



Mike Pompeo’s global ‘democracy’ bender was pure sabotage

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Mike Pompeo spent his final days in office advancing administration efforts to force the world to submit to Washington, often in the name of promoting “democracy” — an irony as we grapple with his own party’s unprecedented tests to democratic institutions here at home.

But let’s face it — he was doing politics, not foreign policy. He hoped to lock President-elect Joe Biden into the administration’s failed policies and score personal points for a possible presidential bid in 2024.

Exhibiting an unnatural fixation on Iran, President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA, or nuclear agreement, and applied a succession of economic sanctions intended to force Iran into what would amount to surrender negotiations. Instead, Iran restarted its nuclear activities, interfered with Gulf oil traffic, disrupted Saudi oil production, remained active in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, and attacked American facilities, including the U.S. embassy, in Iraq. Pompeo continued imposing new sanctions after the election. For instance, in December Washington targeted an Iranian airline and Iran’s largest shipping firm.

Without evidence, Pompeo also added a last-minute charge that Iran had become the “home base” for Al-Qaida. Ironically, Washington had played footsie with al-Nusra, the Al-Qaida affiliate, in Syria, and supported coalition forces in Yemen that armed Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Experts dismissed Pompeo’s claim. Even anti-Iran hawk Ambassador James Jeffrey explained that the Tehran-al-Qaeda relationship was transactional, not operational, and that Sunni Gulf states had similar limited contacts with the terrorist group.

Pompeo hoped to make it more difficult for Biden to fulfill his promise to return to the JCPOA. Every additional sanction will increase Iran’s demands for returning to the agreement. Moreover, though Biden will have the power to remove any embargo added by Trump, doing so will expose the new administration to attack for “rewarding” Iran.

As late as December, the State Department imposed new sanctions on Syria and Venezuela. The administration’s expressed purpose was to force both regimes from power, essentially by starving their already impoverished populations. This is pure cruelty. In Syria, the regime survived more than nine years of brutal civil war and is not going to dismantle itself; in Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro has survived seven years, despite steadily intensifying U.S. pressure.

Pompeo's measures attempt to strike, respectively, at Iran and Russia, the chief patrons of Damascus, and Cuba, which is closely linked to Caracas.

During his last days in office Pompeo added Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism. The list long ago lost all meaning, and now is a political designation intended to sanction and delegitimize disfavored regimes. Havana is a brutal dictatorship but does not engage in anything recognizable as terrorism. This action was a final gift to Florida's generally hawkish Cuban-American community, which helped deliver the state to Trump on November 3, and will be an important political constituency in 2024 when Pompeo is likely to run.

It also will pose another obstacles to Biden's interest in returning relations with Havana to when Obama left office. In the short term, it may impede businesses from dealing with Cuba and Cuban-American families here to provide assistance to their families back on the island. Moreover, a Biden reversal of the designation would provide an attack point for Florida Republicans.

Even more malign was Pompeo's designation of Yemen's Houthis as a terrorist organization. It was another political falsehood. He cited Yemeni missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, which only followed multiple, and much deadlier, Saudi air strikes on civilian targets, including weddings, funerals, markets, apartments, mosques, and even school buses.

As for actual terrorism, the Houthis long opposed AQAP, considered to be the most dangerous affiliate of the transnational terrorist organization. In contrast, the ousted government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi actively cooperated with AQAP. The United Arab Emirates, which joined with Saudi Arabia in an attempt to restore Hadi to power, provided money and U.S.-supplied weapons to several radical groups, including AQAP.

As noted by the United Nations, the terrorism designation will aggravate the grievous humanitarian crisis that has resulted from the Saudi/Emirati invasion. Pompeo's action is primarily an attempt to add indirect pressure on Iran, which aided the Houthis after the Saudis and Emiratis attacked. This illegitimate designation of Yemenis may be the secretary's cruelest midnight action.

In December the administration paid off Morocco for agreeing to revive official relations with Israel by recognizing Rabat's control over the Western Sahara, the former Spanish colony that was illegally seized against the wishes of the vast majority of the population in 1975 against the wishes of its population. The transaction does little to benefit the United States. It may seem that it matters little to Israel, which long has had a positive unofficial relationship with Morocco. But Pompeo apparently sold out the cause of hundreds of thousands of Sahrawi people, many of them still exiled in refugee camps in neighboring Algeria, to aid the reelection campaign of Israel's embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Plus, the U.S. siding with Morocco in this land seizure dispute has implications for Israel's own relationship with the Palestinian territories.

More dangerous for America is Pompeo's actions involving Taiwan. The president broke protocol by taking a congratulatory call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen after his election in 2016. In the ensuing years the administration adopted policies to bolster Taiwan's international status. Washington also agreed to a major arms deal with Taipei.

Although these steps increased tensions with China, the trade war and human rights loomed larger. However, in his last days Pompeo relaxed 40-year-old State Department rules for dealing with Taiwan which, he explained, had been imposed to “in an attempt to appease the Communist regime in Beijing.”

The Department also planned to send UN Ambassador Kelly Craft to Taiwan the week before Biden’s inauguration. Craft’s trip was ultimately cancelled, apparently to add verisimilitude to the claim that Pompeo cancelled his planned trip to Europe to allow the department to concentrate on the looming transition. That explanation was widely derided; sources indicated that Pompeo abandoned his plans after even Luxembourg’s foreign minister refused to meet with him.

Americans underestimate the importance of Taiwan to the Chinese people as well as their government. Even liberal students with whom I have dealt over the years believe that Taiwan is part of China. Pompeo’s actions will fuel an increasingly fractious relationship with an increasingly globe-spanning power.

The president is in charge for his entire term. However, America does best with a cooperative transition. Instead, Pompeo is acting as a political pyromaniac and using the justification of “democracy” and “freedom” as matches. He acted with flagrant dishonesty to justify positions intended to advance his own career and harm the incipient Biden presidency. The interests of the U.S. and the American people will suffer significantly as a result.

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