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THE SECOND-MOST DANGEROUS AMERICAN

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Last week, Donald Trump continued to reshuffle his foreign policy team in line with his vision. Trump has replaced his national security adviser for the third time in 14 months. Lt. Gen. Herbert McMaster held his position for exactly one year (before him, Trump had to fire his close friend Gen. Michael Flynn, who had made false statements about the content of his phone calls with then-Russian ambassador Sergei Kislyak in late 2016). He has been replaced by John Bolton, known for his militaristic views and nicknamed John “Bomb Iran” Bolton.

In the George W. Bush administration, Bolton was Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and US ambassador to the UN (he was acting ambassador because the Senate refused to confirm his nomination and Bush appointed him when Congress was in recess). McMaster’s dismissal has long been expected; he never developed a personal rapport with Trump, who thought that his adviser did not duly follow his agenda and clashed with the president too much, while Bolton has always been part of Trump’s personnel pool (he is one of the few foreign policy heavyweights in the Republican establishment who supported Trump in the election). But still there was hope until the very last moment that a more moderate figure would be appointed, and not a hawk who has publicly called for a war with Iran and North Korea. In the US, he is called the “second-most dangerous American” (the first one of course is Trump).

Bolton’s appointment has created panic in the European and Asian capitals. And there is a reason for that. The prospect of the US’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), a major achievement in nuclear nonproliferation over the past several decades, is now obvious to the Europeans. Just as new Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Bolton was appointed by Trump mainly to help fulfill one of the

president's main election promises – i.e., the US's withdrawal from the “disastrously flawed Iran nuclear deal” that was signed by the weak Barack Obama administration (it seems that Trump does not really understand exactly why this deal is flawed and whether it has an alternative). . .

For his part, Bolton pitched to Trump his JCPOA “exit plan” that envisions not only the reinstatement of the tough sanctions regime if Tehran does not meet the US's categorical demands but also a military operation, in conjunction with Israel, to wipe out Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Under Rex Tillerson, the US attempted to come to terms with the European Union on “fixing the nuclear deal” by adding to it new restrictions on Iran's missile program; however, the last round of such negotiations in Berlin in mid-March failed to bring any breakthroughs.

Bolton's appointment probably would not immediately lead to a war between the US and Iran (it is hard to talk about the long term). The Pentagon is categorically against that and Trump himself has promised the country would not become embroiled in a new war. Bolton's rhetoric should be seen as Trump's newly acquired public tool for pressuring and coercing Iran and the Europeans (as well as Moscow) into accepting America's demands. However, it seems that the fate of the “nuclear deal” with Iran is sealed. On May 12, Trump will most likely not block the introduction of new sanctions against Iran, which would give Tehran cause to claim that the US has violated the terms of the deal and to declare its termination.

Bolton's position on North Korea is leading to hysteria in Asia. He has always been opposed to talks and deals on freezing North Korea's nuclear program. While serving in the George W. Bush administration, he suspended a 1993 deal with North Korea reached by the Clinton administration and then torpedoed the new agreements that had already been reached with Pyongyang within the “six-nation talks” format in 2007 (this is one of Vladimir Putin's grievances against “our American partners”). Bolton sees the answer to the North Korean nuclear missile problem as “[a jointly managed effort to] dismantle North Korea's government, effectively allowing the swift takeover of the North by the South” as part of American military occupation. His predecessor, Gen. McMaster, was hardly a dove on this issue and publicly talked about the need for a preventive strike on North Korea's missile and nuclear facilities (a bloody nose strike) as a way to exact maximum pressure on Pyongyang. But Bolton's views in this regard border on insanity. This man is claiming there is an international legal basis for launching a first strike on North Korea. . . .

It seems that Bolton's appointment also does not bode well for Russia. Initial Russian comments were just as panicky: “This is the most hawkish administration of the most dyed-in-the-wool neocons” that will strive to build a strategic deterrence system for Russia and China. Indeed, if there are Russophobes in the US, as the Russian Foreign Ministry never tires of reminding us, then Bolton could easily be at the top of the list.

Bolton has always been opposed to strategic stability agreements with the USSR and Russia. His lifelong cause was to dismantle the 1972 ABM Treaty. He was the one who “refused to listen” to Putin's arguments when he came to Moscow in December 2002 to announce the US's decision to pull out of the treaty. He is also against extending the New START treaty that was signed by Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, making groundless allegations that it gives Russia unilateral advantages. Bolton has also advocated for the US's withdrawal from the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate- and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF) that he believes Moscow has violated. Strategic stability according to Bolton (and in this respect, he is close to Trump's vision) is the US's unchallenged domination in the nuclear sphere and protection of US territory with a wide-ranging missile-defense system. This offers far-from-bright prospects for dialogue with the Russian Federation. . . .

