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U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE



# Department Press Briefing – March 31, 2022

NED PRICE, DEPARTMENT SPOKESPERSON

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**MR PRICE:** Look at this. Welcome back. It has been far too long since this room has seen so many people – a few years. But it is three years – I know – it is very good to see everyone. I say that now; we'll see how this goes. (Laughter.)

Also, I know some of you have been traveling with us. Welcome back to those of you who have been on the road. You look about as well rested as I feel. So with that —

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible) kind of an insult. (Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.)

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** No, to me – I mean, to us.

**MR PRICE:** So with that, let's get started. I have a few things at the top, and then we'll turn to your questions.

Today I want to start with a topic that is near and dear to each of us in this room, and that's media freedom and media censorship. Even more fitting that it's on this day – the very day that

media freedom and media censorship. Even more exciting than it is on this day, the very day that we open the doors to the briefing room by lifting the COVID-19-imposed capacity limits. It's really nice to see so many of us here who are dedicated to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas.

Russian authorities have shuttered independent Russian media outlets. They have blocked social media platforms. They have restricted access to international news outlets in Russia, and they have threatened even prison time for anyone who would speak out about Putin's war against Ukraine and anything other than Kremlin-approved distortions. This is a systematic campaign to keep the truth from the people of Russia, an all-out effort to control what people in Russia believe they know about the world, and what the world knows of them.

Even before their most recent actions to restrict the flow of information, the Russian Federation widely controlled media and harassed independent journalists. While President Putin accuses us of peddling fake news and Russophobia, the U.S. and international media – all of you in this room – provide a broad range of factual reporting because we believe, you believe, in the importance of free and independent media.

While Russian Government officials peddle their propaganda and try to explain the Kremlin's unconscionable actions, the Kremlin has refused to allow its own people access to information and diverse viewpoints, despite our very best efforts.

Without access to independent journalism, the Russian public cannot possibly make informed decisions about their future, or even clearly understand what that future might look like because of the actions of their own government. President Putin knows this. And despite the Kremlin's attempts to keep them in the dark, the people of Russia continue to seek out independent information sources.

We will, just as we always have, continue to share the truth with the people of Russia, using all tools at our disposal to help them understand the truth about what their government is doing, purportedly in their name. And we will continue to call on Russian authorities to end their suppression of freedom of expression, and to allow for the development of a free and independent Russian press.

I also want to honor the courage and fortitude of the many independent Russian journalists who have been doing their all in this environment. These individuals – some of whom were

forced into exile, many of whom have chosen to remain in Russia, and nearly all of whom are faced with the threat of criminal penalties for reporting factually on Russia's war in Ukraine – continue to risk their livelihoods and their freedom to ensure their fellow countrymen still have access to rigorous and professional journalism – to the truth – be it in underground publications or the few social media platforms still not banned by the Kremlin.

President Putin chose this war; the people of Russia did not. They have a right to know about the death, the suffering, the destruction being inflicted by their government and military on the people of Ukraine and the Russian people themselves. They have a right to know about the human costs of this senseless war to their children, to their cousins, their brothers conscripted to die on Ukraine's soil. And they have a right to know how Putin's brutal, unprovoked, and unjustified war has been a strategic blunder that has drawn condemnation from virtually every corner of the globe, and left the Russian Federation increasingly isolated.

We call on President Putin, his government, and the Russian Federation's military to honor Russia's international obligations and commitments, end its attacks against the people of Ukraine, withdraw Russia's troops from Ukrainian territory, and respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of its own people.

One last note. You've heard me say many times that we have no higher priority than the safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas. We take seriously our responsibility to inform U.S. citizens about developments that may impact their safety and security when they are traveling or residing outside of the United States.

In recent weeks, as you've heard, we have seen reports that Russian security officials have singled out and detained U.S. citizens in Ukraine and in Russia itself.

We have also heard President Putin denigrate equality, free speech, and human rights for all.

For these reasons we are warning U.S. citizens that the Russian Government security officials in both Russia and in Ukraine may be singling out U.S. citizens based on their nationality. Our updated travel advisories now reflect that information.

We reiterate that all U.S. citizens in Russia and Ukraine should depart immediately.

Next, the United States is deeply concerned by the Tunisian president's decision to unilaterally dissolve the parliament, and by reports that Tunisian authorities are considering legal measures against members of the parliament. We have consistently communicated to Tunisian officials that any political reform process should be transparent and inclusive, and undertaken in coordination with a range of political parties, labor unions, and civil society. A swift return to constitutional government, including an elected parliament, is critical to democratic governance, and will ensure widespread and lasting support for needed reforms to help Tunisia's economy rebound.

And finally, on Transgender Day of Visibility, today, the United States affirms that transgender rights are human rights. We celebrate the achievements and resilience of transgender, nonbinary, gender-conforming persons around the world. We recognize their bravery and their hard-fought work for equality, inclusion, and the full recognition of their human rights. We celebrate the diverse expressions of gender and full diversity of gender identities around the world.

We also want to highlight, as the Secretary announced in a statement earlier today, the historic milestone the department has reached in its work to better serve all U.S. citizens, regardless of their gender identity. Starting on April 11th, U.S. citizens will be able to select an X as their gender marker on their U.S. passport application, and the option will become available for other forms of documentation next year.

The department is setting a precedent as the first federal government agency to offer the X gender marker on an identity document. Information on how to apply for a passport with this new option can be found at [travel.state.gov/gender](https://travel.state.gov/gender).

Today and every day, we reaffirm our commitment to promoting and protecting the freedom, the dignity, the equality of all persons, including transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming persons around the world.

So with that, happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. And welcome back to you, too. I – just a technical thing. When – on that last – your last announcement there, when you say the “other forms of documentation,” it will be available next year, what are you talking about? Are you talking about –

**MR PRICE:** So right now we're talking about new passport books. Of course, there are passport cards, there are other –

**QUESTION:** Yeah, I know. But are you talking about visas? Will foreigners be able to use this X if they're applying for U.S. visas?

