



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 28 · THURSDAY 10 DECEMBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 28

CREATING FACTS ON THE GROUND

Six weeks from the handover, three recognitions are bought and a base is signed. He asks what each one costs the man who has not arrived.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 28 — recorded on the day Morocco agreed to normalise relations with Israel.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Creating Facts on the Ground

Weapons for one recognition, a disputed territory for another, and a Russian base signed in the same six weeks. He works out what each is worth — and ends on a poem, and on why a man being honoured did not smile.

A solo broadcast recorded on 10 December 2020 — the longest in the archive so far, and the one with the widest span: an arms sale, three normalisations, a naval base, the eastern Mediterranean, a vaccine's first stumble, and a nomination at the Pentagon. **It ends somewhere none of that predicts. He notices that the nominee never smiles, goes looking for why, and comes back with a poem.**

An archive edition, recorded 10 December 2020. One military command's area of responsibility, one candidate's electoral history and one medical claim are corrected — the last of these in the body rather than the footnote, because it concerns a drug that was widely promoted and has since been tested and found not to work.

01 · THE WEAPONS WERE ALWAYS THE PRICE

The Senate had declined to block a twenty-three-billion-dollar arms sale to the Emirates, and he is not remotely surprised — because, he says, this was the deal all along.

When the agreement with Israel was signed it was speculated, and denied by nobody, that the sweetener was top-range American weapons: precisely the class of weapons on which Israel had always held a veto where Arab states were concerned. Israel's consent, he assumes, rested on the destination of those weapons. They would not be aimed at Israel. They would be aimed at Iran, the enemy both countries share.

He then supplies the mechanism most commentary omitted, and he is right about how these things are done. He would not rule out the possibility that what is actually sold is not the top-range model at all — that the features which might endanger Israel are quietly stripped from the export version. Israel's strategic superiority is probably preserved either way.

The risk he identifies is not about hardware. It is the assumption underneath the transaction, and he states it as the professional's maxim: no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests. The sale freezes Emirati foreign policy at its current setting. It assumes no change of government. What happens if Tehran and Abu Dhabi become friends — or merely stop being enemies enough to tolerate each other?

And the timing produces a second problem, which is the theme of the whole broadcast. Done on the eve of departure, it hands the incoming administration a strategic difficulty rather than a policy.

“No permanent friends, no permanent enemies — only permanent interests. The sale assumes that stops being true.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • WHAT HAPPENS TO WEAPONS ALREADY PAID FOR

He does not think the aircraft and drones will be delivered before the handover, and he gives a practical reason: these are not items sitting in a warehouse to be pulled out and shipped in three weeks.

Which raises the question the next administration inherits — and here he reaches for a precedent that gives it teeth.

Countries have paid for weapons and never received them. Iran paid for military equipment under the Shah; after the revolution both Washington and London declined to supply the equipment and declined to return the money. That dispute outlived the governments that created it.

He does not say the Emirates will be treated the same way. He says nobody knows what the incoming administration will decide, and that a sale announced is not a delivery made. Asked directly whether they might change their mind, his answer is two words: there is a possibility.

“These are not weapons hanging in a store to be pulled out in three weeks and handed over.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • MOROCCO: AN OLD FRIENDSHIP, AND A NEW FACT

The Morocco agreement had been announced that day. He begins by correcting the premise of the question — this is not a relationship being created, it is one being formalised.

Moroccan Jews were never expelled and still live there unmolested. Israelis have long been able to travel there. The intimacy is old.

So the news is the price. As the Emirates were sweetened with weapons, Morocco was sweetened with American recognition of its claim to Western Sahara — the territory the Sahrawis claim as their own, and whose republic the Organisation of African Unity admitted as a member, prompting Morocco to walk out of the organisation for more than thirty years.

And this, he says, is why a departing administration's recognition is still worth having: it creates a reality on the ground. The claim has been recognised by the most powerful state in the system. Reversing that is a different act from never having made it.

The question he leaves open is the one the next administration actually faced: does it reconfirm the recognition, or return to the United Nations position? He does not know. What he is certain of is the shape of the trap — how many fronts is an incoming president willing to open with Israel in order to unpick a fortnight's worth of last-minute policy?

