

# Rex Tillerson may be a Secretary of State with little influence on US foreign policy.

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*Donald Trump surprised many with his appointment of former ExxonMobil CEO, Rex Tillerson – a man with no government or diplomatic experience – to be US Secretary of State. [Vuk Vuksanovic](#) writes that recent events show that the cards appear to be stacked against him, and that Tillerson is likely to have little influence on US foreign policy.*



The appointment of [Rex Tillerson](#), former CEO of ExxonMobil, to the position of US Secretary of State represents one of the most perplexing moves of the Trump administration. The appointment caused a stir among Democrats and Republicans, and generated divisions in the public and the US policy community. However, the political stir that preceded his appointment seems to have been for nothing, as it appears that Tillerson will be a Secretary of State with limited influence on US foreign policy. This appears to be the case in light of budgetary restraints imposed on the department he will be running, bureaucratic limitation of the department itself, as well as political relations within the White House, where it does not appear that Trump wants to keep his appointee in the loop.

## Questions over Tillerson's appointment

Tillerson was approved by the [US Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) in January with a vote of 11-10, with Republicans in favor of the appointment and Democrats mostly opposing it. Nonetheless, strong reservations persist among both parties. Those who opposed the appointment emphasized his lack of a diplomatic experience, referring to the harshness of the corporate world that he inhabited, as well as an absence of subtlety and tact. The US press reported [one instance](#) of such behavior when Tillerson, enraged by a deadlock in commercial talks with the government of Yemen, abruptly threw a book across the room and left it. Furthermore, having been the CEO of one of the largest corporations in the world, Tillerson had to go through tough scrutiny regarding potential [conflicts of interest](#). The fact that Tillerson was suggested for his current post by [three former heavyweights](#) of US foreign policy—James Baker, Condoleezza Rice, and Robert Gates, all people with a history of commercial interactions with Exxon almost certainly boosted this scrutiny.

An additional cause for reservation has been Tillerson's stance towards the issues that dominated US foreign policy in the past several years, namely financial and economic sanctions, as well as human rights. Back in 2014, while still the head of Exxon, Tillerson publicly expressed his own and the company's [reservations towards sanctions](#), evidently both due to their inefficiency, as well as for targeting countries where Exxon had commercial interests, for instance Russia. In recent years, in order to avoid over-relying on military force and risks that accompany it, sanctions have emerged as a major instrument of US foreign policy as part of the trend that Ian Bremmer defined as ["weaponization of finance"](#). Displaying reservation towards what became an established practice in foreign policy circles is always a minus for an upcoming senior official and is certainly not a promising start.

In regards to [human rights](#), it was generally observed during the preliminary hearings that Tillerson does not place a particular focus on this area in his agenda. This was later confirmed when Tillerson decided not to hold a press conference during the State Department's annual human rights report presentation. It is evident that human rights will not be placed high on the list of foreign policy priorities, for either Tillerson or the president, which is certainly displeasing to the Democrats who have traditionally emphasized human rights as a major aspect of US policy.

On the environment, namely global warming, Tillerson, atypically for an oil man, has recognized it as a real problem, a statement which is likely not to be music to the ears of many Republicans. This still does not guarantee that

Democrats, who pay greater attention to the issue, are any more impressed with him. Tillerson's former company, Exxon, has been [reported](#) as having a history of concealing data pertaining to global warming from the wider public. Tillerson's delicate statement on this issue does not appear to be heartwarming for either one of the two parties.

Another source of discomfort for both parties is Tillerson's history of affiliation with various [regimes around the world](#), some of which are authoritarian and opposed to the US. Naturally, his close ties with Russia and its President, Vladimir Putin, were the biggest headache given that the relationship between Moscow and Washington since 2014 reached the low point that many compared to the new [Cold War](#). Indeed, Tillerson in the capacity of Exxon's CEO had a high number of meetings with Putin, which, as far as Americans are concerned, can only be outweighed with the amount of time [Henry Kissinger](#) spent with him. This makes Tillerson's job even more complicated, given the current stigma associated with Putin and Russia in the US policy circles.

## A world class player?

Those in favor of Tillerson's appointment also had their own arguments to make the case. They [emphasized](#) his leadership capacity derived from leading the largest US companies, his strong sense of professionalism, international experience, including dealing with numerous governments, and ability to make difficult deals. The last item has been something that was publicly flaunted by President Trump when in one his [Tweets](#) he described Tillerson as "a word class player and a deal maker". While Tillerson's opponents cite his close relationship with Putin and Russia as a reason why he should not be US Secretary of State, his proponents use the exact argument in favor of his appointment. In the beginning, it appeared that Russia would take a central place in Trump's foreign policy, namely that he intended to make strategic amendments with that country and make it a central partner in the fight against ISIS. As such, Tillerson's appointment was [perceived](#) by some as something that would help that happen.