**MR PRICE:** So not at the moment. Right now we are focused on U.S. identity documents, including in the first instance passport books, but over the course of the next year we'll be updating our systems to allow for other forms of U.S. identity documents.

**QUESTION:** But only – okay. So but only for Americans right now?

**MR PRICE:** At this moment.

**QUESTION:** This does not apply to foreigners seeking entry?

**MR PRICE:** It does not, at the moment.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Going to Russia. Yesterday, officials here both on background and on the record talked about how the intelligence suggested to them that President Putin was being misled by his top advisors, not getting a full picture of what was going on in Ukraine. Today, following up on that, the President, in comments he made just a little while ago, said that there were indications that some of Putin's top advisors had been either detained or put under house arrest. I'm wondering if you can expand at all on that. Who is he talking about?

And while I think it's doubtful that you'll get into the reasons – the information that you have as to why he would say – the President would say that, more broadly, do you think you have good visibility into what's going on behind the walls of the Kremlin? Because the Kremlin spokesman – I suppose predictably – said you don't have a clue.

**MR PRICE:** Well, Matt, I think I'll start with that final question. And I will somewhat reluctantly hearken back to an exchange you and I had several weeks ago, when we laid out – and Secretary Blinken later laid out before the UN Security Council – what we expected the Russian Federation to undertake in advance of what we were concerned were imminent plans for a Russian invasion. We talked about provocations, we talked about false flags, we talked about

potential efforts on the part of the Russian Government to induce a provocation that they would then point to as a pretext for invasion. We talked about dramatic meetings of the security council in Russia. We talked about the Russian Federation's efforts with the so-called people's republics in Donetsk and Luhansk. There was some skepticism expressed at the time. I think that history has shown that the playbook we laid out – and I say this with a degree of lamentation, because we wish it weren't the case – the playbook we laid out did, in fact, come to fruition.

So anyone who doubts the level of information, the ability that we have to garner insight into what is going on inside Russia, and even within the various policy-making apparatus – apparatuses – need look no further than what we said publicly and what has since transpired.

When it comes to the reports that we've seen, we have seen reports that various Russian officials have been sidelined, are estranged, have been essentially put on ice, or, as the President alluded to, have even been placed under house arrest. Now, again, we're not going to go into the details of that or the rationale for that, but it would be quite consistent with what you have heard us say over the past 24 hours or so: We have reason to believe that President Putin does feel misled.

President Putin, if you look at the track record over the course of the past five or so weeks, clearly made several miscalculations. He miscalculated that his forces would be able to enter Ukraine without facing stiff resistance from the Ukrainian people. He miscalculated if he thought, as we believe he did, that his forces would be able to take major urban centers like Kyiv within a matter of 48 or 72 hours. He miscalculated if he thought that we were bluffing when we said we would impose massive and unprecedented consequences on the Russian economy and the financial system and doing that with our partners and allies. And he miscalculated if he thought his actions would not earn his country a pariah status. All of those things have come to fruition.

Now it is true that we believe President Putin feels misled at this very moment. I think there is good reason to believe he may feel misled even prior to the invasion. Why else would he undertake an invasion that was quite clear would precipitate a whole series of consequences that we laid out in advance? He clearly miscalculated if he thought his forces would be able to achieve a quick tactical victory.



So there is good reason to believe that President Putin hasn't been garnering the best information. This is not in some ways a situation that is unique to Russia. This is what Secretary Blinken likes to say is the Achilles' heel of autocracies around the world. Autocrats like President Putin tend to instill fear, intimidation in those around them. They may not, as a result, hear the unvarnished truth, the unvarnished assessments that their advisors may otherwise share.

**QUESTION:** Ned, let me just – one thing. The exchange that you referred to that you and I had was about one specific piece of your analysis, which in fact has not come to pass, and it may very well still, but that specific piece that we had that exchange about, that hasn't happened. But anyway, regardless of that, you talk about we have seen reports about people being arrested (inaudible). Public reports?

**MR PRICE:** These are public reports. These are the same reports that some you have asked me about before.

**QUESTION:** But there is some – presumably, there – but presumably, there is more to it than that for the President to come out and say we have indications that some people have been sidelined or detained or put under house arrest.

**MR PRICE:** Right now, we're speaking to public reports, public reports that many of you have asked me about before.

**QUESTION:** So there is no other underlying intel —

**MR PRICE:** I am just not speaking to intelligence in this case. If we're in a position to release information —

**QUESTION:** Okay. I have got – I have one more, super brief.

**MR PRICE:** Okay. And we do need to move around the room a little bit more now that we have a full house.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's fine.

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

**QUESTION:** Let me just ask you: One top advisor or allegedly a top advisor to President Putin who has not been detained or has not disappeared or not been put under house arrest is Foreign Minister Lavrov. He was in India – he was in China yesterday; he’s in India today doing very public things. And I’m wondering, as it relates to his visit to India and the Secretary’s call to the Indian foreign secretary just yesterday ahead of that visit, if you guys have any specific concerns about what the Indians might be doing as it relates to Russia.

**MR PRICE:** Different countries are going to have their own relationship with the Russian Federation. It’s a fact of history; it’s a fact of geography. That is not something that we are seeking to change. What we are seeking to do, whether it is in the context of India or other partners and allies around the world, is to do all we can to see to it that the international community is speaking in unison, speaking loudly against this unjustified, unprovoked, premeditated aggression, calling for an end to the violence, using the leverage that countries, including India, have to those ends.

There are countries that, by dint of their longstanding relationships with the Russian Federation, are going to have in some ways even more leverage than countries closer to us will. And that is all well and good. We understand that. What we are asking for, what we are calling for is that all countries use the leverage that they have to make sure that that message is coming across to Vladimir Putin loud and clear.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Ned, can you —

**MR PRICE:** I’ll come —

**QUESTION:** — (inaudible) on the intelligence? I’m sorry, very quickly, now you’re saying that it’s intelligence or is that just speculative reports? Because if it’s intelligence —

**MR PRICE:** Sorry, which element, Said?

**QUESTION:** On the fact that Putin is not getting the proper picture. If it’s human intelligence, you guys would be compromising whoever providing that human intelligence is. And if it’s

speculative, it remains, like, very loose.

