

## TENSION BETWEEN TILLERSON AND TRUMP: A CASE STUDY IN GROUP AGENCY DILEMMAS

Sam Koreman

While it can be easy to determine culpability in situations where individuals are the only actors involved, it can be nearly impossible to figure out who is truly responsible for taking actions in settings where the decisions are attributed to groups. When groups of people act together, individuals inside of the group can reasonably disagree with the decision that the group has made despite the outcome. What about a situation where the ‘group’ is only two people? When two people choose to make a decision, it is possible that the two individuals could agree about the end decision but disagree throughout the decision-making process. However, it is also possible that in cases where a decision is necessary, the two individuals may never reach an agreement— if one individual has power over the other, then that person’s decision will be the one that the two choose to go forward with. In that case, it seems especially wrong to declare that the ‘group’ made the decision.

Group agency is a field of philosophical inquiry that attempts to explain the differences, similarities, and questions associated with acting as an individual in relation to acting as a part of a group.<sup>1</sup> It discusses issues of culpability in cases, like the above, where it may not be clear which actors to hold accountable, and attempts to shed light on the times when an individual agent acts not in accordance with his or her personal views, but rather acts in such a way as to further the goals and agency of the group as a whole.<sup>2</sup> While group agency is a fascinating concept in general, what makes it especially useful is its application to understanding why public tension between different government actors in a state with liberal democratic values — one that respects and values reasonable disagreement between individuals — can undermine the strength of the state.

President Donald J. Trump has disagreements with numerous members of his administration and with the American public. However, there are certain cases where his disagreements actively harm the United States’ image and power. The disagreements between President Trump and his appointed Secretary of State Rex Tillerson not only illustrate the problems that can occur because of group agency dilemmas, but also harm the United States’ ability to work with other states in the international arena.

A Secretary of State has numerous jobs. Primarily, he or she must represent the diplomatic interests of the United States in a way that makes the position instrumental to the foreign policy of the United States.<sup>3</sup> As the United States is a political state

Sam Koreman is a proud member of the Dartmouth College Class of 2020, with prospective majors in government and philosophy. Her academic interests lie in analyzing how states can reconcile pragmatic and ethical concerns in order to create effective, internally consistent policy platforms. Although she is only a sophomore, she hopes to pursue a career in academia.

rather than a simple individual, there are questions about which specific actor — or perhaps actors if the answer is the citizen population as a whole — the secretary ought to answer to. Because there are practical difficulties associated with answering to an entire population of individuals that may disagree, the most common answer to this question is that the secretary ought to answer to the democratically elected President. In a normative discussion of agency, this answer is acceptable as the President is the actor who assigned his agency to the Secretary of State. Accordingly, Tillerson both answers to and ought to answer to Trump.

Disagreements between Tillerson and Trump go beyond simple matters of policy implementation and exist on an ideological level. While Trump believes that the United States ought to depart from its past foreign policy leadership in the international arena, Tillerson identifies more with the “traditional, establishment model” of past Secretaries of State.<sup>4</sup> Even in private meetings with Trump, Tillerson consistently advocates for traditional policies and Trump consistently overrules Tillerson’s ideas. Although disagreements in private would be problematic for the working conditions in the White House and the State Department regardless of their results, these disagreements and incongruences do not end in the Oval Office. Because it is impossible for Trump to describe what policies he wants to implement in a perfect degree of specificity, Tillerson inevitably has discretion when it comes to conducting policy in the name of the President. During these moments of discretion, Tillerson makes decisions that — perhaps unintentionally — reflect his ideological beliefs regarding the way foreign policy ought to be conducted.

The clearest example of this is in cases of direct state-to-state diplomatic talks. Recently, while on a diplomatic visit to Beijing, Tillerson told reporters that the Trump administration was currently in direct communication with North Korea regarding North Korea’s potential nuclear threat.<sup>5</sup> In response to this knowledge being made public, Trump responded by tweeting that Tillerson was “wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man” and to “Save your energy, Rex, we’ll do what has to be done.”<sup>6</sup> This immediate — and rather unprofessional — contradiction of Tillerson’s diplomatic work undermined Tillerson’s ability to conduct future diplomacy with North Korea and with other states in the international arena. States have little incentive to negotiate with a diplomat whom they know will just be contradicted by the president.

