

Bolton's War. Escalating US Hostility against Iran. Seeking a Pretext for War

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National Security Advisor John Bolton, aided by his comrade-in-arms Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, is doing everything possible to instigate a war with Iran. Naked aggression as a means of starting such a war may be too much for even Bolton to pull off, so the strategy has been to try to pressure and goad Iran into doing something—anything—that could be construed as a casus belli. So far, no doubt to Bolton's frustration, Iran has exercised remarkable restraint in the face of unrelenting and escalating hostility from the Trump administration. Iran even continues to comply with its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricted Iran's nuclear program, despite the U.S. reneging on the agreement and the resulting absence of economic improvement for Iran that was part of the deal. But Bolton keeps searching for still more ways to goad and to pressure.

One of the most recent ways is a twist on the ever-expanding U.S. sanctions against Iran, the main effects of which so far have been to make life for ordinary Iranians more uncomfortable and to poison relations with U.S. allies and other states doing ordinary business with Iran. The twist—and another U.S. violation of the JCPOA [and of](#) United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231—is to sanction anyone who, in compliance with the terms of the JCPOA and Resolution 2231, imports any heavy water or low-enriched uranium from Iran, thereby keeping Iran's own stocks of these materials under the agreed limits. The U.S. move is a way of pressuring Iran into exceeding those limits and violating the agreement. The move shows that the campaign of goading Iran is taking precedence over even the nonproliferation objective of keeping the Iranian nuclear program peaceful through the enforcement of strict limits.

Unsheathing the Saber

The very latest escalation in the campaign is a saber-rattling [statement](#) that Bolton issued over the weekend: "In response to a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings," the United States is deploying a carrier strike group and bomber task force to the region "to send a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force." The statement was issued in the name of Bolton himself, making the origin clear. No explanation or details have been given about the supposed "troubling and escalatory indications and warnings," and nothing in the news suggests any heightened Iranian interest in attacking U.S. interests or attacking anyone else, for that matter. The phrasing of the statement is more of the obscurantist rhetoric of the "malign, nefarious, destabilizing behavior" variety that has become an anti-Iran mantra but almost never gets to specifics.

Follow-up comments suggest that Bolton's move does not respond to any specific Iranian threat. One [report](#), sourced to Israeli officials, indicates that Israel was the origin of whatever information was involved but that the information was "not very specific" and, in the words of an Israeli official, "It is still unclear to us what the Iranians are trying to do and how they are planning to do it." A Reuters [report](#) quotes a U.S. official as saying that the U.S. deployment, given the already high tensions between Washington and Tehran, was made "as a deterrence to what has been seen as potential preparations by Iranian forces and its proxies that may indicate possible attacks on U.S. forces in the region." The official said that the United States was not expecting any imminent attack and cited no specific Iranian activities that raised any new concerns. If the Iranians have been making preparations for possible military action, that would be only prudent on their part given all the threats they have been hearing from Washington.

The administration's rhetoric about Iranian conduct has been internally inconsistent. When Pompeo or President Trump wants to argue that all those U.S. sanctions have been successful even though they have not brought Iran an inch closer to a negotiating table, they [contend](#) that they have curbed bad Iranian behavior in the Middle East. But when Bolton wants to heat up the war fever, the contention is the opposite—that Iranian behavior is worse than ever. In fact, the nature and tempo of Iranian regional activity have not changed appreciably, one way or another, in the last couple of years. The Iranians do what they do in the region for what they consider to be reasons important to their security, and they do not ramp that activity up or down in response to the state of their nation's economy. What they are doing now is basically the same as what they have been doing for some time.

The language in Bolton's statement about interests "of our allies," as well as a later reference in the statement to how the United States would respond to actions "by proxy" as well as by Iran itself, is an open invitation to Iran's regional rivals to generate some incident that could spark a war. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates once [observed](#), the Saudis "want to fight the Iranians to the last American." Something similar could be said about the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, who has made hostility toward Iran a hallmark of his premiership and the all-purpose distraction from things he would rather not talk about. A shooting war between Iran and the United States would be the best distraction of all.

The opportunities for the regional rivals to ignite a spark are numerous and easy to imagine, ranging from a sophisticated black-flag operation to a simple encounter at sea. Bolton would exploit, rather than be deterred by, any murkiness about responsibility for an incident.

A pretext for war would not even require a manufactured incident and instead could involve spinning the meaning of "proxy" and "ally." Mark Dubowitz of the misleadingly-named Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has been Bolton's most influential pressure-group ally in stoking hostility toward Iran, is using this gambit. He [suggests](#) that such fighting as recently occurred in the Gaza Strip is somehow an Iranian way of distracting Israel from Iranian plans "for strikes against U.S. assets and allies." In fact, the fighting in Gaza has everything to do with conditions in Gaza and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict and nothing to do with Iran.

Effects of War

It probably would be futile to try to get inside the war-mongering mind of John Bolton to figure out *why* he wants a war with Iran. Suffice it to note that Bolton to this day contends that the 2003 war against Iraq—a colossal blunder of U.S. foreign and security policy—was a good thing. He probably expects a war with Iran to trigger regime change in Iran. That overlooks the likelihood that a war would be at least as likely to trigger a rally-round-the-flag effect as it did during the devastating Iran-Iraq War, when the Islamic Republic was less well established and more vulnerable than it is today. It also overlooks that any regime change that might occur probably would produce a government more hardline and less democratic than what Iran has now.

Overlooked as well are the other destructive effects of such a war, including but not limited to the direct physical and fiscal costs. They also would include wider economic effects, especially given the disruption to the oil trade that a war in the Persian Gulf region would entail. And they would include lasting animosity toward the United States among future generations of Iranians.

Bolton is in a position to accomplish much of this mayhem himself. He reportedly has caused much of the usual policy-making machinery to be bypassed or simply to fall into disuse. Meetings of National Security Council principals have become [rare](#). There is a parallel here, too, with the disastrous Iraq War. No policy process ever examined whether launching that war was a good idea.

The person who most needs to pay attention to all this is the one in the Oval Office. Having dismissed Steve Bannon when he came to perceive how much his once-influential political advisor was manipulating him, Trump needs to realize how much Bolton is manipulating him now. A war begun in the next few months would be past the “mission accomplished” stage and into the stage of regrets and awareness of costs when Trump—who won votes in 2016 by criticizing excessive U.S. involvement in Middle Eastern wars—is up for re-election. Trump already has cashiered two previous national security advisors, one (Michael Flynn) for good cause and the other (H.R. McMaster) because Trump got impatient with an adult in the room telling him what to do.

Trump’s earlier hesitation to bring Bolton into his administration reportedly stemmed from his [dislike](#) for Bolton’s mustache. Surely getting the United States into another Middle East war, which would be damaging to Trump’s presidency as well as highly damaging to U.S. interests, would be at least as good a reason to separate Bolton from the levers of power.

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