

Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria

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Stanford, CA
January 17, 2018

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Well, good morning. And I really, really appreciate this opportunity to swing down to Stanford while I was out on the West Coast and particularly to address this group. And I want to thank Stanford and the Hoover Institution and the international studies group for allowing me to speak to you this morning. I have familiarity with the Hoover Institution; I've spoken at some of their events in the past in my prior life, and it has consistently produced great, principled scholarship that makes the calls for representative government, private enterprise, and protecting the American way of life right at the center of your activities, and very important topics that we spend our time on.

And in that regard, you certainly have a true advocate in your ranks: my friend, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, who – I don't know if she takes responsibility for this situation she got me into or not, but I – (laughter) – I hold her partially accountable anyway. And – but I appreciate Condi's advice and counsel. When you arrive at the Secretary of State's desk, I was looking for the how-to manual; there wasn't one there. So she's been a great source of help and inspiration to me.

And I also want to acknowledge the other co-host, one of our nation's most dedicated and gifted public servants, certainly of the 20th century: former Secretary George Shultz. And George and I have known each other a long time as well, and I'm a great admirer of his work as well.

I've just come from a ministerial meeting in Vancouver, in which a number of nations discussed how to better implement our maximum pressure campaign against North Korea. The United States and our allies are and continue to be united in continuing this campaign until North Korea takes meaningful steps toward denuclearization. We all agreed – all of us – that we will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea.

From Vancouver I made a quick swing down here to California. And I appreciated Dr. Rice's help in arranging this for me on somewhat short notice. There are some people back in Washington that are suspicious I'm escaping the bad weather today to just come down here, but I am delighted to be here.

The topic and the subject of my remarks today is to talk with you about the way forward for the United States in Syria.

I'm going to start by giving you a kind of a broad historical and political context for what are some very difficult situations facing the Syrian people, and they raise concerns for all of the international powers as well.

Then I want to describe why it is crucial to our national defense to maintain a military and diplomatic presence in Syria, to help bring an end to that conflict, and assist the Syrian people as they chart a course to achieve a new political future.

And then lastly, I want to detail the steps this administration is taking to achieve a stable, unified, and independent Syria, free of terrorist threats and free of weapons of mass destruction.

Then, as indicated, Dr. Rice and I will have a little conversation.

For nearly 50 years, the Syrian people have suffered under the dictatorship of Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar al-Assad. The nature of the Assad regime, like that of its sponsor Iran, is malignant. It has promoted state terror. It has empowered groups that kill American soldiers, such as al-Qaida. It has backed Hizballah and Hamas. And it has violently suppressed political opposition. Bashar al-Assad's grand strategy, to the extent he has one beyond his own survival, includes hosting some of the most radical terrorist elements in the region and using them to destabilize his neighbors. Assad's regime is corrupt, and his methods of governance and economic development have increasingly excluded certain ethnic and religious groups. His human rights record is notorious the world over.

Such oppression cannot persist forever. And over the years, latent anger built up within the country, and many Syrians rose up and opposed Assad's rule. Within the days of what began as peaceful demonstrations that swept Syria in 2011, Assad and his regime responded to his own people with bullets and jail sentences.

Since that time, the story of Syria has been one of a humanitarian catastrophe. Up to half a million Syrians have died. Over 5.4 million Syrians are refugees, and 6.1 million are internally displaced persons, or IDPs. And as a result of conflict between regime and opposition forces, whole cities have been destroyed. It will take years to rebuild an entire nation.

Previous American efforts to halt the conflict have been ineffective. When Assad used chemical weapons on his own people in 2013, in defiance of an American red line threat to retaliate, U.S. inaction emboldened the regime to further disregard civilian lives. In April of last year, the Trump administration responded to Assad's use of sarin nerve agent on civilians with cruise missile strikes that destroyed 20 percent of Assad's air force. We did this to degrade the Syrian military's ability to conduct further chemical weapons attacks, to protect innocent civilians, and to dissuade the Syrian regime from further use or proliferation of chemical weapons. The United States takes chemical weapons threats seriously, and we cannot stand idly by and allow their use to become regularized. We will continue to seek accountability and justice for the victims of that attack.

In 2012, the Assad regime military forces began to struggle badly against armed opposition. The regime was soon bolstered through the assistance of Iranian-backed fighting forces. But despite this help, by August of 2015, Syrian rebel forces had made substantial progress against Assad's regime. Fearing for his own survival, Assad then appealed to Russia, his

longtime ally, for help. Russia intervened to save the regime, largely by providing increased air power, intelligence, and arms support.

