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# Department Press Briefing with Spokesperson Ned Price – December 9, 2021

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**MR PRICE:** Good afternoon. I feel like we have an empty room today. Hopefully a few more will trickle in. We have a couple things at the top, and then I look forward to taking your questions.

First, today on International Anticorruption Day and the first day of the President's Summit for Democracy, the Department of State reaffirms its commitment to prevent and to combat corruption globally. To bolster this commitment, the department is establishing a coordinator on global anticorruption. This coordinator will integrate and elevate the fight against corruption across all aspects of U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance, working closely with interagency and international partners. The coordinator will lead State Department implementation of the U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption, as announced this week by the White House, as we bring all resources to what President Biden has called, quote, "the challenge of our time."

Additionally, the Secretary is publicly designating 11 current and former officials for their involvement in significant corruption under Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriation Act. This action complements this week's announcement of financial sanctions on corrupt actors and entities by the Department of the Treasury. The United States renews our call for countries to address the scourge of corruption worldwide and to effectively implement their international anticorruption commitments, particularly those under the UN Convention against Corruption, and provide support for civil society and journalists, and measures to promote open and accountable governance.

Next, tomorrow is Human Rights Day, which commemorates the world coming together at the United Nations General Assembly to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflects the universal commitments countries have made and are expected to fulfill to protect human rights. While rights-respecting leaders consider this a solemn commitment, others have willfully ignored or diminished the human rights of their own people or of other peoples.

With this in mind, the United States places human rights at the center of our foreign policy. We will rejoin the UN Human Rights Council on January 1st, 2022, as a full member, to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced or never heard, and to promote respect for human rights globally.

With that, I would be happy to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Well, lucky you. I have nothing.

**MR PRICE:** Okay. All right. Daphne.

**QUESTION:** All right. If I could start with Iran.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Reuters has reported that the U.S. and Israeli defense chiefs are expected today to discuss possible military exercises that would prepare for a worst-case scenario to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, should diplomacy fail. Is the U.S. discussing with Gantz the need to get ready for a plan B if diplomacy fails, and does that include military options?

**MR PRICE:** Well, as you know, Israeli Defense Minister Gantz is in Washington. He will have an opportunity to meet with Secretary Blinken today. It's going to take place later this afternoon, and I expect we will have a readout of that meeting after the fact. I know that the Secretary is looking forward to seeing Minister Gantz again, and of course the minister will have an opportunity to have additional discussions with his counterparts at the Department of Defense.

When it comes to our approach to Iran, again, at the present moment we remain focused on diplomacy and focused on diplomacy to see if it can deliver a mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. We continue to believe that a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA is possible, and we believe, again, that diplomacy, in coordination with our closest allies – our European allies that are part of the P5+1 but also the partners that are part of that configuration – provides the best, the most durable means for addressing our collective concerns with Iran's nuclear program, and for addressing what it is that all of us seek, and that is to ensure that Iran can never acquire a nuclear weapon.

Now, Iran's escalations of its nuclear activities, the intransigence that it has shown, including most recently in Vienna last week, it will put to the test whether diplomacy can be able to achieve that mutual return to compliance. You've heard from the Secretary, you've heard from President Biden, that regardless of how we get there, the United States is committed to the fact that Iran must never be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon. That is a commitment that we subscribe to and we always will subscribe to.

So again, I wouldn't want to speak to contingency planning. I wouldn't want to speak to what we might be contemplating if diplomacy – if the path to diplomacy towards a mutual return to compliance isn't viable in the near term. But we are discussing those alternatives. We are discussing those options with our close partners, with our close allies, and that includes with the Israelis. We have already had good discussions with the Israelis about the path forward and how we can work together to ensure that Iran is never able to acquire a nuclear weapon.

**QUESTION:** Well, have your partners or allies today heard anything from Iran that suggested greater flexibility?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, the talks just resumed today, and many of the heads of delegations as I understand it are not there. Rob Malley, for example, and his team won't be traveling there until over the weekend. So it will probably be another several days until we have a sense of where the Iranians are in the context of the restart of this round and, importantly, the flexibility that they may or may not be willing to show.

**QUESTION:** Ned?

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** News reports said that Israel rejected a U.S. request to not defy it in advance of any strike on Iran. Can you confirm these reports?

**MR PRICE:** I'm not in a position to confirm any such report. What I can confirm is that our relationship and our security relationship, our intelligence relationship with our Israeli partners is, in many ways, unsurpassed. We have very thorough information-sharing. We benefit from the information that we each have within our own possession. We share that on a routine basis. We cooperate together on a number of fronts and including on the challenge that Iran poses to Israel and to the region as well.

**QUESTION:** And one more on Iran. The Iranian foreign minister – or deputy foreign minister for economic affairs has said that Iran has got \$3.5 billion from unfrozen money and they expect to have more money unfreeze in the future. Do you have any comment on that?

