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TRANSCRIPT

Press Call

“What to Watch For at the UN General Assembly”

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Transcript by Rev.com

Caleb Diamond:

Thank you. Good morning and thank you all for joining us today. Today our experts will address what they're watching for during the U.N. General Assembly. I'll start off briefly by introducing my colleagues.

Jon Alterman is director of the Middle East program. He'll start by covering the broader U.N. topics, as well as the latest out of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Then we go to Bill Reinsch, our Scholl Chair in International Business and our trade expert. He'll cover the latest in U.S.-Japan trade talks and other potential trade bilats at the U.N. General Assembly. And then we'll – last but not least is Heather Conley, director of the Europe program here. She will cover the latest in Brexit uncertainty, European diplomacy, as well as the potential outcome of a Trump-Zelensky meeting at UNGA, which has been all over the news today.

They'll each deliver brief remarks and then we will open it up for questions from you on this call. We will send you all a transcript. Thanks for joining with us. And with that, I'll give it over to Jon.

Jon B. Alterman:

Good morning. I think for President Trump at the U.N., the hope is the third time is the charm. The first time President Trump went up to the U.N. in 2017, other leaders were so uncertain of what he would want to do that a lot of them stayed away. I spoke to a prominent television host who said normally UNGA week is a time when I get all kinds of presidents and prime ministers on my show. Nobody's even in town. And the ones who are in town are terrified to say anything because either they alienate the president or they alienate their constituencies back home. So that's when the – that was the first UNGA. The second UNGA, as you remember, is when the president was laughed at by the General Assembly when he talked about the accomplishments of his administration.

Now we have a General Assembly meeting where the president really needs allies on Iran. It's clear President Putin isn't going to help him. Prime Minister Netanyahu won't be there. He needs to win over traditional allies to do what traditional allies do, to band together against common threats. The attacks last weekend in Saudi Arabia are precisely the kind of thing that the U.N. was intended to address, to create rules for international behavior and opportunities for collective action.

If you look at chapter one article one of the U.N. Charter, it says the purpose of the U.N. is, quote, "to maintain international peace and security and, to that end, to take effective, collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, for the suppression of actions of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peace means and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations that might lead to a breach of the peace. I think arguably this is precisely the kind of incident that the U.N. was created to be able to address.

The president hasn't had much time for those kinds of ideas. He's argued in the past that each country should act solely in its own interest. And he's argued that American might, combined with his negotiating skill, would build U.S. power. I think it's instructive to look at what the president said in

2017, his first U.N. address. He said, “The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies it’ll have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. ‘Rocket Man’ is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime. The United States is ready, willing and able. But hopefully, this will not be necessary. That’s what the United Nations is all about. That’s what the United Nations is for. Let’s see how they do.”

That was his approach a couple of years ago. Having had the experience of engaging with the North Koreans, having had the experience of trying to do something with Iran, having had the experience of trying to work with others on Venezuela, it seems to me that the president is a little more circumspect about what tools he has at his disposal and what he needs allies to do and what he wants to do unilaterally.

Iran is a very difficult case. The leadership considers the country’s mere survival to be a form of victory, and the Islamic republic has been investing for 40 years in unconventional and asymmetrical capabilities. Iran also has low expectations of flourishing. The country doesn’t have an economic system that is tightly integrated with the global economy. For relatively isolated countries like Iran that have little interest in promoting stability – and I would argue that other countries like that in the 1990s were Libya, North Korea and Iraq – broad international consensus has been an important instrument for managing their tendency for disruption.

President Trump was convinced that he could do much better than his predecessors by taking Iran on by himself. And the events of last weekend suggest that Iran is not following the playbook he’d like them to be following. Even if all of the strikes attributed to Iran are Iranian actions, one could argue that Iran has responded to the U.S. maximum-pressure campaign by acting proportionately, responding to economic costs – with economic costs and not sliding into war.

For the United States, there aren’t especially good – there aren’t any especially good unilateral options. It’s hard to see economically how the U.S. ratchets up from the maximum-pressure campaign. A military strike might serve to further isolate the United States and might prompt the Iranians to crow that they had survived the United States’ assault.

A cyberattack might not ever become publicly known. Any strike against Iran could provoke a series of deniable asymmetrical attacks against U.S. interests around the region and around the world and would spur debate in the United States that the country – that the United States has become a mere handmaiden for the Saudis. That is to say that if this doesn’t go well, the president’s response, it could provoke sharply negative diplomatic, security and political consequences for the president.