In December of 2016, the key city of Aleppo fell to the regime after a brutal campaign that essentially destroyed that city, which had a population over two million people before the war. This symbolized the regime's ruthless determination to regain momentum in the conflict. It also led to – Assad to wrongly think that he would maintain power without addressing the Syrian regime's – the Syrian people's legitimate grievances.

The civil war in Syria was horrific in and of itself. But Syria was thrown into an even greater state of turmoil with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. This was an aspiring terror-state inside the borders of Iraq and Syria. The conflict between the regime and various opposition groups fighting to change Assad's grip on power created the conditions for the rapid expansion of ISIS in 2013 and 2014. ISIS originally emerged from the ashes of al-Qaida in Iraq, a group Assad had covertly backed. Evidence suggests Assad also abetted ISIS by releasing known terrorists from Syrian prisons and turning a blind eye to ISIS's growth. ISIS exploited the instability and lack of centralized authority in Syria to set up what it falsely claimed was a "caliphate," with the Syrian city of Raqqa as its capital. Eventually, ISIS expanded to possess at its height a territory – an amount of territory roughly equivalent to the size of the United Kingdom, and a significant fighting force. Flush with cash from looted banks and in control of oil fields in Syria and Iraq, ISIS had all the elements to sustain itself and carry out attacks on the U.S. homeland and those of our allies. The establishment of a radical terror-state attracted thousands of jihadists from over 100 countries, and motivated other terrorists around the world to commit attacks where they live.

In the wake of the rise of ISIS, millions fled their homes, villages, and cities to escape the brutal regime's ethnic cleansing, resulting in massive refugee flows into the neighboring countries and as far as Europe and Scandinavia. By the middle of 2014, ISIS had a stable base of operations in Syria and significant revenue streams to fund, plan, inspire, and direct attacks against targets in the West and against our regional allies. It was using Syria to build chemical weapons for use against our partners. Recognizing the destructive power of a strengthening terrorist organization, America focused on a military defeat of ISIS. In spite of the threat ISIS posed in Syria, Assad focused instead on fighting the Syrian opposition, even with Iranian and Russian military support at his back.

The Trump administration's counterterrorism policy is quite simple. It is to protect Americans at home and abroad from attacks by terrorists. Central to this policy is to deny terrorist and terrorist organizations the opportunity to organize, raise money, recruit fighters, train, plan, and execute attacks.

When he took office, President Trump took decisive action to accelerate the gains that were being made in Syria and Iraq. He directed Secretary of Defense Mattis to present within 30 days a new plan for defeating ISIS. The President quickly approved that plan. He directed a pace of operations that would achieve decisive results quickly, delegating greater authority to American commanders in the field, and he gave our military leaders more freedom to determine and apply the tactics that would best lead to ISIS's defeat. Today, nearly all territory in Iraq and Syria once controlled by ISIS, or approximately 98 percent of all of that once United Kingdom-sized territory, has been liberated, and ISIS has not been able to regain one foot of that ground. ISIS's physical "caliphate" of Raqqa is destroyed. The liberated capital of the caliphate no longer serves as a magnet for those hoping to build a terrorist empire. Approximately 3.2 million Syrians and 4.5 million Iraqis have been freed from the

tyranny of ISIS. Over 3 million internally displaced Iraqis are now back home, and Mosul, the caliphate's second capital city in Iraq and one of Iraq's largest cities, is completely clear of ISIS. In Iraq, for the first time since the beginning of the crisis in December of 2013, there are more Iraqis going home than there are that are still displaced.

As we survey Syria today, we see the big picture, a situation characterized by principally three factors:

ISIS is substantially, but not completely defeated.

The Assad regime controls about half of Syria's territory and its population.

And continued strategic threats to the U.S. from not just ISIS and al-Qaida, but from others persist. And this threat I'm referring to is principally Iran.

As part of its strategy to create a northern arch, stretching from Iran to Lebanon and the Mediterranean, Iran has dramatically strengthened its presence in Syria by deploying Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops; supporting Lebanese Hizballah; and importing proxy forces from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Through its position in Syria, Iran is positioning to continue attacking U.S. interests, our allies, and personnel in the region. It is spending billions of dollars a year to prop up Assad and wage proxy wars at the expense of supporting its own people.

