

Press Releases: Previewing Secretary Pompeo's Upcoming Trip to Budapest, Bratislava, Warsaw, Brussels, and Reykjavik

Special Briefing
Senior Administration Officials
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Good morning. Thank you. And thank you, everyone, for joining us this morning for this background call on Secretary Pompeo's upcoming trip to Budapest, Bratislava, Warsaw, Brussels, and Reykjavik. Joining us today are [Senior Administration Official One]. And we also have [Senior Administration Official Two]. They'll give a brief overview of the trip and the activities of the trip, and then we'll turn it over – we'll open it up for some questions. And as a reminder, this call is on background. So now I will turn it over to Senior Administration Official Number One.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: So thank you, everyone, for taking the call. And I'll just start from the top and give a description of the trip, and then happy to discuss additional questions.

Secretary Pompeo will have five stops on this trip to Europe. He'll start in Budapest, go to Bratislava, Warsaw, Brussels, and then stop off on Reykjavik on the way back. So this is from February 11th to February 15th.

On the 11th he'll start in Budapest, where he will meet with Prime Minister Orban, Foreign Minister Szijjarto, Defense Minister Benko. Some of the themes that will be addressed in Budapest: first of all, our ongoing efforts to bolster the security relationship, to counter Russian aggression, strengthen NATO deterrence. A couple things that will be discussed in particular: one is the defense cooperation agreement. I think as most of you know, we have had talks underway for a few months now with both Hungary and Slovakia on defense cooperation agreements. We've made some progress in negotiations this week; we'll see where we stand next week. Also some discussions on air and missile defense, and I would expect to see the Secretary acknowledge Hungary's role in Afghanistan and the D-ISIS coalition.

Also in Hungary, we will continue to push for energy diversification in Central Europe. The Secretary will urge Hungary to engage more robustly on completion of Krk Island for LNG import as well as the BRUA pipeline and

discourage Hungary from support for TurkStream. We will also discuss regional cooperation and stability. The U.S. will make clear our support for Visegrad Four and the Three Seas Initiative as platforms to push back on Chinese and Russian influence in the region and press Hungarian leaders to drop their block of NATO engagement with Ukraine.

The Secretary will also express support for civil society. His first meeting in Budapest will be with a group of leaders from NGOs. He wants to hear their views on the full spectrum of issues in Hungary. In Budapest, and also in Bratislava, the Secretary will be announcing several new initiatives that the U.S. will be unveiling in 2019 to strengthen U.S. engagement across Central Europe and the Visegrad region that includes initiatives in anti-corruption, journalism, youth exchanges, and people-to-people contacts. And as many of you know, this is part of a larger effort that we have been planning for some time for 2019 to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the end of communism.

Finally, in Hungary, the Secretary will give particular focus to the role of China in Central Europe and express our concerns about the growing presence of Huawei in Hungary and urge regional leaders to heed the warnings of countries from Asia Pacific who have found themselves in difficult straits as a result of working too closely with the Chinese.

In Slovakia, the Secretary will meet with President Kiska, Prime Minister Pellegrini, and Foreign Minister Lajcak to discuss U.S. – the U.S.-Slovak security relationships. As I mentioned, we have a defense cooperation agreement negotiation underway with Slovakia. The Secretary will welcome Slovakia's decision to purchase F-16. We will also talk to the Slovaks about their priorities under the OSCE chairmanship, which Slovakia currently holds. We will continue to stress the central importance of strengthening the OSCE role in Ukraine and particularly focus on the role of the special monitoring mission and the need to heighten U.S. and EU responses to Hungarian – sorry, to Russian aggression in the November Kerch Strait attack.

The Secretary will visit with civil society and a group of youth in Slovakia and pay his respects at the Gate of Freedom Memorial. As some of you know, this is a site where more than 400 people died attempting to escape from communist Czechoslovakia to freedom in Austria. And we'll mark the 30th anniversary of the end of communism.

This will be a theme in all three of the Central Europe stops – Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland – that this is the 30th anniversary of 1989 and the events that resulted in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism. The Secretary will call attention to what we are – were fighting for in 1989: freedom, individual liberty, free markets. The Secretary will underscore the role in all three of these stops that the U.S. played in supporting that transition and encourage U.S. allies to strengthen their resistance to Russia and China across the board in commerce, energy, security, and rule of law. He will emphasize that the United States intends to compete for positive influence in Central Europe, as outlined by the National Security Strategy. And I think you can expect to see his message in all three of these stops be that we expect those whom the U.S. helps to not abet our rivals, and that it's up to our allies to keep Europe free.

