

Rex Tillerson's Trials and Tribulations

President Trump's meddling hand in the Mideast encouraged the Saudi-Qatari showdown and made Secretary of State Tillerson's job all the more nettlesome, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will stay in his job no more than two years, maximum. He is an honorable man who came to Washington with a patriotic sense of wanting to do something on behalf of his country. There is no reason to expect that he will be caught up in sleaze found elsewhere in the administration. His previous career demonstrated he has management and leadership ability, while giving him much experience in conducting business overseas. But the frustrations of his current position will be too much for him to bear for very long.

Some of those frustrations emanate from the nature of the Trump presidency. This administration simply has little place for diplomacy, notwithstanding how much the President likes to talk about making deals. The proposed meat-ax cuts to the State Department are one of the most obvious indications of that. Another indication is how the nation's chief diplomat, the Secretary of State, often seems to be left outside the innermost circle of foreign policy decision-making.

A related source of frustration is a President working at cross-purposes with some of what Tillerson is trying to do. This is not unique to the business of the State Department, and the Secretary of State is hardly the only one of the President's senior subordinates whom Trump has undercut. But probably the most salient example of such undercutting is how Trump's steep tilt toward the Saudis has complicated Tillerson's efforts at resolving the conflict between Qatar and its Gulf Arab rivals.

There is also the discomfort of a Secretary of State having to defend the indefensible, on matters such as climate change and trade. And Tillerson has to do so at a time when foreign trust in the United States to do the right thing in world affairs is at a nadir.

Other difficulties for Tillerson have more to do with the differences between his business experience and government, although some of these difficulties are exacerbated by tendencies of the Trump administration. As CEO of Exxon Mobil, Tillerson was fully in charge. He is not in charge now, and not just in the sense that he reports to the President. There are multiple political and policy interests that present complexities he did not have to confront as a business executive.

Although a corporate CEO does have to deal in a sense with multiple constituencies in the form of shareholders, customers, suppliers, and creditors, that array is standard in a way that can be described in a business textbook. The Washington policy environment is different from anything else, and it certainly cannot be simplified in terms of dollars and rates of return.

The Turnover Troubles

The quadrennial cycle of administrations coming and going is another Washington phenomenon that has made Tillerson's job harder and does not correspond to anything in his business career. Tillerson has been criticized for seeming to give greater priority to developing a reorganization plan for the State Department than to filling vacant positions on the existing organization chart.

But this approach would be a normal and appropriate way for a new chief executive of a corporation to approach his task. Why appoint someone to a job that may soon be redefined or abolished? The difference is that Exxon Mobil never had to deal with its upper ranks being depopulated every four years. Tillerson's filling of State Department vacancies has been greatly complicated by the heavy hand of a White House that applies political litmus tests and makes sure no never-Trumpers get a job. Tillerson has considered this White House role to be such an impediment that he uncharacteristically lost his composure by shouting at the White House personnel chief about the problem.

Then there are the many clashes of foreign interests that a Secretary of State must deal with, that will not go away, and that cannot simply be ignored. Unlike in the business world, where failure to strike a deal means turning to some other oilfield to exploit, such options are often not available in foreign policy.

Tillerson has just made his most salient personal foray yet into international problem-solving – shuttle diplomacy to try to resolve the dispute among the Gulf Arabs – and he is coming home empty-handed. At the end of his trip, Tillerson not only declared how “tired” he was but also made very explicit comments about how different such work was from being CEO of Exxon Mobil and how difficult it was in having to deal with “fragmented” decision-making in the U.S. Government. Meanwhile, the Gulf Arab dispute is still a problem for the administration's foreign policy.

Earlier on the trip, Tillerson stopped in Turkey to accept a lifetime achievement award from the World Petroleum Council. In his remarks to the oil executives, Tillerson said, “I miss all of you. I miss you as colleagues, I miss you as partners, I miss you as competitors, I miss the healthy debates, the collaboration, the breakthroughs that were achieved.”

Against the backdrop of his current job – with the unhealthy debates, the highly imperfect collaboration, and the failures in achieving breakthroughs – those words were undoubtedly sincere and strongly felt.

Tillerson will not go back to being an oil executive, and his Washington experience will make him feel he deserves a retirement more than ever. He probably already is counting the days until he has spent just enough time in his current job to make a graceful withdrawal.

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