

Senate confirms Trump choice for CIA director

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The US Senate voted Monday night to confirm Representative Mike Pompeo as the next CIA director. The 66-32 vote is likely to be replicated in many other confirmation votes over the next two weeks, as all 52 Republicans were joined by 14 Democrats, including Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer.

Pompeo is the third Trump nominee to a top national security position to win Senate confirmation, and the first non-general. Retired Gen. James Mattis was confirmed January 20 to be secretary of defense, and retired Gen. John F. Kelly was confirmed the same day to head the Department of Homeland Security.

The vote on Pompeo, originally scheduled for January 20 as well, was delayed after senators received his written answers to their questions. In this response, Pompeo seemed to reverse himself on the question of waterboarding and other torture techniques.

An ultra-right Republican congressman from Kansas, aligned with the Tea Party faction and financed by the billionaire Koch brothers (Koch Industries is headquartered in Wichita, Kansas), Pompeo was a prominent advocate of waterboarding in 2014, denouncing the Obama administration for banning the practice by executive order.

During a confirmation hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Pompeo said that he would not seek to overturn the legal ban on waterboarding, passed by Congress in 2015. But in his written answers to questions, he said he would consult with CIA experts on whether waterboarding and other interrogation methods prohibited by the US Army Field Manual would be needed.

Pompeo said he would ask CIA interrogators whether the manual was “an impediment to gathering vital intelligence to protect the country.” If they said the manual was too restrictive, he would seek changes

“within the law.” The field manual is up for its next review in 2018, and can be revised at the direction of President Trump and Secretary of Defense James Mattis. In his public statements, Mattis has vehemently opposed waterboarding and other torture tactics.

Pompeo is on record opposing the 2015 law, passed after the revelations of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, which placed largely cosmetic restrictions on the NSA collection of information on American citizens. He wrote in January 2016 that he urged Congress to restore “the collection of all metadata, and to combine it with publicly available financial and lifestyle data in a comprehensive, searchable database.”

In his written responses to senators, Pompeo reiterated this position, again saying he would base any policy proposals on the collection of metadata on the wishes of CIA operatives in the field of counterterrorism.

The vote to confirm Pompeo came only an hour after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted to approve the nomination of ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson to be secretary of state. The 11-10 party-line vote followed the announcement by Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, the lone Republican holdout, that he would support the nomination.

On Sunday, two other Republican Senate critics of Tillerson, John McCain and Lindsey Graham, dropped their opposition. They issued a joint statement declaring, “Though we still have concerns about his past dealings with the Russian government and President Vladimir Putin, we believe that Mr. Tillerson can be an effective advocate for US interests.”

All three Republicans had criticized Tillerson as unduly pro-Russian, citing his many years with ExxonMobil making deals with Russia, the world’s largest oil producer, and his having received an Order

of Friendship in 2013, awarded personally by Putin.

In his confirmation hearing, Tillerson went out of his way to appease both Republican and Democratic war hawks in relation to both Russia and China. He called for a tough line against both nuclear powers, even suggesting that the US might block China from accessing its own islets in the South China Sea, on the grounds that these bits of land had been artificially created and were not legally Chinese territory.

At a press briefing at the White House Monday, Trump's press secretary Sean Spicer confirmed that blocking China from its islets was indeed under consideration by the Trump administration. Chinese spokesmen have called any such action tantamount to an act of war.

The Democrats who voted against Tillerson did so for the same reason that McCain, Graham and Rubio had initially criticized him: his business ties to Russia. The top Democrat on the committee, Ben Cardin of Maryland, said a major issue was Tillerson's unwillingness use the term "war crimes" to describe Russian military operations in Syria. He contrasted Tillerson's responses to the more hawkish language of the new Secretary of Defense Mattis and South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, named by Trump to become ambassador to the United Nations.

Cardin, Schumer, McCain and Graham are planning to introduce legislation that would bar the reduction of economic sanctions against Russia without congressional approval. The bill, likely to have overwhelming bipartisan support, could be scuttled only by the intervention of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who controls the flow of legislation.

The sanctions bill is part of the continuing campaign waged by the Democrats and a section of the Republicans throughout the Trump transition centered on the claim that the Russian government hacked into the emails of the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign in an effort to aid Trump. The purpose of this propaganda offensive, which lacks any factual foundation, is to prevent any softening in the hardline anti-Russian policy adopted by the Obama administration in 2014 as part of the US intervention that brought down the elected pro-Russian government in Ukraine and replaced it with the current far-right, pro-US regime.



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