

Analysis

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Pompeo faces fire over ambassador targeted by Trump

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had achieved the seemingly impossible in Donald Trump's Washington - pleasing the mercurial president while casting himself as a defender of his institution. But that willness has reached its limits. Pompeo is now facing fire over accusations he ducked from standing up for the US ambassador to Ukraine, whose sacking is a key part of the House of Representatives' impeachment inquiry into Trump.

The unusually open criticism by seasoned diplomats comes amid growing expectations that Pompeo will soon exit to run for Senate in his home state of Kansas - where his frequent travel has also come under scrutiny. Michael McKinley, a four-time ambassador tapped by Pompeo to accompany him around the world as his link to the Foreign Service, resigned in October after the White House put out a conversation between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Trump - who is accused of pressuring Zelensky to investigate the family of domestic rival Joe Biden - in the call denounced the ousted ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, telling the Ukrainian leader that "the woman" was "bad news". McKinley quit with a courteous letter saluting the Foreign Service, but a transcript released Monday of his deposition to House investigators revealed he had unsuccessfully asked Pompeo to back the veteran ambassador.

"Since I began my career in 1982, I have served my country and every president loyally," McKinley said. "Under current circumstances, however, I could no longer look the other way as colleagues are denied the professional support and respect they deserve from us all." McKinley said he asked Pompeo to issue a statement defending Yovanovitch's "professionalism and courage." "He listened. That was it. Sort of, 'Thank you,'" McKinley said. McKinley said he was later told "it would be better to let this die down" rather than draw "undue attention" to Yovanovitch.

In her own deposition, Yovanovitch said a senior official called her at 1:00 am and told her to take the first flight home, citing vague security concerns, after a campaign against her spearheaded by Rudy Giuliani, Trump's personal lawyer. Returning to Washington, she did not see Pompeo but testified that Phil Reeker, the top diplomat for Europe, told her "that the secretary had tried to protect me but was no longer able to do that."

'Derelict in duty'?

McKinley nonetheless credited Pompeo with improving the atmosphere at the State Department after the "devastating impact on morale" under his predecessor Rex Tillerson, a former oil executive who made cost-cutting his top priority. But Bill Burns, a decorated former ambassador generally known for his mild manner, called Pompeo "derelict in his duty" for allowing the "demagogue" Trump to advance an agenda in Ukraine that circumvented diplomats.

In a 33-year career, "I've never seen an attack on diplomacy as damaging, to both the State Department as an institution and our international influence, as the one now underway," he wrote in Foreign Affairs in October. Pompeo, rarely bashful, hit back in an ABC News interview, saying Burns "is clearly looking for a spot in the next administration."

After faithfully executing Trump's often shoot-from-the-hip diplomacy, Pompeo has also started to emulate the president's seeing-enemies-everywhere rhetorical style. Speaking to Fox News, Pompeo mused that former president Barack Obama may have blocked military aid to Ukraine because of Biden's son Hunter, whose lucrative position on the board of a Ukrainian energy company has been seized upon by Trump. The Obama administration said it did not give arms so as not to inflame the conflict with Russian-backed separatists, a decision reversed by Trump who signed off on but then controversially delayed lethal aid.

Out of key picture

Pompeo remains one of the few officials not to cross Trump in public but he has also appeared, curiously, to be on the sidelines. Vice President Mike Pence took the lead in negotiating with Turkey to end its incursion into Syria, with Pompeo standing behind him. Pompeo was also not in a photo proudly released by Trump of the raid that killed the Islamic State group's leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, instead attending the wedding of his son's friend in Kansas. Pompeo's visits to Kansas, including a trip with Trump's daughter Ivanka to high-light job creation, have come under attack by Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, who said Pompeo may be violating a law that bars official travel for partisan purposes. In one of his many interviews with Kansas media, Pompeo called the New Jersey senator a coastal elitist who "can't understand how someone would want to go to (an) amazing place like Kansas" - a turn of phrase that would not sound out of place in a campaign. — AFP

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Iraqi women are pictured in front of a colorful mural in Baghdad yesterday representing Iraqi TV channels "that do not want to see, hear or speak about" the anti-government protests that have engulfed Iraq since early October. — AFP

Iraq PM's power clipped amid pro-Iran pressure

As anti-government protests sweep his country, Iraq's embattled premier has found his decision-making powers clipped by rivals and his entourage subject to increasing pressure from Iran, Iraqi officials told AFP. Adel Abdel Mahdi, 77, came to power last year as the product of a tenuous alliance between populist cleric Moqtada Sadr and pro-Iran paramilitary chief Hadi Al-Ameri, with the required blessing of Iraq's Shiite religious leadership.

He was seen as an almost professorial figure who could tackle unemployment and government graft as Iraq's first prime minister since the defeat of the Islamic State group. Most observers expected summer protests would put an early end to his mandate, and even he said he had his resignation letter "in his pocket". So when popular demonstrations erupted in early October over corruption and lack of jobs, the premier readied a resignation speech to deliver live on television, three government sources told AFP, requesting to remain anonymous.