In order to combat the fear of contradiction by the president, Tillerson has often made statements that conflict with his past diplomatic work and complicate his future bargaining endeavors. Regarding North Korea specifically, Tillerson defended Trump’s comments in early August that the United States was willing to rain “fire and fury” on North Korea as a statement meant to illustrate that the United States was “just reaffirming...that the United States has the capability to fully defend itself from any attack.”<sup>7</sup> Earlier in the summer, Tillerson reiterated that “there is no gap between the president [and himself]...there are [only] differences in terms of how the president chooses to articulate elements of that policy.”<sup>8</sup> There are very clearly differences be-

tween Tillerson's actions and Trump's policies. By being forced to contradict himself — or to weaken his positioning on certain issues — Tillerson diminishes his authority. By weakening his authority, he also undermines the authority of the United States to realize policy. With respect to North Korea specifically, Tillerson's inability to bargain effectively greatly increases the risk that North Korea may accidentally cross an invisible line drawn by a President who often forgets where the line is. Even if North Korea effectively bargains with Tillerson, that would not guarantee that the results of the negotiation would be respected by Trump.

This same undermining of Tillerson's authority to conduct negotiations occurs in elements of foreign policy other than direct state-to-state diplomatic talks. In multilateral negotiation, Trump's comments inflame tension between the United States and other actors. Specifically, regarding the negotiations surrounding the Iran Nuclear Deal, Trump's address to the United Nations General Assembly when he called the Iranian leadership a "corrupt dictatorship" is acting as a huge disincentive for Iran to even participate in diplomatic talks with Tillerson.<sup>9</sup> Tillerson's beliefs about what the talks ought to consist of are rendered irrelevant by actions that are completely removed from his sphere of influence. While Tillerson's comments represent Trump, Trump's comments do not represent Tillerson — Trump only represents himself. By undermining diplomacy with other states, Trump forces Tillerson to, at the bare minimum, make compromises regarding Trump's foreign policy in order to make any progress in the international arena. What makes this situation perhaps even more noteworthy is that the Iran deal is one of the few areas of foreign policy that Trump and Tillerson agree on. Both Tillerson and Trump want to renegotiate the deal in order to strengthen the position of the United States within the deal and within the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Although their intentions align in this particular case, Trump's actions negatively affect Tillerson's bargaining power — once again illustrating the importance of total coherence in situation where group agency is necessary.

Another facet of the incoherence between Trump and Tillerson is in regard to events that happen in the domestic arena. While often Tillerson will alter his beliefs to adhere to Trump's wishes, recently Tillerson opted to condemn comments that Trump made in response to racially charged violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. In no uncertain terms, when asked if Trump's response to blame violence on "both sides" — both the white supremacists responsible for inciting the violence and the protesters who simply responded to it — represented American values, Tillerson responded that "the president speaks for himself."<sup>11</sup> The insinuation is clear. Tillerson neither approves nor agrees with Trump's failure to condemn the display of white supremacy in Charlottesville. While many of the US's allies might welcome this comment as it reinforces the idea that at least some of the US's leadership maintains strong, visible support for human rights, they must also consider this remark with a metaphorical grain of salt. Once again, Tillerson does not have the final say on the United States' goals and priorities — he answers to Trump.

All of these practical realities of diplomacy inevitably ask a normative question —

does Tillerson have the right to contradict Trump given his current job? While there may be moral arguments that argue in favor of Tillerson maintaining disagreements in order to preserve and respect a personal sense of identity or integrity, the answer is ultimately “No.” To be clear, under any normal circumstances as an agent in and of himself, Tillerson possesses an absolute right to engage in reasonable disagreement with any person he would wish to.<sup>12</sup> However, diplomatic positions within a state are assignments of agency in order to further the goals of the state itself. As the state in some sense assigned its agency to Trump, and Trump assigned his agency to Tillerson, Tillerson’s agency is “separated out from what the agent does or achieves...[via] a mirroring or doubling effect” that—while acknowledging the individual importance of Tillerson’s agency—also denies its absolute importance.<sup>13</sup> To put this idea in other words, while individual agency may be some vague, intrinsic good, that intrinsic good cannot usurp the instrumental importance of an individual being assigned agency to participate in some sort of collective government action. By accepting the position of Secretary of State, Tillerson’s individual agency regarding foreign policy decisions largely disappears.<sup>14</sup>