It’s perhaps my failure of imagination, but two things seem clear to me. The first is that there’s unlikely to be a way to fix the Iran issue. It will have to be a problem that’s managed for many years. It’s not a question of finding the perfect agreement or treaty with the Iranians. It’s creating a set of incentives and disincentives that can shape Iranian behavior in a less malign direction.

Second, the only way to pursue long-term management of Iranian behavior is through assembling a large number of countries who coordinate their actions. It's possible in some instances that the depth of such actions must be sacrificed in order to maximize their breadth. But it's only through breadth that Iranian behaviors can be shaped.

The Iranians, it seems to me, have laid a trap. They've challenged a president with unilateral instincts to double down on them and isolate the United States from the world. In the circumspection we've seen coming out of the administration last week, it feels like the president is aware of this challenge. Iran is a hard problem, but frankly it's precisely the kind of problem that the United Nations was created to address. The president has an opportunity, especially in his bilateral meetings next week, to begin addressing them.

Bill.

William Reinsch:

OK. Well, thank you all for tuning in.

I'm going to – we can do a little – in the trade landscape as a whole, there's – this was a week of rumor, primarily, and not a week of facts. So there's not a lot to report. There may be some clarity next week as a result of some meetings. But if you look at non-UNGA things, USMCA talks continue to make progress. Ambassador Lighthizer is meeting with the House Democrats this morning. So later today we might have some news about how that's progressing.

The Chinese are in town, at least until this afternoon, when they're headed out to the Midwest to meet with farmers. We may have some information later today about how those talks are going.

The two events coming up – one is UNGA-related and one is semi-UNGA-related – is that the president will be rallying with Indian Prime Minister Modi in Houston on Sunday, and he'll be meeting Japanese Prime Minister Abe on Wednesday in New York.

In reverse order, looking at the Japan agreement, there is a widespread expectation, certainly spread by the president, that they'll be signing an agreement at that meeting. The gossip from Japan, at least a couple days ago, was that things are not quite that far along so – or at least they're not as far along as the president said they were, which is not to say that they won't be that far along by next Wednesday. The negotiations with Japan are famous for going to the last minute and end up in marathon sessions to – and finish whatever it is that's on the table.

So I would expect something to be signed. The parts that seem to be established are Japanese concessions on agriculture market access that will be – match pretty much what they offered in TPP so that the president can say he got back what he had – what he gave up, basically, by pulling out of TPP.

The United States, in response, has agreed to make, actually, I gather, a fairly broad series of tariff reductions on manufactured goods but not autos, but a lot of other stuff that will either be zeroed out if the tariffs are low or reduced by up to 50 percent because under the statutory authority that's – if the tariffs are higher than 5 percent all the president can do – the most the president can do is reduce them by half.

So look for a schedule. These things will not all happen at once. This is a staging exercise. Tariffs will be reduced over periods of years. So the immediate short-term impact on the industrial tariffs side is likely to be modest. On the agriculture side, if the Japanese agree to reduce some of these tariffs immediately or at least soon, you'll see a – you know, potentially, a significant impact for the farm community.

There is already announced a digital trade agreement, which will likely track either the language in USMCA or the language in the comprehensive – what's the P – CPTPP – the TPP of the 11. I forget what the P stands for offhand, at least the first P. It'll track one of those things and that's both good and noncontroversial.

The great unknown is automobiles. The Japanese have been clear that they don't want to agree to anything without a firm commitment not to impose automobile tariffs. The president has not said that and so that remains to be – to be worked out.

If I were going to predict, which I'm happy to do, knowing that I'm probably wrong, but if I were going to predict it will be that the workout will be something along the lines of yes, but; the United States saying yes, we will not impose new tariffs but, comma, we reserve the right to take action if there is a surge in Japanese automobile imports. That leaves all of you in the media to figure out what that means.

The benign explanation is that it means, simply, the president is restating authority to take safeguard measures that he already has in U.S. law and that is permitted under WTO rules. The less charitable explanation is that this is sort of a return to managed trade and implicit quotas, which the U.S. is saying, if you don't keep your imports to a level that we find acceptable then we're going to start taking action against you either via quota or tariff.

No one's going to say that because I think if they did Prime Minister Abe wouldn't sign the agreement. That's not politically sufficient for him in Japan. But it's going to be left, I think, to observers to determine, you know, what will probably be a vague statement which of those alternatives is meant and we'll just have to wait and see. Ambassador Lighthizer, as you know, is a long-time believer in managed trade and I rather expect that whatever he says he'll be thinking that if you don't keep the imports down to a desirable level we are going to take action.

