

Trump's Intelligence Circus: Tillerson, Pompeo and Haspel

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It takes much to make a figure like Rex Tillerson seem not merely sane but competent. The Trump administration, with its almost paranormal sense of revisionism and fantasy, has managed to make old Rex seem mildly credible. His sacking, inflicted with adolescent petulance, was bound to happen.

At stages, Tillerson came across with clues and cues about what would happen, for instance, with the North Korean nuclear imbroglio. In December 2017, he suggested the possibility of talking, without conditions, to North Korean leaders, quipping that they could even talk about the shape of the table they might wish to sit at.

It was a stance adjusted within days: Trump had obviously had a word in his ear that such a position did not tally with the “maximum pressure” program being exerted by Washington. Nor did it match the mania of insisting that, as a precondition, Pyongyang would agree to denuclearisation.

Little wonder, then, that Tillerson found himself out in the arctic cold with a surprise announcement last week that an invitation to speak directly with Kim Jong-un had been accepted.

“Rex wasn’t, as you know, in this country,” [mused Trump](#). “I made that decision by myself.”

At stages, both men seemed, not merely at odds with each other, but openly skirmishing. When Trump insisted on jettisoning the Iran nuclear deal, a point he has reiterated at several points during the 2016 presidential campaign, Tillerson growled. Decertification, which did take place in October, was delayed.

While hardly being a friend of Teheran, the former Exxon Mobil CEO did at least realise one thing: sinking the deal would signal to Iran that all bets were off. In Trump’s school boy styled confession,

“We disagreed on things. When you look at the Iran deal, I think it’s terrible. I guess he thought it was OK. I wanted to either break it or to do something, and he felt a little bit differently.”

At stages, Tillerson came across as distantly arrogant in the face of a boss he [called a moron](#). (That remark was occasioned by Trump’s enthusiasm last July that he wished to increase the inventory of US nuclear warheads from 4,000 to a previous total of

32,000.) His boss, in turn, felt that there was no chemistry between them.

The muck infested ponds that feature the latest round of appointments sees Mike Pompeo move from his gun slinging role at the Central Intelligence Agency to the position of Secretary of State.

“We’re always on the same wavelength,” [claimed Trump](#). “We have a very similar thought process.”

Deputy Director Gina Haspel has been moved up.

Pompeo’s Trumpist wavelength has been decidedly erratic, elevating various figures and entities of the world to the level of demon status. Iran, for instance, is apparently [“intent on destroying America.”](#) Foremost in his targeting obsessions has been WikiLeaks, an organisation he views as venal and mercenary. Caring not one jot for the First Amendment, Pompeo was keen to find some aggressive redress to neutralise the activities of that small but industrious outfit.

As Tillerson’s successor, hammered out agreements are bound to be revised, if not overturned. A clue can be gathered from his stance on Iran, one which he took in Congress. In 2015, he voted against the Obama administration’s decision to remove various economic sanctions on Iran, a decision premised on Teheran’s pulling back on its nuclear program and accepting a verification regime.

Towards China, Pompeo has already promised dedicated confrontation. On [Fox News Sunday](#), he thought it “clear what the Chinese are doing, whether that’d be on trade or the theft of intellectual property or their continued advancement in East and South China Seas”. To “have a good relationship with China in the way the world desperately needs”, it was necessary to engage “in pushing back against the Chinese threats”.

The CIA shuffle – putting the sketchy Haspel in the top position – is interesting for its various impediments. She is, for instance, a veteran of those dark days when torture was euphemised by means of “enhanced interrogation techniques”.

Haspel’s involvement there was not merely philosophical but practical: [she physically presided](#) over torture at a CIA black site located in Thailand, then subsequently attempted to smudge the record. She was ably assisted by the destruction of 92 videotapes documenting the interrogation methods used on al-Qaeda suspects at the Cat’s Eye. The defiant 2005 order came from that not-so-good angel in disguise, [Jose Rodriguez](#), the CIA’s counterterrorism chief. The confirmation hearings promise to be fascinatingly lurid.

Should she, in fact, wish to venture out of the United States, tribes of lawyers and engaged activists preoccupied with such unfashionable topics as the dignity of the subject will be watching. The European Centre for Constitutional Human Rights has made Haspel a person of fascinating interest in [filing a legal intervention](#) with the German Federal Public Prosecutor (*Generalbundesanwalt* – *GBA*) hoping to secure an arrest warrant.

Universal jurisdiction can be such a confounding thing, especially for officials keen on conducting activities with impunity. Given time and circumstance, Trump may shortly be

scouring for another replacement in his ever busy schedule of appointments.

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