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TRANSCRIPT

Event

"The Future of U.S.–Africa Minerals Diplomacy Fireside Chat with Frank Garcia, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs: Future of U.S.–Africa Commercial Diplomacy"

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FEATURING

Frank Garcia

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs,
U.S. Department of State

CSIS EXPERTS

Gracelin Baskaran

Director, Critical Minerals Security Program, CSIS

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Gracelin Baskaran: At the heart of today's conversation is a simple but consequential question: How do we translate renewed U.S. engagement with Africa into deeper commercial partnerships, greater investment in tangible economic outcomes? So I'm grateful to all of you here. I'm grateful to the nearly 700 people-plus who will be joining us online from around the world. Thank you.

And there's really no better person to open this conversation. So it is my great pleasure to welcome my friend, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Frank Garcia, to discuss the future of U.S.-Africa commercial diplomacy and how we turn renewed engagement into lasting economic partnership. (Applause.) Frank, thanks so much for joining us.

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Frank Garcia: Thank you. This is really an honor to be here and to see old friends, new friends, young friends, and everyone in between. Yeah, thank you.

Dr. Baskaran: I would love for you to kick us off today with how, has your first couple months in this role been? You've been incredibly busy.

Mr. Garcia: Yeah. Yeah. Well, no, thank you. You know, I appreciate that. And I also appreciate CSIS's leadership, you know, on this front, and the challenge that was laid down by CSIS three days after I took over as the assistant secretary. And it was a – it was really, you know, kind of an awesome article that came out and said, hey, Frank's got to get it in gear. (Laughter.) Which was awesome. I actually loved it. And, if it's OK with you, maybe I can respond?

Dr. Baskaran: Of course.

Mr. Garcia: And so respond to this. So, you know, I have the mic. I get to do this, right? (Laughter.) So before we jump into the discussion, I want to thank you for this piece. And I mean that genuinely.

Dr. Baskaran: I didn't write it.

Mr. Garcia: You're CSIS. (Laughter.) You know, you get you get to wear it. So, you know, as you might recall from this article, it suggested about a half-dozen near-term steps I should take. And I'm happy to tell you that I've taken them and more. So first and foremost, Bureau of African Affairs has signaled seriousness on trade, which is instrumental to this assembly that you brought together today. So I'm grateful for the opportunity to participate. Last week, in my second trip to the continent, visited Zambia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. In each of those countries, the overriding message was our emphasis on commercial opportunities, and framed within our overarching trade-not-aid policy. So I think that that's key.

In Ethiopia, we're moving several deals in a positive direction. We're deepening agricultural food security partnership. You might even have seen my tweet when I was on a John Deere tractor with two thumbs up. It was really fun to be at the end of this assembly line, you know, there in Ethiopia on a John Deere tractor, being able to start it for the first time. There was something that is kind of like – you feel like a proud dad, in some ways. Not that – my kids were not born green. So just to be clear.

We also had an opportunity to expand the U.S.-Ethiopia aviation relationship. And the United States is, you know, instrumental in helping the Ethiopians take off, pun intended, with their aerospace industry. There's a new airport that they're designing there in Kenya. I had a chance to meet with President Ruto. And them developing their mining sector is absolutely instrumental. And one of the things that I had a discussion with him on is the United States made a decision early on that we weren't necessarily going to be the miners, but we were going to be the technology leaders in going after the minerals. And so I think, you know, in that strategic pause – which was one of the reasons I was interested in talking with you – in that strategic pause we've invested pretty heavily in the technologies to get after, kind of, the refining phases. And we'll talk about that maybe a little bit later on. So I think that was very much a positive thing.

As also suggested in this article, we've engaged our African partners early and directly. So I've met with, you know, basically heads of many of the countries, and so – six countries so far.

And the, in terms of measurable benchmarks, which was – which was one of the challenges, so, we have a tracker. Our team compiles this tracker. We have our deals in there. We have brought together under this administration, with Secretary Rubio's leadership, basically disparate pockets of deals that were being tracked across all the different parts of the State Department, have brought – been brought together into one portal that allows us to have view across all of the State Department where we are pursuing these commercial deals. So it was a great idea – and it was an idea that Secretary Rubio, you know, had put into practice – and we're driving that really hard.

