



## Bolton-Pompeo relationship hits new low as foreign policy tests mount

Kaitlan Collins, Kevin Liptak and Zachary Cohen

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Long-simmering tensions between top figures on President Donald Trump's national security team have devolved into all-out hostility, creating a deep disconnect between staffers on the National Security Council, led by John Bolton, and the rest of the administration, six people familiar with the matter said.

While there's been friction between Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for months, as CNN [first reported in May](#), things have gotten worse recently. Bolton and Pompeo rarely speak outside of formal meetings, three of the sources said, including a recent stretch of going weeks without speaking to one another. That has left key coordination efforts between the White House and State Department to underlings.

There's also a rift between Bolton and Trump's acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney, who oversees the West Wing. Mulvaney has clashed with Bolton over ideological differences in recent months and sought to distance himself from the embattled national security adviser.

Mulvaney has even added a national security expert to his team and made him an assistant to the President, the highest-ranking title in the West Wing. The expert, Rob Blair, joined Mulvaney from the Office of Management and Budget in January, and allows Mulvaney to have a hand in national security without going through Bolton.

Trump hasn't indicated whether he minds the dispute underway among his team. In fact, he's said in the past that he tends to enjoy when his aides are at odds with each other.

But the current situation has led to a deep sense of isolation for NSC staffers working under Bolton, who are charged with coordinating foreign policy and national security options for the President.

The internal rift has only added to the sense of confusion about the administration's foreign policy priorities, and left some allies and experts scratching their heads about who is running Trump's policy abroad, according to diplomats and administration officials.

"The administration's national security team is the weakest in decades and is now on the verge of complete collapse," said Tom Wright, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "Meanwhile, the President just goes rogue, making vital decisions on the fly, with little thought or process."

Given the number of foreign policy problems facing the country, including Iran, North Korea, China and Venezuela, multiple White House officials expressed dismay that the relationship between a secretary of state and national security adviser could disintegrate to this extent.

Still, administration sources contacted by CNN were defensive about issues related to foreign policy and denied that there is a rift between Pompeo and Bolton, or that they rarely speak outside formal meetings. "This is false and your reporting is frivolous," State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said.

"Nearly everything in this article is false," National Security Council spokesman Garrett Marquis said.

"Can we get away from the palace intrigue and focus on something that matters -- like perhaps today's opioids announcement?" said White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham.

#### Former allies

Once closely aligned on tactics and ideology, Pompeo and Bolton no longer meet privately to hatch plans and devise ways to approach the President, multiple people familiar with the change in their dynamic said. While their views on Iran and North Korea remain largely in sync, they have sharply diverged on how to handle a president who is often at odds with their advice.

Pompeo, who joined the Trump administration as CIA director before being tapped as the chief diplomat, has developed closer ties to Trump than perhaps any other member of the Cabinet, according to administration officials. His skill has been in anticipating and maneuvering around Trump's whims, the officials said, in ways that Bolton hasn't been as adept at navigating.

Whereas Pompeo tends to strike a balance between what the President wants and what the national security community feels is important, Bolton is more combative and outspoken in his views, a style that has irked the President in recent months.

When Bolton was first hired by Trump last March, he was empowered to revamp the National Security Council. He downgraded positions he felt were unnecessary and filled others with loyalists, some of whom have worked for him for decades. He met regularly with the President privately, and when he wasn't in the Oval Office, he often got together with Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence. The three men were — and remain — ideologically aligned, and often combined forces to sway the President.

#### Bolton sidelined

In recent months however, that dynamic has changed dramatically. Trump has made clear that Bolton's interventionist views will not outweigh his own isolationist instincts, including in the Middle East. In remarks from the Oval Office in May, Trump told reporters, "I actually temper John, which is pretty amazing."

Privately, he has warned Bolton to tone down his rhetoric and remember the promises Trump has made to end foreign wars. Trump has also told other people, including foreign leaders, that Bolton's hawkish views do not always represent his own, according to multiple sources familiar with those conversations.

Last week, the Washington Post reported that Bolton had been sidelined as top officials prepared for negotiations with the Taliban. Bolton's staunch opposition to a peace deal irritated the President, who has made clear that he wants to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2020.

A source close to Bolton told CNN that even if he has been sidelined on Afghanistan by State Department officials for the moment, he is still voicing his criticism directly to the President.

Bolton and other advisers who are fiercely critical of the terms of an emerging deal with the Taliban, believe that despite his fundamental desire to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan that Trump remains amenable to changing his mind if additional information is presented in a certain way, a source familiar with the President's thinking said.

Meanwhile, Pompeo and his envoy leading the negotiations, Zalmay Khalilzad, remain focused on securing a peace deal, which would reduce the number of US troops in Afghanistan from roughly 14,000 to 8,000, aligning with the President's own stated goal of withdrawal.

More broadly, the same source close to Bolton maintains that the national security adviser's professional ambitions have little impact on how he operates in his current role, noting that he continues to offer the President his unfiltered opinion even when it does not align with Trump's inherent views. However, this source added that Bolton fully understands that his job is to execute Trump's agenda.

Bolton accepted the role of national security adviser with the understanding that it could be his last opportunity to affect change from inside an administration, multiple sources have told CNN, and that at his core, Bolton's decision-making is motivated by ideological principles rather than personal ambition.

Pompeo now avoids Bolton, sources who have observed them say, and does his best to distinguish his approach to Trump from Bolton's, even if their advice often mirrors one another's.

Administration sources point to a recent national security meeting as an example of how Pompeo has distanced himself from Bolton.

As Trump huddled with his national security team earlier this summer over whether to proceed with a planned retaliatory strike on Iran, the debate between military advisers and congressional leaders at times became intense, but Bolton, Pompeo and Pence agreed: Trump should strike.

Multiple people familiar with the President's thinking said the entire episode wavered from on-again to off-again strikes, but after Trump's reversal that evening, Pompeo and his allies reacted mutedly and insisted they were on board with the President's decision.

#### Political ambitions

Though Pompeo has publicly denied that he's running for Senate in Kansas next year, people close to him have said the option is still on the table. Should he decide to run, having worked for Donald Trump and around John Bolton could be used as ammo for the opposition.

Pompeo recently met with Trump's former chief strategist Steve Bannon to discuss the race, and several people have suggested to CNN that Pompeo will run if he thinks Trump could lose re-election. The Washington Examiner first reported the meeting with Bannon.

Two sources familiar with the situation told CNN that Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has been personally lobbying Pompeo to consider a run for the Senate and calls him to discuss the race. Pompeo has until next June's filing deadline to decide.

Bolton is watching Pompeo's political aspirations closely, according to two people familiar with his thinking. They say even though he is aware of his diminished standing, Bolton has designs on the secretary of state job should Pompeo decide to run for Senate.

"There is no question that Ambassador Bolton would love the position as Secretary of State," said Mark Groombridge, a former advisor to Bolton and a scholar at the CATO Institute. "He's thought about it many times before. But he is also smart enough to realize that it would be an uphill climb, not only because of his distanced relationship with Trump but because of Senate confirmation. He has to confront the political realities and the headwinds that are against him."