It is the nature of liberal democracy to allow reasonable disagreements to occur between individuals, and it does seem odd to say that in this particular case there ought not be reasonable disagreement between two individuals who are supposed to represent the values of United States. However, it is worth noting the distinction between Tillerson as an individual citizen and Tillerson as a government official appointed to act on behalf of an elected official. Diplomatic appointments made by a commander in chief imply an assignment of a specific form of agency — while Tillerson performs his job, he has an overarching obligation to represent Trump’s wishes. Because the method of conducting foreign policy contains ideological and personal elements, Tillerson the person cannot be separated from Tillerson the agent.<sup>15</sup> Unlike a plumber who can separate his professional and personal life fairly easily by simply not bringing plumbing equipment home with him, individuals acting on behalf of the state cannot separate their values from their work. Or, at the very least, it is significantly more difficult for them to compartmentalize their beliefs from their obligations. But obligations are often difficult to fulfill. In a world dominated by media where private disagreements become public record, it is ill-advised for Tillerson to disagree with Trump as it puts Tillerson’s ability to perform his professional obligations in jeopardy.

Unfortunately, this means that Trump will always get the final say. Regardless of what a person’s views are on the Trump administration, 140-characters does not a foreign policy platform make. It is dangerous for Trump to get the last tweet when it comes to decisions in the geopolitical arena as nobody knows what the words “Make America Great Again” mean in any specific, applicable context. As such, other states in the international arena have no reason to trust that anything Tillerson proposes is an accurate representation of Trump’s policies. Because of how confusing and vague Trump’s foreign policy is — because of the extent to which Tillerson personally disagrees with Trump — Tillerson can never be able to adequately represent the presi-

dent's interests.

Even if Trump wishes to “drain the swamp” and shrink the size of the government, he ought not kill the state department. Although Trump might believe that he — and he alone — can conduct foreign policy, that belief is mistaken. The world is a big place. Foreign policy is complicated. In order to sufficiently enact policy and conduct diplomacy, it is necessary to delegate tasks if for no other reason than the fact that one world crisis does not stop when another crisis begins. If Trump himself is required to negotiate with Russia regarding the conflict in Syria, that does not mean that the crisis with North Korea will get put on hold. The normative reason for why Trump cannot conduct foreign policy on his own though is more persuasive; just as no businessman would ever walk into a negotiation without understanding the full implications of the most likely results of every possible compromise, the history associated with previous, similar deals, and perhaps the individual opinions of the other negotiators, no statesman should be so short-sighted to think that he or she could conduct diplomacy without experience. Trump does not have foreign policy experience. As such, Trump is in an odd double-bind. Either Trump can conduct foreign policy alone and not accomplish any of his goals, or Trump must rely on agents who understand specific elements of foreign policy to achieve any element of success.

This situation is such an odd and interesting example because it illustrates the necessity of group agency. Multiple people acting together for a single purpose — even absent a coherent, singular concept of agency — is what allows states to conduct daily operations. Without the ability to implement policy in the international arena, the United States will become isolated. And while there may very well be legitimate ideological reasons why a statesman might wish to adhere to an isolationist foreign policy, that does not justify why a politician should actively take steps to incentivize other states in the international arena to blacklist his or her state from diplomatic conduct. Absent bargaining power, a state is forced to compromise on its own beliefs, values, and priorities. Thus, Trump ought to take steps to heal the fractures that have formed within his administration. Empowering Tillerson to make decisions on his behalf would not undercut Trump's power — it would greatly strengthen it.