And then, you know, finally, in terms of addressing diplomatic ballast – and I take this as, like, OK, the administration perhaps wasn't moving as fast as we would like in terms of ambassadors. You know, I respond to that by we have career diplomats that have been, you know, working in Africa for 20 to 30 years. They may not be chief of mission at the ambassadorial role, but they are consummate professionals, and I have absolute confidence in them and their ability to do the job. And I've had the chance to see them carrying that out.

But on that – on that front, we have two this week. Somalia and Djibouti were announced just this week. And then the Senate is starting to move forward with their – in terms of Benin, Gabon, Kenya, and Togo confirmation hearings this week. And our nominee for Cabo Verde was – had her hearing yesterday. So we're moving – we're moving ahead aggressively on that front.

And I actually do – I read these things. I appreciate them. My skin is thick; maybe not as thick as my skull sometimes, but – (laughter) – that's OK. Anyway, but thank you for the opportunity. Yeah.

Dr. Baskaran: Frank, and thank you so much for your leadership in this space.

Mr. Garcia: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Baskaran: You have accomplished an extraordinary amount in a short time, and you've certainly been a lot of places.

Now, you came into this role with a long history on the continent that maybe not everyone in this room knows about. Could you tell us a little bit about what first drew you to Africa and how that path led to where you are now?

Mr. Garcia: Sure. No, thank you for the question.

So, in one of my earlier careers, I was a naval officer onboard a ship, and the ship was operating in the North Arabian Sea and in and around the Strait of Hormuz. Heard that name recently? (Laughter.) And you know, and so we've been operating in there for quite a while.

While off-station from the North Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, we had an opportunity to do a port call in Mombasa, Kenya. And it was really – I think it was a combination of having been at sea for quite a while, but most importantly the people that I met there were friendly; they were, you know, kind of innovative; they were kind of driven; and very, very welcoming to us as sailors. And I said, there's something very special about this place. And that kind of sparked my interest. And in the intervening decades – I won't count how many – you know, I continued to go back to different places across Africa.

And then, while on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, I had the opportunity to kind of select the area in the world that I wanted to specialize in, and it was real clear to me what I wanted to focus on. So I wanted to focus on the intelligence underbelly of Africa, the continent, and all of the issues that make the continent great and some of the issues that hold the continent back with regard to security. And so for many, many years I've had that opportunity, and so that kind of brought me to the point where,

when this opportunity came forward, I was ready to jump. And have been enjoying it.

Dr. Baskaran: And well-placed for this event. I recall you blew something up in a mine in Rwanda once.

Mr. Garcia: Indeed, yes. Yeah. That was – that was actually a lot of fun. I had an opportunity to travel with Ronny Jackson, who has been, you know, kind of a longtime travel partner. He's the chair of the Intelligence/Special Operations Subcommittee on HASC – on the House Armed Services Committee – and also very much an Africanist. We were in a – not in the mine at the time, but we were outside of a mine in Rwanda. And this is, I think, Trinity Metals. And they gave him the detonation plunger – or, I think it was actually, like –

Dr. Baskaran: (Laughs.)

Mr. Garcia: It was actually a plunger. And so there we stood outside the mine, and you know, you can imagine all of the kind of nervous faces from, you know, the company leadership there – OK, a member of Congress is going to detonate this shaped charge, and we're going to hear a big boom, and – you know, and you know, new minerals are going to come gushing forth.

So he yells: Fire in the hole! Nothing. (Laughter.) And I'm scanning the faces of – you know, of C-suiters that were there. Nothing happened. And he's, like, uh. And they're like, try again. Try again. So he yells: Fire in the hole! Presses the plunger. Waits. Boom, the deep thunder. And you could just see people kind of melting, like, oh, thanks be to God. (Laughter.) You know?

