

WALL STREET JOURNAL

James Mattis to Depart as Defense Chief Over Troop Withdrawals from Syria, Afghanistan

Nancy A. Youssef and Rebecca Ballhaus

December 21, 2018

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said he would resign at the end of February after President Trump ordered the drawdown of all troops from Syria and many from Afghanistan, because his views no longer “aligned” with the president’s, an abrupt departure of a military figure considered a stalwart of national security.

Mr. Mattis told the president he would quit during a White House meeting Thursday afternoon, after expressing concern about the president’s surprise call to rapidly withdraw more than 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria as well as the prospect of beginning to withdraw as many as half of the 14,000 troops now in Afghanistan in a matter of weeks.

Military officials fear the moves could lead to the re-emergence of Islamic State or like-minded groups in countries where the military has made heavy investments or endanger the U.S.’s on-the-ground partners, U.S. officials said. Mr. Trump said Wednesday ISIS had been defeated in Syria and it is time to bring the troops home. He hasn’t addressed the drawdown in Afghanistan this week.

The unexpected series of events appeared to catch many in the military off guard.

Mr. Mattis had long told associates he wouldn’t quit the post but would have to be fired. Yet in a pointed letter to the president, he suggested he chose to leave. The president had a right to a secretary of defense “whose views are better aligned with yours,” Mr. Mattis wrote.

Legislators and some within the Pentagon said they were shaken by Mr. Mattis’s departure and what it could mean for the U.S. military and the nation’s broader national-security strategy. “We are on the edge,” one Pentagon official said. “This is unbelievable.”

MATTIS’S LETTER TO TRUMP

“Because you have the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my positions.” [Read the full letter.](#)

On Twitter, Mr. Trump praised the progress made under Mr. Mattis’s tenure at the Pentagon and lauded him as “a great help to me in getting allies and other countries to pay their share of military obligations.” He said he would name a new defense secretary shortly.

Mr. Mattis was considered a steadfast member of the president's national-security team, even as his influence more recently waned within the White House. During an October appearance on CBS's "60 Minutes," Mr. Trump said Mr. Mattis was "sort of a Democrat" in a rebuke of the defense chief, fueling rumors that Mr. Mattis's tenure would end sometime after November's midterm elections.

There were other hints that the White House was trying to push out Mr. Mattis. Earlier this month, Mr. Trump named Army Gen. Mark Milley as the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10 months before the current chairman and top ally to Mr. Mattis, Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, was set to leave.

The president bypassed Mr. Mattis's first pick for the job, Gen. David Goldfein, who leads the Air Force.

The president has sought to shake up his administration after the midterms. Mr. Trump's chief of staff, John Kelly, a retired Marine and close friend of Mr. Mattis, is set to leave the White House at the end of the year and will be replaced by Mick Mulvaney, who will serve as acting chief of staff. Mr. Trump also announced the departure of his interior secretary, Ryan Zinke, last week, and is expected to replace Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, according to people familiar with the matter.

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders, asked about disagreements over policy between Mr. Mattis and the president, told Fox Business News: "Only one person was elected to be commander in chief and president of the United States and that was Donald Trump."

Republican lawmakers praised Mr. Mattis's tenure and some sounded warnings about what his departure meant. Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) said Mr. Mattis's letter "makes it abundantly clear that we are headed towards a series of grave policy errors which will endanger our nation, damage our alliances & empower our adversaries."

"There is chaos now in this administration." Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) said.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) issued one of his harshest public criticisms of Mr. Trump over Mr. Mattis's departure. "I believe it's essential that the United States maintain and strengthen the post-World War II alliances that have been carefully built by leaders in both parties," he said in a statement. "We must also maintain a clear-eyed understanding of our friends and foes, and recognize that nations like Russia are among the latter."

Mr. Mattis's departure was unexpected, and there may not be a presumed immediate successor, officials said.