**MR PRICE:** I want to be very clear. The United States has not released any money to Iran. Any

such report to the contrary is incorrect. We also understand that our partners have not transferred frozen funds to Iran. And of course, the United States has not authorized or approved any such frozen transfers to Iran. All of our current sanctions remain in effect. They will remain in effect until and unless we're able to reach a diplomatic agreement.

**QUESTION:** Wait, wait. So are you saying that the money the South Koreans sent them that was held in escrow is – are you making a distinction between money that's been held in escrow and money that's frozen, like in accounts that —

**MR PRICE:** We have not —

**QUESTION:** So you say – are you saying that no – that Iran has not received any money from oil sales or from whatever that would – over the course of the last 11 months that it would not otherwise have gotten?

**MR PRICE:** We have not transferred any money to Iran.

**QUESTION:** No, no. Not you.

**MR PRICE:** We also understand that our partners have not transferred these frozen funds to Iran.

**QUESTION:** Okay.

**MR PRICE:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Thank you, Ned. Some reports also on Iran – some reports are saying that the Iranian regime is using the negotiations as a tactic, as a political cover to gain more time in moving ahead with enriching uranium and then getting closer to have a nuclear weapon. Have you a comment on that? Especially some describe this as a policy of appeasement from U.S. towards Iran.

**MR PRICE:** It is a concern that we share. It's a concern that we have as well as a concern that our P5+1 partners have. It is precisely why we have been very clear that Iran will not be able to play for time, that Iran's nuclear escalations and its provocations won't give Iran any additional leverage in these negotiations. The only thing these provocations and these escalations will do is

to bring us closer to the point of a potential crisis. And we are not looking for a crisis. We certainly hope the Iranians aren't looking for a crisis. We are looking, at the moment, to diplomacy and the possibility that it still has – we believe – to deliver a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, which, as we've said, is the best approach to ensure on a durable, permanent basis, verifiable basis, that Iran is not able to acquire a nuclear weapon. So if that's Iran's strategy, it's a strategy that will fail.

**QUESTION:** Just a follow-up. What would you say for critics that they are saying that this is kind of a policy of appeasement, that that's how it looks, a policy of sometimes they would say weakness from the Biden administration towards Iran?

**MR PRICE:** I can assure you that if the Iranian regime suspects the United States of weakness, they will be sorely surprised.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Ned, well, when is enough enough? I mean, when do you say that we have to stop this? And what does it look like after that? At the point at which you say "no more," what happens next?

**MR PRICE:** There have been a number of questions about the calendar, about the timeframe, and we've made this point before. One, the runway is very short. There is not much time left. We've also been —

**QUESTION:** Is this the last round?

**MR PRICE:** We've also been assiduous in not putting a fixed duration on that timeframe, chiefly because – well, a couple reasons. One, we don't want to convey to the Iranians just how far they can go in their provocations, but also importantly, it's not so much a temporal clock. It's not the traditional clock, the traditional calendar. As I said yesterday, it's more of a —

**QUESTION:** It's not a sundial.

**MR PRICE:** It's more of a technological clock rather than a sundial, as Matt was just saying. It's a technological clock, and that technological clock is based on the assessments of the provocations and the advancements that Iran is making in its own nuclear program and what that renders,

what that gives unto Iran in terms of its nuclear program.

We are still committed to the idea that diplomacy has the potential to bring us back into compliance, to bring Iran back into compliance with the nuclear deal. We are still committed to seeing if that's the case, because according to our assessments and the assessments of our closest partners, a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA is still the most advantageous pathway to seeing to it that Iran is not able to develop a nuclear weapon.

Now, that will change, and it could change in the very near future if Iran's nuclear provocations continue, because as Iran spins more centrifuges, as it accumulates more nuclear material, as it enriches at higher degrees, not only does it gain that knowledge, but it gains those advantages in terms of its nuclear program. And with every step, it lowers the so-called breakout time, the time it would take for Iran to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon if it makes the strategic decision to weaponize.

So we are watching this very closely, and when it is apparent to us – when, based on our assessments, including the assessments that are predicated on information both public and non-public – when it is apparent to us that a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA is no longer the most advantageous path for us, for the United States, that is no longer a path we'll pursue.

**QUESTION:** What is the other path?

**MR PRICE:** Again, we don't want to speak to contingencies. I will say that our preference will always be for diplomacy, not because diplomacy is always going to be the only path available, but because diplomacy will always be the most durable approach to see to it and lasting approach to see to it that Iran is not able to acquire a nuclear weapon.

**QUESTION:** Last one, sorry: Have you conveyed to Iran what it looks like if they don't comply, if they don't come back?

**MR PRICE:** We —

**QUESTION:** Specifically to Iran what —

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, these discussions in the context of Vienna are indirect. We don't have direct discussions with the Iranian regime in that context. Again, it would be our preference to have those discussions with Iran, in part so that these potentially could be more effective and

they could be point to point, but also, to your point, so that we could look the Iranians in the eye and make very clear where we stand, make very clear that the United States will not permit the Iranian regime to acquire a nuclear weapon.