Additionally, the unresolved plight of millions of Syrian refugees and IDPs remains a humanitarian crisis. The catastrophic state of affairs is directly related to the continued lack of security and legitimate governance in Syria itself. Assad has gassed his own people, he has barrel bombed entire villages and urban neighborhoods, and repeatedly undermined any chance for a peaceful resolution of political differences. Those abuses continue to this day, as seen in recent civilian casualties in East Ghouta and Idlib Governance^[1]. There is no way to effectively facilitate a large-scale safe and voluntary return of refugees without a political solution.

In short, Syria remains a source of severe strategic threats, and a major challenge for our diplomacy.

But the United States will continue to remain engaged as a means to protect our own national security interest.

The United States desires five key end states for Syria:

First, ISIS and al-Qaida in Syria suffer an enduring defeat, do not present a threat to the homeland, and do not resurface in a new form; that Syria never again serves as a platform or safe haven for terrorists to organize, recruit, finance, train and carry out attacks on American citizens at home or abroad or against our allies.

Second, the underlying conflict between the Syrian people and the Assad regime is resolved through a UN-led political process prescribed in UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and a stable, unified, independent Syria, under post-Assad leadership, is functioning as a state.

Third, Iranian influence in Syria is diminished, their dreams of a northern arch are denied, and Syria's neighbors are secure from all threats emanating from Syria.

Fourth, conditions are created so that the refugees and IDPs can begin to safely and voluntarily return to Syria.

And fifth, Syria is free of weapons of mass destruction.

The Trump administration is implementing a new strategy to achieve these end states. This process largely entails increased diplomatic action on the heels of our ongoing military successes. Our diplomatic efforts will be characterized by stabilization initiatives and a new emphasis on the political solution to the Syrian conflict.

But let us be clear: The United States will maintain a military presence in Syria focused on ensuring ISIS cannot re-emerge. Our military mission in Syria will remain conditions-based. We cannot make the same mistakes that were made in 2011 when a premature departure from Iraq allowed al-Qaida in Iraq to survive and eventually morph into ISIS. It was that vacuum that allowed ISIS and other terrorist organizations to wreak havoc on the country. And it gave ISIS a safe haven to plan attacks against Americans and our allies. We cannot allow history to repeat itself in Syria. ISIS presently has one foot in the grave, and by maintaining an American military presence in Syria until the full and complete defeat of ISIS is achieved, it will soon have two.

We understand that some Americans are skeptical of continued involvement in Syria and question the benefits of maintaining a presence in such a troubled country.

However, it is vital for the United States to remain engaged in Syria for several reasons: Ungoverned spaces, especially in conflict zones, are breeding grounds for ISIS and other terrorist organizations. The fight against ISIS is not over. There are bands of ISIS fighters who are already beginning to wage an insurgency. We and our allies will hunt them down and kill them or capture them.

Similarly, we must persist in Syria to thwart al-Qaida, which still has a substantial presence and base of operations in northwest Syria. As in the years before 9/11, al-Qaida is eager to create a sanctuary to plan and launch attacks on the West. Although ISIS is the terrorist group that has dominated the headlines most in the last few years, al-Qaida is still a grave threat and is looking to reconstitute in new and powerful ways.

Additionally, a total withdrawal of American personnel at this time would restore Assad and continue his brutal treatment against his own people. A murderer of his own people cannot generate the trust required for long-term stability. A stable, unified, and independent Syria ultimately requires post-Assad leadership in order to be successful. Continued U.S. presence to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS will also help pave the way for legitimate local civil authorities to exercise responsible governance of their liberated areas. The departure of Assad through the UN-led Geneva process will create the conditions for a durable peace within Syria and security along the borders for Syria's neighbors.

U.S. disengagement from Syria would provide Iran the opportunity to further strengthen its position in Syria. As we have seen from Iran's proxy wars and public announcements, Iran seeks dominance in the Middle East and the destruction of our ally, Israel. As a destabilized nation and one bordering Israel, Syria presents an opportunity that Iran is all too eager to exploit.

And finally, consistent with our values, America has the opportunity to help a people which has suffered greatly. We must give Syrians a chance to return home and rebuild their lives. The safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees serves the security interests of the United States, our allies, and our partners. To relieve the enormous pressure of refugee flows on the surrounding region and on Europe, conditions must be created for these refugees to safely and voluntarily return home. It will be impossible to ensure stability on one end of the Mediterranean, in Europe, if chaos and injustice prevail on the other end, in Syria.