So I think everyone in the C-suite kept their job, but it was really – it was fun to be there and to see – you know, to see what Rwanda was doing on that front, what Trinity Metals was doing, and actually go down into the mine and get dirty and muddy and watch the – you know, watch the mining crews doing their job. It was really fascinating. It was really, you know, the first mine of that sort that I've been in. So I'll go in more.

Dr. Baskaran: You never learn more lessons than when you are right at the rock face of these operations.

Mr. Garcia: Absolutely.

Dr. Baskaran: Frank, I want to shift a little bit. We hear a lot about a new era of U.S.-Africa relations. What actually makes this era different?

Mr. Garcia: So what is – you know, in this administration what we're doing that I think makes it very, very different is, you know, the aid to trade moniker is not just a nice rhyme. It's a reality. And that reality is, instead of, you know, kind of

dropping off, you know, kind of relief aid – which is wonderful in terms of saving some lives – the focus now is very much on kind of commercial opportunities that actually can be sustained and spawn further development and helping to pull countries out that choose to cooperate with us. So I think that that drive for commercial venture, and coupling that commercial venture with aid that can also help facilitate the commercial venture – coupling those two together is really powerful.

And we didn't have the ability to do that before. USAID had, you know, controls of, you know, a lot of the throttles in terms of where the aid was going. But now with this this architecture that we have, you know, to answer your question, we've brought those two together so we can take an aid package, we can couple it with an economic – an upcoming economic opportunity investment, and then help do things that are – you know, are local, but also at the national level help our African partners work with us to help grow jobs here in America, and also help develop opportunities for the countries that are working with us. So I'm really excited by that. And I think that that is different.

Also, in terms of the health memorandum of agreement, like, this is, like, one of those things where you'd say, why didn't we do this before? So for those of you that may not be tracking kind of the health memorandums of agreement, the idea here is, well, let's make sure that the African countries are investing in their own health programs. And so the United States took a position on these health memorandum of agreement. And we said, OK, we're going to be – we're going to start as the biggest contributor in that, but you're going to have – to have some skin in the game. And then over time, over a five-year period, the amount the U.S. taxpayers are going to be carrying drops down, and down, and down, while the amount that the African partner is carrying increases, and increases, and increases.

And if they default on their option year, guess what? We match the default. So it's compounded pressure that's put on the African nation. And I'd have to say, that's probably the second thing that is very, very significant, is the structuring of those health memorandum of agreement that we haven't done before. But the African nations that we have partnered with are ecstatic about it. And coupled with that, we continue to provide, you know, like in Zambia, I was part of a donation from the United States in lenacapavir, which is an antiretroviral drug which requires, like, two doses a year for HIV. So we're continuing to lead the charge on that front. And I'm very proud that the United States continues to be that largest – the world's largest donation entity.

Dr. Baskaran: And it's incredible how much African countries, they want jobs. They want the economic growth. And that does require growing the economic pie

through meaningful investments. Is there a particular project that you would mark as a good demonstration project of this new era?

Mr. Garcia: Well, there's a couple of them. I think what we're doing right now in the Lobito Corridor is really huge. And that has been, you know, kind of a very, very big project. So for those of you that may not be tracking, Lobito Corridor, you know, connects a lot of the mineral-rich regions in Democratic Republic Congo with going out down towards Angola. And all along there, what we're looking at is not just a pathway to be able to build refining and extraction opportunities to be shared with the continent, but we're also looking for agriculture to be – to follow that whole rail line.

Because one of the biggest challenges, you know, Africa is blessed with plentiful land, oftentimes, you know, plentiful rainwater, mineral-rich land. And so – but now we'll have this corridor which will couple both our need and demand for rare earth critical minerals, value addition with, you know, DRC and Angola, and then also be able to double down on it with agricultural food production. So I think that's probably a really huge example of a corridor in particular that that really covers down on both rare earth critical minerals and ag.

Dr. Baskaran: And really makes a project more bankable.

Mr. Garcia: Absolutely.

