

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
Via Telephone

Washington, DC

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MS NAUERT: So, Elise, we have 10 minutes, so I'll just stand by.

QUESTION: Okay, okay. Mr. Secretary, two months ago you inherited a State Department essentially on its knees really – low morale, the staff had really been depleted – and you promised to bring the swagger back. So I'm interested in your view. How have things changed, do you think, since you took over?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, we're two months in and we have made a significant amount of progress in doing a couple things. First, we're reducing the amount of command and control; that is, I have allowed officers to make decisions. We've moved many decisions out of the seventh floor back to the professionals in the work force, just as I described what I would do – allowing the experts to make the judgments, understanding the President's direction and understanding my guidance so that they know commander's intent. And I think that's made a real difference not only in our ability to execute the President's vision but do so in a way that moves at the speed of our adversaries.

Second, we've made a real push to get the team staffed up as well. I've conducted a couple of swearing-ins myself both for a big group of Civil Service officers as well as some swearing-ins for some seniors. We're making progress on Capitol Hill too, and in the coming weeks we expect we'll have a whole much more handful of under secretaries, assistant secretaries that'll get pushed through. So real progress on getting the team back on the field as well.

And all in all, we've also had some opportunities to be at the front of policy making. We did great work – the team was fantastic – in Singapore helping the President execute that mission. I'd say the same about the work that we're doing in the preparation for the NATO summit. All the kinds of things that get the team excited about doing what it is they came to the State Department to do.

QUESTION: Let's talk a little bit about North Korea. In the statement, Kim Jong-un at the summit agreed to some very broad principles on denuclearization. Secretary Mattis, for instance, said he hasn't seen any visible signs of steps yet. Have you been able to put more meat on the bones with specifics about what the North Koreans are willing to do and when?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Forty years of history, and now 12 days of an agreement, and – but I will say – I will say this. There are understandings that had been put together prior to the summit, some that took place while the President was there in Singapore, that have, I think, put us on the right trajectory so that we can build out a framework for success.

But none of that can happen, none of that framework can be filled out, absent the two primary decision makers – in North Korea, the decision maker making clear his intent to denuclearize. I heard it myself when I visited there as CIA director, I heard it myself when I visited Pyongyang as

Secretary of State, and I heard it again when there was a group together with the President and Chairman Kim. He has been unequivocal in his statement that he's prepared to do this. We've seen for the first time them talk about that inside of North Korea.

There always will be challenges, and there's work to do. But none of this could have happened without the commitment of the two most senior leaders, and so long as that commitment stays in place, the United States is prepared to do exactly what the President said: Create a brighter future for North Korea and provide security assurances for the North Korean people.

QUESTION: But I mean, you yourself said obviously it's the beginning of a process, and clearly Kim Jong-un had to make those declarations. But you've said that your patience, the U.S. patience, can't be infinite on this. So I'm – have you given yourself any kind of – I don't want to use the word timeline, but how long can you give to test the actual seriousness of those commitments? I've heard maybe you'd like to try and get something on the table by the end of the summer, just to proceed or know that maybe it's time to reassess how you look at it?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, Elise, we'll constantly reassess. That's an ongoing process. And we'll – we hope that we will have an ongoing process of making progress. But look, the President was clear. Each of the actions that we've taken – his decision to suspend the high-level war games – exists only so long as there is good-faith negotiation progress, productive results being achieved. If we can't do that, if it turns out that there's just – there's no – there's no capacity to deliver the outcome that both presidents said they wanted – yeah, we'll reassess whether that's – I'm not going to put a timeline on it. But whether that's in two months or six months, we're committed to moving forward in an expeditious manner to see if we can achieve what it is the two leaders set out to do.

QUESTION: You have this NATO summit, the President's trip to the UK in a few weeks. It's on the heels of the President imposing these tariffs. And I mean, he's used some pretty incendiary language, I think, to describe some of our closest allies, and now you hear the Europeans and Canada say that they just don't think they could count on the U.S. And that's got to make your job harder now in advancing some of your top policy goals when your friends aren't with you. How are you going to mend these kind of rifts in the transatlantic alliance?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I was a young soldier in Germany in the 1980s. I remember some of the same conversation – oh goodness, the European partners are concerned about something that the United States is doing. I say all of that, right? We were going to put missiles in, we were going to take missiles out – I could go on. I could go on for hours about places where the United States and Europe have had issues where they disagreed.

I set that up by way of background because the things that you mentioned are in line with the kinds of discussions that America and Europe have had for decades. In this instance we're trying to make sure that the European partners share their fair burden of building out the critical alliance with NATO. We're trying to make sure that the trade arrangements between our countries are fair and reciprocal and balanced.