## NOTES

---

1. Roth, Abraham Sesshu. "Shared Agency." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. May 01, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/shared-agency/>. ; List, Christian, and Philip Pettit. *Group agency: the possibility, design, and status of corporate agents*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.
2. Roth, Abraham Sesshu. "Shared Agency." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. May 01, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/shared-agency/>.
3. Beauchamp, Zack. "The Trump administration is publicly contradicting itself on North Korea." *Vox*. August 10, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/8/10/16126730/trump-gorka-tillerson-north-korea>.
4. Gearan, Anne, Philip Rucker, and Ashley Parker. "Death spiral: Tillerson makes nice but may not last long with Trump." *The Washington Post*. October 04, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-death-spiral-tillerson-makes-nice-but-may-not-last-long-with-trump/2017/10/04/7ad19894-a921-11e7-850e-2bdd1236be5d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.936be5f30b17%29](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-death-spiral-tillerson-makes-nice-but-may-not-last-long-with-trump/2017/10/04/7ad19894-a921-11e7-850e-2bdd1236be5d_story.html?utm_term=.936be5f30b17%29).
5. DeYoung, Karen. "Trump contradicts Tillerson on North Korea, the latest in a series of put-downs." *The Washington Post*. October 01, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-contradicts-tillerson-on-north-korea-the-latest-in-a-series-of-put-downs/2017/10/01/1f11f886-a6bb-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.66f138fbaebd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-contradicts-tillerson-on-north-korea-the-latest-in-a-series-of-put-downs/2017/10/01/1f11f886-a6bb-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975_story.html?utm_term=.66f138fbaebd).
6. Trump, Donald J. "...Save your energy Rex, we'll do what has to be done!" *Twitter*. October 01, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/914497947517227008?lang=en>.
7. DeYoung, Karen. "Trump contradicts Tillerson on North Korea, the latest in a series of put-downs." *The Washington Post*. October 01, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-contradicts-tillerson-on-north-korea-the-latest-in-a-series-of-put-downs/2017/10/01/1f11f886-a6bb-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.66f138fbaebd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-contradicts-tillerson-on-north-korea-the-latest-in-a-series-of-put-downs/2017/10/01/1f11f886-a6bb-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975_story.html?utm_term=.66f138fbaebd).
8. DeYoung, Karen. "Trump contradicts Tillerson on North Korea, the latest in a series of put-downs." *The Washington Post*. October 01, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-contradicts-tillerson-on-north-korea-the-latest-in-a-series-of-put-downs/2017/10/01/1f11f886-a6bb-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.66f138fbaebd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-contradicts-tillerson-on-north-korea-the-latest-in-a-series-of-put-downs/2017/10/01/1f11f886-a6bb-11e7-92d1-58c702d2d975_story.html?utm_term=.66f138fbaebd).
9. Sanger, David E. "The Contradiction Buried in Trump's Iran and North Korea Policies." *The New York Times*. September 20, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/world/asia/trump-iran-north-korea-.html>.
10. Sanger, David E. "The Contradiction Buried in Trump's Iran and North Korea Policies." *The New York Times*. September 20, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/world/asia/trump-iran-north-korea-.html>.
11. Sanger, David E. "The Contradiction Buried in Trump's Iran and North Korea Policies." *The New York Times*. September 20, 2017. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/world/asia/trump-iran-north-korea-.html>.
12. Bernard Williams's explanation of integrity in supports this. He explains that there are certain personal projects and values that constitute some intangible "integrity" that ought to act as a side constraint on a person performing certain actions. However, even taken to its logical extreme, the implication of a person possessing integrity does not mean that he or she is justified in not performing obligations. If Tillerson possesses some reason related to integrity for his contradictory actions, then he has the choice to leave his current position. But it is impermissible to shirk his duties while he is obligated to them.
13. Stonge, Paul, and Mike Michael. "Suggestion and satisfaction: On the actual occasion of agency." *In Agency without Actors? New approaches to collective action*, p. 19. New York, NY: Rutledge, 2012

14. This is not an argument about rights forfeiture in the same vein as rights forfeiture in the case of punishment. Tillerson has not forfeited his right to hold his opinions as he has done nothing wrong. It might be more similar to forfeiting a right to property via some binding agreement. His agency in terms of his discretion regarding policy decisions has been minimized. It is only because of the extent of his job that this idea is disconcerting. For example, the claim that a painter ought not paint a butterfly when someone is commissioning her to paint a portrait does not seem morally repugnant. Even though the painter might have a desire to paint the butterfly—and, in normal cases, has the choice on what she chooses to paint—she ought to refrain from painting it as a contractual agreement has been made. Just as the painter does her job, Tillerson ought to do his job.
15. Although we might wish to believe that our representatives can be impartial actors, politicians are human. Bias, preconceived beliefs, and personal values can affect the decisions that assigned agents can face. This phenomenon can be seen in arguments regarding cultural capture. See Kwak, James. “Cultural Capture and the Financial Crisis.” In *Preventing Regulatory Capture: Special Interest Influence and How to Limit It*, 71-98. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014.