Dr. Baskaran: It's hard to make an entire transportation corridor work on the economics of minerals, right? But if you add in manufactured goods and agriculture, you also increase the bankability of the project itself.

Mr. Garcia: Absolutely. Yeah. Without a doubt. That's – no, that that's exactly right. And I think that's one of the things that – you know, one of the challenges we're perpetually facing. Oftentimes capital doesn't necessarily flow so easily into Africa. But it's when we are in – I think, within the State Department and we're working with our partners in EXIM and DFC, and we're working together as a team – and USTR – we're working together as a team, that the anxiety in terms of the due diligence phase for, you know, some – what I'll call the U.S. venture capital, you know, banking segment gets reduced tremendously. And I think that there's great power in that.

Now, we do things differently. You know, we have these different pots of money and different focuses. And I think the onus is on us in the State Department to make sure we're addressing that issue, which is who do we go to and how do we buy down the risk, you know, for the U.S. taxpayers, and to make sure the return is there. But, yeah, bankability is absolutely key, and

remains a challenge for many of the projects that we're after. But not an insurmountable one.

Dr. Baskaran: Absolutely. So, you know, one of the things we'll hear from some of our African ambassadors later today, and there is a push on the continent to get more value addition out of their materials. They don't want to go to the traditional model of extraction and then exporting raw materials out. What does U.S. support look like for Africa's industrialization, particularly on critical minerals?

Mr. Garcia: No, that's a great question. And I mentioned briefly in my response to the article, you know, that the United States made – which was, you know, why I had reached out on has does the cycle of critical minerals in the United States looked like over decades? And on that front, United States, 15-20 years ago, kind of made a decision, like, OK, let China do it. We didn't really care where it was going to happen, because – and they were manipulating the market. You know, really, you know, dropping down prices to prevent others from entering the market. Well, to some degree that was to our benefit, right? I mean, so let them lose money. Let us, you know, use that capacity, still get what we needed.

But then we woke up one morning and said, wait a minute, you know, China is starting to manipulate the market in a way that is threatening to U.S. national security. Unacceptable. President Trump came in. Secretary Rubio, with his leadership, said, OK, we're going to – we're going to turn this around. We're going to flip the script. We're going to take this technology investment that we have invested in for the last 10 to 15 years, we're going to start deploying that into Africa. In this last trip, I won't be specific about the country, but we have a tender that we're putting an offer in on, and where value addition is intended to happen as part of our offering.

That's what our African partners want. They want the value of addition. And in this particular instance I have in mind, there is absolutely, you know, really leading-edge U.S. company high-tech being able to move the mineral up the value stream, and also be able to access more than one mineral that's in the value stream.

In the past, with the – some extractive work that has been done by others, there were multiple minerals that were as part of an extracted mineral baseline. Well, they're able to make bank on each of the minerals that were in that extraction, and this kind of stops that. And so I think that that gives us greater credibility and transparency with the countries that choose to work with us in that segment.

Dr. Baskaran: You mentioned how other countries do things on the continent. Obviously, there is a lot of competition for these key strategic sectors on the African continent. How does the United States become the partner of choice?

Mr. Garcia: I think we become the partner of choice by being who we are. And who we are is, you know, we do business, I think, in a very transparent way. I think transparency is absolutely key.

You know, we tend to be collaborative and not coercive. You know, we tend to be transparent in our business processes and not opaque. And I think just that that approach in terms of the U.S., how we work, it really matters a lot. And it starts with something that we call, like, a Strategic Minerals Framework Agreement.

So one of the challenges of – you know, of having these kind of agreements in countries that don't necessarily work with us frequently is they haven't done a lot of this with us. So how do we lower the barrier to entry? We go forward and we offer a Strategic Framework Agreement. And that Framework Agreement gives kind of a set of rules to guide follow-on negotiations that are contract-specific.

So I think those Framework Agreements help to, one, improve the transparency; two, it helps to establish a common set of principles that we will negotiate a contract on; and then, three, helps us when we move into an offer on a particular tender for them to understand what we're getting. So it really is a way of creating an onramp that is – you know, again, lends to that kind of transparency.