In Poland, the Secretary will meet with Foreign Minister Czaputowicz, discuss security and energy issues, build on the strong relationship with the – that the United States has with Poland. He will also, as most of you know, cohost with Poland the Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East, and I will defer to my colleague from the NEA Bureau to elaborate on that.

The Secretary will then make his way to Brussels where he will meet with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Frederica Mogherini to discuss U.S.-EU cooperation on a wide range of issues, but in particular, to keep the focus on our efforts to restore democracy in Venezuela and support Venezuelan Interim President Juan Guaido and the National Assembly, as well as the importance of strengthening European security and addressing the threats posed by Iran and Russia.

And finally, the Secretary will travel to Reykjavik, Iceland on February 15th. In Reykjavik, the Secretary will meet with Prime Minister Jakobsdottir and Foreign Minister Thordarson and discuss security issues in the high north – North Atlantic and, in particular, engage with our friends in Iceland on their upcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council. That's a brief *tour de table*.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Senior Administration Official Number Two, would you like to make any opening remarks?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Good morning. We've talked quite extensively about the forum in Warsaw, so I'm not sure how much more I could add to that. My colleague Robert Palladino addressed it yesterday. But for those who haven't been tracking it 100 percent, you know it's an opportunity for the countries who have been invited to share their perspectives both within and outside the region. We've received a very positive responses from our partners and allies about the conference. No particular country or issue will dominate the agenda of the conference. We'll be able to talk about regional crises and their effects on civilians. We'll talk about missile development and proliferation, cybersecurity, emerging threats, the energy sector, and of course, countering extremism and illicit finance.

So we're very much looking forward to robust exchanges on all of these issues and very grateful for the Polish Government for cohosting this event with us.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Now we'll go to questions.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to ask a question, please press * then 1 on your touchtone phone. You will hear a tone indicating that you are in queue. You may remove yourself from queue at any time by depressing the # key. Once again, please press * then 1 for questions.

MODERATOR: All right. We'll go to our first question.

OPERATOR: And that is from Nick Wadhams, Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks very much. I just had a quick question for each of you.

[Senior Administration Official One], I'm wondering whether given the U.S. effort to bring Hungary closer into the fold and discourage it from cooperation with China –

MODERATOR: Nick, you're kind of hard to hear. I'm sorry to interrupt. Could you speak into your mouthpiece?

QUESTION: Can you hear me now?

MODERATOR: Yes, better. Thank you.

QUESTION: Okay. [Senior Administration Official One], I'm wondering whether the U.S. is disappointed in Hungary given the degree to which it's now cooperated with Huawei. You mentioned this a little bit, but could you expand on that given how much the U.S. has sort of tried to pull Hungary closer into the fold? It seems like Huawei has made Hungary a pretty major hub for its operations.

And then also, [Senior Administration Official Two], on the Warsaw Conference, is the U.S. disappointed with the responses it's gotten so far? As far as I understand, several European countries will not be sending foreign minister to that conference because they're concerned about the message or the fact that the U.S. may be trying to use this essentially as a means to bash Iran. Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Nick, thanks for that question. As you know, what we're trying to do in Central Europe is increase U.S. diplomatic, commercial, military, and cultural engagement across the board. Our view is that that is overdue and needed, that it has been in part the lack of robust U.S. engagement over the last decade or so in Central Europe that has created the vacuums that China and Russia have very readily filled. I think Huawei's strong presence in China – which, if I'm not mistaken, is the largest telecom presence outside of China – is indicative of that pattern.

So our efforts at diplomatic engagement are aimed at competing for positive influence and giving allies in the region a indication of U.S. support and interest in order to have alternatives to China and Russia. And that's been our emphasis across the board, by the way, in our efforts to increase defense cooperation, what we're doing in energy diversification, our restructuring of OPIC, and effort to provide alternatives to Chinese financing in the region, and of course, also some of the initiatives the Secretary will be talking about with NGOs.