What each signature cost

Three deals struck on the way out — and the problem he says each one leaves behind

WHO SIGNED	THE SWEETENER	THE INHERITED PROBLEM
United Arab Emirates Recognition of Israel	Top-range American weapons Israel had always vetoed — aimed, both sides say, at Iran.	It assumes Emirati policy never changes. What if Tehran and Abu Dhabi merely stop being enemies?
Morocco Recognition of Israel	American recognition of its claim to Western Sahara — a fact created on the ground.	Reverse it and you side with the UN against a new partner. Leave it and you overturn decades of policy.
Sudan A Russian naval base	Not an American deal at all — but signed in the same six weeks, and read the same way.	No administration wants to be called soft on Russia. He cannot see what Sudan gains from it.

"These are foreign-policy realities created on the ground that will make problems for the incoming administration."

SESSION 28 • CREATING FACTS ON THE GROUND

As assessed on this broadcast

Three signatures in six weeks, the price attached to each, and the problem he says each leaves behind.

04 • THE LAME DUCK, AGAIN

His verdict on the whole run of last-minute agreements is unambiguous and not partisan: what is being done in the foreign-policy field is not in the interest of the United States.

Then he collects the winnings on an argument he had made three or four weeks earlier. All of this, he says, is drawing American attention to a provision of its own constitution that it has never had cause to examine — a lame-duck president and a lame-duck Congress holding office for two months after an election.

His line on it is flat and worth keeping: nobody does that.

It is a useful example of how his commentary works. He is not scoring the events; he is using them to test a rule, and the rule is the thing he keeps returning to.

"Two months in office after losing an election. Nobody does that."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • A RUSSIAN BASE, AND THE REFLEX IT WILL TRIGGER

On the Russian naval facility agreed with Sudan, his first move is to doubt that Sudan has read the room. He is not sure it is in Sudan's interest at all — an agreement signed on the eve of a new American administration will be perceived as a provocative act by both parties to it.

The historical claim he makes is the substance of the section, and he dates it: going back to Lumumba, to Nkrumah, to Nasser, the United States has taken very strong exception to Russian military or strategic presence in Africa. Independence notwithstanding, Africa has been treated as an American area of concern — which is why a dedicated African command was created, and why American forces are based on the continent.

The mechanism he identifies for why this will not be quietly tolerated is domestic rather than strategic, and it is the sharper observation. No American administration can afford to be called soft on Russia. The next presidential election is already being thought about, and the opposition is already collecting the charges it will bring.

He admits the limit of his own analysis honestly: he does not know why the Sudanese agreed to it.

Asked whether it disturbs the balance with South Sudan, he says yes — and describes the mechanics without moralising. Tilt one side towards Moscow and the other is compelled to look towards Washington, simply to restore the balance.

“Every American administration is terrified of being called soft on Russia. That is what Khartoum has not priced in.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • METHOD IN IT: ERDOĞAN AND THE OTTOMAN DREAM

Asked about Turkey, Greece, undersea resources and the threat of European sanctions, he does not analyse the dispute. He supplies the intention he thinks explains all of them at once.

His assessment is that the Turkish president is determined to recreate the Ottoman Empire, and that this is the ultimate objective around which the alliances and the enmities make sense. There is, he says, a sense to the madness.

The evidence he offers is the willingness to fight everybody. Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft over Syria and got away with it. Turkey bought Russian weapons in defiance of what the alliance it belongs to stands for, and got away with that too. He adds a claim not widely known and not confirmed: that Russian intelligence had tipped Erdoğan off about the coup planned against him — which, if true, is a debt not repaid.

The immediate proof he points at is that day's news. A victory parade in Baku following the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the Turkish president in attendance, the latest Turkish weapons on display, and a slogan doing the work of a policy: one nation, two states.

So the quarrel with Greece belongs inside that larger design, and the question for Europe is not about gas fields. It is whether the Union will do what the military alliance did not — draw a line — and whether its threatened sanctions are credible at all.

“There is a sense to the madness. The allies and the enemies he makes only add up if the object is the empire.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • WHO COMES AFTER A STRONG MAN

Asked whether a change of leadership in Turkey would undo all this, he first corrects a misapprehension. The coup he referred to was three or four years earlier, not recent.

Then he answers the real question, and the answer is a general law rather than a Turkish observation. Men who come close to being dictators do not build up alternative personalities around them, because those personalities become dangers to them. He is not aware of anyone being groomed for the era after.

But he refuses the comfortable conclusion, and this is the part worth sitting with. The nationalism is not the leader's private project. Turks who look back on the Ottoman period as a golden era may not be at all averse to what is being done — they may welcome the renaissance.

Which means removing the man would not remove the programme. That is the difference between a personality and a constituency.

