



Trump and Bolton: Making a Greater American Century?

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Summary

The last month has seen dramatic upheavals among the key personnel within the Trump administration tasked with advising the president on foreign affairs and national security policy. Trump has sought a wider range of policy options on Iran and North Korea and he is now likely to get them from a more hawkish team, increasing the possibility of new US regime change operations. This briefing compares current events to the rise of the Neo-Conservative agenda in 1997-2002.

Introduction

Within the Trump administration the appointment this month of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State, Gina Haspel as the new Director of Central Intelligence and especially John Bolton as National Security Advisor have raised concerns that President Trump now has a team of advisors who are collectively likely to advocate early military action at times of crisis. There is particular concern over Trump's probable withdrawal from the nuclear weapons agreement with Iran as early as this coming May, and that the risk of failure in the forthcoming summit meeting with Kim Jong-Un will result in strong calls from those close to Trump for pre-emptive military action.

In analysing the current state of US politics there are some valuable insights to be gained from two decades ago when a powerful group in Washington was insistent on the need to make America great again, convinced that it had a unique opportunity to lead the world to a better state through what became

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termed the *Project for a New American Century*. This was a world view which resulted not just in forceful military action against al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks but also the invasion and occupation of Iraq, conflicts that continue to this day.

What makes this particularly appropriate is Mr Bolton's connection with that era, especially his roles in the State Department and as US Ambassador to the United Nations. This briefing draws a comparison between those two periods which at first sight show some remarkable similarities but also some differences. These are particularly relevant in assessing the significance of the recent appointments and their possible consequences.

The Late 1990s - towards the New American Century

In the mid-1990s, and especially after President Clinton was re-elected in 1996, opposition to the administration from within the Republican Party rose markedly. This was partly due to his personal behaviour but more because his administration was seen to have failed to respond to the collapse of the Soviet Union leaving the United States as the world's sole superpower with unique leadership opportunities.

There were two somewhat different intellectual traditions within this opposition. The more entrenched element, especially in foreign and security policy circles, would be among those described as assertive realists. They saw US military power as having been downgraded just as there were new threats emerging, but they were more traditionally conservative in terms of economic relations. The second much more recent intellectual development was neo-conservatism, which had originated in a transformation of some elements of the liberal left into a strongly free-trade orientation while also sharing the belief in the power

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of assertive military operations, appropriately described at the time as “idealistic hawkishness”.

There was substantial overlap in these positions and they were in strong agreement that Clinton had failed dismally to exercise world leadership. They expressed themselves most forcefully in the 1997 *Statement of Principles of The Project for the New American Century*. Referring specifically to Clinton’s failure, the statement declared:

“ “We aim to change this. We aim to make the case and rally support for American global leadership. “As the 20th century draws to a close, the United States stands as the world’s pre-eminent power. Having led the West to victory in the Cold War, the United States faces an opportunity and a challenge. Does the United States have the vision to build on the achievements of past decades? Does the United States have the resolve to shape a new century favourable to American principles and interests?” ”

The Statement looked back more to the Cold War achievements of President Reagan than President George H W Bush, drawing out four principles:

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- **“We need to increase defence spending significantly if we are to carry out our global responsibilities today and modernize our armed forces for the future;**
- **we need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values;**
- **we need to promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad;**
- **we need to accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.**

“Such a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity may not be fashionable today. But it is necessary if the United States is to build on the successes of this century and ensure our security and greatness in the next.” ”

The Bush Presidency

These views might have counted for little if George W Bush had not won the 2000 Presidential Election, beating Al Gore in the Electoral College rather than the national vote, and when President Bush formed his administration he brought in many who believed strongly in the need for a new American century. They included the Vice President, Dick Cheney and his influential Chief of Staff, Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense and his highly influential deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, and John Bolton at the State Department, initially as Undersecretary for arms control but subsequently as Ambassador to the United Nations.

Within months the new administration was demonstrating a radically new approach to foreign and defence policy. Changes included withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, refusal to participate in plans to establish the International Criminal Court, opposition to new moves in Geneva to control the spread of weapons in space and, most significant, withdrawal from the Kyoto Climate Change Accords.

