



Trump Announces Retired USMC General James “Mad Dog” Mattis as Secretary of Defense

By Roxanne Perugino

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On December 1, during a victory rally in Ohio, President-elect Donald Trump announced the nomination of retired Marine Corps General James “Mad Dog” Mattis to be his secretary of defense. Trump noted the official date of appointment would be Monday, December 5.

Mattis earned the nickname “Mad Dog” for his off-color language and obsessive dedication to the military. As the former head of CENTCOM (2010-13), he frequently clashed with President Obama over Iran, whose regime Mattis views as the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East region. In 2010 Mattis coauthored a counter-insurgency strategy manual credited with helping to halt some of worst sectarian violence in Iraq before the US withdrawal at the end of 2011.

Mattis is a nearly universally respected combat leader known for his deep study of the history of warfare. The *Washington Post* reported that Mattis “has often said that Washington lacks an overall strategy in the Middle East, opting to instead handle issues in an ineffective one-by-one-manner.”

Mattis’s views are more closely aligned with the president-elect and national security advisor-designate, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn. It is noteworthy that the Obama administration removed Flynn as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2014. Mattis, however, does not share the same views about Russia and Russian President Vladimir Putin as Trump and Flynn. He has expressed deep concern over Russia’s intentions, which could include breaking NATO apart. Moreover, during the presidential campaign, Mattis was not reluctant to criticize Trump’s rhetoric that NATO was obsolete and that members do not pay their fair share.

Israel-Palestine: At an Aspen Security Forum shortly before his retirement, Mattis remarked that his job as CENTCOM commander was made more difficult because the United States is seen as “biased in support of Israel.” He also said that the current situation in Israel is “unsustainable” and that he supports a two-state solution. Because of these comments, the Zionist Organization of America opposes Mattis’s nomination.

However, a recent statement published by the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), hardly a liberal organization, said attempts to portray Mattis as anti-Israel were “ill-founded and unfair.” JINSA claims it recently consulted several notable Israelis and Americans in the civil and military communities who have interacted with him and they share JINSA’s confidence in Mattis’s support for a strong US-Israel relationship. JINSA CEO and President Michael Makovsky said, “...General Mattis has noted this alignment of views with Israel, and

correctly explained the synchronization of Israeli and Arab outlooks on these subjects. This should be heartening to the overwhelming majority of Americans who believe that a strong State of Israel is necessary for its own sake and important for a strong America.”

Iran: Like the president-elect and Flynn, Mattis has been critical of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and most likely would support any efforts by the incoming Trump administration to modify or annul the JCPOA. He criticized Congress for being “pretty much absent” when the JCPOA was negotiated.

Middle East allies: Mattis is on record as praising the friendship of regional allies like Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. He has been critical of President Obama’s Middle East policy, noting it gives the perception that Washington is pulling back from its allies. He has stressed the need to bolster ties with the intelligence agencies of Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. In 2012 he supported providing weapons to Syrian rebels.

Mattis is expected to be confirmed but his appointment will require a congressional waiver of a law, the National Security Act of 1947, which forbids a military general from becoming the secretary of defense until seven years have elapsed since retirement. The idea was to ensure that the US armed forces be controlled by a civilian. The law was waived in 1950 to allow Army General George Marshall to become secretary of defense. The law was changed in 2008, reducing from ten to seven the number of years that a nominee must be retired from the military.

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York) opposes such a waiver while the chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) and Representative Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), respectively, support the nomination. Most Democrats have yet to weigh in on the nomination or on the waiver legislation. As noted in earlier profiles, executive branch nominees require only a simple majority vote of 51 because of the rule change when Democrats controlled the Senate. However, under current Senate rules, the waiver legislation will require 60 votes, giving Democrats some leverage over Mattis’s nomination.