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Pompeo Sticks Even Closer to Trump as Impeachment Crisis Grows

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Michael Pompeo has emerged as one of President Donald Trump's most prominent defenders even as the Ukraine controversy in Washington threatens to engulf the secretary of state -- and his political future.

Pompeo, the last remaining member of Trump's original national security team, has made clear he will fight what he calls congressional overreach by Democrats leading the impeachment inquiry who are demanding documents and testimony from the diplomats who work for him. And he's said that the president did nothing wrong when he asked Ukraine's president to investigate Democrat Joe Biden and his son Hunter on a July 25 phone call.

Rep. Schiff Is 'Deeply Concerned' About Pompeo's Alleged Interference

Rep. Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, discusses Pompeo's involvement with Ukraine.

The secretary has been 4,000 miles away in southern Europe this week, but his defense of Trump and attacks on Democrats in Congress resonate both in the Oval Office and in Kansas, where Pompeo is weighing a Senate run in 2020. While the impeachment crisis could bruise his political standing -- forcing him to choose between the president and defending his department's career diplomats and appointees -- breaking with Trump now would probably be political suicide.

"Pompeo's career play is to remain as close as humanly possible to the president and, in a ruby-red place like Kansas, the president's endorsement will seal the seat," said Christopher Preble, vice president of defense and foreign policy studies at the Washington-based Cato Institute.

Yet that strategy has risks: While Kansas hasn't elected a Democratic senator since 1932, voters there picked a Democratic governor in 2018. The Democratic share of the state's registered voters has climbed gradually to more than 25%. And Pompeo may be unable to escape blame -- and possible legal repercussions -- if the president is eventually impeached.

Listened to Call

Even from Italy, where he visited his family's ancestral home, Pompeo has been in the thick of the impeachment debate back in Washington. In Rome on Wednesday, Pompeo said publicly for the first time that he listened in during Trump's July 25 call. Earlier in the week, he spurned demands for officials to testify to House committees this week as "unfeasible" and said

Democrats were trying to “intimidate, bully, & treat improperly the distinguished professionals of the Department of State.”

After three years working to earn a place in Trump’s innermost circle -- first as CIA director and now as secretary of state -- Pompeo’s fate is intertwined with the president whose candidacy he opposed during the 2016 Republican primaries. Testimony and additional documents expected to emerge as the impeachment inquiry expands will make it hard for the top U.S. diplomat to stay out of the fray.

“How do you prepare for information that may be out there that hasn’t been released?” said said Jeremi Suri, a professor of public affairs and history at the University of Texas in Austin.

Despite Pompeo’s resistance to congressional demands for diplomats to testify, Kurt Volker, Pompeo’s former special envoy to Ukraine and a prominent donor to Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, appeared behind closed doors on Capitol Hill throughout the day on Thursday.

Volker shared documents showing U.S. diplomats exchanged text messages arguing about whether Trump improperly demanded that Ukraine investigate Biden and his son in exchange for military aid the administration had held up.

“As I said on the phone, I think it’s crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign,” Bill Taylor, the U.S. charge d’affaires in Kyiv, said in a text in September to Volker and Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union. Sondland -- who contributed \$1 million to Trump’s inauguration committee, according to the Center for Responsive Politics -- answered that the president “has been crystal clear: no quid pro quo’s of any kind.”

At one point, Sondland told Taylor he should talk to Pompeo if had objections, an indication that the secretary of state was aware of the maneuvers.

In addition, in August Sondland and Volker discussed a proposed statement for Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskiy that would have committed his government to pursue issues involving Biden as well as Trump’s suspicion that Ukraine meddled in the 2016 election to help Democrat Hillary Clinton, according to excerpts released by House Democrats late Thursday. In return, the officials dangled the promise of a firm date for Zelenskiy to visit Trump in the White House. No such statement was issued.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch -- who was recalled to Washington in May -- is scheduled to testify before the House committees on Oct. 11. Trump said Thursday that he’d heard “very, very bad things about her.”

Trump had long wanted Yovanovitch ousted after hearing rumors that she had badmouthed him, but Pompeo sought to delay her departure, according to an official familiar with the episode. She left her post in Kyiv two months earlier than scheduled but remains with the State Department.

Bigger Tests

Pompeo's recent actions suggest he's starting to tread more carefully after his initial defiance of Congress. In an interview with Italy's Sky TG24 from his trip, he said that the State Department has an obligation to "try and cooperate with our parliamentary, our congressional colleagues."

"I will do that," he said. "The State Department will do that."

Bigger tests are coming soon. In addition to Yovanovitch's testimony, the House committees conducting the inquiry have asked for a deposition from State Department Counselor Ulrich Brechbuhl, a friend, business partner and confidant of Pompeo dating to their time together at West Point.

Emails show Brechbuhl was aware of allegations in right-wing media against Yovanovitch as well as efforts by Rudy Giuliani, Trump's personal lawyer, to pursue corruption claims against the Bidens.

Trump showed he still holds Pompeo in high regard when he tweeted Wednesday that Democratic Representative Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, "should only be so lucky to have the brains, honor and strength of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo."

Trump went further in the Oval Office later in the day, saying Schiff couldn't carry Pompeo's "blank strap," a euphemism for athletic supporter.

Senate Seat

Pompeo has given mixed signals when asked about his interest in the U.S. seat in his adopted home state of Kansas.

One person familiar with his thinking, who asked not to be identified discussing private conversations, said the secretary most likely wouldn't run for the Senate unless Trump determines the Kansas seat is at risk for Republicans and asks him to join the race. Pompeo genuinely enjoys the job of secretary of state and has no desire to leave, the person said.

Yet Trump's high regard for Pompeo may prove to have an expiration date. Like former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley, Pompeo so far has been a rare exception to the rule that Trump's closest advisers, given enough time, fall out of favor with the president and become subject to humiliating tirades on Twitter or in the Oval Office.

Rex Tillerson, the former Exxon Mobil Corp. chief executive officer and Pompeo's predecessor at the State Department, went in just over a year from being seen as a steady hand to an object of mockery by the president, who said he was "dumb as a rock." The same happened with former National Security Advisor John Bolton, who Trump said "made some very big mistakes" and gained the Trumpian moniker "Mr. Tough Guy."

"If he thinks that the Trump ship is going down, then the sooner he gets off the better," Suri, the University of Texas professor, said of Pompeo. "But if he thinks they're going to weather the storm, then he has to wait because if he jumps ship, Trump will come after him."