This markedly unilateralist outlook was not about US withdrawal from the world stage into isolationism but more about shaping world trends to fit in with the idea of the new American century. It was expressed succinctly by the leading neoconservative writer, Charles Krauthammer, in the house journal of the movement, *The Weekly Standard* (4 June 2001):

“ “Multipolarity yes, when there is no alternative. But not when there is, not when we have the weak imbalance of power that we enjoy today – and that has given the international community a stability and an essential tranquillity that it had not know for at least a century. The international environment is far more likely to enjoy peace under a single hegemon. Moreover, we are not just any hegemon. We run a uniquely benign imperium.” ”

This benign imperium got a severe shock three months later in the 9/11 attacks which seemed to strike at the heart of the very idea of an American century, and the reaction was forceful, initially in Afghanistan. This appeared initially successful but was followed by the extension of the war on terror against al-Qaida and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan into a potential conflict against members of an “axis of evil” made up of states that supported terrorism and sought to develop weapons of mass destruction. The main members of the axis were Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and by early 2002 it was clear that the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq would be the first candidate for regime termination.

Current Relevance

John Bolton was one of the key advocates for the Iraq War and has long maintained the view that the war was necessary. Moreover, he also believes that the other two axis members, Iran and North Korea, are a continuing threat to the world, being strongly opposed to the Iran nuclear deal agreed by former President Obama and arguing for pre-emptive action against North Korea.

At first sight there seem to be strong similarities between the early 2000s and the present day, with John Bolton a direct connection between the two. There certainly are some elements since the idea of the new American century was very much about making the United States the world leader – “making America great again” – with particular opposition to any states that might in the future threaten that leadership. While Russia was nowhere to be seen in the early 2000s, the impact of 9/11 and the risk from “rogue states” were dominant among neoconservatives and assertive realists. More generally, the “America First” idea extended well beyond the field of traditional security threats to embrace issues such as climate change.

In this context some of Mr Trump’s unexpected success in being elected in 2016 was down to the idea that President Obama had failed to maintain the forceful leadership that was required for the new American century, being far too lax in dealing with potential threats and disastrously weak in agreeing to the nuclear deal with Iran. The parallels with the late 1990s are intriguing, even if the main neoconservative criticism of President Clinton was a failure to respond to the post-Soviet era power vacuum rather than new threats evident prior to 9/11.

In the late 1990s, global leadership was there for the taking but now it is much more of a matter of facing economic as well as security threats, the latter being focused especially on China. Where Trump differs from Bush is that Trump is

focused on Middle America and those supposedly left behind by, in his view, the weak self-serving liberal elite of the Obama era. America must stand up for itself, both at home and abroad. For Bush, America had to reclaim leadership after the shock of 9/11 but this was after it had already started to demonstrate new power in the world in the first months of 2001.

Conclusion

There are four principle concerns for the immediate future. One is that the international security nexus is now dominated by a singularly hawkish John Bolton as National Security Advisor and the right-wing evangelical Christian Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State. Furthermore, Pompeo runs a State Department that is still hugely lacking in professional diplomats following the relative disinterest in such matters by Rex Tillerson and Donald Trump.

Secondly, while retired General James Mattis at the Pentagon may be rather more cautious than Bolton and Pompeo, his relationship with Trump is highly variable and he is, in any case, likely to be counterbalanced by Ms Haspel at the CIA, a long-time intelligence professional about whom there are questions relating to the agency's use of harsh interrogation methods.

Thirdly, Trump himself is highly unpredictable in matters concerning international security and one of the effects of this is that those close to him can readily promote courses of action that would not be recommended by seasoned diplomats.

Finally, we have Bolton, Pompeo and Haspel all likely to be in post when issues relating to Iran and North Korea come to a head, possibly as soon as the early summer

There are similarities between the post-9/11 Bush approach to international security and that of the Trump administration and, given that the Bush approach resulted in sixteen years of war, it is even more important now that close allies of the United States endeavour to speak truth to this singularly unpredictable power.

Image credit: [Gage Skidmore/Flickr](#).

About the Author

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