**MR PRICE:** It is – I can tell you this, Said: It is not speculative. As you know, since this military buildup – what was initially a military buildup began last November, we have consistently declassified information. As Secretary Blinken first started speaking about this publicly last November – I believe in the first instance standing next to his counterpart from Ukraine, Foreign Minister Kuleba, on the floor of this building – since then, we have consistently declassified information.

Believe me when I tell you it would make my job much easier if I could tell you precisely how we know things, when we came into possession of these things, precisely the sourcing behind it. Obviously, we can't do that. Every time we declassify information, we do so with an eye to protecting sources and methods. So when you hear something from us that is predicated on intelligence information, it is going to be a very distilled-down version of what we have.

Andrea.

**QUESTION:** Let me ask you about the President's decision today on the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which is in response to what the White House is calling the Putin price hike. And you've just come back from a trip where there seemed to be very positive relations with the Emiratis and the Secretary. Yet in the last few days, OPEC, including the Saudis and the Emiratis, has refused to kick Russia out of OPEC Plus, being the larger group; has – have refused to increase production, have refused to condemn anything that Russia has done. So I'm wondering why we are not putting more pressure on the Saudis and the Emiratis, and why the cozy appearances between the Secretary and the Emirati prince in the last few days.

**MR PRICE:** So there's a lot there in that question. Let me start by saying that we do have an interest in a steady global supply of energy. There have been a number of conversations, not only on the part of Secretary Blinken but others in this building, including Amos Hochstein and counterparts throughout the world with – and counterparts throughout the U.S. Government around the world with countries and companies. We have spoken publicly of some of those conversations; we haven't spoken publicly of all of them, but we do, of course, maintain an interest in a steady global supply of energy. The President's announcement today was part and parcel of that. The release over the next six months of an average of a million barrels a day from our Strategic Petroleum Reserves is key to that.

But there are also longer-term steps that we are engaged in right now, both with ourselves and with our partners and allies around the world. And the most important element of that is building resilience and lessening our dependence, our collective dependence, on Russian energy over time. As you know, Andrea, it was just a couple weeks ago now that in the wake of the President's visit to Brussels there was created a U.S.-EU energy task force. It has both a short-term focus, and that is seeing to it that we maintain that steady supply of energy, including for our European allies, but then working, over time, to reduce dependence on Russian energy. It is much easier for us to do as a country than it is for many of our partners and allies around the world. That is because we are an energy producer; we have energy infrastructure in this country that is well-developed to the extent that many, if not most of our colleagues, around the world do not.

**QUESTION:** But that applies to Germany, as they transition, and that's a long-term issue. But the war is now.

**MR PRICE:** That's correct. And —

**QUESTION:** And what our Persian Gulf "friends," quote/unquote, and allies could do to pump more and to criticize Russia would be infinitely greater than what the President can even do from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

**MR PRICE:** Andrea, we are not, as you know, a member of OPEC or OPEC Plus, but we do engage regularly with members of OPEC Plus. That includes our partners in the Gulf. We have had conversations with them about our interest in a steady supply —

**QUESTION:** Are you disappointed with their response?

**MR PRICE:** Andrea, it is up for them to decide what OPEC does, what OPEC Plus does. The point of our conversations has been to express our interest in a steady global energy supply.

You know that the Secretary earlier this week did have an opportunity to meet with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed. It was – I think you have heard from us and from our Emirati partners – a really, truly excellent discussion. We do benefit from the relationship that we have with our Emirati partners in terms of the personal elements of it. We do benefit from the perspective that the crown prince brings to this. It was a conversation and a

discussion that was certainly substantive in terms of the issues, the threats we face and collectively we face emanating from Yemen, the threats we face from Iran, the whole panoply of issues that we're facing together.

But it was also a meaningful conversation because the two had an opportunity to discuss the broader state of the relationship both now and over time. They took part in a bilateral meeting with their respective teams, including the sons of the crown prince, one of whom was injured in Afghanistan, a testament again to the fact that our Emirati partners have been with us in different ways over the years. But then they were able to take a walk around the crown prince's compound in Morocco and spend additional time together. So you have heard from us coming out of that engagement, you've heard from the Emiratis coming out of that engagement that it was quite useful for our bilateral relationship, and we'll continue that work going forward with our Emirati partners on this and all of these fronts.

Humeyra.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I'm sure you've seen Putin is now demanding buyers of Russian gas to pay in rubles, which basically leaves Europe facing the prospect of losing more than a third of its gas supplies. I'm just wondering, first, does the United States believe he will follow through or is he bluffing? If he does follow through, is there anything Washington can do to help Europe?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I think fundamentally this is just another indication of the dire straits that Russia's economy is in. This is a sign of economic and financial desperation on the part of the Russian Federation. It obviously is going to be up to our European partners to determine what's in their best interests, what's in our collective interests. But this is a reflection of the fact that the sanctions, the export controls, the other economic measures, including the measures – the additional measures that we announced today, have had a significant, substantial, profound effect on the Russian economy, that President Putin purportedly is now demanding payment in rubles, something he had not had to do previously. And the delta here, of course, are the measures that the United States, together with our very allies and partners in Europe, have imposed.

And you continue to look across the Russian economy, across the financial system, and you see in many ways the devastation that this has wrought. You also get a sense of the draconian measures that the Russian Federation is resorting to in order to, in some ways, artificially prop

up its economy, prop up its financial system.

Russia specifically is closing off many avenues for people to get rid of their rubles. And again, this is another reason why they want to see these payments in rubles. Russian authorities have barred banks from selling dollars to customers. The brokerages are not allowed to let foreign clients sell securities.