We have been – short of that, we have been very clear in terms of the messages we’re able to pass through our European allies and our other partners, but also in our public statements. I don’t the Iranians are under any illusions about what they will find in the United States.

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

We’ll move around a little bit. Nick.

**QUESTION:** On Iran.

**MR PRICE:** Oh, I’m sorry. Joel, I sort of signaled to you earlier. Sorry. Yeah.

**QUESTION:** Staying on Iran, two questions. One was just apropos of the – one of the Iranian officials in Vienna said that Iran underlined that it seriously continues the talks based on its previous position. So I wonder if we’re going to be having talks this weekend or if they’re going to continue as they’ve started today. Does that mean that the U.S. has modified its negotiating position at all in light of what the Iranians outlined last week?

**MR PRICE:** We are and we have been coming out of last week on precisely the same page with the French, the Germans, the Brits, the EU, but also Rob Malley has had an opportunity to speak to his Russian and Chinese counterparts. We are – there is broad consensus with them as well that the Iranians need to come to the table prepared to negotiate in good faith, prepared to build on the progress that was achieved in the first six rounds, and prepared to change their approach from what we saw last week in Vienna. If the Iranians return or next week if they demonstrate that they have not changed that approach, I don’t suspect this phase of the seventh round will be all that much longer than the last phase of the seventh round.

Nick.

**QUESTION:** Can I just get you to comment a little bit on this – there’s a delegation going to UAE next week to talk about ways in which the UAE – UAE entities are violating the sanctions. Obviously, you have oil sales to China from Iran have continued to grow, and Iran is now



exporting about a million barrels a day. Does this administration feel that maybe it made a mistake by taking its foot off the gas on the sort of maximalist sanctions enforcement? And are you now reversing course on that now that it looks like Iran is not cooperating in the talks?

**MR PRICE:** Well, before I get to the details of your question, I want to make one broad point. We have not taken our foot off the gas. We have not and never looked the other way in terms of sanction enforcement. Our sanctions remain in effect. We have continued to enforce them. That has not changed and it will not change unless we are able to reach a diplomatic agreement on a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

This gets back to the point I was making previously. We have no choice in the context of Iran's continued intransigence to continue with measures to put pressure on the Iranian regime. To that end, a senior Treasury official, as you alluded to, will lead a Treasury and State delegation to the UAE to discuss sanctions compliance. The delegation will be led by OFAC Director Andrea Gacki, and it will focus on engagements with the private sector and key UAE Government officials to discuss the private sector companies and financial institutions that facilitate noncompliant Iranian commerce that runs through or in some way touches the UAE. We'll also have delegations to other partner countries in the coming weeks.

We have been very clear that as long as Iran is not in compliance, as long as we have not achieved a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, we will maintain the pressure on Iran. And there are a number of pressure points. Sanctions are one of them. Sanctions enforcement is an iterative exercise. It always takes work to see to it that the international community, our partners around the world, that private sector entities, financial institutions are doing everything they can to comply and to enforce U.S. and international sanctions to the fullest degree.

So this is an iterative process, this is just the latest turn in that process, and it's imperative that we keep this up because as new sanctions are applied, as bad actors attempt to circumvent sanctions, we always have to be adapting and tightening our sanctions enforcement to be one step ahead of those who would seek to circumvent that.

**QUESTION:** Right, but I mean, it is – you're sending a delegation over there to discuss sanctions compliance. That's not enforcing the sanctions. I mean, you obviously have entities in the UAE, China, ships that are tracked via satellite technology that are doing ship-to-ship transfers. The sanctions are not being enforced on those entities. So is this trip to discuss compliance – is that

what you're talking about when you talk about enforcement? Because why not just enforce the sanctions and designate those UAE entities that are violating the sanctions?

**MR PRICE:** So we're talking about two things. We are talking about compliance and we are talking about in compliance with existing sanctions on the books, but there are additional designations and authorities that we may be in a position to make consistent with the law. And if we feel that it's appropriate to do so, we won't hesitate to do so. We also want to make sure that with the existing sanctions on the books that they are being applied to the fullest extent, that Iran is not able to benefit from any less than full enforcement of these existing sanctions.

We're going to the UAE to discuss private sector entities and financial institutions, to ensure that the United States and our Emirati counterparts, that we have a full understanding of what these entities are doing, what they may be doing in an effort to evade sanctions compliance. To be very clear, we're talking about private companies here and not the work of the Emirati Government.

**QUESTION:** Well, the last one from me then, so, I mean, you're saying on the one hand that you – that the administration continues to enforce all these sanctions to the fullest degree, yet at the same time this delegation is going to the UAE right after you told us essentially that Iran is not showing seriousness in the conversations in Vienna. So are you saying there's no link between the fact that Iran appears to be sort of blowing off or not negotiating in good faith and the fact that this delegation is going now?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'll say a couple things. Number one, we've had previous delegations, sanctions enforcement to countries around the world. Sanctions enforcement and discussions over sanctions compliance is not something that is starting with this delegation – far from it. This has been a task that this administration has been hard at work at since our earliest days.