The United States, along with its allies and partners, will undertake the following steps to bring stability and peace to Syria:

First, stabilization initiatives in liberated areas are essential to making sure that life can return to normal and ISIS does not re-emerge. Stabilization initiatives consist of essential measures such as clearing unexploded land mines left behind by ISIS, allowing hospitals to reopen, restoring water and electricity services, and getting boys and girls back in school. The approach has proved successful in Iraq, where millions of Iraqis have returned to their homes. In Syria, however, unlike in Iraq, we do not have a national government partner for stabilization efforts, so we must work with others. As such, there is a great deal of difficulty to them. Since May, the United States has deployed additional diplomats to the affected areas in Syria, working with the United Nations, our partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and various nongovernmental organizations.

Our work to help local and regional authorities provide services to liberated areas builds trust between local populations and local leaders who are returning. Terrorists thrive under conditions that allow them to peddle their warped and hateful messages to vulnerable people in conflict-stricken areas. Our stabilization efforts will help those people turn away from the prospect of terrorism and toward integration in their local communities.

We must be clear: “Stabilization” is not a synonym for open-ended nation-building or a synonym for reconstruction. But it is essential. No party in the Syrian conflict is capable of victory or stabilizing the country via military means alone. Our military presence is backed by State Department and USAID teams who are already working with local authorities to help liberated peoples stabilize their own communities.

Simultaneous with stabilization efforts, de-escalating the overall conflict is also a critical step to creating the conditions for a post-Assad political settlement. Since July, the United States has worked with Russia and Jordan to establish the de-escalation area in the southwest part of Syria. It has achieved a ceasefire, ended indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations, and with some few exceptions, has thus far held up well. The agreement in the southwest also addresses Israel’s security by requiring Iranian-backed militias, most notably Hizballah, to move away from Israel’s border. We need Russia to continue to work with the United States and Jordan to enforce this de-escalation area. If it does, the resulting cessation of regime-opposition hostilities will allow for the safe delivery of humanitarian aid, create the conditions for the safe and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees, and provide the Syrian people the security to start rebuilding areas scarred by conflict. Our efforts have been – have helped refugees and IDPs return into the southwest de-escalation areas from where they had taken refuge in Jordan, and overall, an estimated 715,000 Syrians in total, including 50,000 Syrians from abroad, returned to their homes in 2017. These early but positive trends can increase through the continuation of de-escalation efforts not just in the southwest, but elsewhere.

On counterterrorism, we will continue to work with allies and partners, such as Turkey, to address the terror threat in Idlib and address Turkey's concern with PKK terrorists elsewhere. Al-Qaida is attempting to re-establish a base of operation for itself in Idlib. We are actively developing the best option to neutralize this threat in conjunction with allies and partners.

The United States is vigorously supporting UN efforts to achieve the political solution under UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This is the political framework for peace and stability in a unified Syria which has already been agreed upon by members of the UN Security Council. Specifically, we will work through what is known as the Geneva process, supporting UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura in his efforts.

The Assad regime clearly looks to Russia as a guarantor of its security. Russia therefore has a meaningful role to play in persuading the Assad regime to engage constructively in the Geneva process. Beyond Russia's own vote to support UNSCR 2254, President Putin reaffirmed Russia's commitment to Geneva in his joint statement with President Trump issued from Da Nang, Vietnam last November. The United States and Russia have worked together on the southwest de-escalation area to success, and we have established deconfliction arrangements around the Euphrates River Valley to ensure the safety of our respective forces.

Russia must now follow through on the commitment our presidents made last November to find an ultimate solution through the UN-led Geneva process. One of the ways Russia can do that is to exert its unique leverage on the Syrian regime, which itself has agreed to participate in the Geneva process. Russia must put new levels of pressure on the regime to not just show up in Geneva but to credibly engage with the UN's efforts and implement agreed outcomes.

The United States, the EU, and regional partners will not provide international reconstruction assistance to any area under control of the Assad regime. We ask all stakeholders in Syria's future to do the same. We will discourage economic relationships between the Assad regime and any other country. Instead, we will encourage international assistance to rebuild areas the global coalition and its local partners have liberated from ISIS. Once Assad is gone from power, the United States will gladly encourage the normalization of economic relationships between Syria and other nations. The United States calls on all nations to exercise discipline in economically pressuring Assad and rebuilding Syria after a political transition. Our expectation is that the desire for a return to normal life and these tools of pressure will help rally the Syrian people and individuals within the regime to compel Assad to step aside.