**QUESTION:** But do you think – will they follow through, or is it a bluff in the financial —

**MR PRICE:** That's not – are you speaking to – about Russia or our European allies?

**QUESTION:** No —

**MR PRICE:** It's not for me to speak to either one, so I will let those respective —

**QUESTION:** You guys are talking to – you guys are sort of making comments about, like, Russian president, like he's isolated or not. So I'm pretty sure that you would have an assessment on whether it's a bluff or whether they're for real.

**MR PRICE:** It's a sign of desperation is what it is.

**QUESTION:** Is there anything that U.S. can do? And just can you also give us an update on Brittney Griner and Trevor Reed?

**MR PRICE:** So what we can do is precisely what we're doing, and that goes to the near-term challenge – the challenge of global energy supply – and to the long-term challenge. And this is precisely – these are precisely the two areas of focus for the U.S.-EU task force that was established in the wake of the President's visit to Europe just recently.

On the near term, we are working, including with some of the steps you heard to today, to see to it that there is a continued, steady, near-term supply of energy for this country and for our allies and partners around the world. But over the longer term, this is about an effort to build resilience, to lessen dependence on Russian energy, and to continue with that transition away from fossil fuels and to renewable energy sources.

Olivia

CHINA.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, Ned. On these reports of Americans being detained, singled out and detained in Ukraine and Russia, is the State Department seeking to verify, or has it verified those reports? How exactly are they being singled out? How many are thought to be detained, and where?

**MR PRICE:** Well, in recent weeks we have seen reports of U.S. citizens being singled out and detained by the Russian military in Ukraine and when evacuating by land through Russia – Russian-occupied territory or to Russia or Belarus. We have also heard President Putin denigrate American ideals of equality, of free speech, as you heard me say before; of the idea that human rights are universal, human rights are applicable to all.

And so, as always, we wanted to warn U.S. citizens of potential dangers when traveling overseas. We are warning our fellow Americans that Russian Government security forces in both Russia and in Ukraine may in fact be singling them out based on their nationality. That's why we updated our Travel Advisories, as we always do. We have an obligation to see to it that we keep Americans informed of the information we have at our disposal when it concerns their safety and security.

We also updated our Travel Advisory to include language about the singling out of U.S. citizens in Russia by Russian Government security officials, including for detention. When it comes to Ukraine, we updated that Travel Advisory to include continued reports of U.S. citizens being singled out and detained by the Russian military in Ukraine, and again, when evacuating Ukraine through Russia-occupied territory or, alternatively, to Russia or Belarus.

We do continue to encourage U.S. citizens in Russia and Ukraine to remain vigilant. They should take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness. And for some time now we have been urging Americans both in Ukraine and Russia to leave immediately. And, of course, this new information only adds to that.

**QUESTION:** But could you explain, are these verified reports? Are you seeking to verify, establish contact with some of these people?

**MR PRICE:** These are verified reports. These are verified reports.

**QUESTION:** So how are you helping these citizens who are presumably detained or otherwise (inaudible)?

**MR PRICE:** So every time an American citizen is detained overseas, it is a priority for our Bureau of Consular Affairs, for our consular office within each embassy we have around the world, to provide appropriate consular assistance.

You may recall that a couple of weeks ago, when Ambassador Sullivan in Moscow had an opportunity to meet with the Russian MFA in person, he took it upon himself to respond to their message with a message of his own. And his message was quite clear: We expect regular, consistent consular access to American citizens who are detained in Russia, including those who are detained in pretrial detention. This is not only an ask, it is also a responsibility. It is an obligation that Russia has, based on the Vienna Convention, based on our bilateral consular agreement regarding access to detainees.

As I have said before, we were subsequently afforded access to Brittney Griner. Without going into details, I will say there has been limited additional progress in terms of other detained Americans. But again, our ask and our request and our demand, consistent with Russia's own obligations, is that this not be one-off, that consular access to Americans who are detained in Russia, including those in pretrial detention, be regular and be consistent, as it is called for under these documents.

**QUESTION:** Are you saying more than the three we're aware of – Reed, Whelan, and Griner in Russia, and the one guy who was detained and then released from Ukraine – is it more than that, or are those —

**MR PRICE:** So on – in terms of Ukraine, there have been Americans who have been detained who have since been released. When it comes to Russia, we're not in a position —

**QUESTION:** Is it just the one?

**MR PRICE:** Is it – what do you mean is it just the one?

**QUESTION:** The one that's been made very public by his member of Congress.

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to speak to specifics. What I can say is that we are aware of



... I am not in a position to speak to specifics. What I can say is that we are aware of instances in which Americans have been detained but they have since been released in Ukraine.

**QUESTION:** Plural?

**MR PRICE:** Correct.

**QUESTION:** Okay. And in Russia.

**MR PRICE:** In terms of Russia, we've spoken of a few of these cases. We're just not going to put a number on it.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, the U.S. has granted a 120-day waiver to allow Iraq to pay electricity imports from Iran. Do you have any details on that, and is this the last time that you renew the waiver?

**MR PRICE:** I couldn't say whether this is the last time the waiver would be renewed or not. As you know, these waivers have a lifespan of 180 days. This is consistent with our commitment to Iraq, to —

**QUESTION:** Hundred eighty or 120?

**MR PRICE:** We'll get back to you on that. I was under the impression it was – we'll get back to you on that.

**QUESTION:** It didn't always – the times on them change, especially in the last administration.

**MR PRICE:** Well, some – every few months these have to be renewed, so I couldn't speak to whether this is the last time. But this is our – part of our commitment to Iraq.

Janne.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ned. I have two questions on Russia and China, North Korea. First question: The foreign minister of China and Russia met yesterday, and these two countries have announced that there is no upper limit on cooperation with each other. Do you see any

indications for China to provide economic and other military aid to Russia? If you answer this, I'm going to follow up for a second question.