“Strong men do not build up alternatives to themselves. Those alternatives become dangers to them.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • TWO REACTIONS, AND AN INDUSTRY WAITING FOR THEM

Britain had begun vaccinating, two health workers had suffered allergic reactions, and the guidance had been revised. He grants the point he had made the week before — this strengthens the case that Britain moved a little precipitately — and notes that the manufacturer was aware of the susceptibility.

Then he says what should have happened, and it is a piece of practical hospital procedure rather than a scientific argument. You ask people what they are allergic to. It is a routine question. They ask him every time; he tells them; it is noted on his file; nobody makes a drama of it.

The framing he insists on is the one the reporting mostly lost: there is no big deal about having allergies. Human beings are allergic to one medicine or another, and it does not make the medicine dangerous. He is allergic to a common drug that millions receive daily. You are simply given an alternative.

What has changed the stakes is not the medicine but the audience. There is now an industry of anti-vaccine narrative, wired into the wider conspiracy traffic, and two reactions are exactly the material it wants. Which is why the avoidable part matters — it could have been avoided.

His own position he states without hedging: there is nothing wrong with this vaccine, and people should continue to take it. And the ledger is already moving — Canada, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have signed on, the American regulator is meeting that day, and he expects more by the end of the following week.

“There is nothing wrong with this vaccine. People should still take it.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • WHY AFRICAN COUNTRIES WERE NOT QUEUING

Asked why African states were not visibly buying, he says the African position is peculiar, and not Africa's fault — and starts with the insult that poisoned the well.

Two French doctors had suggested on air that vaccines be trialled in Africa first, to see whether they killed people. The African answer, he says, was the obvious one: you are not using us as an experiment; try it in Europe, and if it works we can revisit. And then the trap closes. Now the question is whether Africa will get the vaccine at all, or whether Western countries will monopolise it. Do, and you are damned; do not, and you are damned.

His second reason is availability: there is not enough, and he is not sure they could get it even if they wanted it.

The third is logistical and has held up well. This vaccine requires specialised cold storage that does not exist at scale on the continent, while the Oxford one — which he expects — works at ordinary refrigeration. So waiting is not only a posture; it is a supply-chain judgment.

His fourth reason has not held up, and it needs saying plainly rather than in a footnote. He suggests Africa was spared the worst of the pandemic either because of sunlight and vitamin D, or because hydroxychloroquine, dismissed in Europe and America, is in routine African use as antimalarial medication. That hypothesis was live in 2020; the trials that followed found hydroxychloroquine to be of no benefit against Covid-19, and it is not the explanation. Researchers have since emphasised a

much younger population, lower testing and reporting, and earlier border and public-health measures. The vitamin D question remains debated and has never been shown to account for the difference. He is careful to present it as a question for scientists to answer later — which is the right instinct, and the answer that came back was no.

“You are not coming to use us as an experiment. Try it in Europe — and if it works, we can revisit.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • WHY SAUDI ARABIA IS DIFFERENT

On whether Saudi Arabia might normalise relations before the handover, he begins by refusing to be surprised by anything in the next six weeks — and by wondering what could possibly be offered as a sweetener at that level.

But his answer is no, and the reason is not diplomatic. It is the standing of the kingdom as guardian of the two holy mosques, which gives it a position among Muslims everywhere that is ideological and spiritual rather than merely political.

The competition he places it inside is the one that decides the calculation: Saudi Arabia and Iran are contending for the loyalty of Muslims universally. To sign precipitately with Israel is to risk tilting that loyalty towards Tehran. Whatever the material inducement, that is the cost being weighed.

And then he declines to prophesy at all, with a line that should be pinned above every Middle East desk: the region has produced more prophets than any other, and it is also the place that makes a falsehood of prophecy.

“It has produced more prophets than anywhere. It is also the place that makes a falsehood of prophecy.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 • THE MAN WHO DID NOT SMILE

A clip is played of the secretary of defense designate accepting his nomination, and of the story he tells: that in 1877 a young man from Thomasville, Georgia became the first African American to graduate from West Point and went on to lead Buffalo Soldiers — and that nearly 150 years later another son of Thomasville stands there as the nominee.

The Professor's first response is about the man rather than the post. To say he is pleased would understate it, and might even sound condescending. This is a soldier's soldier — an oak of a military man, ramrod solid. He welcomes the appointment for all the reasons given: the first African American to be nominated to that office, at the head of a force in which a large proportion of the ranks are people of colour. Long overdue.

