

Press Releases: Interview With Wilfred Frost of CNBC

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you for having me. It's a privilege to be with you today.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Wilfred, great to see you again.

QUESTION: So you're traveling off to the Middle East this afternoon to give reassurance to your allies in the region. Reassurance about what specifically?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, it's not so much reassurance. We're traveling, we'll visit eight or nine countries along the way to share with them a couple ideas. First – and they know this: America is there. We're there to continue to do the things that need to be done to protect the American people and to ensure Middle East stability.

Second: There's been a lot of noise about this withdrawal from Syria, and we want to make sure they understand completely what that means. There's no change in our commitment to the defeat of the caliphate or of ISIS globally. There's no change in our counter-Iran strategy. America is still committed to taking down the malign influence that the Islamic of Iran – that those activities – the risks that those activities present to the world. There's no change. It's a change in tactics – we're going to withdraw our 2,000 soldiers from Syria – but the mission, the purpose for which we have been involved for the 24 months in the administration, remains in full. That's why we're heading there. We're going to continue to build up the alliances with those partners in ways that are very important for the security of the American people.

QUESTION: I guess some of your allies in the region are a little more nervous than others. How sure are you – to use your own words, sir – that the Turks won't slaughter the Kurds?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, President Erdogan made a commitment to President

Trump as the two of them were discussing what this ought to look like; that the Turks would continue the counter-ISIS campaign after our departure, and that the Turks would ensure that the folks that we'd fought with, that had assisted us in the counter-ISIS campaign would be protected. That's why Ambassador Bolton is there later today or tomorrow, to have a conversation with the Turks about how we will effectuate that in light of the U.S. withdrawal.

QUESTION: Do you trust President Erdogan personally? It seems that President Trump has gone from considering him friend to foe back to friend again in fairly quick succession.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Look, my sense in all of these things in my world internationally is it's about acts on the ground, it's about actions, it's what we actually do. Commitments are important and then making sure that we follow through on those commitments matters an awful lot. That's true for lots of parties, including our NATO ally, Turkey.

QUESTION: You mentioned you're visiting lots of countries – Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait. Is this the anti-Iran tour?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So again, it – we want great things for the Iranian people. That's been the mission of President Trump's administration. We want the Iranian people to have a voice and to be able to control their own leadership, to take the revolutionary activity of Iran and stop the risk associated with it – the risk to the world and, frankly, the risk that comes with all the money and lives that have been spent by the Iranian people to effectuate these policies that we don't think are in line with what the Iranian people really want.

And so an element of this trip is absolutely to continue to build up the coalition – the coalition that includes Gulf states, the coalition that includes Israel, the coalition that includes European countries and Asian countries all around the world that understand that the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism needs to cease that activity.

QUESTION: Would you like to see your European allies back your hardline on Iran more vociferously than they have?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Absolutely. I'd like to see everyone in the world continue to assist the United States and the Gulf states and Israel in this effort. It's an important campaign and the revolutionary nature of the Iranian regime presents a real risk to the entire world.

QUESTION: I want to move on and talk about China. Mr. Secretary, has the trade war with China impacted your job, made it harder? Has it hurt diplomacy?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Trade is an element of what it is that we do. So we have many challenges that were identified in the President's National Security Strategy on China. Trade is certainly amongst them, but we're making progress there. I hope we continue to make progress, and I hope too that we'll make

progress on all of the other places where China is not behaving in the way we wish it would, whether that's their cyber activity that has had a real impact, whether that's the theft of intellectual property, which has hurt American businesses. All of these things and trade on top of it are part of what U.S. diplomats are confronted with each day, and so it's been a part of our conversation for our entire time in office.

QUESTION: Is China's cyber capability stronger than the U.S.'s?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I don't think there's anyone that rivals U.S. capacity to deliver whatever dimension of global power is needed. That's certainly the case in cyber as well.

QUESTION: And when it comes to North Korea, is full denuclearization possible before the trade dispute is settled, or are those two issues linked together?

SECRETARY POMPEO: The Chinese have been very clear to us that these are separate issues. Their behavior has demonstrated that as well, and we appreciate that. China has actually been a good partner in our effort to reduce the risk to the world from North Korea's nuclear capability. I expect they will continue to do so.

QUESTION: I wanted to move on and talk about Brexit. Your ambassador to London last week, Ambassador Johnson, said that the UK was, quote, "in need of leadership" on Brexit. Is that the official State Department view of Theresa May's handling of Brexit?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We've been pretty clear from the beginning the UK people made a sovereign decision with respect to Brexit. We respect that. We do hope that between – as between the EU and the UK, they can come to an agreement so that there aren't negative ramifications that flow. Negative ramifications from a hard Brexit related to not only commerce and trade, but importantly to the national security issues that we have with the British as well as with the European Union. Those are important national security concerns, and so I'm hopeful that all the leaders – the leaders in the EU, the leaders in the United Kingdom – will find a way to come together to make sure that this transition is effective.

QUESTION: You made a speech to Brussels – in Brussels 4th of December. And you said, quote, "Our mission is to reassert our sovereignty... we want our friends to help us and to exert their sovereignty as well." As I said, a speech to Brussels no less. Does that suggest that a fuller version of Brexit is something you think is sensible for the UK?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So the speech wasn't aimed at any particular action. Brexit was a small part of the remarks that I gave. What was really important about that is we do think it's an absolute imperative that multilateral organizations – whether that's the United Nations or the International Criminal Courts – are effective at delivering what their stated missions were. That goes for all of these organizations, the EU included. They need to be sure in every instance that the purpose for which they were intended, taking care of the people that they are deemed – that they have been

entrusted to protect and to serve are actually protected and served by those entities. That's what the remarks were about. It is about making sure that nation-states exercise their sovereignty for the good of their own people.

QUESTION: I just wanted to touch back in the Middle East and ask about Saudi Arabia, and whether or not oil prices being low has affected the sort of level of rebuke you've placed on Saudi Arabia for the Khashoggi murder. If oil prices rose again, would you and the President up the ante somewhat?

SECRETARY POMPEO: They're disconnected. We've taken a very clear message to the world with respect to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. This was a heinous act, it's unacceptable, it's inconsistent with the way nations ought to behave around the world. We've told the Saudis that. We've held Saudi citizens accountable for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. We will continue to do so as new facts arise. And at the same time, we're going to continue to do the things that protect the American people, and that includes a deep and lasting relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

QUESTION: Just to round things off, Mr. Secretary – I mean, has the shutdown made your job a lot harder?

SECRETARY POMPEO: No. No. Look, the State Department operates in difficult conditions all around the world. I hope the shutdown will end because I just think it's better, but we have an important goal there, the administration has an important goal there that the President's trying to achieve. But the State Department will continue to perform its functions around the world in a way that keeps the American citizens safe and performs its diplomatic function. We'll do that no matter what's thrown at us.

QUESTION: And just – I mean, with the shutdown itself, with the Democrats taking control of the House, the departures of the likes of General Kelly and General Mattis, has there been a sense of pressure in the administration? Has it been the toughest couple of months yet since you've been in your role?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Every day is tough. (Laughter.) And I expect every day going forward will be difficult as well. It's a complicated world. America is an important player all across the globe. We're doing well, we're performing our mission, and the team here at the State Department is prepared to continue to do that throughout 2019.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, I appreciate your time. Thank you very much.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much, Wilfred. Wonderful to be with you.

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