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Trump's firing of Tillerson signals further shift toward global war

President Donald Trump's sudden firing of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson Tuesday and the announcement of CIA Director Mike Pompeo as his replacement is bound up with the accelerating shift by the US administration toward a policy of global war as the solution to the deep-seated crisis of American capitalism.

Fired by a morning tweet from Trump, Tillerson was reported by his aides to have had no advance warning that he was to be removed from his post. The tweet came just hours after Tillerson had returned from a week-long trip to Africa, basically an apology tour over Trump's reference to the continent as "shithole countries."

Trump also announced that Pompeo will be replaced by Gina Haspel, an individual who is directly implicated in crimes of torture and forced disappearances.

While Trump's method of removing Tillerson was abrupt, rumors that the secretary of state would lose his cabinet seat had circulated for months in Washington amid the repeated interventions by the US president to undercut his supposed spokesman to the world.

In an extraordinary rebuke to the US secretary of state last October, Trump tweeted from his New Jersey golf club that Tillerson was "wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man," the nickname he had adopted for North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, adding, "we'll do what has to be done!", suggesting military action. The tweet came just as Tillerson was holding talks with Chinese officials on the crisis on the Korean peninsula.

During the same week, it emerged that Tillerson had referred to Trump as a “moron” at a Pentagon meeting over the president’s statement to advisors that he wanted a tenfold increase in US nuclear weapons.

Whatever the frictions between the US president and Tillerson, the multi-millionaire former CEO of ExxonMobil, Trump on Tuesday pointed to a particular difference over foreign policy.

“I actually got along well with Rex but really it was a different mind-set, a different thinking,” Trump told reporters as he left the White House for a trip to California. “When you look at the Iran deal, I think it’s terrible. I guess he thought it was okay. . . . So we were not really thinking the same. With Mike, Mike Pompeo, we have a very similar thought process. I think it’s going to go very well.”

With a personal fortune of over \$300 million and a career that brought him to the top of one of the largest oil conglomerates in the world, Tillerson is a dedicated defender of US capitalist interests. He had significant tactical differences with Trump and others in the administration, however, including over whether some of these interests could be achieved by means of diplomatic negotiations rather than military aggression.

Tillerson was reportedly among those in the White House who last month dissuaded Trump from upending the 2015 nuclear agreement negotiated between Iran and the P5+1—the US, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany—by refusing to sign the four-month waiver of US sanctions imposed over the nuclear program. Trump has reportedly complained that he regretted the decision and has vowed to reimpose the sanctions in May, the next waiver deadline, unless there is a deal to renegotiate the agreement, including terms that Tehran cannot and will not accept.

In an apparent response to the cabinet reshuffle, Iran’s foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted Tuesday: “Mr Trump has made habit of being unpredictable and thus unreliable for anybody to engage with. Nobody will be interested in reaching any agreement with the White House if US signature only good for 4-8 yrs.”

Tillerson had also repeatedly spoken in favor of negotiations with North Korea, even as Trump threatened “fire and fury” and to “totally destroy” the country of 25 million people. In the end, however, Tillerson was caught off guard by Trump, who suddenly declared last week his willingness to participate in direct talks with Korea’s Kim Jong-un on the denuclearization of North Korea to be held by May. Trump made his announcement just a day after Tillerson had told reporters in Ethiopia that it was unclear “whether the conditions are right to even begin thinking about negotiations.”

Tillerson's proposed replacement as secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, has repeatedly made clear his determination to scrap the Iran nuclear treaty and pursue a strategy of regime change in Tehran. After Trump's election, he tweeted: "I look forward to rolling back this disastrous deal with the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism."

As CIA director, Pompeo, who has repeatedly engaged in anti-Muslim rhetoric, referred to Iran as a "despotic theocracy" and a "pernicious empire that is expanding its power and influence across the Middle East."

A former US Army tank officer and right-wing Tea Party congressman from Kansas, whose political career was bankrolled by the Koch brothers, Pompeo boasted last October that under his leadership, the CIA would become a "much more vicious agency." He directed the deployment of CIA assassination squads in Afghanistan to eliminate opponents of the US-backed regime in Kabul.

Pompeo has also made clear his support for regime change in North Korea, declaring last July that he was "hopeful we will find a way to separate that regime from this system ... The North Korean people, I'm sure, are lovely people and would love to see him go."

Speaking on a news talk show Sunday, Pompeo stressed that in any negotiations between Trump and Kim, "there will be no concessions made."

Sources in Washington have indicated that Trump wanted to install Pompeo as secretary of state before any negotiations began.

The appointment of Pompeo strongly suggests that the acceptance of talks with Kim is a ruse on the part of the Trump administration, aimed at paving the way to US military action.

Asked on Sunday in an appearance on ABC where there was a possibility that the talks would not take place, White House spokesman Raj Shah responded, "there's the possibility. If it does, it's the North Koreans' fault, they have not lived up to the promises that they made."

The replacement of Tillerson by Pompeo provoked worried responses from Washington's erstwhile European allies.

"The dismissal of Rex #Tillerson does not make anything better," German Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Roth said in a tweet Tuesday.

Thomas Oppermann, the deputy speaker of the German parliament, meanwhile, warned that the removal of Tillerson, whom he described as "a reliable, intelligent interlocutor," would result in a "further setback for German-American relations." The sudden changes at

the top of the US administration, he added, was a manifestation of Trump's "capricious and erratic" methods.

Trump's ostensible political opponents within the Democratic Party responded to the cabinet reshuffle entirely from the standpoint of the anti-Russia campaign that they have made the focus of their opposition to the administration.

Chuck Schumer, the Senate Democratic leader, said that Tillerson "was not close to tough enough on Russia," and that he hoped that Pompeo "will be a lot tougher and we hope he can persuade the president to be tougher."

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi, meanwhile, attributed Tillerson's firing to his having implicated Russia in connection with the poisoning of an ex-spy living in Britain. "President Trump's actions show that every official in his Administration is at the mercy of his personal whims and his worship of Putin," she tweeted.

When Tillerson was nominated as secretary of state, Democrats opposed him not out of concern that a top oil CEO would be taking over the senior foreign policy position in the US government, but rather over his deals he struck with Russia.

Now, far from opposing the further turn toward war by the Trump administration, they are only demanding that it focus more directly on nuclear-armed Russia.

In a statement on Tuesday, Schumer also made it clear that he was not calling on Democrats to oppose Trump's nominee to replace Pompeo as director of the CIA, Haspel, a 30-year CIA veteran who was directly involved in the torture of detainees under the Bush administration, as well as in the destruction of video evidence documenting those war crimes.