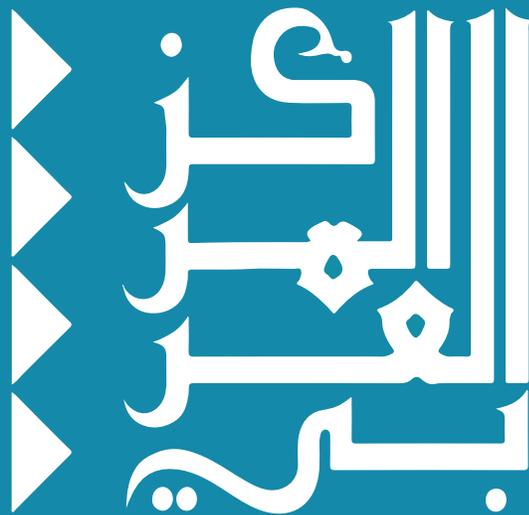


# The Outsider Diplomat: Tillerson Strives to Define his Role

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One of Washington's best kept dilemmas is whether the 69th US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, is under siege by the White House or simply an outsider striving to fit in among competitive power centers in President Donald Trump's Administration. No American secretary of state in the past decades had such a rough start at this federal job, which is considered one of the four most important cabinet positions.

The legacy of most US secretaries of state in recent history has always been a matter of debate. Both Colin Powell and Hillary Clinton were outmaneuvered by White House senior staff, while Condoleezza Rice and John Kerry were imperfect administrators. Yet nearly every secretary of state was ready to hit the ground running. Tillerson, who is the first top diplomat without military or government experience, spent his first sit-down interview on the job defending his official demeanor before giving away his rather personal rationale to serve: "My wife convinced me. She was right. I'm supposed to do this."

In January 2017, Tillerson retired from ExxonMobil after a 42-year career that led him to the top of America's multinational oil and gas corporation. In contrast to his annual compensation at Exxon of \$33 million in 2014, he currently makes \$203,700 per year at the State Department, a fraction of his corporate salary. It was reportedly Condoleezza Rice, a fellow Texan, who last November suggested his name to Trump, and former Defense Secretary Robert Gates endorsed that choice three days later.

As a first impression, Tillerson is rather an odd pick for the president. He donated to Republican candidate Jeb Bush in the primaries and supports the principles of climate change and global free markets, including the Trans-

Pacific Partnership (TPP) from which Trump withdrew last January. After two months in office, Tillerson is gradually coping in his new job; his success or failure will indeed have a significant impact on US foreign policy in the coming years.

### **Report Card and Lessons: The First Two Months**

Even before officially starting his job, Tillerson stirred inadvertent controversy that taught him the first lesson in public diplomacy. In his confirmation hearing on January 11, 2017, he told US senators that Washington will have "to send China a clear signal" that the building and access to new artificial islands in the South China Sea are "not going to be allowed." Chinese state media reacted by warning of a "devastating confrontation" and "large-scale war" if the United States followed through. That episode made him more cautious in the weeks that followed.

After taking office on February 2, Tillerson waited until February 16 to make his first public—and brief—remarks about the G-20 conference in Germany, without fielding questions from reporters. During that same period, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, who was confirmed by the Senate on January 24, became the de facto top diplomat largely due to her White House access. Until now, she occasionally eclipses Tillerson in conveying policy, mostly on issues related to Russia and Syria.

After President Trump escalated tensions with China over Twitter, the so-called shadow secretary of state Jared Kushner (Trump's son-in-law) was quietly bonding with Chinese officials to smooth things over. Kushner is also directly involved in Middle East peace

negotiations as well as relations with Mexico. Most recently, he traveled to Iraq with US military leaders to see firsthand the progress in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In addition, Chief White House strategist Steve Bannon reportedly spoke with the German ambassador to the United States. There are increasing indications that Tillerson's clout in foreign policy making is limited; on March 30, he was in Ankara with the tough task of mending fences with Turkish officials yet with no policy tools available or clear messaging.

Indeed, so far the new secretary of state has traveled to seven countries, and he has been mostly visible on East Asia. Perhaps his official debut was on March 22 at the Global Coalition meeting to defeat ISIL, where he articulated US foreign policy in a substantive way mostly by echoing the views of the White House and the Pentagon. Yet, he was excluded from presidential meetings with foreign leaders, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The White House corrected that trend on April 3 and included both Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis in the meeting between Trump and his Egyptian counterpart, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

Once confirmed, the expectation was high about Tillerson's tenure. In welcoming remarks to State Department employees on February 2, Tillerson made a pitch for unity and acted as a skilled executive ready to lead his staff in a new direction. However, things went south since that time. As the State Department's manager, he failed twice to select a pick for his deputy, as both John Bolton and Elliott Abrams were vetoed by the White House. While John Sullivan's name has been reported for weeks as the top choice, the White House has yet to make

a formal announcement of a senior appointment that will need Senate confirmation. Meanwhile, the State Department remains in a leadership vacuum whenever Tillerson is on official travel.

Furthermore, the first official State Department briefing to reporters did not begin until March 7 and the department has yet to have an official spokesperson. In contrast, it took three days for the Barack Obama and George W. Bush Administrations to start their own State Department daily press briefings. Until recently, the State Department was referring reporters to the White House for policy guidance. On February 27, the White House announced a 30 percent cut in the State Department's budget, which fed the narrative about Tillerson's diminishing influence in the Trump Administration. While agencies like the State Department and the Pentagon are traditionally competitive, now they are finding common ground under Trump's presidency. Mattis and Tillerson are synchronizing their efforts to provide damage control for Trump's statements and to make sure the White House is not intrusive in their departments' internal procedures.

