

The Washington Post**Opinions**

The CIA is entering a danger zone. Here's the map.

**By David Ignatius** Opinion writer July 25 at 7:31 PM

If the ghosts who inhabit the walls of the CIA could talk, they would tell Director Mike Pompeo to be careful. The agency is entering a danger zone where a White House in turmoil wants the CIA to take aggressive action overseas but hasn't developed the clear strategy or political support needed to sustain it.

Pompeo is an activist, an exuberant politician with a flair for delivering one-liners. He's a risk taker, who wants the agency to be more aggressive both in collecting information and in using covert action against targets such as North Korea and Iran. This aggressive stance was clear in his remarks last week at the Aspen Security Forum and in other public comments over the past six months.

Pompeo has some big problems that complicate his agenda. He won't be able to deal with them without a broad, bipartisan base of support. Otherwise, he's going to run into the same ditch in which the agency has regularly gotten stuck for decades — launching bold (sometimes dubious) programs that eventually deflate like leaky balloons, harming the agency, its workforce and its allies abroad.

Here's a road map of three dangers ahead, drawn from conversations with a half-dozen CIA veterans who served in Republican and Democratic administrations:

- Intelligence today is politicized, perhaps more than at any time in our history. President Trump outrageously likened intelligence professionals to Nazis and regularly describes intelligence estimates of the Russian threat as “fake news” or a “witch hunt.” Senior ex-spooks, not surprisingly, have fought back. In the process, the CIA is becoming a political football.

James R. Clapper Jr. and John Brennan, former directors of national intelligence and the CIA, respectively, took some roundhouse swings in Aspen, calling Trump's remarks “insulting,” “completely inappropriate” and “not . . . honorable.” They're right. The problem is that the millions of Americans who fantasize about a supposed “deep state” become more convinced that this conspiracy exists when they hear former intel chiefs attack the president.

- The Trump administration has failed to make clear strategic decisions. Trump's policies on Syria, Russia, Iran and China are a hodgepodge of conflicting goals and unresolved issues. Meanwhile, the president keeps pushing the agency to come up with options.

Historically, this is where the CIA gets in trouble. Presidents who want “wins” but lack a systematic diplomatic strategy have used covert action to topple governments or wage undeclared wars. When the secret campaigns backfire and public support disappears, the agency is left holding the bag. The lesson: When policymakers don't know what to do and turn to covert action, the agency should sometimes say no.

Pompeo's penchant for covert action was clear in his Aspen comments. On North Korea, he advocated separating the country's military capability from its erratic leader, Kim Jong Un, and said, “The North Korean people . . . would love to see him go, as well,” though he tempered this threat slightly by

joking that the United States should be careful about “what’s behind door number three.” On Iran, he said the United States should stop “appeasement” and “find a platform which could uniformly push back against Iranian expansionism.” In combating the Revolutionary Guard Corps’ leadership, he said, “we’re deadly focused on making sure [they] don’t maintain capacity and power.”

- Finally, and most important, the administration Pompeo serves is in disarray. The president is trying to bad-mouth his attorney general into resigning, and he may plan to fire special counsel Robert S. Mueller III next. The country needs steadiness and independence from the CIA. Pompeo should think about institutional and constitutional obligations, as well as presidential ones. He knows where the accelerator is, but he should also look for the brake.

Richard Helms, perhaps the most astute director in the CIA’s history, was so wary of getting involved in policy debates that it’s said he excused himself from presidential briefings once he had delivered the intelligence. President Lyndon B. Johnson supposedly would press him to stay and offer his views.

Pompeo, a blunt ex-congressman, appears to have the opposite instinct. He’s at the White House nearly every day, and it’s said that his briefings with Trump sometimes veer back and forth between intelligence and policy matters. Trump wants action; Pompeo wants to deliver. This can-do temptation is inherent in the relationship between any president and CIA director, but in this case, it may be a cause for concern.

Pompeo is as ambitious and ideologically passionate a CIA director as we’ve seen in decades. On the wall near his agency dining room is a portrait of Helms, with a bemused, skeptical look in his eye. I hope Pompeo takes a moment to consult his predecessor.

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