But what is also true is that unless and until Iran changes its approach, we will look to ensure that the international community, including private-sector entities, companies, international financial institutions, and others, are implementing the sanctions that are on the books fully. And of course, we will look to see if other additional designations and authorities are appropriate given what we're seeing – or not seeing – from the Iranian regime.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. The problem with that is one of the first things that this administration did was to lift the previous administration's ETO designation on the Houthis, an Iranian proxy, right? Then

to lift the previous administration's FTO designation on the Houthis, an Iranian proxy, right? Then

you went to the UN and you rescinded the finding that Iran was in significant nonperformance with the JCPOA that the previous administration had made. You removed sanctions that had been imposed on Iranian diplomats at the UN, travel restrictions on them. And you have also since then lifted a variety of different sanctions, which you have agreed that you have, and you've called it sanctions hygiene, I believe, is the – or good sanctions hygiene to lift these things.

So when you get a question like what Nick just asked you about whether or not sanctions have been enforced, and in fact, there has been an easing of sanctions.

**MR PRICE:** Matt, I can take each of those in turn. Rather than do that and waste the time because I know we've discussed each of those at some length exhaustively in recent months, I will make the point that Iran is under no less pressure under this administration than it was previously. We have not taken our foot —

**QUESTION:** Well, they certainly don't seem to think so.

**MR PRICE:** Well, I will leave it to the Iranians to characterize their perceptions of things. But I can tell you if you look at the authorities that we have wielded against Iran, the tools we have wielded against Iran, and adding an additional tool that previously was not in the mix, and that's diplomacy —

**QUESTION:** Okay. Well, how – so how is it that the Iranian oil exports have gone up?

**MR PRICE:** Oh, I thought you were going to —

**QUESTION:** Yeah. No, I mean, how is it?

**MR PRICE:** Matt, these – first of all —

**QUESTION:** I mean, you accept that they have. I mean, the IAEA – I mean, not the IAEA. The I —

**MR PRICE:** International Energy —

**QUESTION:** EA – yeah.

**MR PRICE:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** IEA.

**MR PRICE:** Yeah.

**QUESTION:** IEA, yeah. You accept that their figures are correct, that the amount of oil that they are exporting has gone up, and the amount of money that they're taking in or that's going into various accounts has gone up, right?

**MR PRICE:** There's – this is probably too complex to go into the full details from the podium. It involves world energy consumption. Obviously, coronavirus has something to say about that. But what I will say —

**QUESTION:** Coronavirus?

**MR PRICE:** In a – yes, of course.

**QUESTION:** It's actually pretty – I think it's pretty simple. It's like I give you a dollar and you give me this amount of oil or – or petroleum, right?

**MR PRICE:** My point —

**QUESTION:** It's not that complex.

**MR PRICE:** Energy consumption fluctuates based on international commerce and activity —

**QUESTION:** Yes, but the amount of money that Iran —

**MR PRICE:** — that pandemic has something to say about.

**QUESTION:** The amount of oil that Iran has been able to export and the amount of money that they have been able to take in from those exports has gone up over the course of the last 11 months, not down.

**MR PRICE:** And we are focused, as I was just saying, on ensuring that the sanctions that have not been lifted against Iran – we have not lifted sanction that are consistent with the JCPOA —

**QUESTION:** Okay. Well, then, like as Nick said, it's a question of enforcement.

**MR PRICE:** And that is what we've set out to do.

**QUESTION:** All right.

**MR PRICE:** That is why we're having these conversations with —

**QUESTION:** Okay. Well, people have the — there's a — misunderstanding out there that you guys are not so concerned about enforcing the sanctions that —

**MR PRICE:** Again, I can't speak to the perception of others. I can speak to our policy. It is our policy that our sanctions remain in effect. They will remain in effect until and unless we're able to achieve a diplomatic agreement where they can be lifted consistent with the parameters of the JCPOA. Again, Matt, this is why we are focused on the enforcement of sanctions that are on the books and why we will continue to look to use other authorities as appropriate if we need to apply and we're in a position to apply additional pressure to the regime if it doesn't change its approach.

**QUESTION:** Ned, to what extent do you think are the sanctions enforced on Iran? And what's your reaction to Anwar Gargash of UAE, who said additional Iran sanctions are not a solution in nuclear talks?

**MR PRICE:** Well, look, we want diplomacy to succeed. We want diplomacy to be what leads us back to a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA. I'm not in a position to quantify sanctions enforcement. There are entities around the world we know that have been seeking to skirt the sanctions, the U.S. and international sanctions that are in place. That's why we're so focused on working with our partners around the world to cut down on that, to identify those entities and those institutions and to remind them that they are putting themselves at great — in great jeopardy if they continue such activity, facing the laws of the United States and potentially other jurisdictions as well.