But I think what I would underscore is that it's been the lack of U.S. engagement that has helped to create some of those vacuums. That's part of what we want to address. And to just give you a data point that underscores that, the last time a U.S. secretary of state was in Bratislava, for example, was 20 years ago. If you look at, say, France, we've had Secretary of State visits something like 65, 66 times in that 20-year period. Vladimir Putin showed up in Hungary twice last year alone, and the last time a U.S. president was in Budapest was 2006. So our message is we have to show up or expect to lose. We've been at this approach now for about a year. We know the

results of lack of U.S. engagement in the region, so we want to step up that diplomatic engagement.

The Secretary's visit is, by my count, the 14th senior U.S. official in the last 12 months to go to Central Europe, so we are trying to send a very strong message to our allies as well as our adversaries, and we don't agree with the Central European countries or with Hungary on everything, but we believe that we need to treat allies like allies and expect them to behave accordingly.

MODERATOR: Senior Administration Official Number Two, would you like to –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Sure, yes. Nick, thank you. No, we're not disappointed with the turnout. In fact, the RSVP roster has grown since our initial press call on January 28th. We think that we have critical mass here to engage on the topics that I mentioned and address the overall topic of peace and security.

There are side discussions, even a plenary on Yemen for example. Why would it not be in the interests of the other invited countries not to participate in a meeting that is getting at the Yemen conflict, whose resolution is in the interests of all of our European allies? So we think anybody who doesn't participate is going to be missing out, but we've got a good roster. I think we have an excellent agenda set forward, so I think we're looking – very much looking forward to making as much progress with those who are there on these tough regional issues.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll go to the next question now.

OPERATOR: And next we have Carol Morello, *Washington Post*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing this. I have a quick question for each of you.

Official Number Two, this is a question I asked in another call a couple days ago and it was ignored, so I'm hoping I can get an answer this time. Do you expect to have any discussion with the Saudis or anyone on the Khashoggi murder, perhaps urging the Saudis to tell them to stop impeding the UN investigation, as the special rapporteur said, and showing concern about the intercept showing MBS talked about using a bullet on Khashoggi a year earlier?

And Official Number One, in addition to Huawei, will you be talking to Mr. Orban at all about your – his seemingly coziness with Vladimir Putin and attempt to cultivate better relations?

MODERATOR: We can start with Senior Administration Official Number Two.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Carol, thank you. I mean, the resolution of the Khashoggi investigation is a priority for the administration. The Secretary had an opportunity to meet with the minister of state for Saudi Arabia yesterday. You'll see from that readout that he, as he has in practically every engagement that he's had with the Saudis, he's raised the Khashoggi matter and pushing for those same benchmarks that we have been

pushing for – credibility, accountability, timely response to the investigation. So that’s an ongoing issue that we continue to work with the Saudis.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Hey, Carol. Good to hear your voice. Thanks for the question. The short answer is yes, I do expect us to see the Secretary raise with Prime Minister Orban the problem that we have with his interactions with Vladimir Putin. This is part of a broader pattern across Central Europe.

I would expect to see the Secretary discuss with his senior Hungarian interlocutors the full range of issues in our bilateral relationship, but I would say part of our concern is very much the scale of corruption in Central Europe, and that includes Hungary. The corruption problem creates pathways for Russian and Chinese influence, so you really can’t separate the two. And this is one of the initiatives that we will be unveiling is U.S. support for efforts to look more closely at the intersections between corruption and Russian and Chinese influence.

I would also expect to see the Secretary raise the Russian presence in Central European energy grid and energy sector. I’m thinking in particular of the Paks nuclear plant but also Hungary’s support for TurkStream and our efforts to encourage alternatives to that like Krk Island LNG terminal, which will only succeed if the Hungarians show a degree of support for that project that is greater than they have shown to date.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We’ll go to the next question now.

OPERATOR: The next question is from Christina Ruffini, CBS News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Good morning, guys. Thanks for doing this. I wanted to talk about Bratislava and Budapest. I’m wondering if you can give us any guidance. Were those stops planned before or after the U.S. made the final decision to withdraw from INF, and is that something you’ll be discussing possible future plans to place short or intermediate-range missiles in those countries? Is that something that will come up in discussions while we’re there? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah, thanks, Christina. I appreciate the question. The effort to engage Central Europe and these stops in particular, Bratislava and Budapest, as I mentioned a moment ago, are part of a larger U.S. engagement strategy to coincide with the 30th anniversary of 1989. The initiatives that the Secretary will be unveiling in cultural ties and people-to-people links, all of this has been in the works now for many months to get ready for this anniversary year. As I mentioned, our strategy has emphasized the need for increased U.S. diplomatic, commercial, and people-to-people engagement with that region. So from where I sit, I don’t see anything about our efforts in Central Europe that have anything to do with where the U.S. has been at on INF.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We’ll take the next question.

