

Press Releases: Interview With Hadley Gamble of CNBC

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for joining CNBC.

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's great to be with you.

QUESTION: I want to kick off by asking you specifically about what we've seen in the last couple of weeks. We've seen a ratcheting up of the rhetoric when it comes to Iran. We've also seen, of course, more pressure coming from the Trump Administration in the form of sanctions on individuals, on commodities, on oil, and of course, lots of questions about whether or not what we've seen in terms of the movement of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* toward the Gulf and the possible deployment of a Patriot system to the Gulf as well is maybe signaling that we're going to have imminent conflict. How do you respond to that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: President Trump has been clear since the beginning of his administration, and then a year ago – just a bit over a year ago now – we withdrew from the nuclear deal. It was a terrible deal. All kinds of bad things happened during the deal. They increased terrorism, more missile launches, and a radical increase in malign behavior from Iranians toward entities that range from the Houthis to Hizballah. All of that occurred while we were in the JCPOA, and President Trump is determined to change that behavior from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

We laid down in May of last year the 12 simple things we're asking Iran to do. And the pressure that you see – the economic pressure we have applied, the sanctions that we've put in place, the efforts we've made to help Iraq stand up its own independent sovereign government, the support we provide to Lebanon – are all aimed at the same thing. Iran is the major destabilizing influence in the Middle East, and we aim to fix that.

QUESTION: And walk me through what led you in recent weeks to this uptick in terms of the military pressure that you're placing in the Persian Gulf?

SECRETARY POMPEO: What we've seen from the Iranians is increased threats, and we've seen this reporting. It's real. It appears to be something that is current; that is, things we're worried about today. So we've done all of our things to increase our security posture to the best of our ability, but we also wanted to make sure that we had deterrent forces in place, so in the event that Iran decided to come after an American interest, whether that be in Iraq or in Afghanistan or Yemen or any place in the Middle East, we were prepared to respond in an appropriate way.

QUESTION: That's a whole lot of military hardware that's going into the Persian Gulf right now. It's a place that I've lived over the last 10 years. I mean, in terms of this uptick, there are a lot of fears, and whether they be in the military itself or externally in the region, about potential for miscalculations there. How worried are you?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're not going to miscalculate. Our aim is not war. Our aim is a change in the behavior of the Iranian leadership. We hope the Iranian people will get what they finally want and what they so richly deserve.

The forces that we're putting in place, the forces we've had in the region before – you know we often have carriers in the Persian Gulf. But the President wanted to make sure that in the event that something took place, we were prepared to respond to it in an appropriate way. And as the Secretary of State, I wanted to make sure that we had all the political-diplomatic tools in the right place, and we wanted to make sure that we can provide the President with an option set in the event that the Iranians make a bad decision.

QUESTION: I want to ask you about something in terms of what happened over the last week or so. You made a surprise trip to Baghdad, and amongst all of the press reports that we saw in the last several days there was a great deal of surprise, I think, on the part of our European allies, potentially even the German chancellor herself, as regarding the fact that you missed a meeting that was a longstanding meeting. Do you want to set the record straight there, kind of clear the air?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. Look, I regret that I wasn't able to meet with Chancellor Merkel and my counterpart, Heiko Maas. We've rescheduled them already. It's back on the calendar. I'm confident we'll do this in the next couple weeks. We've not announced the exact date, but I think we've got it now set that on a day that works for both she and I. I very much want to have that conversation and –

QUESTION: Were you surprised by that backlash that you saw in the press?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Only in this. Our European partners are important allies on this issue with respect to the Islamic Republic of Iran, right? There's assassination campaigns taking place in their countries. They, even the Germans, have arrested Qods Force officials inside of their country.

And they've seen too – we've seen European businesses respond. They

understand America's sanctions. They have almost entirely withdrawn their business operations from the Islamic Republic of Iran in spite of their government's efforts to keep some of them in there.

This is the pressure that we hope to convince the leadership in Iran that there's another path, that there's a straightforward way forward for them. And we're happy – as President Trump says, we're happy to sit down and have a conversation with them, begin to have talks about ensuring they have no pathway to a nuclear weapon – something that was given to them under the JCPOA; that their missile program comply with 2231 – that's a UN Security Council resolution; and that this adventurism, this revolutionary effort to control capitals in Damascus and in Beirut and in Sanaa, that that's not appropriate, it's destabilizing. And we're asking them to conform to the normal things that normal nations do – nothing more.

QUESTION: You mentioned the difference between European businesses, German businesses for example, versus the actions of some of these European governments. Walk me through what you see as the relationship with the United States in that post-Merkel world.

SECRETARY POMPEO: So look, when I talk to the Europeans, they get the threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the nuclear file, they entered into an agreement and they have taken a different path. President Trump made the right decision to withdraw. It was the right decision for America. They've made the sovereign choices for their nation.

