

John Bolton is dangerous. But Trump's inept White House might restrain him.



By Tom Nichols March 23

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President Trump finally did what [everyone knew he was going to do](#), firing Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster as his national security adviser and replacing him with John Bolton. It is hard to find anyone enthusiastic about Bolton's appointment: Liberals who have hated him for [years are horrified that Bolton is now, finally, near the levers of power](#).

But even among conservatives, the ritual support from exhausted, hangdog Republicans (along with [the usual, if tepid, praise from the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal](#)) cannot disguise the fact that Trump has finally run out of options and defaulted to a man who, in Trump's eyes, is [likely more qualified because of his appearances on Fox News](#) than anything he knows about foreign policy.

Bolton is focused and [has a reputation for being a relentless bureaucratic infighter](#) who will certainly be more skilled at manipulating the process than McMaster was. His critics point to his antagonism toward the United Nations and his unrepentant support for the invasion of Iraq, but these views are not actually that unusual among conservatives. Far more dangerous is his fixation on military adventurism in the Middle East [and especially in Asia](#).

That horrified reaction from all sides of the foreign policy world, though, shows why Bolton is unlikely to turn his most extreme ideas into actual policy. Make no mistake: He can do plenty of damage to the country as national security adviser, and he likely will. But the fact that Bolton has, for years, been kept out of the highest levels of government suggests that he has had difficulty finding any takers for [views that verge on crackpot militarism](#). That is not likely to change.

Although media reports refer to Bolton as supporting “[preemptive war](#),” this is inaccurate. Preemption is a form of self-defense in the face of immediate danger. (When Israel attacked Arab forces that were about to attack it first in 1967, for example, that was preemption.) What Bolton has advocated, repeatedly, is *preventive* war, a discretionary use of force far in advance of a gathering threat. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, or when Nazi Germany invaded Norway, these were preventive wars. So, for that matter, was the U.S. invasion of Iraq; there’s a reason that Bolton himself regularly fudges these terms to use the more attractive notion of preemption.

Worse, Bolton thinks that preventive war can destroy regimes hostile to the United States as a way of enhancing its own security. He has advocated unilateral action against Iran, for example, as a means both of [stopping the Iranian nuclear program](#) and as a path to regime change.

There are other reasons the new national security adviser will be in for a rough ride, aside from the extreme positions he advocates. Bolton represents yet another betrayal of the Trump base, [as some of the most hard-line conservatives are already screaming](#). (That reaction is one small consolation in all of this for the Never Trump Republicans, of whom I am one.) Yes, there are still many Trump supporters who don’t know much and care even less about foreign policy. But that could change: Trump promised his voters that he was the alternative to a cabal of warmongers nesting in Washington’s darkest branches, and he cannot now deliver on that promise by hiring the most aggressive hawk in the tree.

Trump’s base, of course, does love to see distress among people who actually know things about policy, and in that sense, hiring Bolton could reap a short-term political benefit for the White House. But even Fox News will not be able to rescue its former talking head once Bolton starts proposing to embark on wars that Trump swore he would never start. Nor is it likely that Bolton will immediately seize control of a national security bureaucracy still coping with nearly two decades of continual war and whose most respected voice today is that of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

Indeed, Bolton might find the tension of working for Trump irresolvable. The president ran as an isolationist and an America-firster; Bolton believes in military action to attack regimes that are even a potential threat to the United States. So far, Trump has corrupted the views of almost every adviser who has worked for him. Will Bolton change Trump’s mind, or will Trump mousetrap Bolton into backtracking on his own beliefs?

Perhaps the greatest danger is that this appointment represents Bolton’s last chance at a position of authority, and thus he will shoot for the moon in an all-out attempt to see if he can turn years of blunted and discredited plans into reality.

If so, Bolton’s adherence to his own agenda could well lead to a staff revolt in the National Security Council (if one is not already in the offing); to greater paralysis in the interagency policy process; to yet more destruction in the State

Department; and to even greater political and operational distance between the White House and the Defense Department.

Which means that as panicked as the Trump administration's opponents might be, the larger danger is not that Bolton will succeed in remaking American foreign policy as much it is that he will contribute to the utter incoherence of the Trump foreign policy team, and consequently accelerate the free-fall of American power and prestige in the world. And that, more than any of John Bolton's weird schemes, could invite greater tests of American will and even raise the risk of war.

Bolton's views are dangerous, and, yes, he could very well be the vehicle by which the United States yet again chooses a preventive war that no one knows how to finish. The more likely outcome, however, is also the one that would, somewhat pathetically, also be the best one: that Bolton turns out to be just another celebrity hire who thinks he has been brought on board to help steer the ship of state — only to find that the rudder has long been broken, and the captain is already extending yet another plank to be walked.

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