But every conversation – and I have conversations with great frequency – I spoke with Chrystia Freeland within the last 30 hours. I spoke with the foreign minister of France yesterday morning as well, and I'm sure I'll speak with Boris sometime this week. Every conversation we have is aimed at achieving a shared set of objectives. The rift between the United States and Europe is much overstated. There are so many things where we share common values and common concerns. I am confident that we will work to achieve the goals that the President has laid out and these things that

are presenting challenges today; but in the end the traditional values-driven alliance between Europe and the United States, that transatlantic alliance, will remain strong, as it has for coming on 70-plus years now.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, the President is soon going to meet with President Putin. The last time they met, Putin said that Russia didn't meddle in the election, and Director of National Intelligence Coats said that he thinks though they still are. And with the midterm just a few months away, does this have to – doesn't this have to be an important agenda item at this – at this upcoming meeting?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There's lots to talk about between the United States and Russia. As you know, Ambassador Bolton is headed that way now. I've spoken with my counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, a couple of times in these first couple months, whether it's the battlefield in Syria, the situation in Ukraine, Russian active measures. There are many topics that I'm sure President Trump and President Putin will discuss, and each of them is important to trying to put the relationship back in a place where there are a common set of understandings. The Russians, unlike the Europeans, don't share our value set. It is a different conversation, but it is still a conversation that's worth having.

QUESTION: But don't – I mean, that aside, and obviously there are a lot of areas that you do work together, but don't you – do you think this is the issue that's preventing those warming of ties, really – the mistrust?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I mean, they killed someone in Britain. I could go on. To say that there's a single issue that's caused there to not be a warm relationship between the two countries, I think, would be a misnomer. But make no mistake; I think President Trump agrees the Russian interfering – Russians interfering in our election – is something that they simply cannot do. I don't think – I don't think he'd take any umbrage with that.

QUESTION: I have just a couple more questions, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Of course.

QUESTION: Since the U.S. pulled out of the Iran deal, the JCPOA, we've seen new designations, you've sent the State Department officials and Treasury officials out to discuss next steps, and you've been very vocal yourself about Iran, including the threat from the IRGC. Do you think a possible next step could be designating them as a foreign terrorist group? There's some talk in the administration that this should be a next step.

SECRETARY POMPEO: There are a bunch of next steps. I don't want to get out in front of the decision-making process of the President. But the --

QUESTION: That's on the table, though, isn't it?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There are lots of – there's lot of things that are being discussed, things that will prove, we believe, very effective at the end goal – which is, at the end of the day, what matters, right? Right.

And the end goal is to convince the Islamic Republic of Iran to be a normal country. It's pretty simple. It's been funny; everybody's talked about these 12 things that I demanded of Iran. They are no different from what I demand of Belgium, right? They're no different than what we demand of – pick a country – of Singapore, right?

Be a normal country. Don't conduct terrorism, don't launch missiles into international airports, don't be the world's largest state sponsor of terror, comport with nuclear requirements. None of these are things that are difficult or somehow singling out Iran; but rather, we're asking them to do the things that nations that are part of the community of nations do so that they can behave in normal commerce, normal diplomatic relationships, all of the things that we're looking for. It's pretty straightforward. And a particular designation that we make or a particular operational tactic that we undertake, I'm not going to talk about those tonight.

QUESTION: Understood. I'll just end on the immigration crisis that's playing out. You've seen these images of the family separations, some reports that parents are being sent with other kids. It's prompting a lot of outcries around the world. And I'm wondering: How concerned are you about the stain this might be placing on the U.S. image and, when placed kind of alongside the tariff issue, concerns that there's this perception the U.S. is protectionist, closing up shop?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. I have the amazing blessing of being the foreign minister for the most generous nation in the history of civilization; and that goes for trade issues, that goes for the acceptance of refugees; it goes for our deep history of humanitarian assistance, whether that's reconstruction money or people on the ground. I am not at all concerned that anyone in the world could look at the United States but understand it to be anything but a beacon of hope, of democracy, and freedom. We have a long history of that. and it has continued under the Trump administration.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, just to finish --

MS NAUERT: Elise, we've got to go.

QUESTION: Just to finish, one last question, please.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Thank you so much, Mr. Secretary.

Just to follow on that, your department has had travel advisories from some of these countries. Last year, you know that there was that State Department report about the need to tackle the root causes and the real drivers of illegal immigration, and such as poverty, violence, and crime. These are some of the most dangerous countries that these people are coming from, and is there any thought to making a more concerted effort to demonstrate U.S. leadership to deal with some of these underlying conditions that might be a better deterrent to counter some of these images?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There's multiple prongs to the Trump administration's effort along the lines that you describe, and yes, we are at the State Department, who has a part of this, doing our best to work with the Northern Triangle countries to create conditions on the ground such that they won't make this long, arduous, and ultimately often perilous trek up and through Mexico to attempt to get into the United States. We do think that's important. But we've done a lot of work with those Central American countries to address that irregular immigration, and there's always more that can be done, and we're working hard at it.

MS NAUERT: Elise, we've got to go.

QUESTION: Got it. Mr. Secretary --

SECRETARY POMPEO: Elise, thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thanks for taking the time and hope to see you soon.