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ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

# Rex Tillerson's Big Oil Ties Endanger the Climate and National Security

By [Cathleen Kelly](#) | Posted on January 6, 2017, 9:51 am



AP/LM Otero

Then-ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson speaks to reporters in Dallas on May 28, 2014.

**This article contains a correction.**

The direct link between climate change threats and the duties of the secretary of state is strong. As droughts, floods, heat waves, and other symptoms of a warming world increase both in number and intensity—throughout the [Middle East, Africa, Asia, the Arctic, Europe](#), and the [United States](#)—the next U.S. secretary of state will face urgent pressure to curb climate change and manage the effects of a warming planet that can no longer be avoided. Failure to do so will [damage the global economy](#) and [destabilize](#) an already wobbly security landscape, with potentially dire consequences for U.S. national security interests.

The next U.S. secretary of state must, as Secretary John Kerry has, protect U.S. foreign policy and security interests and demonstrate a track record of personal and diplomatic credibility. President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for the job, former\* ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, does not meet those qualifications.

[Foreign policy experts](#) and [environmentalists](#) alike have expressed concern that Tillerson, with his Big Oil ties and [history of deceiving the American people](#), is [unfit for the job](#). Tillerson has a [web of business ties](#) to Russia and a documented [friendship](#) with its president, Vladimir Putin—an [aggressive authoritarian ruler](#) who, according to U.S. intelligence officials, [orchestrated](#) hacking and propaganda to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election and is [widely regarded](#) as a threat to global stability. Although Tillerson announced [plans to divest](#) from ExxonMobil, which he is legally required to do if he is confirmed as secretary of state, he has worked for the company for more than [40 years](#). In other words, he has seen the world through a Big Oil—and ExxonMobil—lens for the bulk of his career, while earning an annual salary that reached [\\$24.3 million](#) in 2016 and amassing current and future company shares that together total roughly \$240 million. Tillerson's long-standing and highly profitable relationship with ExxonMobil leaves little doubt that his allegiance to the oil giant will remain strong. These ties also raise the [specter](#) that Tillerson will end U.S. sanctions against Russia to advance ExxonMobil's [\\$500 billion business venture](#) in Russia's Arctic, which is already melting rapidly due to climate change.

For these reasons, the U.S. Senate must reject Tillerson as secretary of state.

## Corporate ties and lies

While rising through the ranks of Exxon and ExxonMobil, Tillerson for decades led the oil giant in [funding outside groups](#) to deceive policymakers and the American people about the real health and security risks and costs of climate change. This [\\$33 million](#)

[misinformation campaign](#) was designed to create a veil of uncertainty around well-established science so that Tillerson's company could avoid carbon pollution limits and enhance its profits at the expense of clean air, public health, and U.S. national security.

In 2012, Tillerson [acknowledged](#) that carbon pollution is “going to have a warming impact,” but contrary to Exxon's own [research](#), he equivocated, “How large it is is very hard for anyone to predict.” Ample [evidence](#) makes clear that climate change is, in fact, already having widespread and unprecedented effects, with serious repercussions for [public health](#), the [economy](#), [water supplies](#), [food security](#), and [coastal communities](#). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [concludes](#), “Continued emission of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes” across the planet, “increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems.”

At a [2013 corporate shareholder meeting](#), Tillerson said, “If you examine the temperature record of the last decade, it really hadn't changed.” In fact, the opposite was true. By then, [scientifically credible data](#) from NASA clearly showed a “Sustained Long-Term Climate Warming Trend.” Soon thereafter, NASA [reported](#) that 2005 to 2015 was the warmest decade on record.

In November 2016, Tillerson reversed his previous stance on climate change denial during a [speech](#) in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates: “At ExxonMobil, we share the view that the risks of climate change are serious and warrant thoughtful action. Addressing these risks requires broad-based, practical solutions around the world.” But this admission came too late: Tillerson had already shown that he was willing to ignore scientific fact to further line his overflowing pockets.

## The urgent need to implement—not undermine—the Paris Agreement

[Experts agree](#) that in order to prevent a cascade of unmanageable climate change effects, governments and companies around the world have just a handful of years left to transition away from fossil fuels to build a low-carbon global economy. Despite the pressing need to curb carbon pollution, Donald Trump continues to waffle on his public stance on climate change and has [not yet revoked](#) his campaign promise to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement. Trump's most worrisome statement on the topic is, in fact, the [cabal of climate change deniers](#) he has nominated to his cabinet.

To allow any hope for a future in which climate change effects lessen, not worsen, the next secretary of state must emphatically reaffirm the U.S. commitment to the Paris deal. Tillerson's record of deception and his fossil fuel industry ties raise the risk that, as the top U.S. diplomat, he would slow the Paris Agreement's implementation, a move that would also [damage the credibility](#) of the United States as a diplomatic partner. Tillerson's oil industry ties and history of distorting the facts on climate change to enhance corporate profits at the expense of clean air and a healthy climate [raises serious questions](#) about whether he would, as secretary of state, direct U.S. foreign policy to advance Big Oil interests ahead of the interests of the American people.

## **To manage climate-driven security threats, the United States must recognize them**

According to [national intelligence experts](#), a growing number of conflict regions around the globe share a common thread: Their economic, political, and social instability is exacerbated by climate change. For example, Syria's ongoing civil war, which has spawned one of the most severe refugee crises in recent history, started in part due to the impacts of climate change, according to the nonpartisan [Center for Climate and Security](#).

In 2014, the [U.S. defense strategy](#) defined climate change as a "threat multiplier," and an August 2016 National Intelligence Council, or NIC, [report](#) concludes that climate change effects will pose "significant national security challenges for the United States over the next two decades." The NIC report illustrates numerous examples of how more frequent and severe extreme weather events are driving food and water shortages, exacerbating poverty, and escalating conflict in areas including India, Pakistan, Mali, Mauritania, Mexico, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen. A secretary of state who is not even fully convinced of the validity of climate change risks will be ill equipped to recognize and respond to such crises as they emerge.

In September 2016, President Barack Obama issued a [presidential memorandum](#) calling on federal agencies to take coordinated and significant steps to reduce climate change risks to U.S. national security. The next secretary of state will need to work quickly to implement that memorandum, and there is little indication that Tillerson is primed to do that.

Rex Tillerson's oil industry ties and record of raising doubts about the dangers of a warming world make it unlikely that he will take the urgent action needed to fulfill U.S. commitments under the Paris Agreement and manage the escalating risks of climate change. If his

past record is prologue, he is likely to prioritize protecting Big Oil interests ahead of the interests of the American people—at the cost of U.S. national security, the health and safety of people around the globe, and the prosperity of future generations.

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**\* Correction, January 6, 2017:** *This column has been updated to accurately state Rex Tillerson's position as the former CEO of ExxonMobil.*



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