In terms of sanctions, look, sanctions in the case of Iran, as in all cases, they are a means to an end. And the end in this case right now is a potential mutual return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. That's what we would like to see happen. If we determine — again, based on that technological clock — that a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA isn't in our interest. if there is a better path forward — better consistent with our interests and the interests

of our allies and partners – we will pursue that. But we are not there at this point just yet.  
Yes, Jenny.

**QUESTION:** You mentioned there'd be other delegations. Are any of them traveling to China? And is the U.S. prepared to ratchet up pressure on China over its purchase of Iranian oil?

**MR PRICE:** We have had a number of discussions with the PRC, including at the seniormost levels, regarding their compliance with U.S. and international sanctions on the Iranian energy sector. They understand our position on this. We're going to continue to have those discussions in a diplomatic context with them. The PRC, if you listen to their senior officials, is – the PRC is just as committed to the strategic end goal that we are, to see to it that Iran is permanently and verifiably barred from obtaining a nuclear weapon. The PRC recognizes, as we do, that a mutual return to compliance still remains the best avenue to achieve that.

So at a broad level, our interests in this area, in this arena – that is, the Iranian nuclear program – our interests align broadly. Now, we'll continue to have discussions with them bilaterally and in the context of the P5+1 about how we can work together most effectively to ensure that we get there with Iran or otherwise that Iran gets the message.

**QUESTION:** So no commitment that they'll actually take action to pressure Iran further?

**MR PRICE:** So I'm not going to read out the discussions that we've had, but we have had a number of discussions with senior PRC officials, including at the highest levels, to make our clear our position on this. And we'll continue to do that.

Yes.

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

**MR PRICE:** Anything else on Iran? Sure.

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

**MR PRICE:** No? Or – sure, Iran.

**QUESTION:** Just really quickly, sorry. Is there any reason Malley would not go – return to talks in

Vienna over the weekend if Iran doesn't change its inflexible position? And could you just clarify

your comments from earlier this week about why he's not returning until the weekend?

**MR PRICE:** It's our understanding that heads of delegation in some cases aren't returning until early next week. He'll return this weekend. As I may have mentioned, he'll be at the G7 in Liverpool with the Secretary, and he intends to travel to Vienna from there.

Yes, Joel.

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

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** We heard last week – a senior State Department official during the Saturday background briefing referred a couple of times to the possibility that the Iranians want a different deal; if they want a different deal, they should say that they want one.

So I wonder, are you guys – do you have any plans in place for how to acquire leverage to set the terms for a negotiation about a different deal? And would that be mostly a sanctions effort, or would it be more on the security side, as the official referred to things that we would need to do to make sure that they don't acquire a nuclear weapon?

**MR PRICE:** Well, right now we are focused on one deal, and that's the Iran deal, and seeing if we can achieve a mutual return to compliance with that. If you listen to what the previous Iranian government said and what this Iranian government has said, that is still what they say they're seeking to do.

Now, their words haven't been matched by their actions in Vienna last week. What we'll be looking to see, if – whether there is additional symmetry between what we've heard from them and what we see from them when talks – when discussions resume in earnest.

Again, from our perspective, the JCPOA and a mutual return to compliance with it conveys the most advantages to us and to our partners and our allies in the P5+1 and beyond, because to our mind and based on the assessments of our nuclear scientists, our diplomatic practitioners, our intelligence professionals, the advantages afforded by the JCPOA outweigh other options that may be available at the time being.

But again, that may not be the case – it certainly won't be the case forever. It won't be the case for long. So if we get to a point where it is no longer in our interest to seek a return to compliance with the JCPOA, that's when we'll look at alternatives and perhaps test out their viability.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yes, Ned, on Sudan. Congress is working right now in passing some legislations to impose sanctions on individuals who had a role in the latest military takeover. Where does the Biden administration stand on this? Does it approve of it? Is it going to be supported or will it be opposed by the Biden administration?

**MR PRICE:** Well, right now where we are focused is fulfilling the full democratic aspirations of the Sudanese people as the only means to forge a stable Sudan. There obviously has been some progress in that regard. The agreement that was reached on November 21st between the prime minister and between General Burhan, it was progress, but it was only a first step, as we have discussed. There is more work that remains to restore and to see to it that the civilian-led transition remains on track.

And so what we are looking to Sudan and Sudanese officials – we'll be looking to them for certain actions in the coming days. Number one is the release of all those detained since October 25th. Second is the lifting of the state of emergency. Third is ending all security force violence against peaceful protesters. And fourth is the completion of the civilian-led cabinet selection process.

This has been a tumultuous period in Sudan's history. It's been, unfortunately, a somewhat violent period as well with peaceful protesters losing their lives for doing nothing but peacefully airing their voices in the street. So we are focused right now on seeing to it that the progress we've seen, the initial progress we've seen, is durable so that those aspirations of the Sudanese people can be realized, can be put on track once again.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, just to follow up, Ned, is the administration going to be supportive of the Congress efforts? The Congress is very serious now on imposing compulsory sanctions on individuals by names. Where does the Biden administration stand on this?