On India, that remains a little bit of a mystery. The Indians are very anxious to get back into the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences program, which gave them zero tariffs on a range of items that has been quite useful to them. The United States has a very long list of trade grievances with India,

most of which you know. It's hard for me to believe that the Indians are going to agree to more than a handful of – addressing more than a handful of those problems. They haven't in the past, and the problems are serious. It's also hard for me to believe that Trump and Modi will meet without agreeing to something. So you should expect an agreement, but you expect it to be a very modest one. Whether it will be enough to bring them back into the GSP program remains to be seen.

I give the administration credit for using that as leverage. That has not really been done frequently before, and certainly not on this scale, and it got the Indians to the table. Whether it will get them to agree to things that they have for the last 20 years in various formats refused to agree to remains to be seen.

And so with that I'll stop and turn it over to Heather.

Heather A. Conley:

Thanks, Bill. Good morning, everyone.

Well, I'll begin in some ways where Jon began, thinking about the European issues, a set of issues as we head towards the General Assembly. It was President Trump's speech last year that gave a very robust defense of sovereignty, national sovereignty. And of course, the European ally and partner, they gave – the counter-speech to President Trump's speech was French President Emanuel Macron.

And I think watching President Macron during the GA, certainly his speech this year, is really a continuation of the G-7, and you are seeing a very robust return of French international diplomacy. So I think, again, on display we'll see Macron the mediator and Macron the champion of multilateralism. And of course all the issues surrounding the U.N. Climate Action Summit and climate diplomacy – again, the Paris Agreement is another incredible platform for French diplomacy.

I think you will continue to see President Macron very active on the Iran account, and I assume some bilateral conversations. He sees himself as a bridge. He's continued to see himself as a unique diplomatic bridge between the European Union and Russia, and between Russia and Ukraine. Again, watching his activism in those particular areas is something that I will be following very closely.

This is also going to be an opportunity for Brexit to come to the U.N. General Assembly. Of course, today is day 41 till we get to the deadline of October the 31st. U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson will be meeting with the Irish prime minister, the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar. And again, we are on this pressing timeline to see if there is an alternative that can be found related to the Irish border, the so-called backstop. We'll also be awaiting early next week the outcome of the U.K. Supreme Court ruling on the suspension of the U.K. Parliament. So this could be – while the prime minister is at the General Assembly it could be quite bumpy for him domestically, and we'll see how that comes forward as well. So we're going to – really going to be doing a Brexit watch at the – at the U.N. to see the many twists and turns.

But finally, perhaps all of this is going to be overshadowed by this growing-by-the-hour controversy over President Trump's interaction with the new Ukrainian president, Zelensky. He will meet President Zelensky on Wednesday the 25th. If you'll recall, President Trump was due to meet with President Zelensky on the margins of his visit to Warsaw, Poland, to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the start of the Second World War. That visit was, of course, postponed because of Hurricane Dorian. The vice president went in his place. We've had now former National Security Adviser John Bolton, who also traveled to Kyiv. But again, we don't have, obviously, the clarity that we need regarding this meeting, but this is I think going to be the most-watched bilateral meeting at the General Assembly. And this will certainly have the intensity of international focus on a very new Ukrainian president who just last year was a television star, so this will be quite an extraordinary approach focusing on U.S. assistance to Ukraine. The list of the \$250 million in assistance on military aid – there has been press speculation that there's additional financing of \$140 million towards Ukraine. Some important changes have happened within the Ukrainian parliament and government and, potentially, some good news with a prison swap between Russia and Ukraine just a few days ago. So lots of intensity swirling around there. I wish I had more answers for you. I don't. It's just something we're going to be watching very closely.

So with that, thanks again, everyone, for being on the call, and back over to Caleb.

Caleb Diamond: Thanks, Heather. And I think with that we'll move into question and answer.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, we'll now begin the question and answer session of today's conference.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

Our first question will come from the line of George Condon of National Journal. Please go ahead.

George Condon: Right. Thanks a lot.

You know, both Heather and Jon mentioned the president's speeches in '17 and '18. Well, last year he condemned multilateralism, condemned globalism. How in the world do you square that with any effort to get allies to help on Iran? Did they – are they deaf to any pleas that he makes, or do they just laugh privately?

Jon B. Alterman: Well, I think two things. First, you know, his speeches had both condemnations and embraces of multilateralism. I think there was a certain balance that he thought he was achieving and calibrating the America first instinct with the need for multilateral action – something that I'm sure the president's speechwriters are working on. It's important to remember that the world wants the United States to lead it. There is no other country or collection of countries that can lead the world, can lead international consensus the way the U.S. can do when it seeks to do it. And I encountered

a huge amount of nostalgia when I've talked to Europeans, to Asians, to Arabs about a desire for the U.S. to recover some of its leadership roles.