UNSCR 2254 also calls for UN-supervised free elections in Syria. The United States believes that free and transparent elections, to include the participation of the Syrian diaspora who have been displaced – all those who were forced to flee the conflict – will result in the permanent departure of Assad and his family from power. This process will take time, and we urge patience in the departure of Assad and the establishment of new leadership. Responsible change may not come as immediate as some hope for, but rather through an incremental process of constitutional reform, UN-supervised elections – but that change will come.

The United States recognizes and honors the great sacrifices the Syrian Democratic Forces have made in liberating Syrians from ISIS, but its victories on the battlefield do not solve the challenge of local governance and representation for people of eastern and northern Syria. Interim local political arrangements that give voice to all groups and ethnicities supportive of Syria's broader political transition must emerge with international support. Any interim arrangements must be truly representative and must not threaten any of Syria's neighboring

states. Similarly, the voices of Syrians from these regions must be heard in Geneva and in the broader discussion about Syria's future.

On these points, the United States hears and takes seriously the concerns of our NATO ally Turkey. We recognize the humanitarian contributions and military sacrifices Turkey has made towards defeating ISIS, towards their support of millions of Syrian refugees, and stabilizing areas of Syria it has helped liberate. We must have Turkey's close cooperation in achieving a new future for Syria that ensures security for Syria's neighbors.

Finally, reducing and expelling malicious Iranian influence from Syria depends on a democratic Syria. For many years, Syria under Bashar al-Assad has been a client state of Iran. A Syrian central government that is not under the control of Assad will have new legitimacy to assert its authority over the country. The reassertion of national sovereignty by a new government, along with de-escalation efforts and new flows of international aid, will lower violence, set better conditions for stability, and speed up the departure of foreign fighters.

We recognize Syria presents many complexities. Our proposed solutions will not be easy to achieve. But it is necessary to proceed in these ways for the sake of our security and that of our allies. We will not repeat mistakes of the past in Iraq, nor will we repeat the mistakes made in Libya.

Well-intentioned military interventions independent of stabilization and political strategies give rise to a host of adverse, unintended consequences. For this reason, we seek to de-escalate the civil war in Syria, work for peace, and encourage all parties to head to the negotiating table. Continued fighting will likely lead to worsened humanitarian conditions, more chaos, and increased regional military intervention in Syria. Our focus is to build a positive political path forward that honors the will of the Syrian people and sustains the unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

As with almost all of our foreign policy challenges, the steps for achieving our objectives cannot be undertaken alone. We will continue to work closely with allies and partners. In suffering many terrorist attacks over the past few years, our allies in Europe have sadly experienced firsthand what groups like ISIS and al-Qaida are capable of. We need allies and partners to support our strategy in order to permanently mitigate the risk to security posed by these terrorist organizations and others.

And finally, the Syrian people have endured seven years of unimaginable chaos and hardship. They need help. A new course of action is a preferable alternative to more years of wishful thinking. A stable, unified, independent Syria will serve the national security interests of the United States, its allies, and our partners. If that reality can come to pass, it will be a victory for all, and it will support the ability of the Syrian people to pursue their own God-given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Thank you for your kind attention, and I look forward to our discussion. (Applause).

SECRETARY RICE: Well, thank you. Thank you very much for that comprehensive look at one of the most daunting problems that, I think, anyone in the international system has faced, and I'd like to return to a couple of substantive issues, but I want to ask you a question first about being Secretary of State. It's kind of a hard job, isn't it? (Laughter.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It's – yeah, it's a little different. (Laughter.)

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah. (Laughter). So, when I was secretary, I'd get up in the morning, and there were some things I'd see on my calendar, and I'd think, "Oh good, I'm going to get to do that," and then there were some things that I'd would think, "I'll just – maybe I'll just go back to bed." What do you like about the job, and what do you find most challenging?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, what I like most about the job is what I've always enjoyed throughout my career, and it's the quality of the people you have the privilege to work with every day. And what I'll say about the people in the State Department, the career people as well as the political appointees: These are extraordinarily dedicated individuals, some of the greatest patriots you'll meet anywhere, and they really come in every day with one objective in mind, and that's to carry out the foreign policy goals, objectives of the administration, but to serve the interests of the American people.

So what I look forward to every day is even if we're talking about really complicated issues, like the one I just described – and Syria is one of the most complex situations on the ground – the level of intelligence and the level of openness for us to have a good conversation about that is what I most look forward to. And I have a bullpen area – it used to be the Deputy Secretary of Management's office. I absconded it, and we have nothing but whiteboards in there, and I love going in the bullpen and just whiteboarding these exercises.