But what he wants to use his own programme for is something nobody else was discussing. He noticed that the nominee never smiled. He does not know whether the man has teeth; if he does, none showed. There was, he says, so much bottled within him.

The distinction he then reaches for he makes cautiously, and warns twice that his words may be inadequate. He had concluded, on this programme months earlier, that Africans everywhere should call themselves Africans, with the varying prefixes pointing back to the same root. But there is something more than that, and it is the difference between African Americans with African names and African Americans with European names — a name being, in that context, a record of what was done.

So he goes looking for the thing the silence reminded him of, and comes back with a poem: David Diop's "Africa", written by a man born in 1927 who died in 1960 — and he asks the audience to notice the year of death, at the moment independent Africa was just arriving. He reads it out in full. It moves from the Africa of proud warriors that a grandmother sings of, through the bent back and the scars, to a young tree standing alone whose fruit slowly acquires the bitter taste of liberty. (The poem is in copyright and is not reproduced here or in the transcript file.)

And then he says what the reading was for, which is the finest sentence of the broadcast. That is what he thought about listening to the man speak — strong, tall, filled with strength. This was not a broken man. This was a survivor.

"This was not a broken man. This was a survivor."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

12 • THE WAIVER, AND THE FIVE HE WILL NOT NAME

The nominee needed a Congressional waiver, having been recently retired. Asked whether that was pushing his luck, the Professor calls it clever — and explains the cleverness in one line.

The Senate had granted exactly that waiver to a white general four years earlier. So the nomination puts a question to them: if you could do it for him, why not for this officer — is it because he is Black? It is a challenge to show whether they are racist or not, and he thinks it very clever indeed. Nobody, he notes, is challenging the man's competence.

Then he tests the arithmetic under the worst case, and this is the practical politics. Assume the opposition wins both Georgia seats — though he expects a split, one each. Even then, he says, he could name five Republicans outside the party's populist wing who would be prepared to cooperate. Hold the Democratic side solid and the cabinet gets confirmed.

He declines to name them, which is the correct instinct and also the frustrating one. But the structural point survives the discretion: a Senate majority is not the same thing as a working majority, and the difference is made of individuals.

It is worth recording what happened. The Democrats won both Georgia seats, so the arithmetic was never tested — and the waiver passed comfortably, with substantial Republican support.

"If you could do it for a white general, why not for this one? He is challenging them to show whether they are racist."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

13 • A POST THAT NEEDS NOBODY'S PERMISSION

The last question is about the former ambassador appointed to run domestic policy — a post requiring no Senate confirmation.

He deals with the history without evasion. The objection is Benghazi: she was ambassador at the United Nations when the consulate was attacked and American diplomats killed, and the comments she made at the time were precipitate and got up the backs of Republicans — which is probably why she never reached the State Department.

And he adds a phrase worth noticing, because it separates the woman from the episode: that is not really her fault. The remarks were made from a briefing she did not write.

His reading of the appointment is tactical and, characteristically, about the next thing rather than this one. It keeps her in public life, in a role that needs nobody's confirmation, and it gives her a

domestic-policy record — which is exactly what someone would need if they were ever to run for office.

“A post that requires no confirmation, and a domestic record. That is what you build if you may one day run.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He argues that arms sales freeze a partner's foreign policy at today's setting. How should a state sell weapons to a country whose interests may move?
- Recognition creates a fact on the ground that is costlier to reverse than to withhold. Where else does that asymmetry decide outcomes?
- He says no American administration can afford to be called soft on Russia. What does a foreign policy look like when its constraint is a domestic accusation?
- Removing a strongman does not remove the constituency that wanted what he wanted. Which current leaders would that be true of?
- He hears a man's silence and goes looking for a poem to explain it. What does that method get at that a political reading would miss?

Watch Session 28 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

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An early broadcast with a correspondingly rough automatic transcript; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. Corrections: the secretary of defense designate's last command was United States Central Command, whose area of responsibility is the Middle East, Egypt and Central Asia rather than the Mediterranean, though Iran, the Gulf and the Red Sea were indeed his theatre; the former ambassador considered running for the Senate in Maine in 2019 but did not stand, so she did not run and lose; and reports that Russian intelligence warned of the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey circulated widely but were never confirmed. The hydroxychloroquine suggestion is addressed in section 09 rather than here, because the trial evidence that followed is unambiguous. David Diop's poem, which he reads in full, is in copyright and is described rather than reproduced, both here and in the transcript file.