PRITI PATEL

ANDREW MARR SHOW
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AM: Can I ask you first of all were we told by the Americans not to send Boris Johnson to Moscow?
PP: Well, it’s quite clear that events with regards to Syria have moved on, and our focus, and rightly the Foreign Secretary’s focus, is now working with the international community to look at a political resolution. And so he’s focusing on the G7 meeting that’s taking place this coming week and working, of course, with the US, but importantly, other allies in the international community when it comes to finding the right kind of peaceful and political settlement to this conflict.

AM: The problem, if I may say so, with that explanation is that we are saying now the important thing is to talk, to negotiate, to get back to the negotiating table, above all with the Russians, and yet at this moment we choose not to go and talk to them. That’s what’s surprising.
PP: Well, I think on the contrary. Because of course the American Secretary of State is going to Russia –
AM: He’s the one that matters.
PP: - and is talking to the Russians. But I think also this isn’t just about one voice, this is about the international community coming together, and our Foreign Secretary is working with his American counterpart as that is the right thing to do. But importantly as well, that we work across the international community. And this matters when you look at the overall issue when it comes to Syria. This is the world’s largest humanitarian crisis that we are seeing and the world has come together. Our counterparts across Europe, in America, we’ve all worked collectively to lead the way and provide support to the hundreds of thousands of people that have been displaced and harmed because of this awful and atrocious conflict.
AM: And I think you’ve got some more money aimed at those people right now. I think we’re spending more per head on the Syrian crisis in a humanitarian sense than any other country at the moment, is that right?

PP: Well, this is the most protracted crisis that we have seen in a generation. The United Kingdom has committed 2.46 billion pounds to the Syrian crisis, to people in the region. So yes, those inside Syria, we’ve seen in excess of, you know, 13.5 million people suffer just the most appalling things that we can only imagine, but also we’ve seen huge displacement into countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. So our resources are keeping people in the region, but importantly giving them life-saving and life-changing support. So we’re supporting Syrian refugees to get employment, get children into education, because that’s vital, but also the humanitarian support as well is crucial. In particular medical support, as we’ve seen after the barbarous chemical attack that took place this week.

AM: If this is not the right time, for whatever reason, for Britain to talk to Russia, when will be the right time?

PP: Well, I think, Andrew, we look at this in the round, and we are speaking to all counterparts. And you saw just two days ago the UN Security Council, you know, the United Kingdom speaking up, making its voice very clear and heard within that content (sic), and of course speaking to all partners. And we are engaging with all partners constantly. This week alone I was in Brussels, the Foreign Secretary was in Brussels, we were engaging with all our counterparts. So it’s fair to say that our engagement –

AM: But not the Russians.

PP: - our engagement is with everyone.

AM: Except the Russians.

PP: But as we have seen today, the US Secretary is going to Russia. Our Foreign Secretary is engaging with other international
counterparts. We need a negotiated political solution, there’s no
doubt about that.

AM: I’m sorry –

PP: And Russia has an important role to play here as well.
Because they have to become part of the solution. And we will all
engage with them through, hopefully, a UN-mediated process.

AM: But this is what is so bemusing – I’m sorry to go on about it,
but we keep saying we must talk to the Russians, they’re at the
heart of the process, and yet, given the opportunity for a kind of
really important, big summit in Russia, we pull out right at the last
minute. We offend the Russians, we don’t know why we do it, we
don’t get a proper explanation of what’s going on.

PP: Well, actually Andrew, on the contrary, there is nothing is
bemusing when we see what has happened this week. And with
respect, we are constantly engaging with all our counterparts, and
there has been dialogue. Obviously the Foreign Secretary has
engaged with his Russian counterpart previously as well. So these
discussions are continuous, and that is the right approach, and
obviously we are now working – and rightly so – leading the
discussions with other international counterparts to look at how
we can achieve a negotiated political solution.

AM: I’m sorry, viewers can make up their own mind I guess about
whether they’re bemused or not. But can I ask you, if there is
another chemical attack of the same kind would we support
another strike by the Americans in the same way?

PP: Well, I think, you know, we’re not even going to speculate on
hypothetical scenarios and situations. But what we will do, and
this is why UK aid is so important, we’ll continue to provide the
life-saving support that is required when we see such enormous
medical emergencies, and that is why we, through Dfid, UK aid is
providing additional support to the World Health Organisation
today to provide medical support, but importantly to, you know,
prepare for all sorts of eventualities, because quite frankly the
conditions inside Syria are more than atrocious, and I think we have a complete duty and an obligation to make sure that we’re providing all the support necessary to the Syrian people that are living in such horrendous conditions.

AM: Well, it’s great that we’re providing humanitarian support. The reason that we’re not doing any more military, of course, goes back to this 2013 vote in the House of Commons. George Osborne has said this week that the events of the last few days give us a chance to reverse what he called, ‘that terrible vote.’ Do you think we should be going back? Do you think your government should be going back to the House of Commons for another proper debate and vote on Syria and reopen the possibility of Britain becoming involved in these actions as well?

PP: Well, I think the point is that parliament spoke in 2013, and the focus right now, rightly so, has to be on a political solution, and that means working with our international counterparts to look at how we can bring those that are engaged in this war to stop the war and to get them around the negotiating table. That has to be the first principle right now, and looking to achieve a political settlement. You know can’t look to the future and see whether or not we’re going to have another debate or go back to parliament. I think we all have to work – we owe it to the Syrian people who’ve suffered over the last six years to work together across the international community to try and get political settlement.

AM: To choose not to go and talk to the Russians?
PP: But also, Andrew – well, Andrew, also, importantly, to all the forums that are coming up. The G7 forum. We’ll have the G20 forum. There are plenty of other forums where we’re all meeting our counterparts. We have to work with each other and actually look to find the right solution going forward.

AM: You suggest that we shouldn’t go back to parliament, we should accept the 2013 vote as a done deal. But this is a new
parliament, it’s a new government, it’s a new Prime Minister, and it’s, sadly, a new situation in Syria. Isn’t there a case for going back to parliament?

PP: Well, I think there is a case to look at the option of political negotiations, and that has to be the right focus right now. We’ll see what happens, Andrew, I don’t have a crystal ball here, no one does in terms of what may come over the next few days, weeks and months. So I think we have to do the right thing right now, which is engage with others. But I think, importantly, let’s not forget about the awful suffering. You know, we’ve seen the most barbaric attacks this week, we have to make sure that the international community – and Britain is leading the international community when it comes to the humanitarian response – that we stand together, we stand tall and we look after those people where we can in the region, but also work incredibly hard to make sure that we can get aid supplies and medical supplies to the people that desperately need them inside Syria.

AM: I’m not sure we made a huge amount of advance, but thank you very much indeed, Priti Patel, for joining us from Liverpool. (ends)