wrongful detainees, and we continue to pass along the status of our negotiations to bring their loved ones and our citizens home.

**QUESTION:** One more on Syrian President Assad's visit to UAE. I wonder – the Department has said it's profoundly disappointed in the Emiratis for inviting Assad. Have you communicated that to the UAE, and to what extent do you think this invitation that they've extended to Assad is a reflection of strained relationships between you guys and the Emiratis?

**MR PRICE:** We – as you heard us say on Friday, we are profoundly disappointed, we're troubled by this apparent attempt to legitimize Bashar al-Assad. He – this is an individual who remains responsible and accountable for the death and suffering of countless of his fellow countrymen. He is responsible for the displacement of more than half of the pre-war Syrian population and for the arbitrary detention and disappearance of over 150,000 Syrian men, Syrian women, and Syrian children.

You've heard this from the Secretary, you've heard this from others in this administration, but we do not support efforts to rehabilitate Assad. We do not support others normalizing relations with Assad. We have been very clear about that. To your question, we've had a number of conversations with our Emirati counterparts in recent days, and we urge states considering engagement with the Assad regime to weigh carefully the horrific atrocities this regime has visited on their own people over the last decade. And just recently we celebrated another grim milestone.

Countries should also consider the regime's continuing efforts to deny much of the country access to humanitarian aid and security. We've made clear that, for our part, we will not lift or waive sanctions, and we do not support reconstruction of Syria until and unless there is irreversible progress towards a political solution, which we have not seen. And in fact, we will continue to use our sanctions authorities consistent with the law to hold accountable those Syrians, including members of the regime, who have perpetrated these atrocities on their own people.

**QUESTION:** Just to be clear, though, there was a conversation with the UAE after Assad's visit.

**MR PRICE:** We have regular conversations with our Emirati partners, and I can confirm that there have been conversations in recent days.

**QUESTION:** Ned, it may be true that Assad remains responsible for what has happened in Syria, but you said that he remains accountable. And in fact, that's the problem, because he isn't been held – he hasn't been held accountable. So that's – so it's the accountability problem that I think even you are getting at. Right? And when you say that you oppose normalization but that – of any country with Syria right now, how do you explain the fact that you guys have at least eased sanctions or allowed Syria to import energy so that it can get to Lebanon?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, we can do two things at once. We can continue to hold the Assad regime

accountable for the atrocities it has perpetrated against its own people, for the forced displacement of much of its or a large part of its population, and still account for the humanitarian needs of people in places like Lebanon and those people, including those inside Syria, who themselves have been the victims of Assad's atrocities.

**QUESTION:** Right. Except that you just went through this whole thing about saying you won't – you won't support reconstruction in Syria, which is for civilians whose homes and lives have been destroyed because of this. You say you won't support that. But you're willing to allow the Syrians to import energy to pass on to Lebanon for Lebanese civilians.

**MR PRICE:** Matt —

**QUESTION:** So how are you —

**MR PRICE:** There —

**QUESTION:** So aren't you punishing Syrian – excuse me – aren't you punishing Syrian civilians for the, quote/unquote, "crimes" of their leader?

**MR PRICE:** We are punishing members of the regime by using the authorities that are available to us, and many of our partners around the world have done the same, to economically isolate the regime to the extent we can, to impose economic pressures and economic costs, just as we can continue to devise ways to account for the humanitarian needs of people in the region that don't directly benefit the regime.

There is nothing that we have done that directly benefits the regime. What we have done is sought to account for the significant humanitarian needs – and again, many of these humanitarian needs result from the very actions of the Assad regime. Many of those who are suffering have themselves been the victim of this very regime.

Yes?

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Can I switch gears?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Okay. On the —

**QUESTION:** Sorry, this —

**QUESTION:** Turkey?

**MR PRICE:** One final question on this?

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Are you considering any sanctions on UAE based on Caesar Act? And how do you feel that your allies in the region are taking steps against U.S. interests?

**MR PRICE:** Look, of course we don't preview sanctions. Our Emirati partners, they are a partner of ours, and they will continue to be and are an important partner of the United States. We share a number of interests, including the security interests, our shared interest in bringing to a close this conflict in Yemen. We have a shared interest in terms of regional stability, in terms of pushing back on Iran, in terms of helping our Emirati partners defend themselves against the attacks that have emanated from Yemen, from the Houthis. And of course we are committed to all of that.