OPERATOR: The next question is from Shaun Tandon, AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, thanks for doing this call. I wanted to follow up with Senior Official Number One on Hungary. You mentioned the concerns with the Orban government. As you know, the previous administration gave a bit more of a cold shoulder to the Hungarian Government. I wanted to see – you say you’ll mention human rights and other concerns. Is there any concern that perhaps the Secretary’s presence could embolden the Orban government? Was that a factor, particularly as the Secretary has spoken in Davos and elsewhere of change throughout the world – Brexit, the Trump election, Bolsonaro? Is there any concern that this would be seen as more of a – as more of something to boost Orban in his role domestically?

And for Senior Official Number Two, just one quick question. I see that Poland has announced that the Palestinians have been invited to the Warsaw conference. I wanted to see if you could explain that a little bit to see whether you expect any talks on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, if you think the Palestinians would accept this offer. Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Shaun, thank you for that question. What I would say is the current state of affairs in Hungary and in Central Europe, which includes many of the problems that we have in these relationships, came after about a decade of U.S. disengagement, and that disengagement was not only political in nature but I think strategically a deprioritization of Central Europe. And we know what resulted from that disengagement. So the vacuums that were created by the U.S. not being more strongly present in these places – those vacuums, they do get filled, they have gotten filled. So it’s in that period of time that we have seen China come forward with the 16+1 Initiative, that we’ve seen Vladimir Putin become much more aggressive with a full-court press in this region, and yes, we do have concerns in rule of law and corruption and energy security.

But the purpose of diplomacy is to talk and is to engage. We’re using diplomacy to look for areas of shared interest that have been neglected in the recent past. We’re also using that diplomacy as we have in recent months as a messaging opportunity to talk about where our disagreements are with some of these governments. That’s the purpose of diplomacy. And I would just underscore that these are NATO allies. We have diplomatic interactions with countries that are not NATO allies on a very regular basis. Secretary Pompeo has been traveling to North Korea and to other places with egregious human rights records because our diplomacy can lead to greater security. So we’re using diplomacy for that purpose.

What I would say is that our approach on Hungary and Central Europe is consistent with the U.S. approach as outlined by the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy to compete for influence in vulnerable regions of the world, not just Europe, where Chinese influence in particular is growing. And in that regard, our effort with Hungary and with Slovakia is complementary to our actions in Asia Pacific, it’s consistent with what we’re doing in Serbia, Belarus, Cyprus, Azerbaijan. The goal is to wrong-foot the West’s rivals in places where they have gained bridgeheads, and we cannot do that without diplomacy.

So I think that's going to be the main focus. I think you can expect to see the U.S. delegation talk to our friends in Central Europe about areas where we have interests that need to be rediscovered and developed, and also see us talk to our allies about areas in democracy and corruption where we have a problem and that problem is creating an inroad for authoritarian rivals.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Senior Administration Official Number Two.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Yes, indeed. As noted, we have asked the Palestinian Authority to send representatives to this event. Senior Advisor to the President Jared Kushner is also confirmed to participate. He will discuss the administration's efforts to advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians and also take questions from the audience. So we would very much welcome the Palestinian Authority's perspectives during the discussion, but I do want to emphasize that this is not a negotiation but a discussion, and we look forward to fostering a constructive conversation in Warsaw.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll take the next question.

OPERATOR: The next question is from the line of Nadia Charters, Al Arabiya. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. It's Al Arabiya. Actually, I was asking the same question about the Palestinian issues that – since you mentioned that Mr. Kushner is addressing this conference. I'm just wondering why now, why he feels that this is the right platform since there have been, I will say, a little bit of silence on the peace deal. So what he hopes to achieve from this conference, and is this any bilateral meeting that he will have with the Israelis, with Netanyahu, with the Arab delegation? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Thank you. I don't think we have all the answers to the bilateral engagements. I'd refer you to Mr. Kushner and the White House for those schedules. But obviously, many Arab leaders are going to be here, there will be numerous bilateral engagements, Prime Minister Netanyahu's also scheduled to be there, et cetera. So – but I think the primary point here is this is a conference on peace and security in the Middle East, so it's a ripe opportunity, I think, to have a conversation about the Arab – sorry, the Israeli and Palestinian issue as well as some of the other issues like Yemen and Syria that I highlighted at the outset.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll take the next question.