In many ways, I think the president has an open door to lead the world if he is willing to embrace multilateralism. And as he looks at the Iran problem, it's hard for me to imagine that he sees a very good unilateral option. If the question is how do you engender a multilateral response, he has a team led by Secretary Pompeo which is going to try to do that. And it seems to me that Secretary Esper is hoping that the baton on this is going to be held by Secretary Pompeo and not by the Defense Department.

Heather A. Conley: Well, George – this is Heather. Thanks so much. I think, you know, the challenge has been, just looking at how the administration has tried to bring together allies for the maritime activity in the Straits of Hormuz, only –

Jon B. Alterman: Operation Sentinel.

Heather A. Conley: Thank you. Operation Sentinel. Only the U.K. has stepped forward. Many European countries have been asked, but there is great reluctance because they simply don't know what the policy is. They don't know where it's heading. And there's just absolutely great reluctance. This is why I think President Macron's position here will be so interesting, because he has been very eager, from the time of his state visit in 2017 – or, sorry – 2018 to the G-7 to present a diplomatic package that he is uniquely able to bring forward, and to help the president out of his current dilemma. And it's just a question, I think, of whether that will be effective or not. But the president is so mercurial on this issue, no ally feels comfortable in putting their government behind a policy that could dramatically change. They just don't have the certainty. And I think they're not certain who is in charge of the policy other than the president himself.

Caleb Diamond: Next question.

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

Caleb Diamond: It looks like we have one more.

Operator: Yeah, we do have a question from the line of Jordyn Phelps of ABC. Please go ahead.

Jordyn Phelps: Hi. I know we're not actually anticipating a meeting between President Trump and President Rouhani, but of course this is a question mark that's going to be hanging over the General Assembly. I was wondering if you could talk to the possibility of a meeting and sort of give us a little history lesson on past times that we've been snubbed by Iran at the U.N.

Jon B. Alterman: I have an extraordinarily difficult time imagining that there's going to be a meeting. One of the questions in my mind is whether the apparently Iranian-orchestrated attack on Abqaiq was carried out by elements of the Iranian government that want to prevent U.S.-Iranian talks or whether it was carried out by elements that want to strengthen Iran's hand in U.S.-Iranian talks.

The Iranians have their own political context that make it hard for them to seem to be submitting to American pressure. And one Iranian analyst told me last week that the Iranians are hellbent on demonstrating that sanctions won't bend the Iranian will, because then if the United States wants to do anything in the future, it will just sanction Iran.

So I think the Iranians have put themselves in a corner where it's hard for them to agree that they're – that they're going to become less confrontational, but that drives their economy into a weaker state.

I think, as The New York Times reported a couple of weeks ago, that the long-term Iranian strategy is to find some way to be in dialogue, probably initially in a multilateral framework, which includes the United States, with the hope that they will get rewards merely for entering that dialogue. And that's partly to compensate for their relatively weak negotiating position.

It's worth remembering that Iran, with all its oil and gas wealth and 80 million people, has a GDP the size of the state of Maryland, and they're not really a near-peer competitor for the United States. They're terrified that in negotiations with the United States, they'll get taken to the cleaners. And part of their negotiating strategy is let's see if we can get a concession just for agreeing to enter the negotiations.

But I don't think Iran really has a long-term option other than being in dialogue. I think that's where this is going in the intermediate term. And in the near term, seeming to give something – a reward to President Trump, which is the way it's been portrayed in Iran, would be political suicide on the Iranian side.

Caleb Diamond: I think we'll take the next question.

Operator: Well, our next question will come from the line of Deirdre Shesgreen of USA Today. Please go ahead.

Jordyn Phelps: Thanks for taking my question.

Again on Iran, I'm wondering, Mr. Alterman, if you can talk about sort of best-case, worst-case scenarios. I mean, what would an ideal outcome look like for the Trump administration, and what would a disaster look like?

Jon B. Alterman: Look, an ideal outcome is that Iran's regional behavior visibly and markedly improves, that there is some progress toward reimposing serious limits on Iran's nuclear program, and that there's greater visibility and greater limits on Iran's missile program. That is the best-case scenario.

Again, I don't think you can fix the Iran problem, but you can engage the Iranians in talks that have enough prospective positive achievements that Iran is no longer threatening hubs of the global energy network.

