

Press Releases: Interview With Thora Arnorsdottir of RUV

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

U.S. Embassy Reykjavik
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QUESTION: So welcome, Mr. Pompeo.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, very much. Thanks for having me on your show.

QUESTION: So the scope of your visit to Hungary, Poland, Slovakia on this European tour was pretty clear, but why is Reykjavik your last stop?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, this is a place where America needs to continue to engage the important relationship we have, and you see it with American tourists coming here. So there's a deep economic relationship. We have had a historic, important security relationship as well. The geostrategic importance of the place at which the island sits escapes no one, including some of America's adversaries and the adversaries, I think, of European countries as well, and so I wanted to get here to see our American friends here and talk to them about ways we can further the cooperation between our two countries.

QUESTION: So maybe to simplify, you're afraid that we've made new friends in your absence maybe.

SECRETARY POMPEO: If America is not engaged, if we pull back, folks will fill the vacuum, and the Russians and the Chinese see that and use every opportunity they can, and we think that presents risk to freedom-loving nations like Iceland and freedom-loving nations like America. And so if we work together and America is on the scene, we think we'll make lives for each of our two countries much, much better.

QUESTION: So I want to stick to the Arctic for a bit because, like you said, the Chinese have put forward their policy; they call it a Silk Road. They've been working here in diplomacy for decades. And we have Russian submarines in our waters that we don't know what are doing. They have eyes set on the Arctic. Where have you been? Where is the U.S. policy on the Arctic? What's

the plan?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So this administration – yeah. It’s a fantastic question. It’s why I’m here. This administration has developed a plan. We have a theory. You can read it in our National Security Strategy. It is laid out very clearly. We believe that this is a space – the Arctic is a space where there should be freedom of navigation; there should be low tension; there should be security; there should be rule of law; there should be transparency about what’s taking place. We think if those things happen, that good countries of the world, countries like Iceland, the democracies of the world will be successful, and those who have malign intent, those who are coming to the Arctic for reasons that are about domination or about control or about extending their economic influence at the expense of others rather than creating win-win situations, we think they will be the net losers if we can build out an Arctic system that looks like that. Iceland has been at the forefront of it, and we very much want to make sure we’re partnered and engaged.

QUESTION: This is a very beautiful vision, but how are you going to make sure that’s what’s going to happen? I mean, you could read between – not even between the lines – it was quite straightforward that you’re afraid that Iceland is going to be a bridgehead of China –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah.

QUESTION: – that have been in the Arctic. How are you going to ensure this vision comes true?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. So it’s not just Iceland. China has these ambitions elsewhere, as far – places as far away as Africa and places like Asia as well, in what I could call the Chinese near-abroad.

We think we – collectively, we think the West has a better model for the world, and so how will we do this? First, it’s a series of conversations. It’s to make sure that we all share the same set of facts about the risks. The first way one protects themselves is they arm themselves with knowledge about risk, and so one of the things that we have done this last year and a half is go out to our friends around the world and identify for them basic facts about the risk that engagement with some of these other countries presents. And we think when they see that, they’ll be prepared to engage along with us, invest their own resources in protecting themselves, not only from a security perspective, but importantly, from an economic perspective as well. Some of the practices that China has engaged in can only be deemed predatory economic practices, which are much to the detriment of the nations that allow them to do that.

So we want to get out and share that understanding, and then I’m confident we will build institutions and relationships that allow freedom and democracy to flourish. And where the Chinese show up simply to compete, we think this is very reasonable. It’s not a containment strategy but one that says eyes wide open and make sure that the deals that countries are entering into with China actually benefit the countries that engage in them.

QUESTION: Now, because our time is limited, I'm going to move southwards from the Arctic to the Middle East, the region which has been in a critical situation for too many years. Now, there is a thing that I don't get. President Trump declared victory over the Islamic State in Syria in December in a tweet – the only reason for us being there – and then John Bolton comes and says no, no, no, we're not pulling out, we're not deserting our allies and there is a lot of Daesh still to fight, and then you say, well, we're going to pull out but we're still going to get rid of every Iranian boot in Syria, I think you said –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah.

QUESTION: – and we're going to protect our allies, the Kurds. How are you going to have it both ways? With, like, magic and mind power? I mean, how do you do it if you're not there?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. I actually think we all three said the exact same thing. The mission set hasn't changed remotely. The caliphate that was in Syria – you remember the people in cages; you remember the beheadings; you remember that they controlled a massive amount of territory. That's gone. It's gone in part because of good work by the United States but also good work by our allies and good work by the local forces in Syria as well, and in Iraq. This was really good work. As that's advanced, as the caliphate has been taken down, the mission doesn't end. We fight ISIS on multiple continents today, but our tactics will change, and they'll continue to change, and we will adapt just as ISIS adapts. We get the threat from radical Islamic terrorism. President Trump understands this intently. We're determined to fight them where we find them and to reduce the risk to not only the United States but to our allies.