Regarding Russian meddling in the US election, Bolton, on the one hand, echoed Trump (“the results of the election were not impacted by the Russians; the Obama administration politicized the situation in favor of Hillary

Clinton”), but on the other, he described Russia’s election interference as “attempting to undermine America’s Constitution” and as “a casus belli,” and Vladimir Putin’s personal assurances to Trump that Russia was not involved as proof of the deceptive nature of the Russian regime that cannot be trusted on anything. On the issue of Skripal, Bolton urged a very strong response to Russia, in addition to the expulsion of diplomats, so Bolton has probably supported the previous team’s recommendations to expel Russian diplomats from the US this week as an “act of solidarity” with EU countries.

It would seem that Bolton’s appointment does not bode well for the Kremlin. However, this is not quite so; there is also an upside. First, the appointment of Bolton, who is known as a skillful bureaucrat, will create more chaos and confusion within Trump’s foreign policy team and in American policy planning. Bolton will reshuffle the National Security Council staff in favor of his protégés (the fate of Fiona Hill, one of the most balanced specialists on Russia, is interesting in this context) [and] become involved in bureaucratic turf wars with Pentagon chief Mattis (who will keep trying to block scenarios for a preventive war with North Korea and Iran) and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly (he was against Bolton’s appointment). Chaos and disarray in America always creates a window of opportunity for the Kremlin and for Putin’s personal diplomacy with Trump. Of course, there is an increasing risk that America’s policy will grow more unpredictable, but should we worry about that?

Second, if the US withdraws from the Iran nuclear deal and talks with North Korea break down (i.e., if Bolton’s recipes are followed at least partially), that would create major dividing lines between the US and its European and Asian allies, who would not support American actions or new sanctions. Serious friction would arise between Washington and Beijing (which is currently closer to the US than to Russia on the North Korea issue). That would be an ideal situation for Moscow. It immediately opens up opportunities for it to act as a mediator and to play on its partners’ differences. This gives [Russia] more room to maneuver and bargain on other issues more important for it, such as Ukraine and EU sanctions. The Iran nuclear deal naturally suits Moscow, but a conflict between the US and Iran and between the US and the EU suits it even more. A military conflict on the Korean Peninsula is of course a dangerous thing, but a military clash on a limited scale between the US and China makes relations with the Kremlin more valuable for both powers, so there will be something to bargain over.

Third, Bolton’s views on key aspects of the existing world order are remarkably close to those of the Russian leadership. They include an obsession with military force; as well as contempt for international institutions and legal norms, multilateral diplomacy (Bolton eschews such concepts as a “United Nations”) and especially the EU (he invariably refers to EU leaders as “EUroids”). Bolton even takes the same view of the UN Security Council as Russia, seeing it as a place where great powers barter from a position of strength (even though Bolton despises the UN, he respects the Security Council, where the US has veto power). Bolton is mistakenly labeled as a neoconservative who believes in fostering democracy, human rights and other liberal values through regime change. This is not quite the case. He is a right-leaning conservative hawk of the Barry Goldwater kind advocating for US global diktat from a position of strength. In this respect, he is close to Trump’s “America First” concept, but without Trump’s isolationism (Bolton believes in NATO and free trade).

Bolton could not care less about democracy and human rights (he is a great friend of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi, who is not known for his commitment to democracy). Bolton is pushing for regime change in Iraq, Iran, Syria and North Korea for purely strategic reasons: He regards them as a military threat to the US. He believes in “preventive war,” when a military threat should be eliminated on the distant outskirts of US borders before it has fully materialized (oftentimes, this threat is deliberately exaggerated or even invented, as was the case with weapons of mass destruction in Iraq). But how is this fundamentally different from the Russian operation in the Crimea and the Donetsk Basin (“to prevent NATO bases from cropping up there”) or in Syria (“to destroy terrorists

on the distant outskirts of our borders”)? If you look closely at the remarks of Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov, who makes no distinction between military and nonmilitary means of an interstate conflict, the concept of “preventive wars” is a familiar one for the Russian leadership: After all, it unties its hands in the post-Soviet space. Making big deals between great powers – what’s more, at the UN Security Council – isn’t this an ideal picture of the Kremlin’s new world order? Talk about a mind meld.

This may be the reason why official Moscow’s reaction to Bolton’s appointment was fairly restrained, despite its history of acute confrontation with him. “This is the US administration’s business” (said Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov); “[This is] President Trump’s right” (said Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov); “I had good working contacts with him at the UN and then we often had lunch together, but the most important thing is that this demonstrates President Trump’s intention to normalize relations” (said Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov). This indicates high expectations rather than panic.

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