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US state department to abolish climate change envoy

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Critics say Rex Tillerson’s restructuring will further diminish US’ standing in international affairs



Rex Tillerson told Donald Trump that the US should stay in the Paris Agreement to protect its own interests, but he was ignored (Photo: greatagain.com)

By **Karl Mathiesen**

Secretary of state Rex Tillerson has informed Congress that the US will no longer have a special envoy for climate change, the official that has led delegations to UN climate talks since 2009.

In a letter (below) addressed to Bob Corker (R-Tenn), the chairman of the Senate committee on foreign relations, Tillerson outlined a plan to abolish 36 out of 66 special envoy positions.

Some of the positions would be entirely scrapped, said Tillerson, or “if an issue no longer requires a special envoy or representative, then an appropriate bureau will manage any legacy responsibilities”. This was the case with climate change, which will now be managed under the Bureau of Oceans and International and Scientific Affairs (OES).

“I believe that the Department will be able to better execute its mission by integrating certain envoys and special representative offices within the regional and functional bureaus and eliminating those that have accomplished or outlived their original purpose,” Tillerson added.

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The OES will subsume seven employees currently working for the vacant office of the special envoy for climate change, as well as \$761,000 in support costs.

The position of climate envoy was established by Barack Obama in 2009 and was filled by Todd Stern until 2016. The envoy for Obama’s last year in office was Jonathan Pershing, who left the political appointment when the government changed in January this year.

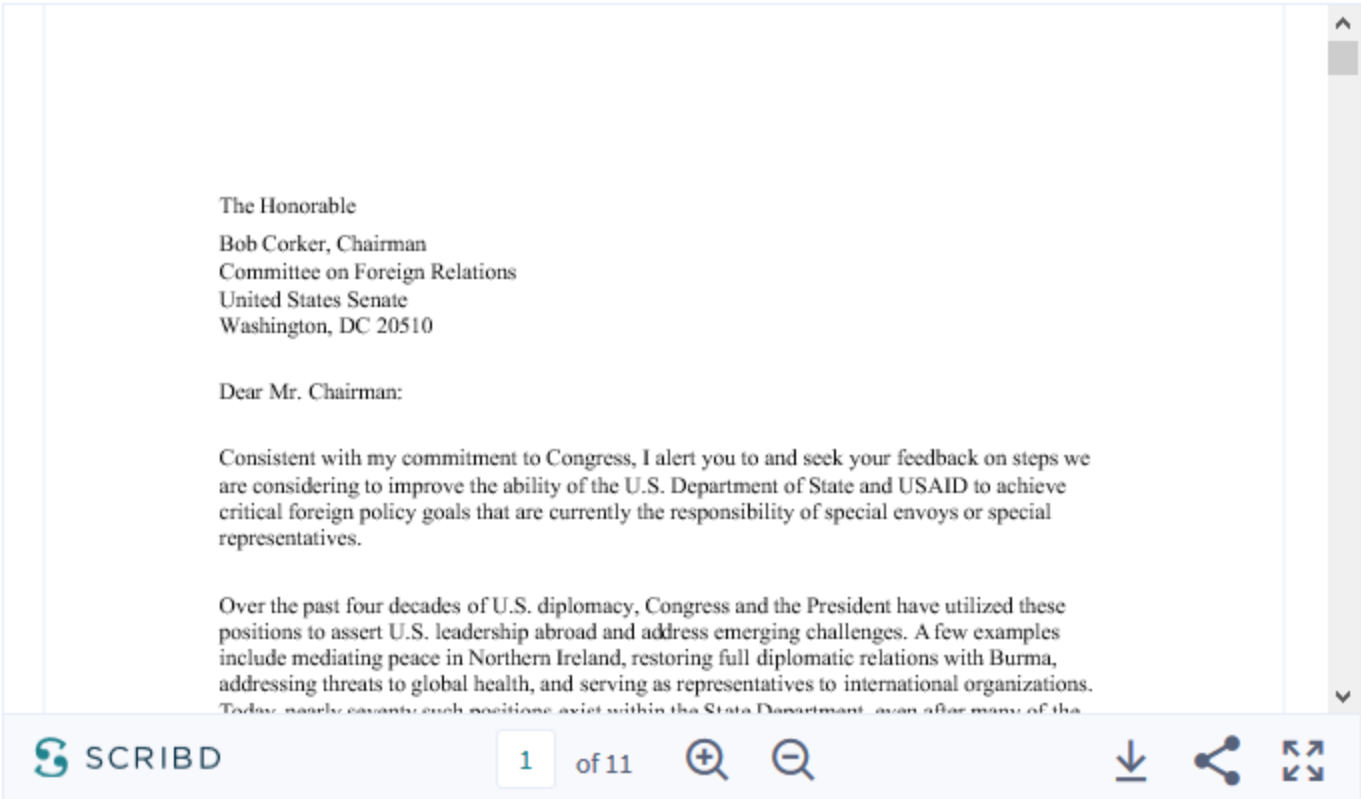
The special envoy was the US’ diplomatic figurehead, a position Stern used to become one of the major forces behind the eventual shape of the Paris deal, right down to the 11th hour wrangling over a troublesome “typo” in the text.

A state department official told Climate Home that the goal of Tillerson’s bonfire of the envoys was to ensure that the resources of the state department were more aligned with the administration’s policy priorities.

“The secretary has determined that the changes proposed will advance US national security interests, and will help to counter the influence of US adversaries and competitors,” the spokesperson said.

Under president Donald Trump, the US administration has announced plans to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, although it remains a party to the accord until it can formally withdraw in 2020.

Tillerson letter to Bob Corker by Karl Mathiesen on Scribd



This month, the state department indicated the US would continue to send a delegation to climate talks while it remained part of the deal.

But critics said the announcement reflected the diminishing importance of climate change as a foreign policy issue for the US.

David Waskow, director of the World Resources Institute’s international climate initiative, told Climate Home: “The role of the special envoy made clear to the world the US determination to engage effectively in global cooperation. Getting rid of the special envoy is a further reinforcement of president Trump’s decision to shift into rapid reverse when it comes to the Paris Agreement and global action.”

According to CNN, senator Ed Markey (D-Mass), who sits on the foreign relations committee with Corker, said on Tuesday: “None of these are incidental... Each one of these areas has a reason why they have a special envoy.”

Corker responded to the letter with praise, reported CNN. “Through the years, numbers of special envoys have accumulated at the State Department, and in many cases, their creation has done more harm than good by creating an environment in which people work around the normal diplomatic processes in lieu of streamlining them,” he said.

In May, in response to budget proposals to cut 32% from his budget, Tillerson agreed to slim down the department. Other state department cuts under Trump include abolishing the Global Climate Change Initiative, which funds the UN climate process.

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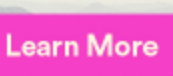
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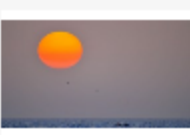


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