Tillerson is first and foremost facing a culture shock after transferring from the secrecy of a multinational corporation to the public life of a top diplomat. He is accustomed to negotiations behind closed doors with no media coverage, leaks, or messaging. His views on that issue cannot be more clearly expressed than his interview with the Independent Journal Review: "We have some very, very complex strategic issues to make our way through with important countries around the world, and we're not going to get through them by just messaging through the media. We get through them in face-to-face meetings behind closed doors." He added, "I'm not a big media press

access person. I personally don't need it." While in Seoul, a local paper reported that Tillerson canceled a dinner because of fatigue. However, the dinner was never planned; rather, the US Secretary of State had lost control of the narrative and had no media staff or pool of reporters to immediately correct the report and deny the rumor.

### **"Deconstructing" the State Department?**

Every incoming US president has the privilege to fill at least 4,000 federal vacancies. As of April 5, the Trump Administration has yet to make nominations for 486 key positions that require Senate confirmation. At the State Department, there are still 431 vacant positions, of which 266 are career officers or civil servants that serve beyond the presidency. Trump said last month that "a lot of these jobs, I don't want to appoint, because they are unnecessary to have."

While Bannon, who played a key role in rationalizing the White House budget proposal, talks about the "deconstruction of the administrative state," many at Foggy Bottom fear what might come in the next four years. Part of the White House argument is that US non-military aid has increased over the past decades. According to a January 2016 survey, Americans believe that foreign aid makes up 31 percent of the federal budget; however, it is actually less than 1 percent.

Meanwhile, over 100 management and ambassadorial posts are yet to be filled at the State Department; in fact, only four ambassadors have been named so far (for China, Israel, Britain, and Russia). The Trump Administration kept over 50 staff in their positions on a temporary basis to ensure a smooth transition, including three State Department officials: Special Envoy for

Combating ISIL Brett McGurk, Undersecretary of State for Public Affairs Thomas Shannon, and Ambassador-at-Large on Human Trafficking Susan Coppedge. Unlike many of his predecessors, Tillerson did not come to office with his own team. Key staff guiding his policy since day one are members of Trump's team: Chief of Staff Margaret Peterlin, Communications Advisor R.C. Hammond, and Senior Advisor Matt Mowers, among others.

The leadership vacuum at the State Department was further exacerbated on January 25 when several key State Department officials were ousted, a move that was interpreted as a "routine changeover"; however, it removed the old guard career officials and strained the work flow of the department. A few days later, a State Department dissent cable protested the January 27 White House executive order that banned travelers from six Muslim countries. The White House's response was that they should "either get with the program or they can go."

Approximately 70,000 employees work for the State Department, in the United States and abroad, and many of them see their boss alienated from White House meetings and marginalized in his ultimate task of representing the US government abroad. There are no better words to describe the mood at Foggy Bottom than what a mid-career State Department officer said last month: "This is probably what it felt like to be a British foreign service officer after World War II, when you realize, no, the sun actually does set on your empire. America is over. And being part of that, when it's happening for no reason, is traumatic." That statement is obviously exaggerating the situation; however, it reflects an agonizing "administrative state" fighting to remain relevant. Tillerson's most crucial task will be to

build a bridge of trust between the White House staff and the State Department.

### **What Kind of Secretary of State Will Tillerson Be?**

The success of any secretary of state has always been measured by his or her access to the president and impact on US foreign policy. In a survey of 1,615 international relations scholars released February 2015, 32 percent ranked Henry Kissinger as the “most effective US Secretary of State of the last 50 years” while John Kerry finished last with 0.31 percent. Since criticism is always harsh on the current holder of an office, Tillerson will likely have the lower mark if that survey were conducted today.

It is natural for Tillerson to have a learning curve, so it might be premature to issue a verdict on his performance. After lowering expectations in the first two months, he has enough room to grow. His earlier silence could be justified as he took on an institution with no senior leadership and is serving under an administration entangled in a web of scandals and investigations. Furthermore, Tillerson’s job is to convey a US foreign policy that is not yet set in stone. In a centralized White House with a hand-picked inner circle, it will be hard to see how Tillerson, for instance, could have influence on Israel policy with Trump’s son-in-

law in charge of that portfolio, or to exercise any significant impact on Middle East policy with Mattis exclusively overseeing the war on ISIL. The greatest challenge for Tillerson will be to recognize his beat—that is, in the area or topic he can take the lead and have an impact.

Obviously, he has access to Trump but he does not have his ear yet. During his Senate confirmation, Tillerson deferred to Trump and said, “I’ll carry out his policies in order to be as successful as possible.” That dynamic will likely not change unless Trump recognizes the power of diplomacy. Foreign diplomats and officials will be more tempted to reach out to Kushner to have direct access to Trump, instead of going through Tillerson.

While the White House is entangled in politics at home and the Central Intelligence Agency is consumed by the Russian hacking saga, the State Department must assume the role of civilian leadership in the Trump Administration. The Pentagon alone cannot lead the war against ISIL without civilian oversight and sensitivity to regional and local politics; otherwise, US policy will likely face accumulating challenges moving forward. Tillerson is cornered in an administration with many competing centers. If he does not find himself a place on the table, US diplomacy will surely suffer.

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