**MR PRICE:** Well, again, our sanctions – all of our sanctions have standards attached to them. And so if the legal and policy standards are met, of course, we'd be supportive of sanctions. But it's



difficult to say anything akin to that in the abstract.

Ben.

**QUESTION:** On Russia-Ukraine, please. Is the administration in any way pressuring the Ukrainians to cede more autonomy in the eastern half the country, Russian-held areas? Is that happening in any way in the face of Russian aggression?

**MR PRICE:** Absolutely not. There have been absolutely no deals cut. There have been no concessions made, no such elements even discussed. What the President did in the call with – in his teleconference with President Putin was to look President Putin squarely in the eye and to make very clear that the United States is committed to Ukraine’s sovereignty, its independence, its territorial integrity as well. We believe that the most effective means to de-escalate tensions and to perhaps forestall the possibility of conflict is full implementation of the Minsk agreements. The Minsk agreements spell out what Russia and what Ukraine need to do. That’s what we believe – where we should invest our energy. It’s something that we have discussed with our Ukrainian partners. It’s something that President Putin made – excuse me, President Biden made very clear to President Putin. It’s something that Secretary Blinken made very clear to Foreign Minister Lavrov.

If you look at the violations of the Minsk agreements, the vast majority have been on the part of the Russian Federation. So we want to see full implementation of the Minsk agreements as a means to de-escalate tensions and hopefully forestall the possibility of conflict.

**QUESTION:** Will there also be dialogue about Russia’s concerns about Ukraine joining NATO? Will everyone sit down together? And I think the term was to try and find some accommodation, but isn’t that just caving to this aggression?

**MR PRICE:** We are not using accommodation in the same way that you may be using accommodation. What we are setting out to do is to work closely with our Ukrainian partners – and of course, President Biden was just on the phone with President Zelenskyy a few moments ago. We had an opportunity – Secretary Blinken had an opportunity to speak to President Zelenskyy the other day. We had an opportunity to see the foreign minister in Europe last week. But we’ve also engaged NATO. The President today is engaging the Bucharest Nine as well.

We are working intensively with our NATO Allies, with our other European partners, to see to it that we are fully coordinated, that we are working together in lockstep. And in that context, in the

context of de-escalation, we would be supportive of dialogue – dialogue between the parties, and that includes, of course, Russia, Ukraine, NATO; dialogue we know including between Russia and NATO in the context of the NATO-Russia Council, the OSCE, other mechanisms – these have been key to de-escalating tensions even at the height of the Cold War, even in the post-Cold War world.

There is nothing to say that dialogue couldn't do the same here. Dialogue is not a concession. Dialogue is not an accommodation. Dialogue is not a compromise. If dialogue can de-escalate tensions, if it takes place in the broader context of de-escalation, we think that could be a constructive element, and it's something that we're willing and ready to support.

**QUESTION:** But it is giving Putin a seat at the table when it comes to negotiations about —

**MR PRICE:** These aren't negotiations. These are not negotiations about the fate, about the borders of any country. We've talked a lot about Ukraine, but the broader point is this: In some ways, it's even bigger than Ukraine, because what Vladimir Putin seeks to do is to rewrite the rules of the international order, is to circumvent the idea that small countries can't bully – large countries can't bully small countries – that a country can, at the barrel of a gun, redraw borders. That cannot happen; it must not happen in today's world. We are committed to that. It's – we see it applied here in the context of Ukraine, but it's also a much broader proposition that applies equally in Europe as it does in the Indo-Pacific. It's something that we stand by. So there is no concession; there is no negotiation on that.

What dialogue can increase is communication, of course, but also transparency. And if the Russian Federation is under any sort of misimpression, if the Russian Federation doesn't have an understanding about what NATO is, what it is not, what it seeks to do, what it doesn't seek to do, dialogue can help with that. What this is not is an effort to discuss borders, to discuss Ukraine without Ukraine. We're not going to do anything with Ukraine without Ukraine, our partner.

**QUESTION:** And then a slight tangent, but you made it very clear to Russia, you say, what the consequences of an invasion would be. Why not make it as clear to China what the consequences of an invasion of Taiwan would be?

**MR PRICE:** Look, we have made very clear to the PRC that any effort to change the status quo unilaterally, by force, would be a profound and dangerous mistake. We have been fully clear about that. We've also been clear that we are committed to the Taiwan Relations Act. This is

something that President Biden voted for as a senator in 1979. We are taking all of these actions, and we were – our approach is predicated on the requirements spelled out in the Taiwan Relations Act and consistent with our “one China” policy.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, again on Ukraine. The White House, Ned, was very clear that there will be very tough economic measures against Russia if it goes ahead with an incursion against Ukraine. But are these economic measures enough to deal with such a big geopolitical power move by Putin? Some said this is a ruthless move by Russia.

**MR PRICE:** Well, we’ve talked about strong economic measures. And just to be clear, these are economic measures that we intentionally have not resorted to in the past just because of their scale and of the magnitude and the damage they would inflict on the Russian economy.

