

# The Washington Post

## With Bolton's departure, Pompeo gets 'more running room'

Carol Morello

September 11, 2019

The departure of John Bolton as national security adviser puts Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the driver's seat for the administration's foreign policy debates.

With his chief rival for influence with the president suddenly out of the picture, Pompeo will have more autonomy and freedom to operate without being blocked by his polar opposite in style and temperament.

During his tenure, Pompeo has assiduously burnished his relation with President Trump. He seems to innately understand Trump's mood and agenda, and tries to make things happen the way Trump wants.

When they disagree, Pompeo keeps his personal views so private he sometimes is referred to as a Trump whisperer; Bolton, in contrast, seemed incapable of keeping his opinions to himself.

So Pompeo made no attempt to sound disappointed at a Tuesday news conference when he was peppered with questions about [Bolton's departure](#).

"There were many times Ambassador Bolton and I disagreed; that's to be sure," Pompeo said at the White House event, frequently breaking into a grin. "But that's true for lots of people with whom I interact."

Pompeo's jocular mood reflected the smoother road that is probably ahead for him as he tries to advance Trump's foreign policy goals without Bolton around to argue against them.

"Bolton's departure gives Pompeo more running room," said Cliff Kupchan, chairman of the Eurasia Group. "Every time the president, or Pompeo, or anyone in the administration came up with an idea, they had to face Dr. No. That person has now been fired. So the rest of the team, which is more moderate by definition, will now have an easier time moving their agenda."

Ultimately, foreign policy is set by the president, not the secretary of state or the national security adviser. So the impact of Bolton's leave-taking can be overstated.

"Trump has always been the decider in chief," said James Carafano, a national security and foreign policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation. "It was his foreign policy before Bolton came. It will be his foreign policy after Bolton leaves. I don't think the president cares a hoot if Pompeo and Bolton disagree. What he cares about is getting the decision he needs to get to."

The differences between Pompeo and Bolton were less ideological than tactical, though a wide gulf separated the ways they expressed their views to the president and in public.

John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said policies on North Korea, Iran and Afghanistan should be communicated with fewer indications of internal strife.

“Pompeo is as much a hawk on Iran as Bolton,” Glaser said. “Negotiations with North Korea will be less hindered, with less internal dissent. It mostly boils down to Bolton’s reputation as a bureaucratic manipulator who makes enemies within the executive branch as a matter of habit. Unlike Bolton, Pompeo has a way of going along with Trump and not boldly stating where they disagree on policy.”

Even stylistic differences can have a major effect on diplomacy, however. Early in his tenure as national security adviser, Bolton nearly ended talks with North Korea when he endorsed the “Libya model” for nuclear disarmament. North Korea threatened to walk away from a summit in Singapore, perceiving a threat because the Libyan model helped lead to the toppling of Moammar Gaddafi’s regime by a domestic uprising and a NATO-led coalition.

“That revealed the true side of Bolton,” said Steve Pomper, who served in the State Department and the National Security Council during the Obama administration. “He’s a guy who’s a maximalist. He doesn’t believe in measure-for-measure deals and is very skeptical of taking his foot off the gas until the end of the road. The problem is, you don’t get there unless you’re willing to do measure-for-measure deals.”

Pompeo, in contrast, has shown himself willing to negotiate with Pyongyang, Tehran and the Taliban, all policies promoted by Trump.

“Bolton was ideological and brought his ideology onto the job with him,” said Pomper, who now is the senior director of policy for the International Crisis Group. “Pompeo may be ideological. But while serving in the administration, his ideology is sublimated to his role as an enabler.”

Aaron David Miller, a former State Department official who is a foreign-policy analyst at the Carnegie Endowment, said Bolton effectively self-destructed through his bellicose public pronouncements. Pompeo’s silence has allowed him to thrive.

“It’s really quite a feat,” he said. “You can only say no to a president so many times, and then the president stops listening or essentially writes you off. Pompeo was a ‘Yes, but . . .’ man. Because of that, he’s survived. Now, assuming he stays, Pompeo may now have the opportunity to become one of strongest secretaries of state in recent years.”

It is too early to tell how shedding Bolton will affect whether Pompeo resigns and decides to run for the Senate in his home state of Kansas. Political allies in Congress and in Kansas have been urging him to vie for the seat being vacated by Sen. Pat Roberts (R), who is not seeking a fifth term. Pompeo is be widely favored to win the nomination and would be a strong Republican candidate in the general election. The filing deadline for the primary is in June.

Miller, for one, thinks the case just became stronger for Pompeo to stay where he is, for the sake of continuity in perilous times.

“You’ve got Iran, North Korea and Afghanistan, among a lot of issues that are all incomplete and all politically resonant,” Miller said. “If I were running the railroad, I would not want to lose the secretary of state. Pompeo has proven himself to be resilient, if nothing else. And relatively consistent.”