But when we talk about threats of terror, and we talk about threats of destabilization, and we understand the risk from Hizballah and the Houthis and from Iraqi militias under Iranian control and not under the control of the Iraqi Government, which is what we want, I think the Europeans understand and they share our concerns.

QUESTION: Apparently, your meetings in Baghdad led to more meetings (inaudible) a great deal of worry there that anything that might happen to U.S. troops or U.S. military installations could have a major backlash for Iraqis and their government. What's your take there?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. So that's not our intention. Our intention is to help the Iraqis with the needs that they have. ISIS still remains in Iraq. We have forces on the ground there working to help the Iraqi Security Forces stand up and rebuild themselves so that we can continue to keep ISIS risk at bay. They understand that we're there for that purpose.

And we don't want Iraq in the middle of this. This is what we went to tell them. They needed to make sure that Americans were safe at the facilities that they have invited us to be in; and second, they needed to understand that if there were actions taken against American forces in Iraq that we would respond forcefully and appropriately against Iran; that that response likely would not take place in Iraq but would likely take place in Iran itself.

QUESTION: Of course, you've mentioned that the Trump administration,

President Trump, has said again and again that he doesn't want a conflict directly with Iran.

SECRETARY POMPEO: None of us do. None of –

QUESTION: But you set up a situation whereby you could respond, as you say, militarily if you needed to. But this, of course, is a president that campaigned on the idea that we need to end these foreign engagements, we need to bring the troops back from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. How worried are you that we could escalate the situation?

SECRETARY POMPEO: This is the President who made clear that we would protect America's interests, right? He campaigned on America First. If a nation strikes an American interest, President Trump has been unambiguous. You saw the strong action he took when Assad used chemical weapons, right? We drew a red line, and when we made the commitments, President Trump executed that.

In the same way, an attack on American interests from an Iranian-led force, whether it's an Iranian proper or it's an entity that is controlled by the Iranians, we will hold the responsible party accountable. President Trump has been very clear about that. Our response will be appropriate.

QUESTION: Obviously, investors and governments have been keenly watching what all of this has done in terms of movements in the oil markets, the moves in energy markets generally. How do you respond to the idea that the United States has realized what other governments in the past, particularly Saudi Arabia, have, which is that oil can be used as a weapon?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Simple math. That's how I respond. About a year ago, President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA. You'll recall – I'll bet on your television station – folks were talking about how oil prices would rise, they'd spike; it would be chaos in the crude oil markets. In fact, crude oil prices today are lower than they were the day that we withdrew from the JCPOA. Lower. Not higher, not radically higher, not crazy higher, not chaos, but lower.

We've done the good diplomatic work to ensure that our oil markets are adequately supplied. We've worked with our partners. American economic excellence, freedom, deregulation has created enormous capacity for crude oil production in the United States itself. And that combination of good work around the world and work inside the United States has continued to make sure that crude oil markets are adequately supplied, and I am convinced they will continue to be.

QUESTION: And when it turns to higher oil prices, obviously higher oil prices, good news for countries like Saudi Arabia and other GCC nations.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, but they're not higher.

QUESTION: My question would be in terms –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I mean, it's just math. It's just math. You can chart it yourself. Put the chart up on your screen. The prices are lower today than

when we withdrew from the JCPOA.

QUESTION: Well, taking Iran off the table in terms of its supplies to the markets, that actually benefits Russia.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Oil prices are lower today than when we took the first barrel of oil off the market from Iran. They were producing roughly 2.7 billion^[1] barrels per day for export. They're down to now somewhere around a million barrels per day. We're heading them towards zero. And crude oil markets, even the futures market – show them on your screen – they continue to predict that there will be adequate supply in the crude oil markets.

QUESTION: When you talk about Saudi Arabia specifically as a U.S. ally, when I spoke to Deputy U.S. Secretary of Energy several months ago at the Munich Security Conference, we had a long conversation about the nuclear file with regards to Saudi Arabia, because of course, we've heard from Mohammed bin Salman over the last couple of years. He said if Iran were to get a bomb, we would want to get a bomb as well. And he assured me that were Saudi Arabia to start working with U.S. companies that there would be a red line drawn, that they would have to subscribe to this 123 agreement, that they would not be given a green light to enrich uranium on their own. Where are we today on this? Because there has, of course, been a great deal of controversy over the potential for U.S. material and technology to make its way to Saudi Arabia.

SECRETARY POMPEO: So the United States position is very clear. We don't want any country, Saudi Arabia or Iran, to have nuclear weapons systems. We're working to prevent that in both places. I only wish that John Kerry had done that with Iran. I only wish he had gotten us a deal which would have prevented them to having a clear pathway to a nuclear weapons system. I regret it's what we're having to deal with today.

As for Saudi Arabia, we've been in negotiations with them for some time. If they are able to get their civil nuclear program right and we're able to get the security assurances we need, I assure you they'll be better security assurances than John Kerry got from Iran. But I have to say, when you talk to the Saudis, they say we want the deal Iran got. This is difficult. And so we're going to get them to the right place. And if we do, if we're successful, there'll be good outcomes for American businesses as well. This will help grow the American economy.

QUESTION: So you have no worries that we could end up with a potential arms race in the Middle East?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There's always concern. That's why I wish John Kerry had gotten a real deal. The threat of Iran having a nuclear weapon is precisely what is driving Saudi Arabia to be so concerned about where it sits today.

QUESTION: Shouldn't we be trying to prevent that at all cost?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're trying to prevent it in Iran. That's exactly what we're working on.

QUESTION: Walk me through the difficulties made for you in your position when

you have your predecessor, John Kerry, having high-level conversations with counterparts or former counterparts in Tehran. Does this make your job difficult?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's inappropriate. It's not consistent with what former secretaries of state ought to be doing, and I'll leave it at that. Suffice it to say previous secretaries of state ought to just get off the stage. When their day is done, they ought to leave foreign policy to their successors.

QUESTION: And he shouldn't be prosecuted potentially under the Logan Act?

SECRETARY POMPEO: You've heard what the President has said. I'll leave it to the Department of Justice to make decisions about prosecutions. I know only this: If you're out talking to someone that you did the deal with before, and you're urging that country to behave in a way that is inconsistent with American policy, that's not right.

QUESTION: Walk me through this. So you, in a speech a couple days ago, described China as a new kind of challenge. Where I sit in the Middle East, I have seen not only the growing Russian influence in countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE, but also the rise of China. They are now the largest foreign direct investor for the UAE, for example. And speaking to the ambassador a few days ago, he essentially told me we can't not work with China, we can't not get engaged with Asia more broadly. How worried are you about these new relationships as they continue to evolve? Does that leave the U.S. out?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Hardly. We've talked about a China a great deal. These countries understand. I think each of these countries in the Middle East understands their true partner, their true ally, is the United States of America. I think they'll continue to do that.

Look, the United States has a great deal of trade with China, and we benefit from that. The President understands that too. He wants to get those trade deals right. He wants to make them fair, reciprocal, even. He wants our businesses to be able to compete in China in the same way that Chinese businesses can compete in the United States. Those are simple asks.

As for the Middle East and frankly all around the world, we welcome China's participation as an economic actor. What we don't – what we don't welcome is China showing up and bribing people, China showing up and lending money at rates that clearly have some implication that goes well beyond any private sector entity. These are debt traps. This is in an effort to make a loan and foreclose on that loan in a way that will give China national security power or political power. And our mission, our diplomatic mission, is to ensure each of these countries understands the risks associated with that so that they can make good decisions for their country.

QUESTION: When I spoke to the ambassador, Yusif Utayba, he told me that the growing relationship that they have with China particularly is starting to make people in Washington nervous. Is that something that you're concerned about?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Our partners and allies understand clearly what America's expectations are, from how we will handle national security matters, the things that matter to keep Emiratis safe, Saudis safe, Kuwaitis safe, Bahrainis safe, and Americans safe. We will continue to work with our partners in the region. I am confident that our alliance will remain strong and that we can trade with lots of different countries and still handle the national security implications that come alongside.

QUESTION: And when we also talk about trading partners in the region – you mentioned Russia. You're headed to Russia very shortly. What do you hope to achieve from those meetings?

SECRETARY POMPEO: President Trump has asked me to go to Russia to talk about a broad range of issues. We have lots of places where I hope we can find overlapping interests with Russia. It may be the case that we can't; and where we can't, we'll go our own ways. But it's important. I remember as CIA Director I worked closely with the Russians on counterterror. I am convinced that those efforts were important to them. They saved American lives and Russian lives.

There are places that we'll have a value set that is radically different, that we'll have different views. In those places, we're going to protect America's interests. But in those places where we can find common ground or an overlapping interest, it's completely appropriate and indeed my duty and a necessity that we work together.

QUESTION: And we've seen the United States get very tough on countries like Iran. We've seen you get tough on North Korea as well as on China in these trade negotiations. But at the same time, a lot of folks say, "When are we really going to get tough on Russia?" How much of the Mueller report is going to come into the conversations that you have in coming days?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Boy, that's crazy talk. That's absolute crazy talk. And I've heard it. I've heard it from the previous administration. They say oh, we're not tough on Russia. I only wish they would have stopped the election interference. I only wish they would have put Global Magnitsky on some of the bad actors in Russia in the way the administration has. I only wish they hadn't gutted the Defense budget to the great benefit of Vladimir Putin. Right?