**QUESTION:** And one more on this. Do you have any comment on that trilateral summit that's being held in Sharm el-Sheikh between Israel, Egypt, and UAE officials?

**MR PRICE:** I don't have a specific response. But if we do, we'll pass it along.

Yes?

**QUESTION:** On the sanctions, you sanctioned Turkey. Turkey is a partner and you sanctioned them in the past because they bought S-400.

**MR PRICE:** There's a law on the book —

**QUESTION:** What's the —

**MR PRICE:** — CAATSA, that imposes sanctions on those countries that trigger that authority, in this case the possession of the S-400 system.

Yes?

**QUESTION:** Ned, on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, 50 House Democrats sent a letter to Secretary Blinken asking him to urge or to demand, whatever, Israel to refrain from evicting about 3- or 400 Palestinians from the village of Walaja. Are you aware of the letter? And is there a response from the Secretary of State?

**MR PRICE:** I have seen — I was made aware of this letter only recently. Said, you know our longstanding position when it comes to these issues. It's the same position that we've reiterated, encouraging all parties to refrain from acts that move us farther away from a negotiated two-state solution.

**QUESTION:** But this is a specific village, a specific act in the village of Walaja. Will the Secretary of State urge the Israelis not to do it? I mean, it's imminent. So we're about to see the displacement of maybe some 400 Palestinians.

**MR PRICE:** Said, again, we believe it's critical for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tension and that undercut efforts to negotiate a two-state solution. That certainly includes settlement expansion —

**QUESTION:** But does —

**MR PRICE:** — and evictions, as we talked about.

**QUESTION:** So are you saying that the Israelis should not evict the people of Walaja?

**MR PRICE:** Said, I don't have a response to offer you today to this particular letter.

**QUESTION:** One more quick question on the settlement. Ambassador Nides spoke with, I guess, the Israeli Peace Now movement and so on, and he said something about the settlements. He said — he called it stupid and he called it all kind of things, and he also said that: I am unable to undo a single settlement. Is the United States powerless to actually reverse the process of settlement, not even one settlement?

**MR PRICE:** Said, I reviewed the Ambassador's comments. I don't think he actually said that. What the ambassador —

**QUESTION:** That settlements are not stupid – I mean, he called them that (inaudible).

**MR PRICE:** You – you editorialized a bit. What I think the message that the Ambassador conveyed was the very message that I conveyed here. We've continued to be clear, including with our Israeli partners, including with our partners in the Palestinian Authority, regarding the criticality of avoiding these steps that could inflame tensions or could move us away from a two-state solution.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** I want to go back to Ukraine. One question on do you support Zelenskyy sitting down with Vladimir Putin?

**MR PRICE:** With —

**QUESTION:** With Putin?

**MR PRICE:** With – we support any diplomatic initiative that President Zelenskyy determines for his government, for his country that is in the their – that is in their interest.

**QUESTION:** I – sorry. A question on Saudi Arabia said it will not incur any responsibility regarding any shortage of oil supplies as its oil facilities are attacked by the Houthis. How do you comment on that? This statement was today.

**MR PRICE:** So you've heard us say before that we have held discussions with Saudi Arabia on a collaborative approach to managing potential market pressures. This administration, the President and the Secretary, is committed to doing everything we can to work with other countries to bring down the cost for the American people. Our guiding principle has been to maximize the cost for President Putin and to minimize the cost for the American people and for our allies and partners.

But you did raise the recent attacks against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. You may have seen that Secretary Blinken, just as Jake Sullivan did, yesterday issued a statement strongly condemning these Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia. As you noted, as we've heard from our Saudi partners, the attacks reportedly targeted water treatment facilities as well as oil and natural gas infrastructure. It was a clear attempt, it seems, to disrupt global energy markets. We know that Saudi Arabia faces significant threats from Yemen and elsewhere in the region. We remain committed to helping our Saudi partners improve their capabilities to defend their country against these attacks. There were roughly 400 cross-border attacks last year launched by the Houthis with Iranian support. There have been fatal attacks this year. These attacks have also affected infrastructure, schools, mosques, workplaces, and endangered the civilian population, including tens of thousands of U.S. citizens whose safety is a top national security for us.

So that's why helping to advance a durable resolution to the conflict in Yemen also is a priority for us. It improves the lives of Yemenis and it creates a space for Yemenis to collectively determine their own future and to put an end to this conflict that has only led and has only fueled additional attacks from these Houthi terrorists.

