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Bolton Out, O'Brien In: Will It Matter?

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

Trump's sacking of John Bolton as his National Security Advisor came as a shock as the two were thought to be compatible in many ways, not least in their temperament on foreign policy. Will the exit of Bolton and entry of Robert O'Brien make any difference?

COMMENTARY

ON 10 SEPTEMBER 2019, President Trump fired John Bolton as United States National Security Advisor (NSA), replacing him nine days later with Robert O'Brien, a special presidential envoy for hostage affairs. Bolton had earlier replaced HR McMaster in April 2018, who in turn had replaced Michael Flynn after only two days on the job.

When McMaster was fired his deputy, Nadia Shadlow, who was responsible for writing the Administration's first Congressionally-mandated National Security Strategy, also soon left. When Flynn resigned his deputy, KT McFarland stayed on only until McMaster asked for her resignation four months later. (Her nomination to become Ambassador to Singapore did not work out, and no subsequent nomination went forward until that of Barbera Hale Thornhill on 20 September 2019.)

Four NSAs in Under Three Years

President Trump has therefore had four NSAs in a little over two and a half years. He has also fired or lost both his original Secretary of State and Secretary of Defence, as well as two White House chiefs-of-staff whose responsibilities *per force* elide significantly on national security issues.

This key personnel turnover is matched to some extent in domestic policy areas. Seen in the context of the unusual slowness of the White House in nominating and/or appointing other senior and mid-level officials, the personnel instability of the Trump Administration stands out as relatively acute.

Ronald Reagan also ran through a number of NSAs, five, but over a much longer period — eight years. Reagan's foreign and national security policy record is generally reckoned as anywhere from satisfactory to very good, depending on one's partisan disposition. Accurately or not, few count the number of NSAs who served him as having had very much to do with the outcome.

So does the personnel instability of Donald Trump's Administration in foreign and national security policy really matter? Will substituting O'Brien for Bolton make any difference?

The Trust Factor

There is no simple way to answer this question, not least because two and a half years is not a long time as these things go, and particularly because during those two and half years. US decision-makers (and everybody else) were spared anything like an acute national security crisis. The 14 September 2019 Abqaiq-Khuras cruise missile attacks on Saudi Arabia arguably represent the first crisis of that kind.

It is also a hard question to parse because the Trump Administration is abnormal in so many ways that standard assumptions are hard to trust. For example, no post-World War II American president before Trump rejected the premise that the institutions of the Executive Branch were there to help him do his job.

It is true that these men — Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush 41, Clinton, Bush 43, and Obama — brought different experiences and styles to the White House, and these differences affected how they understood and used the post-1947 institutional set-up for managing foreign and national security decisions. But differences never translated into rejection of the institutional premise itself. In Trump's case it does.

Trump distrusts the entire US intelligence community, for example, believing it to be the core of some "deep state" plot to undermine his effort to reorient American politics. That is most obvious in his attitude toward the FBI but it applies to the entire intelligence community.

Bolton as NSA

Trump has also taken traditional Republican antipathy to the State Department to unprecedented lengths, garroting its budget and choosing not one but two Secretaries of State who have deliberately walled themselves off from the professionals there to rely on a very small number of remarkably inexperienced political appointees.

When Henry Kissinger served as NSA before becoming Secretary of State himself in April 1973 he also famously despaired of the State Department bureaucracy and

devised several end-runs around it in cahoots with President Nixon; but even that did not compare to recent realities.

During the Bolton tenure as NSA there were almost no Principals Committee meetings of the National Security Council, but that is the NSA's main means of doing the job: to assemble the heads of the relevant Executive Branch departments and agencies to hash out options and provide the President with advice and counsel. That is how the government's historical memory and reservoir of expertise is brought to bear on presidential-level decision points.

When that modality is truncated or ignored, as it has been in nearly all previous administrations from time to time on account of either time pressures or concerns about leaks, risks are inherent in decision outcomes. But when that modality is consistently set aside for long periods as a matter of deliberate choice, one is left with seat-of-the-pants decision-making in complex and more-than-occasionally dangerous situations. That is not merely to take risks but to provide them pride of place.

Enter O'Brien: Trump's White House Poodle?

The President supported Bolton's close-to-the-chest approach to White House decision management because it dovetailed with his instinct toward maximum-feasible disintermediation of the Federal government in all its aspects. Ronald Reagan used to say that government is not the solution; government is the problem. Reagan used language like that for political purposes, but Trump (like his former adviser Steve Bannon, who vowed to destroy the American "administrative state") really believes it.

His tweets are designed to bypass all institutions and filters and speak directly to his base. His disposition to mostly unprepared summitry evinces a similar motive — to cut out everyone in the decision process except himself. President Obama's famously disparaging attitude toward what he called "the blob" brings to mind a kindred attitude but, again, it did not come close to the categorical loathing that Trump holds for government routines, norms, and legal responsibilities in principle.

The plethora of "acting" heads of agencies and departments in the US government today testifies to Trumpian disintermediation as well. So does his inclination to appoint people with modest or no reputations in their fields, since in his eyes other personalities with real stature diminish his own prominence — and here we come back to Robert O'Brien.

O'Brien is a State Department lawyer whose fairly narrow expertise and experience lie in hostage negotiations. Unlike Bolton, a veteran official with decades of high-level experience; unlike McMaster, a respected military officer and author; and even unlike Flynn, a military officer and former head of DIA; O'Brien is but a shadow personality in Washington. For all anyone can recall, he has never spoken or written anything of substance on foreign policy and national security questions.

He lacks the clout or policy gravitas to question the President's judgment. He knows nothing of the professional, serious briefing style that soured Trump on McMaster. As a cross between a White House poodle and a bureaucratic factotum, he ought to get along fine with the President.

Trump's 'Reality TV' State of Mind

Above all, Trump's off-the-cuff remark after firing Bolton—and nearly all his remarks are off-the-cuff—that lots of people want the NSA job because it's so easy since “I make all the decisions”, is emblematic of his megalomaniacal, encyclopedically ignorant, and present-oriented approach to his office.

It is not entirely inaccurate, however. When the President demurred at the last minute from launching a military strike against Iran in retaliation for the downing of a US surveillance drone, he took Tucker Carlson's advice over that of his National Security Advisor.

Having known John Bolton on a first-name basis for decades, I'm sure that his ability to stay on the job as long as he did — whatever one may think of his views — turned entirely on his patriotic instinct for damage limitation in parlous circumstances. He must have had to bite his tongue so many times that the healing process may take many, many months.

Not unrelated, two and a half years ago many held out the hope that people near the President like McMaster, James Mattis, John F. Kelly, Dan Coats, and a few others might be able to snatch competence from caprice, the latter defined by the President's “reality TV” state of mind.

The alternative was just too scary. But with Bolton's departure and O'Brien's arrival, that alternative sits cross-legged before us, staring back through any of a number of screens with hollow eyes and a graveyard laugh. Right about now, for all we know, Mohammed bin Salman may be ordering up more bone saws and hit squads to dispatch toward Tehran, or offering tens of billions of dollars to Pakistan for just one small nuclear weapon intended for that same city. Are Robert O'Brien and Donald Trump the kind of men to stop him?

Adam Garfinkle is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore and Founding Editor of The American Interest.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg