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THE CURRENT: What will Pompeo's trip mean for US policy toward Africa?

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PARTICIPANTS:

Host: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, Brookings

Guest: Witney Schneidman, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Africa Growth Initiative, Brookings; Senior International Advisor for Africa, Covington & Burling

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. These past several days, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been on a three-country trip to Africa, visiting Ethiopia, Senegal, Angola.

With us to discuss the goals & outcomes of this trip is Witney Schneidman, a nonresident senior fellow in the Africa Growth Initiative here at Brookings, and senior international advisor for Africa at Covington & Burling. Witney, thanks for being here.

SCHNEIDMAN: Thank you, Adrianna. Nice to be here.

PITA: It's been about a year and a half since a Trump cabinet official has visited. Why is Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visiting these three countries, and why now?

SCHNEIDMAN: Why now is, I mean, it's time. The Trump policies articulated in December 2018 by John Bolton who was national security advisor, and Bolton sort of structured the U.S. engagement in Africa in terms of the great power competition with China and Russia. So, Pompeo's visit is an effort to sort of advance the U.S. agenda in that context. However, since Bolton articulated policy that way, everything's gone forward. Russia's had a summit with 43 African heads of state. The Chinese continue their engagement in Africa. The Chinese foreign minister made a visit to five African countries; the first visit of the year, a tradition in Chinese foreign policy that goes back 30 years. Angela Merkel was just in Africa. So, the world's moving on, and the Trump administration has really been on its hind foot when it comes to senior-level engagement in the continent. So, Pompeo's visit is welcome in that context.

In terms of the countries, Senegal is a very important country in West Africa. It's doing very well in economic growth terms and governance terms. It's also a key partner in the security relationship vis-à-vis the Sahel. The Sahel is a major area of instability right now. Secretary Pompeo had dialogue with senior Senegalese officials. The issue of the Pentagon perhaps drawing down some of its presence in the Sahel I'm sure was discussed.

From Senegal, the secretary went to Angola; again, another strategically important country in southern Africa, under the leadership now of João Lourenço. João Lourenço has taken very bold moves to combat corruption, so Sec. Pompeo's visit there is an endorsement of the bold moves he's taking, underscoring the importance of it going forward and helping Lourenço diversify that economy away from oil and broaden participation in the private sector.

And then his last visit was to Ethiopia, which, with 107 million people is the second-most populous country on the continent. Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed received the Nobel Peace Prize, and the breadth of his reforms is truly remarkably, both economic reforms and political reforms. So, I think there's a broad sense that he needs to be successful on both counts, and Sec. Pompeo was there to endorse that.

PITA: I want to come briefly to one country that wasn't visited. Pompeo didn't make a stop in Nigeria, which is the continent's largest economy, most populous country, but was also recently added to this travel ban that has previously targeted primarily Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, but this year expanded to include four more countries in Africa. How does the travel ban – and it affecting Nigeria in particular – fit into the Trump administration's policy toward Africa?

SCHNEIDMAN: This is the challenge Pompeo has on his African visit and that is trying to articulate a coherent U.S. policy toward the continent, and underscore that the region is a priority for the United States. I think he's facing a lot of headwinds in doing that. On the one hand, the administration has come forward with something they call Prosper Africa, which is an effort to get more U.S. investment into the continent. It's putting all of our embassies on a commercial footing. And the Trump administration supported the creation of the U.S. Development Finance Corporation, a \$60 billion U.S. agency that will make equity investments and really give U.S. companies resources to invest that they've never had access to before. That's the good news.

The bad news, as you say; a week before Pompeo leaves, the administration puts a travel ban on 4 countries: Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, and Eritrea. And it really sends a very disturbing message I think about our interest in having a deeper relationship with the continent. And I think it really raises questions in the minds of investors, well, if we're going to be putting bans on these countries, why are you advocating for us to do more trade and investment in these countries? So I think that's problematic.

There's also been reports that the Pentagon is undertaking a full-scale assessment of U.S. troop deployments, and it's been mentioned that there'll be cuts to the U.S. presence in sub-Saharan Africa. So that again raises the question, well, you're encouraging U.S. businesses to invest in Africa, but the U.S. government is not going to invest in Africa's security, so isn't that problematic for U.S. companies? So I think Pompeo has to wrestle with these, and hopefully when he comes back from his visit there will be some follow-up in the emergence of a more coherent policy.

PITA: As it pertains to Ethiopia, as you mentioned, they've undergone some really promising democratic and economic reforms. They have some really important elections at end of August. Is the U.S. going to be providing additional support for governance, monitoring elections, anything like that to help them continue their steps forward?

SCHNEIDMAN: The U.S. has really stepped up its engagement in Ethiopia. We've had investment conferences there, a number of visits have taken place toward Ethiopia, so I think there's a great desire to see these elections succeed and to see these reforms succeed as well. If Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's successful, Ethiopia is poised to be a genuine leader on the continent in terms of economic growth, in terms of governance. Given the neighborhood in which it sits, the Horn of Africa, having a stabilizing nation there such as Ethiopia might be, is really quite important, given the changes that are taking place in neighboring Sudan, and Sudan's effort to establish a democratic government. So it's really quite exciting and to the degree that the U.S. can signal its full support for that, it's most welcome.

PITA: As to Senegal and the security situation in the Sahel and West Africa more broadly, why has the Pentagon been looking at drawing down some of the forces that are there, and how is that being received in Senegal?

SCHNEIDMAN: It's a good question about why. I think there's a general interest in this administration to cut budgets. We've seen that for the last several years; they have sent budgets to Congress requesting up to 30% less for USAID, 30% less for the State Department, and Congress has pushed back and actually given more to USAID and the State Department. So I think the prospective cuts to the Defense Department's posture in sub-Saharan Africa is consistent with that. But it comes at a sensitive time. The radical Islamic insurgencies are actually increasing the number of attacks. We've had a training program, not only for countries like Senegal, but helping to respond to the threat posed by Boko Haram in Nigeria; we're in partnership with the French and other EU countries. This is not the time to step

away from that. If anything, it's a time to double-down and really help to establish an indigenous capability to be able to respond to terrorism in the region.

PITA: One other thing that was happening this week while Pompeo was in Africa is that President Kenyatta of Kenya was here in DC meeting with President Trump, talking about potential free trade agreement between the two countries. How do bilateral trade agreements like this – if this comes to pass – fit into this bigger picture of, like the Africa Growth and Opportunity agenda, and the bigger picture of U.S. trade within the continent.

SCHNEIDMAN: That's a really good and important question. For the last 20 years, U.S. commercial policy toward the region has been predicated on something called the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, or AGOA. And what AGOA does is it takes down to zero the duties and tariffs on some 6400 products coming from Africa. Congress and the Clinton administration did this as a way to move our relationship with Africa from one of aid to trade, and to try to use the private sector to try and stimulate economic development. AGOA is set to expire in 2025, so the Trump administration has been looking for a partner to establish a free trade agreement with Africa as a model that other African countries might then follow. It's not quite clear whether the Trump administration is actually turning its back on AGOA and saying bilateral free trade agreements are the way to go. I sort of hope not, because we need to have a continental approach to what comes after AGOA.

Similarly, in Africa, 54 countries have come together in support of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, and questions were raised on the continent on what does a Kenya-U.S. free trade agreement mean for this larger effort across the continent to create inter-regional free trade. So I think there are a lot of question marks that remain. We're still in early phases of the beginning of these negotiations toward a free trade agreement with Kenya – it takes a while to negotiate these, as we know. So I think we have to just wait and see, but certainly, from my point of view, I'd like to see the AGOA framework maintained when it expires in 2025, but a much more reciprocal trade relationship phased in after that.

PITA: I want to close with a big picture question about something that you mentioned at the beginning, which is the about frame of U.S. interest toward Africa. Of course, U.S. competition with China, with Russia, that's a geopolitical reality, but how much does the framing of it as either exclusively or primarily through that lens, how does that affect how African leaders, African business and people, how does that affect how they perceive U.S. interests? It's a little bit colonial, right? These two great powers are just fighting over Africa. Do people in Africa see U.S. interest in Africa as actually being about Africa? How is that affecting how Pompeo's messaging was received on this trip?

SCHNEIDMAN: That's sort of the million-dollar question here. Actually President Kenyatta addressed it when he was here two weeks ago, and he said, don't make us choose. For us it's not either-or. We need strong relationships with China, we need strong relations with the United States. And I think that's really the challenge for the Trump administration. How do we make Africa a priority in its own right? And how do we engage with the continent to help it move forward its economic development objectives while we're moving forward our commercial interests?

It's tempting in the current climate in Washington to look at Africa as a zero-sum proposition: Is China gaining and the U.S. losing? Or is the U.S. gaining and China losing? I think that's totally the wrong way to look at it. There are areas where we could actually cooperate with China in Africa. There's no reason that we can't be cooperating on investment and development programs in areas such as agriculture, or health, or education. We can even partner with some private sector initiatives. But there's going to be areas where we have clear differences, and we can call those out. In the commercial sector, there's no question that when American countries do a deal, there's a solid contract in place. With Chinese companies, we don't know; it's much more opaque. We don't know what the terms are. The transparency's not something that's accessible. And that's a problem. U.S. companies do a very good training locals; they hire locally, they promote locally, they work to ensure that African producers are part

of a larger global supply chain. I don't see that happening with Chinese companies. Why not? Let's have that kind of a conversation. And I think from that kind of approach, we can put Africa's development priorities as number one, and then achieve our own national objectives at the same time.

PITA: All right. Witney, thanks very much for being here today.

SCHNEIDMAN: You're welcome, thanks for the time.