**MR PRICE:** So on your first question, we've heard this expression before. I believe the terminology that was used in the 5,000-word joint communique between these two countries several weeks ago now was a friendship without limits. Now, that can be a friendship without limits if the PRC is willing to admit that everything it has stood for on the world stage in recent years and decades means absolutely nothing. If the concept of state sovereignty, if the concept that it has – the principles that it has consistently espoused – territorial integrity at the UN and in other fora – if those mean anything to the PRC, then I suspect this will be a friendship that may in fact have limits.

What we've said is that we are going to continue to engage our counterparts in the PRC to make very clear to them as part of our bilateral engagement – a bilateral engagement that is predicated and focused on establishing guardrails so that the competition that dominates our relationship doesn't veer into something worse, including conflict. We have in a number of engagements, when – including the National Security Advisor's engagement with Yang Jiechi, including with President Biden's engagement with President Xi just after that, made clear that there would be implications, profound implications, for any PRC decision to support Russia's war effort in Ukraine. We said we're going to be watching very closely. We are watching very closely to see exactly what the PRC may decide to do or may not decide to do in this case.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, and the second question: The adoption of a UN Security Council resolution on North Korea is often rejected due to opposition from China and Russia. This cannot deter North Korea's continued provocations. Don't you think there must be a change in the role of the UN Security Council resolutions?

**MR PRICE:** I am not prepared to speak to any position we have regarding the change in – a potential change in the UN Security Council, but what I can say is that in response to the DPRK's provocations in recent days and even longer, we have engaged, yes, at the UN, including in the Security Council, but we have engaged with our allies and partners around the world on a bilateral and multilateral basis. That starts with our treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific, two of whom – Japan and South Korea – we work with incredibly closely on the challenge that is presented by the DPRK's provocations, the challenge – the threat to international peace and security that is posed by its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs. Secretary Blinken

security that is posed by its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs. Secretary Blinken spoke to his Japanese and South Korean counterparts; Deputy Secretary Sherman has had similar engagements. Sung Kim, our special representative for the DPRK, has had engagements as well.

We have done this bilaterally, but as you know, Janne, we have also focused on our trilateral engagement, and Secretary Blinken at that level last had an opportunity to meet together in a trilateral format with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts just a couple of months ago now in Honolulu, Hawaii. It was an opportunity to send a very strong signal that we stand with our allies in the Indo-Pacific, that there will be consequences, continued consequences and accountability for the DPRK's provocations, whether that is in terms of our own national authorities, sanctions that we can put forward ourselves; whether it is in terms of additional UN Security Council sanctions; but also to make very clear that responsible countries around the world should feel an obligation, should be obligated to stand up to threats to international peace and security. That is especially true of permanent members of the UN Security Council. The UN Security Council is the world's preeminent venue for dealing with threats to international peace and security. So when we're confronted with one, we do expect and we do hope that fellow members of the UN Security Council respond appropriately.

**QUESTION:** I have a follow-up on North Korea.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) So I mean, like, North Korea keeps on raising tensions. I mean, they are preparing for a nuclear test or even submarine-launch missiles. So North Korea keeps raising tensions, but your responses have not really been changed, I mean, besides condemning North Korea publicly, coordinating with allies, imposing unilateral sanctions. What else can you do? I mean, as Janne mentioned, I mean, China and Russia are opposing new measures through the Security Council.

**MR PRICE:** So you're right that we have continued to place additional pressure on those responsible for the proliferation of ballistic missile technology, nuclear technology, nuclear advancements in the DPRK. We have announced additional sanctions against those proliferators even in recent days. Sanctions on the part of the United States, on the part of our partners and allies is one important agreement – ingredient. We have also taken necessary measures to ensure the security of our homeland and the security of our treaty allies as well.

measures to ensure the security of our homeland and the security of our treaty allies as well. Recently, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command ordered intensified what we call ISR – that is intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance – collection activities in the Yellow Sea, as well as enhanced readiness among our ballistic missile defense forces in the region.

And just after that, the Department of Treasury – as I alluded to before – announced new actions to help prevent the DPRK from accessing foreign items and technology that enable it to advance its prohibited weapons programs. So we can do all of these things. We can hold the DPRK accountable, we can take necessary measures when it comes to deterrence and defense, but we can also signal very clearly, as we continue to do, that we are open to dialogue, that we are open to diplomacy, that we harbor no hostile intent towards the DPRK – and in fact, to the contrary, we believe that the responsible thing to do would be to discuss the North Korea’s – the DPRK’s ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs in the diplomatic context.

Now, of course, the DPRK hasn’t responded affirmatively to that just yet. That certainly doesn’t mean that we are sitting on the sidelines twiddling our thumbs waiting for them to come to us. We are focusing on the relationship that we have with our treaty allies, focusing on the bilateral elements of that, focusing on the trilateral element of that when it comes to the relationship with Japan and South Korea, and working on those measures of accountability.

Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Yeah – yeah. So as we will see South Korea’s president-elect, Yoon Suk-yeol, taking office in May, will there be any changes in responding to North Korea? I mean, some expects there will be a resumption of U.S.-ROK large-scale military exercises and a stronger stance toward North Korea. So what would you say about that?

**MR PRICE:** I am not in a position to offer anything from here as to how the ROK’s position towards the DPRK may evolve with the new administration. One thing I am confident will not evolve, that is our ironclad alliance with ROK. We will continue to have an incredibly close alliance with our South Korean partners. It is an alliance, it is a partnership that transcends administrations, whether in this country, whether in the ROK, whether in Japan, for that matter, in the trilateral context.

Yes, Ben.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Ned. Just going back to Mr. Lavrov's visit to India, in response to Matt's question you said you'd like to see countries use any leverage they may have against Russia. But there's been some reporting that on this visit the two countries could discuss some kind of rupee-ruble payment system that would undermine sanctions. So I'm just wondering, have you seen these reports? And then if India doesn't use any leverage it might have, could that have any negative consequences on the Quad coordination among the Quad countries?