He never gave it. "He was fully intending to resign during the first week of protests - but stayed under pressure from the different factions," one of the officials said. Instead, Abdel Mahdi appeared in a stern pre-recorded address that aired around 2:00 am on Oct 3, proposing a package of reforms that protesters angrily dismissed as insufficient. He has since resisted intensifying calls for him to step down and for the political system to be overhauled, adopting a noticeably tougher stance towards the demon-

strators. "The premier is shackled by the political parties that brought him to power," a second official said.

'In a bubble'

The first week of rallies ended with at least 157 people dead, most of them protesters shot dead in Baghdad, according to a government probe. After a two-week lull for the Shiite Arbaceen pilgrimage, protests resumed on Oct 24. Sit-ins shut down public universities, provincial government offices and main streets, with protesters shrugging off the proposed reforms. But Abdel Mahdi said they were being used as "human shields" by "infiltrators".

"He's in a bubble, and being told that the protests are a conspiracy against his government and that he should stay in power. He's started to believe it," one official said. Two government sources said the premier was no longer communicating with President Barham Saleh, seen as his top ally in the absence of his own popular base. "Saleh was the first one to suggest finding an alternative to Abdel Mahdi, and their ties got worse after that," one of them said. The president has hosted meetings with leading politicians to set out a roadmap to an snap general election, which would pave the way for a new prime minister.

But Abdel Mahdi on Tuesday dismissed the idea of an early election. "He thinks that if he goes down, everyone should go down with him," an Iraqi official said. Others said he was also under growing pressure from Iran and its

Iraqi allies, who pushed him to sideline several military commanders seen as close to the US. That pressure intensified with the arrival of Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations arm, shortly after the protests began. Soleimani has held meetings in Baghdad and Najaf to convince top party officials to close ranks around the current government. "He's calling the shots," one official told AFP.

'Victim of infighting'

A second official said Abdel Mahdi "is not in a position to push back against Iranian influence". "He knows if he does not follow the Iranian line, he will be forced out and then blamed for what is going on," he said. Abdel Mahdi has made several televised addresses and publishes online statements on a near-daily basis, even as his government imposes internet restrictions in most of Iraq.

After first offering to resign if political factions agreed on a replacement, he has since hardened his stance. On Tuesday, he said a caretaker government would not have the authority to sign much-needed contracts. Officials said a consensus was forming that would keep him at the helm of a transitional government, but he was likely to remain paralyzed politically. Iraqi analyst Issam Faily said the divisions would continue to hamstring any "independent decision-making". "If you have a broad and solid political base, then you have room to maneuver," Faily said. "Abdel Mahdi is the victim of all the infighting around him." — AFP

'Ghost' fishing gear: Trash haunting ocean wildlife

Far out in the South Atlantic Ocean, invisible to the South African coastline, diver Pascal Van Erp surfaced with an abandoned lobster cage covered in algae and other marine organisms. He pulled it up to the deck of the Arctic Sunrise, a Greenpeace vessel conducting research around Mount Vema, an underwater mountain located around 1,600 km northwest of Cape Town. Underneath the layer of the dark algae was a green hard plastic cage used to trap lobsters, with a small white pot attached to it.

"We are a thousand miles off the coast of South Africa and finding abandoned fishing gear here... is extremely disgusting," Greenpeace marine biologist and oceans expert Thilo Maaack told AFP on board the ship. Known as "ghost gear", abandoned fishing objects make up a significant volume of plastic pollution in seas and oceans around the world and can trap large marine wildlife, causing them slow, painful deaths.

Nets, lines, cages, crayfish traps and gillnets are either lost or intentionally dumped in the ocean at an estimated average rate of one ton per minute. An underwater drone revealed Mount Vema, where the Greenpeace mission

operated, had not escaped such pollution. Images showed a scattered array of fishing ropes and nets clinging to the 4,600-m mountain, whose peak sits 26 m below the surface.

Researchers on the three-week expedition could not determine how long the abandoned gear had been sitting there - but say it could have been there for more than a year given the state it was in. The United Nations estimates that 640,000 tons of fishing equipment is discarded around the oceans each year, the weight equivalent of 50,000 double-decker buses, said Greenpeace.

They are estimated to account for 10 percent of the plastic waste in the oceans and seas globally, according to the UN Environment Program (UNEP) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). But "in some specific ocean areas, fishing gear makes up the vast majority of plastic rubbish, including over 85 percent of the rubbish on the seafloor on seamounts and ocean ridges," as well as in the Great Pacific gyre, a Greenpeace report said Wednesday.

