

## INTERNATIONAL POLICY DIGEST

### Farewelling Dr. No: The Sacking of John Bolton

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It was compelling viewing (one does not so much read Twitter as see it as a series of violent flashes). John Bolton, the armed-and-ready national security adviser who has been tiring of the US President's jerks and adjustments, had floated the prospect of resignation. "I offered to resign last night and President Trump said, 'Let's talk about it tomorrow.'" To the New York Times, Bolton reiterated the account. "Offered last night without [Trump] asking. Slept on it and gave it to him this morning."

Hours are lethal in Trumpland; entire worlds can implode at that time, and new ones grow with equal violence. President Donald Trump was keen to set the record crooked. "I informed John Bolton last night that his services are no longer needed in the White House. I disagreed strongly with many of his suggestions, as did others in the Administration." US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was certainly one of them. "There were many times Ambassador Bolton and I disagreed; that's for sure." It pays, however, to qualify: "But that's true for lots of people with whom I interact."

What matters in a Trump sacking is less the normality of its occurrence but its manner of execution. The axe is always held aloft, and, as with any court run by a fickle despot, may fall at any given time. On Tuesday morning, the signs of any movement regarding Bolton were entirely absent. At 11, a news briefing was announced by the White House for 1:30 that afternoon. Bolton would keep company with Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin in a chat on terrorism. Bolton never appeared, leaving Pompeo and Mnuchin to chuckle before the cameras.

Pompeo, unlike Bolton, has certainly found it easier keeping up appearances. Disagreements with the President are kept close to his broad chest. He is the manager of Trump's ever-changing approach to policy, and capable of articulating foreign policy swerves. But do not be fooled, suggest the talking heads. "Pompeo is as much a hawk on Iran as Bolton," claims John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. Glaser's diagnosis of it all? "It mostly boils down to Bolton's reputation as a bureaucratic manipulator who makes enemies within the executive branch as a matter of habit."

The manipulation had been placed in another register over the US-Taliban peace agreement. Trump was happy with the detail; Bolton wanted the agreement sunk as textbook example of capitulation. Trump's circle of aides had gotten irate as Bolton's public dissatisfaction grew. There were leaks into the atmosphere, and not very pleasant ones at that.

The decision to evict Bolton could easily have been caused by something else, the straw that tantalisingly, and destructively, broke the camel's back. On Monday, the possibility of easing sanctions against Iran as part of a preliminary step to meeting Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, was mooted by the President and aides. Treasury Secretary Mnuchin was certainly open to the suggestion. Trump tested the water and concluded that "they'd like to make a deal." A far cry from June, when Bolton's apocalyptic fantasy was being entertained: a possible airstrike on Iran. With 10 minutes to spare, Trump called it off.

On Wednesday, the president attempted to add more light and shine to the canvas. Areas of disagreement with Bolton were articulated. The former adviser had not been "getting along with people" in the administration; he had been "way out of line" on Venezuela. Such points merely underscore the difficulties Bolton was always going to face: from his moustache, which Trump detests, to his priestly dogmatism in international relations.

North Korea was always a case in point: for Trump, a moment for the picture books, the firm handshake for history, and promises for rosy readjustments; for Bolton, a chance to cause a flutter of terror in Pyongyang, airing the view that a "Libya" solution for nuclear disarmament might be in the offing. (That corker eventually assisted the toppling of the Qaddafi regime, hardly a recipe for smooth-talking and deal-making.)

The point was something Trump did not miss. "We were set back very badly when John Bolton talked about the Libyan model! And he made a mistake! As soon as he mentioned that, the Libyan model, what a disaster! Take a look at what happened to Qaddafi with the Libyan model."

Bolton's sabre-rattling enthusiasts were bound to see things differently. "While John Bolton was national security adviser for the last 17 months, there have been no bad deals," claimed a Bolton confidante. In another take, Bolton has been portrayed as the less mad of the two. Jay Nordlinger, senior editor at The National Review, saw JB as a model of consistency. Trump, on the other hand, had been dancing merrily off queue, breaking much fine china on the way. Certainly on Russia; certainly on Ukraine. At the last G7 meeting in Biarritz, Trump expressed his desire that Russia be readmitted to the club. He sported a curious account of Crimea, which was "sort of taken away from President Obama." It was "embarrassing" for him, being "outsmarted by Putin" as he was.

Trump had put a halt on military aid to Ukraine and shown a coldness to the newly elected president, Volodymyr Zelensky. His idea here is to push for a Ukrainian investigation of Joe Biden, the stuff of side-splitting hilarity. Bolton, on the other hand, was in Kyiv paying respect to Ukrainians felled "in the defence of their nation against Russian aggression." In saluting "the Stache" Nordlinger was hoping for his return. The chickenhawks will have their day.

Such shuffling and bloodletting is normally the stuff that thrills political wonks and media vultures. Engineered in-house political assassinations are manna from heaven, and supply good copy in bureaucratic hothouses like Washington. But Trump has made political sacking the stuff of banal ritual, ceremonial inevitability made that much duller for its frequency. Bolton came in praise, worked in disagreement and discomfort, and was ejected. Time for the next mug to take his place.

