



## **Rex Tillerson's Tenure as Secretary of State Was No Success—but What Comes Next Will Probably Be Worse**

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Nothing about Rex Tillerson's firing should surprise us, except perhaps its timing.

Tillerson has often been at odds with his boss in the White House, whether on Russia, Iran, or North Korea. Though widely hailed as one of the "adults in the room," it's not clear he had much influence at all on Trump's biggest foreign policy decisions.

He was widely disliked inside his own agency. Civil servants at Foggy Bottom hated his insularity and his plans to massively cut the State Department's budget and diplomatic capacity.

Even the casual cruelty of the firing should not surprise us. Sure, the President fired his Secretary of State via Twitter, while Tillerson was abroad, without apparently offering him any explanation or courtesy phone call. But from the man who fired James Comey, his FBI Director, via television while Comey was on-stage giving a public speech, this was almost polite.

But while Tillerson's firing has been expected for some time, it will have major implications. America's foreign policy outlook under his successor, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, is likely to move in a more hawkish direction. Although Tillerson's tenure was hardly a success, whatever comes next may well make his troubled run look reasonably good in contrast.

Tillerson may not have had much influence with the President, but he was one of the administration's more reasonable voices. He apparently had a good relationship with Secretary of Defense James Mattis, acting as a sounding board for ideas, and both men have advocated against some of Trump's more disastrous foreign policy decisions.

It's always been questionable the extent to which Trump's more moderate advisers could actually constrain Trump on foreign policy issues. But with the loss of Tillerson and, last week, of Gary Cohn of the National Economic Council, we will see them replaced by advisors who appear to be trying not to restrain the President's worst impulses, but instead to indulge them. On tariffs, conflict, and more, things have the potential to go from bad to worse.

Mike Pompeo, Trump's new pick for Secretary of State, will move from the CIA. In that role, he has certainly been more effective than Tillerson in building a relationship with the President. But he has also often adopted highly political stances on policy, advocating strongly for the President to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal, and speaking out publicly in favor of Trump's political and policy decisions far more often than is typical for the Director of the CIA.

Pompeo's background is in the military, not in diplomacy, and he has little experience of high-level diplomatic negotiations. And given his personal views, Pompeo is likely to strengthen many of the President's worst instincts: He is extremely hostile towards Iran and the Iranian nuclear deal, he has been hawkish on North Korea, and—where Tillerson took a more balanced approach—has largely supported Saudi Arabia in the ongoing Gulf Crisis.

His shift from CIA to State Department will also create a secondary controversy. Trump's choice to replace him is Gina Haspel, a career veteran at the agency, and potentially the first woman to hold the job of CIA Director. She is undoubtedly a better choice than uber-hawk Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), who was widely expected to get the job.

Yet Haspel was also heavily involved in the rendition and torture scandals of the mid-2000s, running a rendition center in Thailand, and implicated in the destruction of interrogation tapes. Her nomination will raise all the old debates about the Bush-era torture programs, and her confirmation hearings are likely to be fraught as a result.

Even Pompeo's confirmation hearings may produce some difficulties: During hearings for his current job, Pompeo promised to be impartial on the question of the Iran nuclear deal carved out under President Obama. Yet he has been one of the strongest and most active supporters of Trump's decision to decertify the accord. Congressional Democrats in particular may question why he backed away from his prior promises, and whether they can trust what he says in these hearings.

Tillerson's firing was predictable, but it opens a whole new set of concerns, from the petty (fraught and difficult confirmation hearings) to the critical (an increasingly hawkish line-up in the White House and raised risk for conflict). Even for Tillerson's critics, then, his firing may not be a cause for celebration. His tenure as Secretary of State was hardly a success. Unfortunately, what comes after is likely to be worse.

(A version of this post originally appeared at Cato-at-Liberty.)

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