

## **“The State of the State Department and American Diplomacy”**

**Nicholas Burns**

The State Department serves as the principal cabinet agency that represents the U.S. government and people in nearly every country in the world. Through the 277 embassies and consulates abroad, American diplomats provide critical services to Americans living and traveling outside the United States, such as issuing and maintaining visas, and ensuring other countries abide by fair trade and investment practices. Further, the State Department conducts official relations with nations to promote international agreements concerning human rights, environmental protection, and nuclear arms control.

While working in conjunction with other instruments of national power, the diplomatic instrument is distinctly different in terms of how it promotes U.S. interests and overarching democratic values abroad. Since its inception in 1789 after the adoption of the Constitution, presidents have relied on the State Department to establish and maintain relations with nations and coalitions that “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”

Indeed, throughout U.S. history, presidents have relied heavily on the services provided by the State Department, including: secretary of state Robert Lansing’s support to Woodrow Wilson in negotiating the Treaty of Versailles in 1919; secretary George Marshall’s support to Harry Truman in drafting the “Marshall Plan” in 1948; and secretary Henry Kissinger’s support to Richard Nixon in negotiating the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks in 1972.

In contrast of previous presidents, President Donald Trump has neglected, if not taken steps to undermine, decades of State Department progress. Taking the reins of foreign diplomacy, Trump has become a leading critic of NATO members and characterized the European Union as a strategic competitor. In addition, President Trump pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, ended the North American Free Trade Alliance (NAFTA) agreement with Canada and Mexico, enacted travel bans on specific Muslim-majority nations, and complimented the power tactics of anti-democratic leaders such as Kim Jung Un, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping. Further evidence of Trump’s controversial foreign strategy lie in his decisions to pull out of the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and the International Organization of Migration.

In both 2017 and 2018, President Trump advocated a 30 percent budget cut in funding for the State Department. Simultaneously, former state secretary Rex Tillerson initiated a restructuring and hiring freeze to the State Department that, combined with the proposed budget cut, would have devastated operational capacity and morale of the Department’s Foreign Service if completely enacted. Further showing the president’s disregard for the State Department and comprehensive foreign relations strategy are the many unfilled senior positions and vacant ambassadorships in the department. Such significant positions include ambassadors to the United Nations, Association of South East Asian Nations, and Turkey. When questioned by Fox News in 2017 about the vacant positions, Trump replied, “I’m the only one who matters, because when it comes to it, that’s what the policy is going to be.”

However, morale was said to improve after Mike Pompeo, a consistent public advocate for the department, succeeded Rex Tillerson as state secretary. Further, though divided on many issues, both aisles of Congress opposed the president’s budget cut requests in 2017 and 2018, in light of growing international challenges that must be faced by strong diplomatic partnerships.

Successfully meeting these challenges will be the legacy of President Trump, if the State Department can regain its full instrumental capacity in foreign policy. This capacity, however, hinges on the department’s ability to re-establish strong diplomatic ties with nations continually growing closer to strategic competitors such as China, India and Russia.