**MR PRICE:** What – I would refer to our Indian partners when it comes to any such rupee-ruble conversion that may have been discussed. When it comes to the Quad, one of the core principles of the Quad is the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific. That is specific in that context to the Indo-Pacific, but these are principles, these are ideals that transcend any geographic region. And part of the reason why these four countries came together is we have a global interest in a world order that is free, that is open, in which countries large and small play by the rules. So it is not in our interest, it is not in Japan's interest, it is not in Australia's interest, or it is not in India's interest to see flagrant examples of countries – whether in Europe, whether in the Indo-Pacific, whether anywhere in between – flagrant examples of countries flouting, violating that rules-based international order.

That is something that the Quad will continue to stand for. It is something that has featured in recent joint statements from the Quad as well, and something that I do not think will change.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Russian-occupied South Ossetia is holding a referendum to fully join Russia. What is the department's position on that?

**MR PRICE:** Well, when it comes to Georgia and South Ossetia, we condemn Russia's ongoing occupations of – occupation of parts of Georgia. We call on Russia to cease its occupation of the Georgian region of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and fulfill its obligations under the 2008 ceasefire with Georgia to withdraw its forces to pre-conflict positions. Neither de facto authorities nor the Russian Government have the right to make decisions about the future of South Ossetia, which is part of Georgia. Just as the United States did not recognize Russia's illegal seizure and attempted annexation of Crimea in 2014, and just as we did not recognize the Kremlin's cynical attempt to recognize independence of the so-called DNR and LNR in

eastern Ukraine just before it launched its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, we will not recognize the results of any effort by Russia or its proxies to divide sovereign Georgian territory. We reaffirm our steadfast commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** Can I just follow up, please, very quickly? When Secretary Nuland testified in Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Ben Cardin ask about Georgia and Moldova. He was interested how the U.S. administration is helping these countries to defend themselves in worst-case scenario if Russia will continue its aggression in this country. So at the same time, U.S. Helsinki Commission sends a letter to U.S. administration, requested Major Non-NATO Ally status for Georgia and Ukraine. So how vulnerable are these countries today in Russia's neighborhood, and if this Non-NATO Ally status can appear in the go-ahead agenda in the State Department or White House?

**MR PRICE:** Well, it's very clear from President Putin's aggression against Ukraine that he has a vision of Russia that goes well beyond its current borders. It is also very clear in our response to his premeditated, unjustified, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine that this is something that the international community will not countenance, will not stand for. We were in Moldova – Secretary Blinken was in Moldova, just a few short weeks ago. We made very clear of our support for the Moldovan Government, for the Moldovan people, for Moldova's territorial integrity, for its sovereignty, for its independence.

The very same thing goes for Georgia. The people of Georgia have relatively fresh memories of Russian aggression and very fresh memories of Russian provocations, including – and the provocations of Russian-backed forces, including those that we alluded to just a moment ago. We will continue to stand with these countries. We will continue to send a very clear signal to Moscow that aggression against its neighbors is unacceptable and will be met with a strong response.

Vivian.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Yes, Ned. The head of the French military intelligence was sacked after failing to predict Russia's war in Ukraine. Obviously, the U.S. correctly assessed that Russia was planning a large-scale attack, and France concluded it was probably unlikely. Obviously, the U.S. went out there early and had tried to rally support with its allies. But I was wondering if you could talk to the French shortfall and whether or not it created any situations that may be complicated a collective response, or if the Biden administration more broadly is concerned about cooperation with the French, just given the fact that we have seen some issues with its intelligence.

**MR PRICE:** I would say far from it. And in fact – and of course I can't speak to the details of intelligence cooperation, but I can say that our French ally has been stalwart in standing with Ukraine. You saw the French Government sign on to any number of statements, whether it was in the NATO context, whether it was in the G7 context, whether it was in the OSCE context, prior to the invasion, making clear that there would be these massive, unprecedented, profound costs that would befall the Russian Federation if President Putin went forward with its aggression.

So I, of course, can't speak to any intelligence analysis or assessments that the French may have produced. But what I can speak to is that very early commitment and enthusiasm we saw from our allies in Paris to be with the international response. And of course, you have seen President Macron really in overdrive in terms of his efforts to facilitate a diplomatic offramp.

Now, of course, whether it's the French effort, the German effort, the Israeli effort, the Turkish effort, other diplomatic efforts, those have not borne fruit not because – not for lack of trying, not because our partners and allies have failed to use their good offices in every way they can. That is quite the opposite, in fact. We have seen our French allies engaged in a very constructive way. They've been engaged with us. They have most importantly been engaged with Ukraine, just as President Macron and others in the French Government have engaged with the Russian Federation in an effort to foster true diplomacy.

**QUESTION:** I have one other unrelated question. Axios is reporting that Secretary Blinken asked Israeli Prime Minister Bennett for his alternative to the nuclear deal and how he would stop Iran from reaching a nuclear weapon capability. Can you talk to that report and also give us a status update as far as any efforts to get this over the finish line at least so we could be talking again officially?

**MR PRICE:** Sure. So a few points there. It, of course, is no secret that we have tactical differences with our Israeli partners. Families – even the closest family members sometimes have disagreements and arguments. The ability for close family members to do that is I think a testament to the closeness, and that’s how we look at that dynamic here in this case.

What we don’t have is any strategic disagreement. At a strategic level, we are – we and our Israeli partners are committed, we are determined to see to it that Iran must never be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon. And so when Secretary Blinken, when we were in Israel earlier this week I suppose it was – it doesn’t feel like that, but earlier this week, we did have an opportunity to speak with Prime Minister Bennett, with Foreign Minister Lapid, with Defense Minister Benny Gantz, President Herzog, and others regarding where we are in terms of the negotiations in Vienna, but more broadly the effort to see to it if we can achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. This is part and parcel of our regular efforts to keep our allies and partners around the world, as well as Congress here at home, informed of those efforts.