But the President, in his conversation, went beyond strong economic measures. He talked about additional defensive material to Ukraine, of course above and beyond what we are already providing, and that’s \$400 million this year, \$60 million in the context of President Zelenskyy’s visit. But also he spoke of our intention, should this go forward, to fortify our NATO Allies in the eastern flank with additional capabilities in response to any such escalation. So it’s about more than just strong economic measures. There are a whole – it’s an array of responses that the Russian Federation would see in response if this military operation were to go forward.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Going on Ukraine, President Biden has said that troops to Ukraine are – unilaterally sending troops to Ukraine are off the table. What’s the implication for the decision for Taiwan? And are you worried that will send a signal regarding your commitment to Taiwan?

**MR PRICE:** Look, I – again, it is probably perhaps too facile to compare Ukraine and Taiwan. Obviously, each country is different and the case —

**QUESTION:** Taiwan is a country?

**MR PRICE:** Each entity is different, excuse me. So I would hate to read too much into this

comparison. I think what we have also made very clear is that we are committed to the territorial integrity, to the sovereignty, to the independence of Ukraine. We are steadfastly committed to Taiwan, consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act. So again, we have a range of deterrent measures that we are prepared to take – strong deterrent measures that we are prepared to take if this military incursion goes forward in Ukraine. And separately we've made very clear that any effort to change the status quo across the Taiwan Strait unilaterally by force would be a profound mistake.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** On Syria. Secretary Blinken tweeted yesterday about Austin Tice. Today, his mother held a press conference calling on this administration to build on the talks that occurred in the previous administration between the U.S. and Syrian officials in Damascus. Would this administration support any sort of direct dialogue with the regime on the issue of securing the release?

**MR PRICE:** Well, we have no higher priority than the safety and security of Americans overseas, and that of course, of course, includes Americans who are unjustly held overseas, and of course Austin Tice unfortunately falls in that latter category. A quarter of his life in captivity. It is something – it is – this is a case that I can tell you is on our thoughts every day. It's something that we're working on every day.

Look, the way we see it is we are – and Ambassador Carstens is leading this effort from the department. We separate the idea of diplomacy and our efforts to free Americans who are held overseas. We can have conversations pertaining to Americans and we can have conversations with regimes with which we have poor relations or, in some cases, potentially no relations at all. That is very different from engaging in diplomacy or speaking to any sort of broader diplomatic shift with any country or regime. So we are committed to doing everything we can consistent with our laws to bring Americans home who are held unjustly.

**QUESTION:** One more on Syria.

**MR PRICE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** Do you have any reaction to Damascus hosting this annual Arab energy conference in 2024. given the U.S. position on normalization?

**MR PRICE:** I don't. I'm not familiar with that offhand. But if we have a reaction, we'll get that to you.

Nike.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Ned, just want to make sure I'm reading your comments correctly. When you said the U.S. oppose unilateral change of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, are you referring specific to China is the one trying to unilateral change the status quo due to the – because of the increasing airplane – military plane flying into Taiwan's ADIZ, or which side is trying to unilaterally change the status quo?

**MR PRICE:** Well, unilateral is unilateral, and it would apply to anyone who would seek to change the status quo unilaterally and by force. I think you are right to point to the incursions, to point to the other intimidating acts that the PRC has demonstrated towards Taiwan in recent days, weeks, and months as, again, intimidating acts, something that we oppose, something that only heightens tensions across the Taiwan Strait, and something we've been very clear and resolute in condemning.

But again, the status quo has served the interests of the region and the broader world over the past several decades. We do not want to see that upended by force.

**QUESTION:** So what you're saying that it means that you are ready to talk to the Syrian regime about this case without having diplomatic and without having any relations –

**MR PRICE:** I'm not speaking in specific terms. What I'm saying is that we view our efforts to bring Americans home as separate from a diplomatic approach.

**QUESTION:** Have you seen these reports of a rather grotesque massacre in Burma? And if you have seen them, do you have anything to say about it?

**MR PRICE:** I have. We are outraged by credible and sickening reports that the Burmese military bound 11 villagers – including children – in northwest Burma and burned them alive. Appallingly, this is not the first time we have seen reports of the Burmese military using such tactics to oppress the people of Burma. The military's widespread use of horrific and brutal violence underscores for us the urgency of ending the Burmese military's culture of impunity by holding

military actors accountable and restoring Burma's path to inclusive democracy. As you've heard us say before, we stand with the people of Burma and their aspirations for freedom, for justice, for democracy, and we call on the military regime to end the use of violence, release those unjustly detained, to address human rights abuses, and to respect the will of the people.

Yes, Ben.

**QUESTION:** On China. State Department guidance at the moment for any Americans traveling to China is Level 3, urges them to reconsider travel to China because – one of the reasons is arbitrary detention. Is that still the State Department's stance for all Americans traveling to China?

**MR PRICE:** Our Travel Advisories are posted online, and they are updated continuously. I don't have the Travel Advisory for China in front of me, but it can be found on state.gov.

**QUESTION:** That's what it is at the moment. And so would that then be true for American athletes going to the Olympics, that they should reconsider travel to China?