Either way, for now things are not looking particularly well for Tillerson and his prospect of being an influential figure in Trump's foreign policy. Firstly, unlike his experience at Exxon where he led one of the world's largest companies with magnanimous financial resources, Tillerson will be leading a government department with limited finances. According to the proposed budget plan, Trump will ensure that Tillerson's resources are even more limited compared to his predecessors. The State Department will [see 29 percent of its budget slashed, while the defense sector will experience a 9 percent increase](#). It is evident that Trump will favor military elements of US foreign policy as opposed to the diplomatic ones. The president apparently wants to have what Eliot Cohen called in his [latest book](#), "the big stick", which is not a promising starting premise for a Secretary of State.

## Poor prospects for foreign policy making

The State Department bureaucracy does not bode well with Tillerson's prospects of becoming a major policy maker. Indeed, as [written previously](#), Tillerson will assume leadership over a government's bureaucratic machinery that has been growing in size for decades, and particularly in the last eight years, and that has very frequently, just like any other bureaucracy, been very slow and ineffective. To make matters worse for the new Secretary of State, his own relationship with the department that he is supposed to lead has not started on the right foot; at the end of January 2017, there was a wave of [resignations](#) by senior State Department officials. Rumor has it that this was motivated by these officials' desire not to be associated with Trump administration and Tillerson. As one [Politico](#) piece noted: "Tillerson is caught between a White House that doesn't respect State and a department that doesn't respect Trump". Even the remaining members of the Department are not prepared to stand firmly behind their new boss. During the first meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, at the sidelines of a G20 meeting in Bohn, Germany, Tillerson displayed ineptitude for [diplomatic protocol](#) when he failed to make an introduction statement for the press and then gave a signal to the press to leave the room before the scheduled start of a private meeting. Many viewed this, not just as a sign of Tillerson's diplomatic inexperience, but also as an indication that he might not enjoy the professional support of the diplomatically more experienced staff at Foggy Bottom. An uneasy relationship is also symbolized by the alleged instruction to the US diplomats [to avoid eye contact](#) with Tillerson.

Moreover, the political dynamics within the administration itself do not bode well for Tillerson. Although it is true that the power of the State Department in foreign policy has been decreasing over the decades, this is not restricted to the US, but also holds true for some European countries, which have tended to have a much more traditional stance towards diplomatic service. In case of US foreign policy, the relations between various government units and political figures within the administration, plays a more important role in determining one's policy significance. Historical cases are ample. During the first Nixon term, Secretary of State William Rogers was famously [sidelined](#) by Henry Kissinger's more personalized diplomacy. During the Carter years, foreign policy planning was marked by strong [clashes](#) between two competent foreign policy operatives, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, which eventually ended with Vance's resignation after the failure of Operation Eagle Claw which was intended to rescue US hostages in Iran. In the administration of [George W. Bush](#), Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser [Condoleezza Rice](#) were also put aside by a pair of politically more influential Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

## **Overshadowed by others in the White House**

Tillerson's chances in this administration do not look good when it comes to his relations with other foreign and security policy staff. Tillerson appears to be [overshadowed](#) by Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. When it comes to the relationship between Tillerson and Trump, one ought to recall that Henry Kissinger compared influence in the White House to the real estate business, stating that the most important thing is "[Location, location, and location](#)". By this Kissinger naturally meant how close one's office is to the Oval Office, and, by extension, how close one's personal and professional relationship is with the President. In Tillerson's case, not too close.

Trump has overruled Tillerson in his choice of deputy [Elliot Abrams](#) who was vetoed by Trump because of Abrams's criticism against him during the campaign. Afterwards in all major foreign policy activities, Tillerson has been kept [out of the loop](#) by Trump, without any exception, including: China, Japan, Israel, Palestine, and Canada. Even in regards to Russia, where Tillerson is supposed to have the strongest saying, things are looking uncertain. The other members of Trump's staff are not as [enthusiastic](#) about rapprochement with Moscow. The resignation of Trump's initial choice of national security adviser [Michael Flynn](#) due to his contacts with Russian diplomats; the appointment of renowned Russian scholar and Putin critic [Fiona Hill](#) to the position of White House Senior Director for Europe and Russia; and the [investigation](#) into alleged Russian hacking of the 2016 election all point to rapprochement being anything other than a smooth ride. This reality has been confirmed by the recent [US air strikes in Syria](#) condemned by Russia. Furthermore, for Tillerson's prospect of being influential, this does not look promising given that he was supposed to be one of the drivers of rapprochement.

Ultimately, it might be too early to tell if Tillerson will indeed turn out to be “the weakest Secretary of State ever”, as famed political scientist [Robert Jervis](#) noted recently. However, for now given the bureaucracy of the State Department, political relationships within the administration, as well as Trump’s relationship with Tillerson, the cards appear to be stacked against Tillerson at this moment. It might very well turn out that the entire debate that preceded his appointment was much ado about nothing moment.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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