Jordyn Phelps: I meant – sorry, I meant specifically at the U.N. Can you talk about, you know, what kind of negotiations –

Jon B. Alterman:

Look, I think at the U.N. the hope is – you know, with President Macron being very eager to take a very high-profile role, if the president is able to get at least acquiescence if not active support from the Russians and the Chinese, the prospect of a serious Security Council resolution that would move toward both understanding what happened and taking steps for consequences, to build broad multilateral support, I think that's the goal, some of which we would see and some of which would happen in small bilateral meetings. But I think there would at least be some statements that suggest that the world is coming together instead of splitting apart on this.

It's important to remember that Russia and China have contradictory interests. China in particular isn't happy for their global energy network to be disrupted, partly because they rely on it but they also don't want the U.S. to be a hegemon that leads the world and isolates China. So I think in some ways they're of two minds about whether this represents an opportunity or a threat to China.

The worst-case scenario is that the president ends up alienating U.S. allies, it feels very much like go it alone, the Iranians treat this as a trap to divide the U.S. from its partners, and in addition carries out a set of difficult-to-attribute asymmetrical attacks that attack U.S. interests and partners throughout the region, and the U.S. gets sucked more and more into a boxing match in the dark, which, frankly, could lead to a war in the region in the extreme case – that, you know, you start having accidents and civilians start dying, and then suddenly you find yourself in a world that nobody wants. And it's – some people have talked about a 1914 moment. I'm not quite sure we're there, but the danger is certainly looming if this continues to spiral.

Jordyn Phelps:

Thank you.

Operator:

Our next question in queue comes from the line of David Boyer of The Washington Times. Please go ahead.

David Boyer:

Hi. Thank you.

I was wondering if you feel that the departure of John Bolton will have any impact on diplomacy, particularly this week – next week at the U.N. with regard to Iran?

And secondly, I was wondering if you think the whistleblower complaint with Ukraine will have any kind of a chilling effect on foreign leaders' willingness to be candid with President Trump in private conversations.

Jon B. Alterman:

It is clear to me that the departure of John Bolton will have an impact, if not only because Mike Pompeo is the undisputed king of the president's foreign policy world. I have a hard time imagining that the speech, which is presumably well underway, wouldn't bear the important fingerprints of Mike Pompeo, and probably wouldn't have National Security Adviser O'Brien's fingerprints because he's very new on the job. And I think that just not only in terms of the points but also in terms of the tone, I think

you'll see a difference between a Bolton and a – and an O'Brien speech, and it will because – it will be because it will be more a Pompeo speech.

Heather A. Conley:

So on the – on the whistleblower effect, I mean, you'll recall at the very beginning of the Trump administration there were, you know, leaks of actually transcripts, highly controversial and contentious phone calls. So this is not necessarily new, the release of those types of phone calls. But yes, of course there's always – has to be a pause in some governments' minds that, well, the confidentiality of their conversations with the – with the most senior levels of government, whether that's the president or other interlocutors, if that can't be protected, that conversation has to be guarded and may change. So, yes, certainly there is a chilling effect on that.

But I think most countries, particularly when there is a phone all between heads of government, they – you know, they publicly release the phone call occurred. Many governments I think get ahead of the U.S. and they put forward what came out of the call. But every leader has a – you know, whether they want to share the fact that a call was made and what came out of it, that is completely up to them. But this has happened before. Leaders, you know, have to be able to communicate. And I don't – I don't believe this would have too, too chilling of an effect of future conversations. But definitely needs to be watched.

Jon B. Alterman:

Look, President Trump has a way of engaging in private meetings that people are used to now. And he sometimes veers off topic, and he surprises people with things they didn't think would come up, and he relates things that were not planned to be part of the meeting. That's sort of intimidating the first time around. I think by the time you've had your third or fourth meeting you've learned to anticipate it, you're on your toes, you have your own idea of a strategy. And, again, I think that's one of the interesting things is that for the first General Assembly nobody knew what to expect from President Trump, and people really wanted to stay away rather than get swallowed up in this.

At this point, President Macron just as an example, has engaged with President Trump any number of times, and is eager for that meeting because he has an agenda, and he has a strategy for how to use the president's predilections and the presidents style to advance his interests. I think more and more leaders around the world are getting more familiar. And, you know, they're adults and they have strategies, because they have responsibilities. And that's different than it was, say, two years ago.

Caleb Diamond:

It looks like that's the last question, unless there are any more.

Operator:

(Off mic) – further questions in queue at this time.

Caleb Diamond:

Great. Well, I think we'll end it here. I just want to thank all of you for joining us today. And thank you, of course, to Jon, Bill and Heather for sharing your insights. I'll be sending out a transcript pretty shortly. And please reach out if you want to set up a one-on-one interview. We'd be happy to make that happen. Thank you. We're looking forward to UNGA next week.

(END)