



Trump's pick for national security advisor could push Pakistan closer to China, Russia and Iran

Nyshka Chandran

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President Donald Trump's choice to tap John Bolton as national security advisor is widely expected to produce more hawkish U.S. foreign policy on rogue states such as North Korea and Iran. Pakistan, a country that's long been a thorn in Washington's side, could also be affected.

If the conservative hawk, scheduled to start the job next week, pursues tough action on Islamabad, that could push the South Asian country closer to China, Russia and Iran, experts warned.

Islamabad was a crucial U.S. ally during Washington's war on terror following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, but bilateral relations have worsened in recent years as the U.S. demands the country do more to fight Taliban-affiliated militants known as the Haqqani network.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration suspended military and security assistance to the South Asian nation. Many believe the president could follow-up by rescinding Pakistan's non-NATO ally status or declaring Islamabad a state sponsor of terrorism.

"Bolton's hardline views may translate into an even more aggressive rhetoric against Pakistan," said Uzair Younus, director of consultancy Albright Stonebridge's South Asia practice.

A hostile policy approach in the form of increased drone strikes, financial sanctions, or diplomatic isolation "would only harden Pakistan's position and bring it closer to other regional powers," such as Beijing, Moscow and Tehran, Younus cautioned.

The three countries, which are currently experiencing frosty ties with Washington, have steadily increased their influence in Pakistan in recent months.

Moscow and Islamabad have been ramping up military and energy cooperation while Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif led a politico-economic delegation to the Pakistani capital last month to discuss strengthened ties. The South Asian nation also enjoys a strategic relationship with the world's second-largest economy, reflected by joint infrastructure projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

That all comes as the White House plans fresh sanctions on Moscow, proposes harsh tariffs on Chinese goods and is considering scrapping a nuclear deal that may increase the likelihood of U.S. military action against Tehran.

Further signs of U.S. hostility could certainly push Pakistan into the arms of Beijing, Moscow and Tehran, agreed Sahar Khan, visiting research fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research group.

"Bolton risks creating more tensions within the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, which is already at an all-time low," Khan said. "Bolton's understanding of Pakistan is based on a binary notion that there are only two kinds of actors operating in Pakistan: Islamists and non-Islamists."

"The reality on the ground is a lot more complicated," she added.

Bolton, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was quoted in February as saying that, if Pakistan's nuclear arsenal fell into the hands of radicals, "you would have Iran on steroids right now."

Islamabad is also a crucial player when it comes to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, where around 15,000 American troops remain more than 16 years following the U.S. invasion. So, tough measures on Pakistan may be a double-edged sword for Washington.

"Pakistan has some leverage over the U.S. and could ultimately respond by disrupting U.S. supplies into Afghanistan, thereby undercutting U.S. military objectives in Afghanistan," said Younus.

But not everybody agrees that Bolton will turn up the pressure on Islamabad.

Jonah Blank, senior political scientist at nonprofit think tank RAND Corporation, noted that Bolton served in President George W. Bush's administration as undersecretary of state for arms control, but was silent on Pakistan at that time.

Back then, nuclear proliferation was Bolton's job and Pakistan was the world's foremost nuclear proliferator on his watch [but] he simply "looked the other way while Pakistan engaged in nuclear proliferation," according to Blank, who said Bolton's attention was instead fixated on states hostile to the U.S., namely Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and even Cuba.

"Unless Bolton has had a very sudden change in heart, there is no reason to expect him to be any tougher on Pakistan now than he was when he served as Undersecretary of State for Arms Control," Blank continued.