**MR PRICE:** Again, we discussed this yesterday. It is our expectation, even as we don't have any official or diplomatic representation at the Games, that PRC authorities treat our athletes – and all athletes, for that matter – with the spirit – with dignity and respect, affording them the protections that are necessary for their safety and security.

Of course, we will have and we do have an embassy in Beijing. We do have a diplomatic presence on the ground in China. As a routine matter of course, we'll be able to provide American citizen services to our athletes and other Americans there associated with the Games. But it is also incumbent on the PRC to afford the protections to American athletes and to other athletes to ensure their safety and security while they're there.

A couple final questions. Nike.

**QUESTION:** So just a follow-up on Beijing Olympics. So the UN – secretary general of United Nations said he will accept the invitation to attend the Beijing Winter Olympics. Would you like to comment on such decision?

**MR PRICE:** My only comment is that each country, each organization will have to reach its own

sovereign decision about participation and the level of participation or lack of participation in the upcoming Olympic Games.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** And on South Africa. Should we expect the travel ban to be lifted soon after all those medical reports saying – especially from Dr. Fauci – that the Omicron variant is not as powerful as we thought before?

**MR PRICE:** So I would say a couple things on this. Number one, these restrictions were put in place on the advice of the President's chief medical advisor and the CDC. This was a decision, this was a step, that was predicated on nothing but the best medical advice and the best science as well. As you know, our CDC and other public health authorities are – they're constantly evaluating public health conditions around the world, and though the resulting assessments inform the steps that we take, including in the context of any potential travel restrictions, it's never our intention to have restrictions any longer than they are absolutely necessary.

Again, it's in this context we also – the world owes a debt of gratitude to South Africa for its transparency but also to South African scientists and Botswanan scientists as well, which were so instrumental in helping to sequence this variant. We're always – we're consistently learning more about this variant. We're monitoring the emergence and spread of the Omicron variant. As we learn more, we expect that information on transmissibility, on disease severity, potential impacts of vaccine efficacy – we expect to learn more about that in the coming days and weeks ahead. We are aware of reports – and I'm sure all of you have seen these – that the Pfizer-BioNTech – from Pfizer and BioNTech – that initial studies show that three doses of their COVID-19 vaccine are able to neutralize the Omicron variant.

Joel.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Just wanted – sticking on China and Europe, of course, the Lithuanian Government says that China is now leading an economic boycott, going around telling multinational companies to sever business relationships with Lithuanian companies over this Taiwan dispute. I wondered, are you aware of any American companies who have received that kind of directive? What would be your message to any companies and to China in this context? And are there any practical steps that you're considering, either to prevent that from taking effect

or to make these Lithuanian companies whole, so that this doesn't become another point of leverage in diplomatic relations?

**MR PRICE:** Well, I'd have to point to private companies for what they may be hearing from the PRC. I can say from our end, we are focused on the relationship and the strong and vital relationship we have with Lithuania. Lithuania – it's a vital NATO Ally of ours; it's a partner across a range of issues, including our strong defense and economic ties and on the promotion of democracy and human rights. And even in the context of the Summit for Democracy, we've seen Lithuania as an active participant.

As Lithuania has endured the – has endured intimidation, including from the PRC, we've reinforced the importance of those ties. We've reinforced that relationship and we've been very clear that we welcome steps by Taiwan and Lithuania to deepen their cooperation, including through Taiwan's opening of a representative office in Vilnius and Lithuania's plans to open a reciprocal office in Taipei.

**QUESTION:** Just so I'm clear, if China is going to multinational companies and giving them instructions about where they can do business in service of Chinese foreign policy objectives, do you see that as an issue between private sector companies and the Chinese Government? Or is that an American foreign policy issue?

**MR PRICE:** We believe that American companies should be able to compete on a level playing field anywhere where it's in their interests. But again, the playing field has to be level, and as I talked about yesterday, we also consistently strive to ensure that American companies, private sector more broadly, that they are operating with their eyes wide open. And so that's why it's incumbent on us to continue to put a spotlight on some of the practices, on some of the abuses that have been ongoing in the PRC. You have heard from us on any number of occasions about our concerns. We've issued a business advisory as well, directed precisely at the private sector community.

We want our companies to be able to compete. We want them to be able to compete on a level playing field. But we also want for them, and we fully recognize that they, too, as good American companies, don't want to compete in a way that in any way directs – directly or indirectly supports the practices that may be going on in places like Xinjiang. And so that's why we have



consistently erred on the side of transparency, why we have been very clear and open in airing what we know has transpired in that context.

Thank – one final question.

**QUESTION:** Sorry. Thank you. So the U.S.-Japan host nation negotiations have reportedly reached the level of a consensus. Would you be willing to discuss the status of the negotiations? And what support does the U.S. expect from Japan and why?

**MR PRICE:** At this intermediate stage I would refrain from offering comments. I'm sure we will have a comment at a later stage on that.

Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 3:35 p.m.)

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