Names that may come under consideration, according to people familiar with the discussions, include Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), an Air Force reservist and military lawyer and longtime national-security hawk; Navy Secretary Richard Spencer, a former Marine; Rep. Mac Thornberry (R., Texas), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee; Sen. Tom Cotton (R., Ark.); Deputy Secretary of Defense Pat Shanahan and financier David McCormick.

Mr. Mattis, 68 years old, was one of the original members of the cabinet and was celebrated by both supporters and some critics of the administration. A legend within the Marine Corps, where

he was a general, the veteran of the Persian Gulf and Iraq wars was seen as both a cerebral military intellectual and the author of popular aphorisms. Among them: “Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet.”

Early into Mr. Trump’s term in office the president frequently cited “Gen. Mattis” as a key member of the administration. But as the president formulated his own national-security vision, he seemed to privately clash with the defense secretary, who sometimes delayed responding to presidential requests he disagreed with, officials said.

When the president suggested assassinating Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Mr. Mattis told his staff to ignore it, according to Bob Woodward’s book “Fear: Trump in the White House.” The president proposed an elaborate military parade, but the idea faded away.

“We probably won’t ever know the true extent of bad ideas he knocked down or slow-rolled,” Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said. “I do believe his value to the administration, and, dare I say, the country, was on those occasions when he, by his mere tone, conveyed a sense of competence and good judgment.”

At times, Mr. Mattis didn’t appear to be a part of key military-related decisions. He was on vacation when the president tweeted in July 2017 the end of allowing transgender troops in the military. Officials said Mr. Mattis learned about the president’s decision to suspend major military exercises on the Korean Peninsula after Mr. Trump told North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during their June summit in Singapore. The military has had to adjust its exercises and readiness in the region ever since.

Most recently, Mr. Mattis has been largely quiet about the deployment of thousands of active-duty U.S. troops along three Mexican border states in anticipation of caravans of largely Central American migrants and would-be asylum seekers, which the president has called an “invasion.”

As Mr. Mattis’s influence diminished, new faces like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, the national security adviser, arrived, both with forceful approaches to U.S. national security, particularly on how to quell Iranian influence in the Middle East as well as stopping its nuclear program. While the administration applied economic and diplomatic pressure, the Pentagon adopted a less aggressive military posture.

The U.S. military drew down defensive weapons and its naval footprint in the Persian Gulf as Mr. Mattis’s Pentagon concluded that Russia and China were pre-eminent threats.

“There was a perception that Mattis was unwilling to project sufficient American military power against Iran, which, until the Syria withdrawal, appeared to be an essential element of the president’s strategy to roll back Iran’s influence in the region,” said Mark Dubowitz, chief executive officer of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and a supporter of the administration strategy. “For the president, the credible threat of the military force means it is therefore less likely that he has to use that power and get himself in a protracted Middle East war, like his predecessors. With his Syria withdrawal, which Mattis rightly opposed, he has severely undermined that credible threat.”

The U.S. posture toward Iran has lurked over Mr. Mattis’s career. He was forced to end his military career while commander of U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for the Middle East, because he felt the Obama administration was too passive against an increasingly

aggressive Iran. The administration was working instead toward what became the 2015 pact under which Iran agreed to curb its nuclear-weapons program.

To become secretary, Congress waived a rule that banned retired troops from cabinet posts for seven years after serving. Mr. Mattis left the Marine Corps in 2013. And while he wore a suit during his stint at the Pentagon he often led the department like a military commander.

He leaned heavily on a bevy of advisers, many of whom had served with him in the military, and kept scores of civilian positions vacant.

He frequently arrived at work around dawn and was at the Pentagon nearly every weekend. And like some generals, he didn't like to be publicly questioned.

During his tenure as the 26th defense secretary, there were fewer news conferences, less information shared with Capitol Hill or details released about the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, which had no end date under his tenure. Information could be used by the enemy, he said.

Most often, he said those who have seen war are the first to oppose it. "Engage your brain before you engage your weapon," was another one of his more popular aphorisms.