What I least look forward to coming in to are those days when I have to deal with the loss of life. And whether it's the loss of a State Department person, or the loss of military personnel, or any American citizen anywhere, those are the days that are difficult, because you make calls to family members, you try to – people who have been taken hostage, you try to give their families reassurance, but those are the days that are really tough.

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah. Now, as Secretary, you face some unique challenges as well. Social media was barely born when I was secretary. Thank God for that. And we know that your boss loves social media, so what's it like, and how do you deal with the constant pressure of social media, especially out of the White House?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, he's world class at social media and I'm not – (laughter) – and I want to confess here in the heart of the creation of this great technology, I have no social media accounts. I have never had any and I don't intend to have any. (Laughter.) It is a great tool when it's used well. The President has used it to great effect by bypassing the traditional means of communicating, and he absolutely thrives on this ability to instantly communicate not just to the American people, but to our friends and allies or to our adversaries, to the entire world.

I don't know when he's going to do that because he – that is just the way the President operates. So the challenge is just getting caught up because I don't – I don't even have a Twitter account that I can follow what he's tweeting, so my staff usually has to print his tweets out and hand them to me. (Laughter.) Now, on the one hand, you can say, "Well, that's nuts. Why don't you get an account?" But on the other hand, I've actually concluded that's not a bad system because it goes out and I don't know it's going to go out, so there's not a whole lot I'm going to do until it's out there. By the time I find out about it, there's actually been some period of time, and dependent on where I am in the world it might be five minutes or it might be an hour before somebody hands me a piece of paper and says, "Hey, the President just tweeted this out." There – I already have the early reactions to that and it allows me to now begin to think about, all right, how do we take that then into – if it's a foreign policy issue, is it – what is it he's tweeting about, how do we take that and now use it?

And so it's interesting. I get the question a lot from people about, gosh, it must be impossible to deal with that. I had to get used to it early on because it was very unconventional for all of us. But I take it and I say, okay, this is information. Let's – we know what our objectives are and he didn't change any of them. This is just his way of wanting to communicate on the subject. How do we take that and use it? And so that's what – that's how I deal with it, but I think I'm probably going to go to my grave and never have a social media account. (Laughter.)

SECRETARY RICE: I was really struck when you talked about Syria and you talked about the way forward in Syria, leaving aside the military side, which obviously there have been some real gains, particularly in clearing ISIS from Iraq and now a leg up, at least, on ISIS in Syria. But I was struck that when you turned to political stabilization, you used a few words that most people would not associate with the Trump administration. I want to have you talk a little bit about that. You talked about values, America's values. You talked about human rights. You talked about the need for the Syrian people to be able to express themselves in free elections.

We would consider those parts of the values agenda, if you will, because going really all the way back to Woodrow Wilson, American presidents have believed that the internal composition of states actually does matter. And I think you've made a very good case that one of the reasons that we face the problem that we face in Syria is that Bashar al-Assad is a dictator who has murdered his own people and oppressed his own people.

And so pull back from Syria and talk about how, after now almost a year on the job, you see the issue of values, human rights, democracy in the – in American foreign policy.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, it's a great question, and it's one that I've – as an engineer, I guess I've had a hard time describing to others how I view it. Our American values of freedom, respect for the individual, human dignity – all of the manifestations of the values that define who we are as a people, who we are collectively as a group of people who have aligned ourselves around these values and defines how we treat one another every day – how you take that into the foreign policy arena.

And at one level, these are values that are enduring, and what I've said to people is you know with foreign policy if you – when you take the values and you try to put them into foreign policy, the concern I've always had is policies can change and adjust, and they do. And so how do you – if you're doing that, your values never change. They never adjust. So our values are with us at all interactions always.

Now, how do you operationalize – and I'll use that word – how do you operationalize the values? Because I think that's getting to the heart of the question. And Syria is a great case study in my opinion of that. Going into Syria and advocating human rights, religious freedoms, women's equal participation in the midst of literally thousands of people and civilians being killed every day doesn't resonate very well, because the most important human right to anybody is our first one: the right to life. Life, then liberty, then the pursuit of happiness. And that's the way I think about our values. I first have to keep people from being killed, and if I can keep them from being killed and if we can create areas of stability, then we begin to create the seeds of liberty, and then we create the pathway to a pursuit of happiness. And underneath all of that are, then, the articulation of our respect for the human dignity, the human condition, all the ways that we express these values that are uniquely American values.

