

US Senate panel rubber stamps “Mad Dog” Mattis for Pentagon chief

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The Senate Armed Services Committee gave near-unanimous approval Wednesday to Donald Trump’s choice to head the Pentagon, voting by 26-1 to approve retired Gen. James “Mad Dog” Mattis as the next secretary of defense. The nomination now goes to the full Senate for a confirmation vote, expected this week, as soon as Trump is inaugurated and submits the nomination officially.

Every Republican followed the lead of committee Chairman John McCain in voting for Trump’s Pentagon nominee. Among the Democrats voting for Mattis were Tim Kaine, the Democratic candidate for vice president in 2016, and Elizabeth Warren, touted as a leader of the party’s liberal wing.

Even the lone Democratic dissenter, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, said she viewed Mattis favorably, but voted no because his selection violates a longstanding legislative prohibition on naming a recently retired military officer to the top civilian job at the Pentagon. Earlier this week, Congress approved a one-time waiver of the requirement that seven years must have elapsed between the officer’s retirement and his appointment. Mattis retired in 2013.

Mattis, a career Marine commander, headed the US Central Command and clashed with the Obama White House over its Iran policy. He favored a more confrontational line, particularly in day-to-day military operations in the Persian Gulf. He was effusively praised by Democrats at his confirmation hearing, particularly because he espoused a hard line against Russia in seeming contrast to the conciliatory posture adopted by Trump throughout the election campaign and during the transition period.

At the confirmation hearing, Mattis advocated a role for the US military in virtually every part of the world, declaring, “America has global responsibilities, and it is not to our advantage to leave any of those areas to the

world absent from our efforts.” He told the committee that world order was “under the biggest attacks since World War II,” adding that the attacks were coming from “Russia, from terrorist groups, and with what China is doing in the South China Sea.”

Asked to list “threats” to the US, Mattis began with Russia. He continued, “[A]nd then it would certainly include any nations that are looking to intimidate nations around the periphery or nations nearby them whether it is with weapons of mass destruction or—I would call it unusual, unorthodox means of intimidating them.” In other words, any country in the world can become the target of the Pentagon.

At a press briefing Wednesday, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer (Democrat from New York) indicated that Trump’s nominees to the three top national security posts—secretary of defense, secretary of homeland security and CIA director—could be confirmed as early as Friday, the day that Trump takes the oath of office as the 45th US president.

Schumer said he was discussing with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Republican from Kentucky) the logistics of scheduling confirmation votes Friday for Mattis, for retired General John F. Kelly to head the Department of Homeland Security, and for Representative Mike Pompeo to head the CIA. “Those three nominees were not on the list of the nine that we had the most trouble with and wanted the most extensive hearings,” he told reporters.

Trump’s national security nominations were endorsed as well by another prominent Democrat, former CIA Director Leon Panetta, who was interviewed in Houston after he addressed an oil industry conference and praised Trump’s selection of Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson as secretary of state.

“If President Trump is willing to listen to people like Rex Tillerson and to James Mattis, the new secretary of

defense, as well as Mike Pompeo and others, I feel much more confident that he will make the right decisions,” Panetta said.

The unanimity of Democratic support for Trump’s national security nominees demonstrates the real nature of the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. Whatever their political differences, the Democrats and Republicans are united in their allegiance to the military-intelligence apparatus of US imperialism.

Schumer made a vigorous display of opposition and outrage at his press briefing, complaining that the Republican majority was seeking to ram through nominees without allowing sufficient time for questioning, and in many cases before the nominees had even completed the necessary paperwork to allow potential conflicts of interest to be vetted.

The Democratic leader declared, “This is a swamp cabinet full of bankers and billionaires,” significantly remaining silent on the other primary component of the Trump cabinet, former military officers, including, in addition to Mattis and Kelly, retired Gen. Michael Flynn as national security adviser and retired Gen. Keith Kellogg as chief of staff of the National Security Council.

Schumer also suggested that Representative Mick Mulvaney might withdraw as the nominee for budget director because of his failure to pay more than \$15,000 in payroll taxes for a nanny. Similar tax delinquencies sank the nomination of former Senator Thomas Daschle to be Obama’s secretary of health and human services, but failed to stop the confirmation of Timothy Geithner as Obama’s first treasury secretary.

Democratic senators made loud noises at several confirmation hearings, particularly those for Representative Tom Price, named to head the Department of Health and Human Services, and Scott Pruitt, nominated as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. But their criticism was perfunctory, however loud, given that a unanimous Republican majority on each committee will move the nominations to the floor of the Senate and the 52-48 Republican majority in the Senate will confirm the nominees.

Even Trump’s nominee to head the Department of Education, billionaire heiress and charter school advocate Betsy DeVos, appears likely to sail through, although her confirmation hearing exposed her complete ignorance on basic education policy issues.

Only Rex Tillerson for secretary of state is in jeopardy, and then only because a single Republican member of the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Marco Rubio of Florida, has criticized him sharply while claiming to be undecided. Rubio’s opposition, like that of McCain and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, is from the right, echoing Democratic Party criticism of Trump’s foreign policy as too soft on Russia.

The main conflict raging behind the scenes, although ventilated in the public charges of “Russian hacking,” is whether the main focus of American military-diplomatic aggression should be directed first against Russia or China. This dispute not only pits the Democrats and a section of congressional Republicans against Trump, but appears to run as a fault line through the Trump cabinet-information as well.

Trump’s nominee for UN ambassador, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, denounced Russia at her confirmation hearing Wednesday, declaring, “I don’t think we should trust them,” and calling for the retention of sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The most significant criticism of the incoming Trump administration took the form of press reports of disarray in the process of staffing the lower levels of the national security bureaucracy, particularly in the Pentagon, State Department and National Security Council. *Foreign Policy* magazine flayed the Trump transition team because it “has not yet named senior deputies for the State or Homeland Security Departments.” The magazine continued: “Meanwhile, dozens of important posts at the Defense Department remain vacant” because of a dispute between Mattis and Trump aides over who gets to make the selection.

CNN reported that at least six senior officials in the Pentagon would stay on for the first weeks of the Trump administration, as well as several top aides in the State Department. Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates has been asked to stay on as well, reportedly because an official at her level is required to approve wiretapping and other surveillance requests that come in daily from the spy agencies.



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