We put real money into our Defense Department. Vladimir Putin can't possibly think that's a good thing for him. They've got a defense budget. The actions that this administration takes I would put up against any in terms of our seriousness in pushing back on Russia and raising costs for them. And we can do that at the same time we can have conversations with them and see if there are places that we can find to work together.

QUESTION: Are you going to be able to put an end to that meddling when it comes to our next elections?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, it's a longstanding challenge for America. I've seen reporting that suggested somehow 2016 was the first time Russia had attempted

to interfere in a Western democracy anywhere in the world. Those of us in the national security world know that's simply not true. This has been a longstanding challenge where the Soviet Union and then Russia have tried to impact Western democracies, not just ours but others as well.

We'll certainly talk about that. We did pretty good work in 2018. Our team at DHS and FBI and all across the United States Government felt very good about the security of the elections in 2018 following the 2016 elections. It'll be even better in 2020. I'm confident that the American people should feel good about the security of our elections in 2020.

QUESTION: As you said, there are a lot of areas where the United States could work quite well with Russia, whether it was energy in Europe or the potential for movement on the Syria situation as well. Where are we today with Venezuela?

SECRETARY POMPEO: A series of good examples. I would add I hope we can find places we can work together in Afghanistan also. They face a – Russia faces a terror threat from Afghanistan also. I do think there are places.

On Venezuela we'll have a good conversation. I had one with Foreign Minister Lavrov when I was in Finland last week. We'll have another one when I see Foreign Minister Lavrov in Sochi and then with President Putin as well. We'll see how much progress we can make.

Our mission in Venezuela is very clear. We want no foreign interference. We don't want foreign interference from China, from Iran, from Russia, from Cuba, or anyone else. We want the Venezuelan people to have their country back and have their own democracy.

QUESTION: The Madison doctrine.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Monroe Doctrine.

QUESTION: Monroe Doctrine.

SECRETARY POMPEO: But more broadly, and more appropriately, we just want them to have a chance that they have elected Juan Guaido as their interim president through their constitution. That's appropriate and necessary, and our task is to ensure that they get to the benefits of that so that – you know the destruction that's been had upon that economy. It happened long before American sanctions. This is years and years of decay in their systems, so now you have starving children, children that are sick without medicine. That's not right. And any country that's interfering and preventing them from getting that ought to pack up, leave, allow the Venezuelan people to begin to regrow their economy and rebuild their nation.

QUESTION: So many people would say about – that's what that the sanctions on Iran were really doing the Iranian people, particularly the economy tanking as badly as it has.

SECRETARY POMPEO: No, these sanctions are directed at the Iranian leadership to change their behavior – point blunt – point blank.

QUESTION: But it does mean the people suffer. But the people do suffer as a direct result of them.

SECRETARY POMPEO: The Iranian leadership understands the cost that's being imposed. This is a kleptocratic regime that has stolen billions of dollars and wastes the Iranian people's own money on these proxy wars all across the world. The Iranian Government, while its people are suffering – according to them – is spending money in Venezuela. They're sending forces to Venezuela. This is not a leadership that reflects what the Iranian people want, and we are determined to assist the Venezuelan people in getting the leadership regime that leads in the way that they want it to.

QUESTION: And finally, sir, I have to ask you about how you would characterize the Trump doctrine, what we've seen with regards to China, the trade war, we've seen with regards to Iran in terms of these sanctions. And what's been interesting to international investors in particular, and those very much focused on energy markets, what's happening in the Strait of Hormuz, is the fact that with all of the pressure and all of the military hardware headed that way at this moment, the President coming out just a couple days ago and essentially saying, "I'd welcome a phone call from Tehran, just call me." How do you describe the Trump doctrine?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Of course, we'd welcome that call. Of course, we want a peaceful diplomatic resolution to each of these conflicts that we've talked about here today. It makes perfect sense. It's entirely consistent.

What President Trump has done is he's – we've spoken the truth, right? The previous administrations just ignored it. China, we've called them out. They ignored the fact that intellectual property was being stolen. We've tried to push back against it, and we will. And they had forced technology transfer in China. They have a million Uighurs being detained. The previous administration turned a blind eye. We won't.

The previous administration saw that NATO countries weren't paying their fair share. This administration has called it out.

Previous administrations allowed the Human Rights Commission at the United Nations to be occupied by some of the most grotesque human rights abusers in the world. Previous administrations wouldn't call it out. We just – we're realistic. We understand the world as it is, and we're working to make it better in every one of those forums.

QUESTION: Realpolitik.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Calling it like we see it; accepting facts as they are, not papering over them; and working every day to improve America's position in the world.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for joining CNBC.

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

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