Dr. Baskaran: And how do we better align U.S. government financing behind this?

Mr. Garcia: We scramble. (Laughter.) I mean, it's a – it's a great question.

You know, alignment is key. You know, one of the – one of the advantages and disadvantages of having kind of the U.S.-backed capital in a couple of different ways, you know, either within – some knobs are controlled by USTR, some by Ex-Im, some by DFC, and they are a little bit different. So I think early on looking at an upcoming project and doing that kind of initial, you know, kind of – I guess I'd have to kind of look at it as a dartboard. What does the dartboard look like for funding this particular project? And what are the – what are the circular rings that are, you know, around the bullseye for the U.S. to be able to leverage it? So it really is – I'm not an attorney, but I'll use the answer "it depends." And I think that that package of financing really depends on the project.

I had – just before getting started here today had a – had a brief conversation about small modular reactors. Well, like that's something – you know, the U.S.

has been the world leader in nuclear power, you know, I won't say forever, but almost forever. And our programs and our technologies in that sector, you know, are unparalleled in the world. So, like, banking that takes – because it's a little bit on the new side of things that we're looking at, you know, putting small modular reactors into Africa to, you know, boost electrification and also to provide sufficient power for refinement, it can do both of those things. But banking that is – there's a dance there, so – and I can't tell you I know all the steps to it yet.

Dr. Baskaran: We're all living it out in real time.

So, you know, you talk about – we talk about financing. The other really powerful form of derisking for the United States is our embassies. We have incredible soft power that we can leverage through our embassies. And in your Senate confirmation hearing, you talked about supporting our embassies to help make it easier for American companies to do business, removing barriers to investment. How do you see our ambassadors and our embassy playing into these strategic goals? Because they really are the ones on the ground.

Mr. Garcia: No, absolutely. And thank you for the opportunity to brag a little bit about our embassy teams. They've gotten the message. You know, rare earth, critical minerals, industrial capacity, shared benefit to the United States and our host countries – every single – almost every single officer at our embassies is lit with this. They really are on fire and are doing an amazing job. We're increasingly using tools that industry – or, that I used, like, in industry in terms of customer relationship management to kind of build the pipeline. Because it is about the pipeline.

And so I'm doing the best I can do to run AF Bureau like a business, so where we're very focused on – you know, on, you know, uncovering and discovering opportunities, that gets into customer relationship management. From there, we mature the opportunity. We're tied together from our headquarters to the field, each of our embassies, using a particular CRM. And then when it reaches a maturity point, then we bring it into our case manager that gives us the ability to track it, to close, and then book it. And thus far, since the start of this administration, we have booked about 60 deals and we've closed about $26 billion worth of revenues for the United States of America. I'm very proud of the work that the teams have been doing there.

Dr. Baskaran: And our embassies speak so highly of the support they are getting from you and the Africa Bureau in Washington. And that's an incredible bridge to close.

Assistant Secretary, I have one last question for you. A year from now, what is the headline that you want to see out of this bureau?

Mr. Garcia: OK. (Laughter.) Wow. What would that – what would that be? I would love – I would love for that to be, you know, something along the lines of – you know, I mean, bet on USA, number one. But, you know, kind of maybe America and African economic partnership making both great again. How about that?

Dr. Baskaran: I love that.

Mr. Garcia: Yeah.

Dr. Baskaran: And I'm so excited to hear from the Alcoa CEO later today about their investment on the continent.

Mr. Garcia: I'm looking forward to actually meeting with them as well. So, you know, thank you so much for this opportunity. This is really great, to sit down and chat like this.

Dr. Baskaran: Thank you so much. And thank you for setting the strategic tone of the day today, and laying out how the U.S. government and the State Department are thinking about that more commercially focused partnership. And I'm so grateful for your leadership on this agenda and really excited to see what you and the team continue to do beyond, you know, your first few days and first few months. Please join me in giving the assistant secretary a round of applause. (Applause.)

(END.)