



What Trump's pick for top diplomat has said about Russia, North Korea, Iran, Syria, China — and Trump's tweets

Nyshka Chandran

March 14, 2018

U.S. foreign policy toward adversaries such as Russia, North Korea and Syria may turn more aggressive if CIA Director Mike Pompeo becomes secretary of state.

President Donald Trump nominated 54-year-old Pompeo — a three-term Republican congressman known for his hardline views — after firing Rex Tillerson, whose sudden departure sparked concerns about the credibility of American diplomatic personnel being directed by an already chaotic White House.

Pompeo became America's spy chief in January 2017. During his 14 months at the CIA, he took a confrontational stance toward Iran and gave staunch support to Israel.

Pompeo's nomination indicates Trump is filling his administration with individuals who share his views, said John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at libertarian think tank Cato Institute.

Pompeo's public statements support Glaser's point of view. The appointment still requires Senate confirmation, but a look at Pompeo's past remarks may shed light on the face of future American diplomacy.

On North Korea

October 2017: Pompeo said Pyongyang would soon be able to threaten a U.S. city with nuclear weapons. He echoed Trump in criticizing previous administrations for failing to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

January 2018: Kim "is looking for a foothold to walk himself back," Pompeo said. "This would be entirely consistent with his historical activity. When he sees the threat, he tries to pacify it. And you can be sure that this administration is not going to fall prey to the same trap that previous administrations did."

July 2017: "I am hopeful we will find a way to separate the [North Korean] regime from this system. . . . The North Korean people, I'm sure, are lovely people and would love to see him go."

October 2017: "With respect to, if Kim Jong Un should vanish, given the history of the CIA, I'm just not going to talk about it. Someone might think there was a coincidence."

Ahead of a milestone meeting between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Pompeo may be a good choice as a negotiator because "he's a hawk," said Sean King, vice president at consultancy Park Strategies.

On Russia

Pompeo has lambasted Moscow's aggression toward the West and other countries, and — unlike Trump — he has encouraged an assertive posture toward the Kremlin.

January 2018: "I continue to be concerned not only about the Russians but about others' efforts as well. We have many foes who want to undermine Western democracy. So there's this Washington-based focus on Russian interference. I want to make sure we broaden the conversation."

April 2017: "I don't have any comment on the [Russia] investigations. They'll run their course. We'll do our duty and provide those who ask and have a right to see it, we'll give them the information that they need so that they can conduct their investigations."

Pompeo had extreme views on Moscow before he became CIA director, "but as a Trump loyalist, he has softened his views on Russia and seems to be in line with Trump," Anders Aslund, resident senior fellow at think tank Atlantic Council, said in a note.

On secret CIA missions

In a recent interview with CBS, Pompeo said the CIA was "most certainly" expanding covert and clandestine operations.

January 2018: "Make no mistake about it. We are doing things today that the CIA was not doing a year ago, and there's more risk attached to those ... I want the president to have the best intelligence in the world."

The intelligence agency's next chief will be 61-year-old Gina Haspel, the deputy director of the agency who played a role in the waterboarding of suspected militants at secret facilities.

On Syria

Pompeo has repeatedly criticized the presence of Iran and Russia in Syria. He has stressed the importance of challenging Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

July 2017: "We're staring at the places we can find to achieve American outcomes in Syria, the things in our country's best interest and not in theirs. When the decision was made to allow the Russians to enter into Syria now, coming on four years ago, fundamentally changed the landscape. And it's certainly been worse for the Syrian people."

July 2017: "It is difficult to imagine a stable Syria that still has Assad in power. He is a puppet of the Iranians and therefore it seems an unlikely situation where Assad will be sitting on the throne and America's interests will be well served."

As secretary of state, Pompeo could "embolden those within the Trump administration who seek to further amplify a more assertive posture within the Syrian crisis," The Middle East Institute, a Washington-based research firm, said in a note.

On the Iran nuclear deal

Pompeo has likened Iran to the Islamic State terror group, calling Iran a "thuggish police state." He's also expressed disdain for a 2015 nuclear deal aimed at limiting the country's nuclear energy program.

November 2016: "I look forward to rolling back this disastrous deal with the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism."

Pompeo is "a longtime die-hard opponent of the Islamic Republic, who has for years advocated for a policy of regime change in Tehran," said The Middle East Institute note. "He was seen as someone willing to help set the stage for a military conflict between the U.S. and Iran."

On China

In the past, Pompeo has praised the world's second-largest economy — while also warning of Beijing's significant security threat.

July 2017: "I think China has the capacity to present the greatest rivalry to America ... over the medium and long term."

October 2017: "We think that President Xi [Jinping] will come out of this in a dominant position with incredible capacity to do good around the world."

"Pompeo has shown a high regard for Xi Jinping as a strongman," noted Jessica Chen Weiss, professor of government at Cornell University and expert in Chinese foreign policy. With Pompeo leading the State Department, "China and Asia can probably expect more of Trump's wild swings between rhetorical confrontation and cooperation."

On Trump's tweets

Pompeo has said that he believes the president's social media posts help the CIA.

December 2017: "I have seen things the president has put on his Twitter account actually have a real-world impact on our capacity to understand what's going on in other places in the world."