



If Confirmed, Pompeo Will Face Tough Challenges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On March 13, 2018, President Donald Trump announced that he was replacing US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson with CIA Director Mike Pompeo. Pompeo, a former Republican congressman from Kansas (2011-17), is an outspoken critic of “the Iran deal” – as is John Bolton, who has since been named General H.R. McMaster’s replacement as National Security Advisor. Pompeo’s confirmation hearing will take place on April 12. Like Bolton, he is likely to face a tough battle for a difficult position.

During Secretary Rex Tillerson’s tenure as US Secretary of State, the declared policy of the US in the Levant was explained by belated concerns over Iran’s propensity to destabilize the region; by the necessity for the US to provide a credible (if reluctant) presence in the Syrian theater “until ISIS is fully defeated and cannot reemerge;” the need for a political solution to be reached to enable Syria to resume the status of a legitimate entity; and the need to provide a counterbalance to growing proxy threats to Israel, Jordan, and Turkey.

If confirmed as Tillerson’s replacement, Mike Pompeo will be entering a congested international crossroads at a globally critical moment. Neither the world at large, nor the US, nor the tenor of relations linking the two will ever be the same again.

The day before he announced his selection of Pompeo to replace Tillerson, President Trump notified Congress that “it is necessary to continue the national emergency declared with respect to the threat posed by Iran, hence to maintain in force the comprehensive sanctions against Iran.” The grounds cited were the “actions and policies of the Government of Iran,” which include “development

of ballistic missiles, support for international terrorism, and human rights abuses" deemed to continue to pose "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States."

On March 15, 2018, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control applied the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act and Executive Order 13694 ["Blocking the Property of Certain Persons Engaging in Significant Malicious Cyber-Enabled Activities"] to individual Russians and to these Russian entities:

- the Internet Research Agency for activity seeking adversely to affect the 2016 election processes and institutions in the US;
- Concord Management and Consulting LLC and Concord Catering (both controlled by someone personally close to the Russian president);
- the Main Intelligence Directorate, or GRU (a Russian military intelligence organization known to be engaged in activities that undermine cybersecurity on behalf of the Russian government); and
- Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB (which utilizes cyber tools to target Russian journalists and politicians critical of the Russian government; Russian citizens and government officials; former officials from countries bordering Russia; US government officials, US cyber security-, diplomatic-, and military staff; and even White House personnel).

On the same day, France, Germany, the US, and the UK issued a joint statement accusing Russia of responsibility for the nerve agent attack in Salisbury. Russia has since followed up on its promise to expel British diplomats in retaliation for PM Theresa May's similar punitive action against the Kremlin. One-upmanship in tit-for-tat counter-retaliations continues to score extra points.

The new US tariffs on steel and aluminum imports seem destined for use as multi-purpose bargaining chips, primarily vis-à-vis North Korea's guardian angel, One-Belt-One-Road builder China. North Korean-Syrian cooperation (over a nuclear reactor preemptively destroyed by Israel years ago; and, more recently, over criminal maritime supplies of mass destruction chemicals) on the one hand; and Iranian-North Korean collaboration on ballistic missile development on the other hand, have taken on a new urgency following the publication on a Syrian opposition site of photos and a report divulging collusion between the North Korean, Iranian, and Syrian governments. That collusion involves building a ballistic missile factory in Syria, a project whose ulterior motives are purported to have been tacitly approved by Russia.

Mike Pompeo will have much to contend with in the event he is confirmed. The challenges include, among others:

- preparation for the US-DPRK meeting to discuss peace, stability, and prosperity on an ideally undivided and denuclearized Korean peninsula;
- a Brexit-stricken EU eager not to rock the boat on the matter of Iran, yet with reasons to view Russia with fresh apprehension;
- Turkish-Qatari joint ideological stances over Gaza and Jerusalem;
- Iran-Iraq-Turkey's closely associated anti-Kurdish strategies;
- Russia's territorial and naval bases and S-400 missiles in Syria;
- the complicated Iran-Turkey-Russia neo-imperialist compact;
- Turkey's comportment as a NATO member;
- Iran's missile manufacturing plants in Syria; and
- Hezbollah's longer-term interests in Lebanon, and now also in Syria, at a stone's throw from Israel's northern borders.

All these issues tend to exacerbate the security dilemma of states in this messy expanse, with grave potential repercussions far beyond the geostrategic span of the Levant.

The region and the world have changed, and complex problems have become ever more interwoven. There is precious little Pompeo can afford to do that Tillerson would not have done, short of sparking an unintended conflagration. It is imperative that a willed military option be detailed, delimited, and decisive.

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