But it's not the case that we have to have 2,000 or 4,000 or 14,000 soldiers in each of these places. We can use locals to help us – it's in their back yard – and we can use other means by which to push back against this, not the least of which is fighting back against the ideology which delivers it.

QUESTION: But you can understand the worries that this has created in the region. I mean –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Actually I don't. Actually I don't don't, to be honest with you. I don't understand.

QUESTION: I mean, honestly and clearly, what does it mean for the allies of the United States in Syria, such as the Kurds? I mean, they obviously were very worried when this declaration came out.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, they were even more worried before we were there.

QUESTION: Sure. I mean –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. And – right.

QUESTION: – and as you said, President Erdogan – why should he give them any mercy south of the border in Syria when it's not even the case in his own

country?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Because we've made clear that there'll be a real price if he doesn't. President Trump made very clear his expectations with respect to how Turkey would treat those to his south inside of Syria. He said that there will be a real cost associated with behavior in that way, and we are fully engaged diplomatically to deliver an outcome which protects the folks that are in Syria as well as ensures that those people in Syria aren't attacking Turkey as well. We think they are each entitled to their own security and we're confident we can deliver that.

QUESTION: Now, I know you're very focused on Iran as well, and the European countries have chosen to stick to negotiations and diplomatic relations, so the European foreign minister didn't show up to the conference in Poland on Iran. Why do you think – why is it your belief that the maximum pressure strategy will change a thing in the regime in Iran?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So three things. We're not focused on Iran; we're focused on security. It turns out the biggest risk to security in the Middle East is the Islamic Republic of Iran, and so that's the place one has to go to tackle the problem. It was a fascinating – we had 60 countries. I regret that Ms. Mogherini didn't attend. I think it's unfortunate for the EU that she chose not to come. It saddens me because we had over 60 countries there, and we had an historic visit; we had Arab countries and we had the prime minister of Israel in the same room, talking about a common threat. We didn't coach them. We didn't train them. They showed up and each made clear that the biggest threat to the stability and the safety of their own people is the Islamic Republic of Iran. You know the history.

The Arabs and the Israelis have a long history. It has not been sitting in a room together, talking about how to push back on a threat to protect their own people. It was historic. It was important. We think it's going to lead to great things in the months and years ahead. And the United States is determined. The pressure campaign is aimed at a singular thing: it is to deny wealth to Qasem Soleimani and to Rouhani and Zarif so that they can commit terror. They're the world's largest state sponsor of terror – so that they don't have the wealth and resources to commit terror acts all around the world, including their assassination campaign in the heart of Europe.

QUESTION: Now, I can't have the Secretary of State in front of me today without asking, even though I know that the building of the wall is not in your ministry, but falls under the department of home security, and I know that you support it, but do you think it's justified to declare an emergency to get the money for it?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Absolutely.

QUESTION: That's a clear answer.

Is it round-up?

MR PALLADINO: We're done. We've got to wrap it up.

(Break.)

QUESTION: That's the thing. You've been Secretary of State for a year. If everything goes to plan, you have two more years. We live in interesting times, to put it mildly. What are your priorities? Like what do you want to have achieved in two years' time? You don't change the world, but where do you want to be in two years' time?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, so three things. One, I lead a big organization, the United States Department of State. I want to make sure that team is ready and capable of delivering American diplomacy in every corner of the world in a professional way long after I'm gone, so I spend a lot of time building out the team and working to make the State Department effective and great partners for countries like Iceland.

Second, President Trump is very focused on the issue of nuclear proliferation and the risk that nuclear weapons pose to the world. In a couple weeks he will travel – I'll go along with him – to Hanoi, where he will again meet with Chairman Kim Jong-un, and I hope we can make a material decrease in the risk that his – that Kim Jong-un's nuclear weapons pose to the world.

The final thing is we want to make sure that international institutions are fit to function. Many of these – NATO, the IMF – lots of international institutions were built decades ago, and President Trump is committed to making sure we ask the question, do they still work? Where they do, United States is incredibly supportive; where they don't, we want to fix them. We want to make sure that the set of rules was in place, that the goals that those institutions were created for, the problems they were intended to solve are actually the problems that they're working on effectively. And if we can do that, if I can be a small part of helping that take place, I'll think – I'll have considered my time as the Secretary of State a success.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for being with us.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much, ma'am.

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