And so it really is how do you create the conditions so people can actually achieve that, and the priority in Syria right now is stop people from being killed. They're being killed. They're being killed by the thousands. Stop that, stabilize it, start creating some conditions, and then we can begin to promote respect for people's religious freedoms, respect for their dignity. And so it is very much – in my mind it's – and being an engineer, this is the way I think it's a process. It's a process inside of a system, and at any point in time and depending on the country's condition, the location, the circumstances, we're going to be at a different place in that process. If we have a stable – a stable government that is repressive of certain religious organizations, then we go right at that. Because it's not that people are being killed, but they're being persecuted; they're being denied their own pursuit of happiness.

So it – very much, I think in each situation, I look at it and say, what is the priority here? And the first priority is always the protection of life – stop people from being killed. And if you do that, you begin to create the conditions where we can truly lean forward and advocate on the values themselves.

SECRETARY RICE: And the tools for doing the kind of work that you're talking about, obviously when you've stabilized a situation, you still have to have the diplomacy, you still have to have the assistance to people. There have been concerns about the commitment to, say, foreign assistance and to having those tools that American diplomats rely on to bring stability. Jim Mattis apparently famously said that if he doesn't have foreign assistance, he's going to need more bullets, just to paraphrase.

Now, a couple of American foreign assistance efforts that have been just universally appreciated: PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which probably, through the efforts of President Bush and then President Obama, saved millions of people from a pandemic; and then the Millennium Challenge, which tries to take foreign assistance and give it to states that are actually going to use it wisely, that are not corrupt. Can you talk a little bit about the future of those programs? And I know you're an advocate for them. How are you doing inside the administration and on the Hill?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, you picked two of the easiest to defend, because PEPFAR is broadly viewed, within the administration even, as like the gold standard of success. It has produced extraordinary results and it has demonstrated it really uses the American dollar wisely. For dollar invested, if you think about it as an investment, it's a dollar invested for the return – PEPFAR, by any measure you want to examine it, has been wildly successful.

And the Millennium Challenge Corporation, similarly, has been wildly successful because of the disciplined process it uses. I think the debate that goes on more is not about those kinds of programs, but about a lot of other assistance programs that may not have the kind of structure around them that PEPFAR has or the kind of structure around them – and accountability to go with structure – that the Millennium Challenge has, and a view that America is, has been, and still is today the most generous nation on planet Earth when it comes to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief. We are always first and foremost.

But if you look at the situation with the nation's finances, and we all know about the deficits that we're building up all the time, I think the President has rightly asked the question of, okay, we know what we're doing; how's the rest of the world doing? And are you doing your share? And so that has become very much an overlay to how this administration thinks about all means of foreign assistance, from the kind of assistance that's provided through USAID

and the State Department to foreign military sales and assistance, to international organizations at the UN and others. We will do our part, but we demand that others do their part as well. And so he has created very high expectations that we will go out and elicit others to step up and start contributing more on a proportionate basis with their ability to do so. And he famously points to a lot of nations around the world that are doing extraordinarily well. In many cases they're doing better than we are with our own economy, yet they're not carrying what in our view is their share of this need the world has.

So a lot of this last year and even the early part of this year is a lot of active engagement with countries around this issue. Having said that, there's no abandonment of our recognition of these needs. And as you know and through the budget process, the budget process involves our two branches of government, co-equal branches. The Congress has their say on it as well, and the administration has theirs. So a lot of this is, in the end, we resolve it through the budget negotiation process.

The last thing I would say about the State Department budget in particular, because it got a lot of – it's gotten a lot of discussion, is I like to give people perspective. The State Department's budget is coming off of a record high – \$55 billion, largest budget the State Department ever had, and a series of about the last five or six years of one record budget after another. And what I tell people, and having run another organization that had large numbers we had to deal with every day, it's very hard to execute – it's very hard for the State Department to execute a \$55 billion budget. I mean, quite frankly, if you want to do it well and you want to be good stewards of the American hard-earned taxpayer dollar that you've been given, we do need to be able to go out and do that well. And the truth of the matter is one of the reasons we're not struggling in 2017 is we had a lot of carry-forward money because no one could execute that size of a budget. And so there's a lot of money that's moving through.

So right now I'd say we're in a dynamic situation where we're not – we're not in a position of being unable to meet, we believe, the most critical needs out there. But it's coming and we're trying to plan ahead and we're trying to elicit more burden-sharing from others around the world.