I’m not going to detail the contents of that discussion beyond the readouts and the joint press avail that you saw for yourself in Israel. What I can say, and what I can do, is make a broader point: This is no longer a thought experiment – what might happen if the nuclear shackles of the JCPOA were lifted and we tried something different – we tried something different in the form of maximum pressure. This has been in some ways a real-world experiment since 2018. In 2018 and in the months before, we were told a number of things about what abandoning the JCPOA – which was working, according to our Intelligence Community, according to this building, according to international weapons inspectors – but we were told a number of things that we were assured would happen if the United States abandoned the JCPOA and pursued another course.

We have been pursuing that other course since then. And everything that we were promised in that period – a so-called better deal with Iran, an Iran whose proxies were cowed, an Iran whose support for terrorism would be diminished, an Iran whose ballistic missile program would be checked – all of those things turned out not only to be not true, but in almost every case the exact opposite has come to fruition. Iran’s nuclear program, most concerningly, has galloped ahead. A breakout time that was measured when the JCPOA first went into effect at 12 months is now down to a time period that can be measured in weeks. Rather than —



**QUESTION:** Twelve months can be measured in weeks too, Ned.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you, Matt. Rather than Iran's proxies be subdued, we have actually seen them emboldened. And you can quantify that in a number of ways, but here's one important way: From 2012 to 2018, there were no significant attacks, there were no attacks against U.S. service members, diplomatic facilities in Iraq. That changed in 2018. And between 2019 and 2020, the number of attacks from Iran-backed groups went up 400 percent. This was in the aftermath of the decision to abandon the JCPOA. It was in the aftermath of the decision to apply the FTO designation to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. It was in the aftermath of the killing of Soleimani, the IRGC chief.

So clearly the effort to put Iran's nuclear program back in a box, the effort to subdue Iran's proxies, has not worked under the strategy that we inherited. We want to see to it that we have a strategy that does work, that is effective. When it comes to Iran's nuclear program, we continue to believe that a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA is that appropriate recourse. And we know that, again, because we have done this before. This is not conjecture on our part. From January of 2016 until May of 2018, it was in full effect. Iran was complying with it, and Iran's nuclear program was verifiably and permanently constrained. And what that means is that Iran was permanently barred from obtaining a nuclear weapon. That is the reality, the reality we've experienced before, that we seek to get back to.

Now, in terms of where we are, we've spoken before of the progress that had been achieved in recent weeks. There are a small number of outstanding issues. The onus is now on Tehran to make those decisions. We continue to believe that, at least for the time being, a mutual return to compliance would bring with it non-proliferation benefits that would be in our interest, in the interests of our allies and partners – our allies in Europe, the E3 that's part of the P5+1, our allies and partners around the world who are not part of the P5+1.

Said.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. First, it's great to see you holding your first non-restricted briefing, and thank you for all the past briefings. I also want to acknowledge our colleagues Shaun, Francesco, and Barbara, who really kept this there and participating and so on. So I want the record to show that.

**MR PRICE:** Absolutely.

**QUESTION:** And second, I want to ask you on the Palestinian-Israeli issue – Ned, I mean, since you guys were there and since you left, violence has spiked. In Israel, in the West Bank, and so on – Hamas is threatening now to escalate after that – after yesterday's attack on Jenin and so on. And then there was also by right-wing settlers that have stormed al-Aqsa Mosque and so on.

My question to you – I mean, as we come close to Ramadan in two days and so on, and we witnessed what we happened last year – what happened last year, did the Secretary of State, did Secretary Blinken, manage to get any kind of assurances that the Israelis will not escalate, will not quell whatever rituals the Palestinians may be conducting during this month to sort of lower the tensions down?

**MR PRICE:** So —

**QUESTION:** Allow them to do their thing.

**MR PRICE:** So let me start with a word on the most recent terrorist attacks in Bnei Brak. You know that the President had an opportunity to speak to the prime minister yesterday. He offered all appropriate assistance to our Israeli allies, to our Israeli partners, as they confront threats to their citizen – their citizens.

Secretary Blinken was in Israel during the course of the previous terrorist attack that took the lives of two police border guards. Shortly after we left, the Secretary issued a statement strongly condemning the subsequent horrific attack that took place in Bnei Brak. It was the third terrorist attack in Israel in a week. And, of course, we send our condolences to the families of the victims of these tragic attacks.

People across the region, stakeholders across the region, including Palestinian Authority President Abbas, King Abdullah, have condemned these attacks. We urge those seeking to escalate tensions to cease their actions immediately. Retaliatory violence is also entirely unacceptable. Every effort should be taken to protect innocent life, whether that is Palestinian life, whether that is Israeli life, all lives.

We appreciate all efforts by Israel and Palestinian Authority to refrain from unilateral actions that exacerbate tensions. As you've heard us say before, as the Secretary had multiple opportunities to say in the region, Israelis and Palestinians alike equally deserve to live in peace and security with dignity.

And this is especially important to your question, Said. As we enter April, in which we're going to see this confluence of holidays for the three major religions, in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians will be celebrating Ramadan, Passover, and Easter, respectively, the confluence of these holidays over the course of the coming weeks was a topic of conversation in Jerusalem, it was a topic of conversation in Ramallah, it was a topic of conversation in the Negev with Foreign Minister Lapid and the other counterparts who have signed on to the Abraham Accords, or normalization agreements. It will continue to be a focus of ours to see to it that tensions are de-escalated, that provocative steps do not move forward. And we will do everything we can to see to it that this holy month for these three religions is a peaceful one.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Thank you, Ned. I'm from China, CCTV. So my question have two parts. We know this week Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi just chaired a third meeting of foreign ministers of Afghanistan neighboring countries. My first part is that – what's your take on this kind of mechanism will promote the solution of Afghanistan issue?

And the second part is during this meeting there is an extended meeting of – on Afghanistan participated by special envoys from China, U.S., and Russia. So how do you weigh the role of these three countries can play in dealing with this type of regional issues? Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Well, to your question, Special Representative for Afghanistan, our special representative, Tom West, did attend the so-called extended "Troika" meeting in Tunxi, China on March 31st, today. The extended "Troika" – that's the – includes the United States, China, and Russia, with Pakistan, in this case, as the additional participant – these are countries that have a good degree of leverage with the Taliban, and the extended "Troika" has, in the past, been a constructive forum, and it is critical that the international community remain united in its approach to Afghanistan. It is especially critical with countries that have a good deal of leverage with the Taliban. The United States would be included in that, Russia would be included in that the People's Republic of China would be included in that and Pakistan would

included in that, the People's Republic of China would be included in that, and Pakistan would be included in that. It is incumbent on all of these countries to use that leverage to push the Taliban in the right direction.