OPERATOR: One moment, please. Next moment is from Shesgreen of *USA Today*. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, this is Deirdre Shesgreen. Thanks for taking my question. It's also about Mr. Kushner's agenda. Can you tell – can you say if he will be providing details about the peace plan, or just a broad overview? And will he be looking to bring other countries on board or what's the goal? And then how much will Secretary Pompeo be involved in that effort?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: I think I would refer you to the White House specifically for his schedule and for the kinds of interventions that

he is planning to have, but all I can stress, I think, is that this whole event is structured for sort of free-flowing and dynamic conversation. We've also said all along the way that we're not expecting everybody to agree on all of the issues. How could that be? So I think the whole idea here is to bring together a good cross-section of global leadership who are interested in making progress on some of the core issues in the Middle East.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And next we have Joel Gehrke, *Washington Examiner*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for doing this. This is for Official Number One on the Arctic. Do you think that China wants to project military power in the Arctic? And can you elaborate, just for explaining to readers, on some of the ramifications for Americans of a security competition in the Arctic with China or Russia?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Yes, Joel, thank you for the question. That's a great question. It's an area of enormous concern for us. I think it's something that hasn't been closely studied enough in the recent past.

The short answer to your question would be yes, I do see the Chinese as creating – they're certainly creating the potential, should they wish to do so in the future, to use military capabilities in the Arctic. I think the Chinese and Russians are a couple of steps ahead of the United States and European Union in realizing the strategic importance of the Arctic as a resource zone, and part of the issue here, and part of the reason for the stop in Iceland, is I think the – I mentioned a minute ago the problem of the rivals of the West developing bridgeheads in various parts of the world. We see Iceland as a place where the Chinese would like to develop a bridgehead, including through port capabilities, and doing so would position Iceland to be a natural hub for China vis-a-vis the Arctic, and it's a classic example of a place where the United States needs to show up more often diplomatically in order to make it clear to our allies that they have our support and to give them alternatives to Chinese courtship.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll take the next question. We'll take the next question now.

OPERATOR: (Inaudible) question's Aime Williams, *Financial Times*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Oh, hi, thanks for doing this. On Huawei, I was wondering if you were more concerned about their presence in Eastern Europe than you are about their presence in Western Europe, and if you could expand a little on why, if that is the case.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Aime, thank you. Thank you, Aime. That's a terrific question. The short answer is yes, we are more concerned about the Chinese presence, the Huawei presence in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe.

I should be clear that, of course, we see this as being problematic across the board, but I think what sets Central and Eastern Europe apart is you have a large number of mostly small and midsize states that – many of whom have a higher propensity to corruption. And if you look, for example, at the 16+1 initiative, it underscores the importance of Central and Eastern Europe in Chinese global strategic plans. 16+1 was actually founded a year before the Belt Road Initiative.

And so I think from a Chinese perspective, they see in Central and Eastern Europe EU member-states – I think 12 out of the 16 members of 16+1 are EU memberships or EU member-states. So they see relatively small countries with a recent history of communism with significant pathways of corruption that lend themselves more readily to state penetration in key sectors, and then they have a springboard to operate within EU fora. And all you need to do is look at the success that the Chinese have had importing individual Eastern European member-states of the EU to block the EU on things like recognition of the human rights problem in China or a support for the U.S. position in the South China Sea.

So yes, I do see Central and Eastern Europe as being a prime target for China and being perhaps more vulnerable than some other parts of Europe to the success of that agenda.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We have time for one more question.

OPERATOR: And that question is from Jessica Donati, *Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you so much for doing this. I wanted to ask, is Brian Hook still going to the conference? And if there are going to be sessions on Iran, what is the aim? What kind of progress are you looking to get there on the (inaudible) of Iran?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Yes. Brian will be going to the conference, and when we talk about the issues of Middle East peace and security, obviously Iran is a key topic. So there will be discussions about Iran's influence in the Middle East, what we can do to help get Iran on a more helpful footing than it has been, to collectively push back on some of its malign behavior in the region. So I think those topics will certainly surface at the event.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, everyone. Thanks to our speakers for joining us and thank you all for dialing in. We wish you a (inaudible) rest of the afternoon. The transcript will be available in a couple hours on our website. Thank you so much.

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