SECRETARY RICE: Thanks. One final question before we let you go. I'd be remiss if I didn't ask about where you started your remarks: North Korea. We've got false alarms going off in Hawaii. We've got people talking about war coming on the peninsula. At the same time, we've got the North Koreans and the South Koreans deciding they're going to march together in the Olympics.

Do you have a sense at all that the rhetoric that we've used, the fact that perhaps the diplomacy is not as front and center as some of the talk about our military options, that we might be driving a wedge with our South Korean allies? I know when I was secretary and trying to do the Six-Party Negotiations, the North Koreans loved to drive a wedge to pick off the Chinese or pick off the South Koreans or pick off the Russians, and it was really important not for the United States to get isolated.

So how should we read these initiatives between the North and South? And tell us about the diplomacy, because I think we're all in agreement, nobody really wants war on the peninsula, on the Korean Peninsula, despite the seriousness of the North Korean threat.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, our diplomacy efforts, which began really last February, the first week I was – after I was sworn in, I was with the President in the Oval and

the very first foreign policy challenge that he gave me was he said you've got to develop a foreign policy approach to North Korea. And so we did and we worked that through the interagency process.

And what we – I labeled it the peaceful pressure campaign; the President has since relabeled it the maximum pressure campaign. But it is – and I know people say, “Ah, we've tried sanctions in the past. They never work.” We've never had a sanctions regime that is as comprehensive as this one, and we've never had Chinese support for sanctions like we're getting now. Russia is a slightly different issue. But the Chinese have leaned in hard on the North Koreans to the point – part of this approach was to help the Chinese come to the realizations that North Korea for the last 50, 60 years may have been an asset to you; they're now a liability to you. And I mean, it's because of how events can play out on the Korean Peninsula. If China doesn't help us solve this problem, there are a lot of follow-on effects, and China is well aware of those.

So I think the diplomatic efforts are about unifying the international community around this sanctions campaign, which has been extraordinarily effective. As President Moon himself told us on the phone call – and I would tell you, we have probably – the level of communication that goes on between ourselves, South Korea, and China on this issue is pretty extraordinary. People would probably be surprised at how often we are on the phone with one another a week talking about this. Moon said the reason the South Koreans came to us was because they are feeling the bite of these sanctions. And we're seeing it in some of the intel, we're seeing it through anecdotal evidence coming out of defectors that are escaping.

The Japanese made a comment yesterday in our session that they have had over 100 North Korean fishing boats that have drifted into Japanese waters – two-thirds of the people on those boats have died – they weren't trying to escape – and the ones that didn't die, they wanted to go back home. So they sent them back to North Korea. But what they learned is they're being sent out in the wintertime to fish because there's food shortages, and they're being sent out to fish with inadequate fuel to get back.

So we're getting a lot of evidence that these sanctions are really starting to hurt. And so the rapprochement of the North to the South, now they're on to the playbook that you know as well as anyone. And the playbook is, okay, we're going to start our charm offensive to the rest of the world and let them see we're just normal people like everybody else. We're going to engender some sympathy. We're going to try to drive a wedge between South Korea and their allies. And we spent an extraordinary amount of time yesterday in the group discussion hearing from Foreign Minister Kang of South Korea about how they're not going to let that happen.

So we understand what this is about, and we've been supportive of this rapprochement, because the other element of the diplomacy is we've been waiting for Kim to decide he wants to talk. We've been very clear, and our channels are open. And as I said yesterday in my press avail, he knows how to reach me if he wants to talk. But he's got to tell me he wants to talk. We're not going to chase him.

So this may be their early effort to break the ice; we'll see. Nothing may come of it, but – we are supportive of that, but I would tell you that among the allies in the region, but equally with China, I don't think we have ever been as unified against this threat. Because China knows the potential consequences of this, to unintended consequences that could come later. And in diplomacy, where you're dealing with someone across the table like this, and when we get to

that negotiating table – and I’m confident we will – I want to know that Secretary Mattis has a very, very strong military option standing behind me. That will give me a better position from which to try to solve this.

As Secretary Mattis and I told our Chinese counterparts when we were across the table from one another in a security and strategic dialogue, I said to my counterpart, Yang Jiechi – I said, “State Councilor, if you and I don’t solve this, these guys get to fight, and we don’t want that. And neither do you.”

So we are highly motivated. It is a long process. It’s taken a lot of patience. We’ll see. But we are committed, as is everyone in the international community, to a denuclearized North Korea. And we’re going to stay on that until we achieve it.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much, and all the best. We certainly hope you succeed. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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