**QUESTION:** Ned, two things real quickly. Just one, all that litany of stuff that you just ran through that you just said the Houthis are doing, are those not the – are those not actions consistent with the actions of a foreign terrorist organization?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, you and I have had this conversation before, including from up here —

**QUESTION:** Well, I —

**MR PRICE:** — and I've given you the —

**QUESTION:** Well, I mean, you just —

**MR PRICE:** — I've given you the answer.

**QUESTION:** — went through the whole thing and you said that they are a clear attempt to disrupt the world energy markets, which that's something that — that's something that a terrorist organization would do.

**MR PRICE:** These — Matt, these are terrorist attacks. We have labeled them as such.

**QUESTION:** Well, I know. Okay. So why not label the group that's doing them as a foreign terrorist organization?

**MR PRICE:** So, as you've heard me say before, there are any number of groups, as we've discussed, that are — that don't carry this specific designation that — whose attacks and operations are no less reprehensible. I think you could have said something very similar about the Taliban, including during the height of —

**QUESTION:** Well, I don't remember the Taliban trying to disrupt the world energy — world energy markets. Did they?

**MR PRICE:** It is — it is also incumbent —

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.)

**MR PRICE:** It is also incumbent upon us, and obviously the differences in geography between Afghanistan and Yemen and the UAE probably make this a conversation that is uninteresting to anyone but the —

**QUESTION:** Mostly, most people. Yes, you're right.

**MR PRICE:** Yes. Yes.

**QUESTION:** So can I go back to your very opening statement on Burma? I just want to know, recognizing that these kinds of designations or determinations are complex and they involve a lot of rigorous legal scrutiny and analysis, still, why did it take so long to — it seems like this was — it came — this determination could have been made several years ago, and that the reason that it was done now was a political decision rather than a decision based on the facts of what has happened there on the ground.

**MR PRICE:** Well, Matt, this determination is based on a rigorous review of comprehensive evidence, the law, and all relevant policy considerations. So the Secretary in his remarks this morning offered a good bit of texture regarding the inputs that went into this. There was a previous study. There are outside expert evaluations that have — that were part of this determination. The Holocaust Memorial Museum itself has been a world leader in documenting the atrocities and the genocide that occurred in Rakhine State.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, but those aren't new.

**MR PRICE:** It is not — it is not new, but it is —

**QUESTION:** Those — but those are — all of those determinations from human rights groups like



Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, which – the leaders of which the Secretary spoke to, I believe, last week. Those date back years when it relates to Rakhine and what’s been happening —

**MR PRICE:** And this administration has been in office for just over a year.

**QUESTION:** No, I get that, but —

**MR PRICE:** It is incumbent on each administration – or at least this Secretary – take seriously the responsibility that he has as Secretary of State to determine on behalf of the United States Government when and if genocide has occurred. So that is not a process that he takes lightly. In fact, he wanted to ensure there was rigorous analysis, not only of the law, not only of the evidence, not only of the policy considerations, but also, of course, taking into account that there was a coup in Burma just a little over a year ago, February 1st of last year.

In everything we do – and we’ve already talked about this in other contexts – we want to ensure that the choices we make, the policy choices we make, don’t have humanitarian – a bearing on the humanitarian situation of people around the world.

**QUESTION:** So do you think that – would it – had this determination been made six months or eight months or a year ago, it would have had a bearing on the humanitarian situation?

**MR PRICE:** It was a process that took some time. We wanted to carefully weigh all of the inputs, not only the law, not only the facts, not only the evidence, but also the policy considerations.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Ned, can I ask a question on Iraq?

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Okay. This past weekend marked the 19th anniversary of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. And General McKenzie gave an interview to *Military Times*, in which he says that our presence will continue to be there for years to come. Could you update us on the status of American presence in Iraq?

**MR PRICE:** We are there, and any American forces are there at the invitation of the Iraqi Government. The Department of Defense has spoken to the end of the combat mission in Iraq. We continue to share vital interests with our Iraqi partners, including to see to it that groups like ISIS, groups that pose a threat to the United States, to Iraq, to countries in the region continue to face pressure from the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

But as the Department of Defense has said, everything we do is in cooperation with and at the invitation of the Government of Iraq.

**QUESTION:** Is the American military presence in Iraq only to support America’s military presence in northern Syria and aiding the Kurds?

**MR PRICE:** I would leave it to my colleagues at the Department of Defense to speak to the specifics.

Thank you all very much.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:35 p.m.)

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