'Zombie in the water'

From their underwater resting ground, discarded non-biodegradable materials continue to catch fish and crustaceans, and ensnare large mammals such as dolphins. "(Ghost gear) is like a zombie in the water," Maaack said. "Nobody takes out the catch, but it's still catching." Such pollution kills and injures more than 100,000 whales, dolphins, seals and turtles annually, according to UK-based charity World Animal Protection.

More than 300 endangered sea turtles were killed in a

single incident last year after swimming into a what was believed to be a discarded fishing net in southern Mexico. "It's a huge problem because as they are initially set to trap and kill marine wildlife, they will do that for as long as they are in the oceans," Greenpeace Africa's campaigner Bukelwa Nzimande, 29, told AFP.

Plastic can take up to 600 years to break down, eventually disintegrating into harmful micro-particles that are ingested by fish and end up in people's food. Bottom fishing was banned on Mount Vema in 2007 by the Namibia-based South East Atlantic Fishing Organization (SEAFO). But only one percent of the world's oceans are covered by regional management bodies like SEAFO.

'Cycle of death'

Around 64 percent of oceans lie outside national jurisdiction, according to the UN. Environmental groups are lobbying the intergovernmental organization to come up with comprehensive governance systems that better protect marine life. They are also pushing for stricter measures forcing fishermen to retrieve lost gear or pay for its retrieval. Meanwhile, non-profit organizations have taken it upon themselves to do some cleaning of the seas and oceans. "For me removing lost gear is the most exciting (thing)," said diver Van Erp, founder of Dutch-headquartered clean-up charity Ghost Fishing, which has been operating since 2012. "When I find it I'm really thrilled," said the 43-year-old, his bright orange suit still dripping from his hour-long dive in the cold South Atlantic Ocean waters. "It keeps catching," said Van Erp. "It's sort of a cycle of death." — AFP

Argentina goat farmers on climate change frontline

In a vast valley at the foot of the Andes, Antonio Sazo counts his goats, having ushered them down mountain slopes in the south of the Argentine province of Mendoza, where climate change forces them higher every year in order to graze. From a third generation of goat breeders, 68-year-old Sazo has seen his herd decimated by drought in recent years. But he isn't giving up the ghost just yet. "I'll stay here with my little goats, I'll keep fighting."

Sazo and other goat breeders scattered along the Andes foothills here are on the frontline of climate change, devoid of the safety net of irrigation canals utilized by neighboring farms or by Mendoza's vineyards, where Argentina's highly prized Malbec wines are produced. "The situation has changed a lot here. It's not what it was two years ago, when the winter was good, with more snowfall," Sazo told AFP inside his wood and adobe traditional house.

With his wife and three of his children, he ekes out a living from a herd of 300 goats in Arro Ponigue, 350 km south of Argentina's lush wine capital Mendoza. Here, 1,300 kilometers west of Buenos Aires, farmers have seen the affects of lighter winter snowfall in the austral spring, when meltwater was scarce on the slopes, lakes dried up and

grassy pastures thinned out. "Climate change has altered the entire cycle of life in the region," said Ivan Rosales, an agricultural engineer at the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA) in San Rafael, Mendoza. Water flow on the mountain rivers will be 11 percent lower in 2019-20 than the previous year, and 54 percent lower than the province's historical average, according to a flow forecast by the Mendoza regional government. "Last year, we said it was not an emergency. It was part of a pattern. The same scenarios are being repeated year after year for the last 10 or 11 years," said Sergio Marinelli, a Mendoza state irrigation official, presenting a report in October.

'Drought, cold and wind'

The quiet drama that has decimated Sazo's herd - recently a thousand strong - contrasts with the robustness of Mendoza's central and northern vineyards, where sophisticated irrigation systems have helped to absorb some of the shock of climate change. Climate warming has slowly but clearly been shrinking the glaciers along the Andean Cordillera above the valleys. "Here we have a lot of drought. It is very cold and there's a lot of wind," said Sazo, his hands blackened from carrying pregnant goats to a corral where they will give birth to one or two kids.

But Sazo knows that the yield will be lower this year, because the animals don't give birth or stop feeding their offspring when there is a lack of pasture or water. He has seen the trend of recent years. Goat breeders, scattered high in the valley, compete for water with bigger farms further below that use a system of irrigation canals to grow potatoes and garlic. "About 5 percent of land in



Argentinian goat farmer Cristian Sazo herds goats back to the corral after grazing in El Alabrado, 136 km from Malargue, Mendoza province, Argentina on Oct 20, 2019. — AFP

Mendoza is dependent on irrigation, and that's where 95 percent of the population lives," Rosales, the agricultural engineer, told AFP. "Everything else is dry, depending on rain or the weather cycles. All they have there is sheep, goat and horse-breeding, there is no other activity possible." Sazo uses his herd to sustain his family. Four of his seven children have left the farm to look for work.

Rosales says the break-up of rural families is another consequence of climate change here. Young people go to the city in search of work "but they cannot always reintegrate into another activity and end up in the slums that surround the city," he said. — AFP