



The Winners and Losers in Rex Tillerson's Departure

Paul D. Shinkman

March 13, 2018

It was hardly a secret that many of America's allies do not see the world through the same lens as President Donald Trump – nor that his own secretary of state may have held similar doubts about the White House's approach to foreign policy.

Now, with Tillerson shown the door in an early-morning tweet-firing on Tuesday, the breach on major issues between the U.S. and the rest of the world may be widening. CIA Director Mike Pompeo, whom Trump has chosen to replace the former ExxonMobil CEO, will help the administration chart a path more in line with the commander in chief's aggressive plans for divisive issues like Iran and North Korea. And the move will set up clear winners and losers around the world.

Tillerson leaves after unsuccessfully trying to reform the State Department along more corporate lines, with few if any notable international accomplishments or initiatives from his 14-month tenure. But Tillerson perhaps stood out most to countries abroad in how he disagreed with Trump, largely on whether the U.S. should withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, how it should approach denuclearizing the Korean peninsula and, particularly recently, deterring Russia.

Trump's plan for both North Korea and Iran, supported by Pompeo according to his past statements, will have wide-ranging effects on those countries themselves as well as some of America's most important allies such as China and Germany, which backed the U.S. in crafting existing policies and which stand to lose the most from the president's hawkish proposals.

His latest decision eliminated from his Cabinet a voice that international partners had relied upon for influence in an administration that increasingly leans toward nationalist policies, experts say.

"They've lost an intermediary with Trump," says Robert Manning, who served during the George W. Bush administration on the secretary of state's Policy Planning Staff, a source of independent counsel to the nation's chief diplomat which Tillerson elevated during his tenure.

In explaining his decision to reporters outside the White House on Tuesday, Trump cited differences with Tillerson over the Iran nuclear deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which the president has repeatedly vowed to tear up. Tillerson, along with the International Atomic Energy Agency and America's European allies who signed onto the deal, agree Iran remains in compliance with it and that a preemptive withdrawal would eliminate a critical component of preventing Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon.

Pompeo has opposed the deal, and will likely support Trump's decision.

Leaving the deal would also drive an additional wedge between the U.S. and the European Union, as well as China and Russia, which also signed on to the nuclear agreement. And further destabilizing what's left of relations with Iran will upset European countries' plans to continue investing in Iran as a result of its compliance with the agreement.

An administration official also told [CNN](#) on Tuesday that Tillerson's sudden departure was timed with the high-stakes summit between the president and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to take place before May, saying the president "thought it was the right time for the transition with the upcoming North Korea talks and various trade negotiations."

Tillerson tried to serve as a clear voice on both Iran and North Korea, says Manning, now with the Atlantic Council. With the former, Tillerson identified that legitimate grievances with Iran's "Persian imperialism" throughout the Middle East had nothing to do with the nuclear agreement.

And on North Korea, he tried to be a consistent and clear adviser of a policy based on diplomacy and international sanctions – not military action. "But he constantly got subverted by this cacophony of voices, starting with Trump's tweets," Manning says, and extending to hawkish rhetoric from other advisers like national security adviser H.R. McMaster, U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, and Pompeo himself, who in July said he was "hopeful" for regime change in Pyongyang.

"This is where I'm personally most worried, because that's where we're closest to war," says Robert Jervis, professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University. "South Korea will lose by this. They're frantically playing the mediator role."

Trump's policies likely backed by Pompeo will also have a drastic effect on China. Early in his administration Trump sought to build good relations with Chinese President Xi Jinping and delegate responsibility to him for solving the North Korean problem, but those hopes were dashed by the end of last year following continued North Korean weapons tests. Trump has now taken to waging wide-ranging economic warfare, most recently with new tariffs on aluminum and steel, with the hopes of punishing China. It will, however, affect global markets.

"This is Trump's real passion, to go after China," Jervis says. "Tillerson would have tried to be a little more civil in managing it."

"Trump's arguments with China are basically correct, but the problem is he's extrapolated that on the global trading system," Jervis says.

Action against Beijing will likely heat up again next month in the form of new sanctions for intellectual property theft under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, which Trump has said will incur "big damages" against China.

What's yet unclear is how Russia will be affected by the personnel change. Early in his tenure Tillerson was thought to be particularly nuanced with Russia, due to his extensive experience there as an oil executive and reported close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Tillerson even received the Russian Order of Friendship directly from Putin in 2013.

But Tillerson's skepticism about coordination with Moscow appeared to sour during his tenure. On Monday, he broke from the official White House position as articulated by spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders and endorsed British Prime Minister Theresa May's shocking declaration that Russia poisoned a former Russian spy living in southwest England.

Tillerson's statement likely did not prompt his firing, but showed he was willing to call out Russia for its perceived meddling – something Trump has been loathe to do.

At the CIA, Pompeo has publicly remained cagey about how he views Russia and what the U.S. is – or isn't – doing to offset Moscow's international influence. Some experts attribute this to his avoiding a sensitive topic for Trump, who remains under investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, by Congress and by the FBI for potential collusion between Russia and his 2016 campaign.

Yet it isn't all negative news for foreign powers as Pompeo takes the diplomatic helm. The former congressman from Kansas and West Point graduate has not limited his interventionist rhetoric to North Korea, and some experts believe this could spell good news for other current or potential warzones, even if it's a bad idea for the U.S.

"While Pompeo is willing to avoid pressing Trump's buttons when it comes to the 2016 Russian election interference and the Mueller investigation, Pompeo is still a strong supporter of U.S. military intervention," says John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Glaser believes that could benefit Ukraine and the Baltic countries – central targets of Russian foreign meddling – and that U.S. support for NATO is more likely under Pompeo, particularly following the Trump administration's decision to provide lethal armaments to Kiev as it fights pro-Russian separatists in the country's east.

Glaser also points to Tillerson's recent efforts to bolster U.S. relations and programs in countries in Latin America and Africa. Indeed the outgoing secretary found out about his firing during a brief visit to Chad and Nigeria.

"Those countries may now get less attention under Pompeo," Glaser says.