When it comes to this issue, our interests are aligned with the members of the "Troika," and that includes when it comes to the imperative of seeing girls return to secondary schools and encouraging inclusive governance. We want to see to it that those are messages the Taliban received not only from us, not only from our European partners, with whom we're coordinating closely on Afghanistan and engagement with the Taliban, but also from a broader collection of countries, and certainly those countries that do have a good deal of leverage.

Yes. Let me move around. I don't think you've had a question. Yes.

**QUESTION:** (Inaudible.) It has been reported that North Korea seems to be preparing for the – another nuclear test, underground nuclear test. So what is your assessment on it?

**MR PRICE:** What is our assessment of —

**QUESTION:** Of the reports that the North Korea seems to be preparing for another nuclear test.

**MR PRICE:** Well, of course, I'm not in a position to speak to intelligence one way or another. But what I can say is that the DPRK has engaged in a number of provocations in recent weeks. But this is a government that has engaged in provocations for a number of years now, and just prior to what is assessed to have been the launch of a probable ICBM, we released information indicating that such a launch might be in the offing. So we are monitoring the situation very closely. We have made clear that continued provocations will incur additional responses from the international community. We will continue to engage with our Japanese counterparts, our South Korean counterparts at the UN, and with our partners and allies around the globe.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, I have a question from my colleague from the VOA Urdu service. Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan said in his speech that there was a threat letter that

purportedly shows evidence of a foreign conspiracy to oust his government. In what appeared a slip of tongue, he named the U.S. as the country behind the threat. So what is your reaction? Do you have any comment on this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we are closely following developments in Pakistan, and we respect, we support Pakistan's constitutional process and the rule of law. But when it comes to those allegations, there is no truth to them.

Yes, Humeyra.

**QUESTION:** Just to follow up on Trevor Reed, Ned, his parents were at the White House yesterday, if I'm not mistaken. And the last time U.S. ambassador saw him was in November. So after President's meeting, I'm just wondering if you guys have any specific plans to make another push to get consular access for him, maybe in the form of a plea through a more higher, like, senior level?

**MR PRICE:** That push has been ongoing since the last time we reported consular access, Humeyra. Our goal, as I said before, has been to see consistent, routine consular access to Americans who are detained in Russia, whether that's in pretrial detention, or to Americans who have been sentenced, including Americans who are unjustly detained in Russia, and Trevor Reed would fall into that category. So we will continue to push at all levels to do everything we can to see to it that Trevor Reed in this case is reunited with his family just as soon as we can.

**QUESTION:** Ned —

**QUESTION:** I need one —

**MR PRICE:** I'll take one —

**QUESTION:** Anything on Brittney Griner?

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** I have a follow-up question about Georgia. I'm sorry, Ned. Sorry for —

**MR PRICE:** Okay. Let me take this, and then I'll come to you, and then I must leave.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** In terms of Brittney Griner, as I – as you – as we noted last week, I believe it was, we were afforded consular access to her; the head of our consular section in Moscow was afforded a visit. It was an opportunity for him to do a welfare check. We came away with the impression that she is doing as well as could possibly be expected under these very difficult circumstances. Again, our goal is to see to it that consular access is not a one-off affair and to see to it that we have regular access to Americans, including Brittney Griner, including all Americans who are held in pretrial detention.

Georgia.

**QUESTION:** So one follow-up about Georgia. We have not heard anything so far from the Georgian Government about a strategy to confront the new security reality against the Georgia since the war broke out. So I wanted to ask you if the U.S. is analyzing parallel scenarios by Russia towards different regional countries and mainly Georgia, and what the United States is preparing for that.

And the second question is about Britain and allies who agreed to send more lethal military aid to Ukraine, and I wanted to ask you where do you stand on that.

And a third one, very quickly, about the Human Rights Report. It's been 34 days already overdue. If – do you have any date when you announce the – for the report day to be publicly available? Thank you very much.

**MR PRICE:** So on your last question, I would say stay tuned. It will be released I would expect next month. Next month starts tomorrow, so relatively soon.

On your other questions, we are looking at all potential contingencies, knowing that, as I said before, President Putin is – he has demonstrated that he is not someone who respects borders; he is not someone who respects the principles of territorial integrity, of sovereignty. And so we are engaged in all relevant and appropriate contingency planning, but it's not something we would speak to publicly.

When it comes to support for Ukraine, we have – we applaud all of those countries who are supporting our Ukrainian partners. Every member of NATO is providing support to our Ukrainian partners, whether that is humanitarian assistance, whether that’s economic assistance, whether that is security assistance. More than 30 countries around the world are providing security assistance to our Ukrainian partners. More than a dozen countries have sought authorization, which we have very promptly granted from the Department of State, to provide U.S.-origin equipment to our Ukrainian partners.

For our part, we have provided \$2 billion to our Ukrainian partners over the course of this administration. We have spoken to about a billion dollars in recent weeks, and that support, that assistance, will continue. It will continue so that our Ukrainian partners can continue to be effective on the battlefield. But the other element of this is that as we support our Ukrainian partners with security assistance, with economic assistance, including the \$500 million in direct budgetary assistance that was announced yesterday, as we support them in every way, what we are also doing is strengthening Ukraine’s hand at the negotiating table. So we’re strengthening Ukraine’s hand. We are continuing to enact these consequential measures against the Russian economy, against the Russian financial system. So it is our goal to do everything we can to support Ukraine, to bring the parties to the negotiating table in a context that can lead to genuine diplomacy and genuine progress.

Thank you all very much.

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

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