

The Pathology of John Bolton

John Bolton has been saying for years he wants the Iranian government overthrown, and now he's made his move. But this time he may have gone too far, writes Joe Lauria.

By **Joe Lauria**

Special to Consortium News



I knew John Bolton and interacted with him on a nearly daily basis with my colleagues in the press corps at United Nations headquarters in New York when Bolton was the United States ambassador there from August 2005 to December 2006.

Most diplomats, officials, and journalists were shocked that Bolton (evading confirmation with a recess appointment) had actually become the U.S. representative, given his long, public disdain for the UN. But that turned out to be the point. It's been the strategy of Republican administrations to appoint the fiercest critic to head an agency or institution in order to weaken it, perhaps even fatally.

Bolton's most infamous quote about the UN followed him into the building. In 1994 he had said: "The Secretariat building in New York has 38 stories. If it lost ten stories, it wouldn't make a bit of difference."

But a more telling comment in that same 1994 conference was when he said that no matter what the UN decides the U.S. will do whatever it wants:

Bolton sees such frank admissions as signs of strength, not alarm.

He is a humorless man, who at the UN at least, seemed to always think he was the smartest person in the room. He once gave a lecture in 2006 at the U.S. mission to UN correspondents, replete with a chalk board, on how nuclear enrichment worked. His aim, of course, was to convince us that Iran was close to a bomb, even though a 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate being prepared at the time said Tehran had abandoned its nuclear weapons program in 2003.

I thought I'd challenge him one day at the press stakeout outside the Security Council chamber, where Bolton often stopped to lecture journalists on what they should write. "If the United States and Britain had not overthrown a democratically elected government in Iran in 1953 would the United States be today faced with a revolutionary government enriching uranium?" I asked him.

"That's an interesting question," he told me, "but for another time and another place." It was a time and a place, of course, that never came.

More Than an Ideology

Bolton possesses an abiding self-righteousness rooted in what seems a sincere belief in the myth of American greatness, mixed with deep personal failings hidden from public view.

He seemed perpetually angry and it wasn't clear whether it was over some personal or diplomatic feud. He seems to take personally nations standing up to America, binding his sense of personal power with that of the United States.

It is more than an ideology. It's fanaticism. Bolton believes America is exceptional and indispensable and superior to all other nations and isn't afraid to say so. He'd have been better off perhaps in the McKinley administration, before the days of PR-sugarcoating of imperial aggression. He's not your typical passive-aggressive government official. He's aggressive-aggressive.

And now Bolton is ordering 120,000 troops to get ready and an aircraft carrier to steam towards Iran.

Bolton's all too willing to make his bullying personal on behalf of the state. He implicitly threatened the children of José Bustani, who Vice President Dick Cheney wanted out of his job as head of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons because Bustani had gotten Iraq to agree to join the chemical weapons protocol, thereby making it harder for the U.S. to invade Iraq.

After Bolton's failed 2005 confirmation hearings, Tony Blinken, the then staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told *The New Yorker's* Dexter Filkins:

"We saw a pattern of Mr. Bolton trying to manipulate intelligence to justify his views. If it had happened once, maybe. But it came up multiple times, and always it was the same underlying issue: he would stake out a position, and then, if the intelligence didn't support it, he would try to exaggerate the intelligence and marginalize the officials who had produced it."

Bolton is no fan of democracy if things don't go his way. He is a vociferous instigator of the so-far failed U.S. coup in

Venezuela and of course Bolton organized the “Brooks Brothers riot” that disrupted the recounting of votes in Florida in the disputed 2000 presidential election.

What is alarming about the above video is not so much that he justifies lying, but the example he gives: lying to cover up military plans like the invasion of Normandy. This is a common ruling class tactic in the U.S. to portray disobedient leaders ripe for overthrow as Hitler. Saddam was Hitler, Milosevic was Hitler, Noriega was Hitler and Hillary Clinton called Putin Hitler. It is a false revival of U.S. glory from World War II to paint foreign adventures as moral crusades, rather than naked aggression in pursuit of profits and power.

Bolton is the distillation of the pathology of American power. He is unique only in the purity of this pathology.

Regime Change for Iran

The U.S. national security adviser has been saying for years he wants the Iranian government overthrown, and now he’s made his move. But this time John Bolton may have flown too high.

He was chosen for his post by a president with limited understanding of international affairs—if real estate is not involved—and one who loves to be sucked up to. Trump is Bolton’s perfect cover.

But hubris may have finally bested Bolton. He had never before maneuvered himself into such a position of power, though he’d left a trail of chaos at lower levels of government. Sitting opposite the Resolute desk on a daily

basis has presented a chance to implement his plans.

At the top of that agenda has been Bolton's stated aim for years: to bomb and topple the Iranian government.

Thus Bolton was the driving force to get a carrier strike force sent to the Persian Gulf and, according to *The New York Times*, on May 14, it was he who "ordered" a Pentagon plan to prepare 120,000 U.S. troops for the Gulf. These were to be deployed "if Iran attacked American forces or accelerated its work on nuclear weapons."

Two months after Bolton was appointed national security adviser, in June 2018, Trump pulled the U.S. out of the six-nation deal that has seen Tehran curtail its nuclear enrichment program in exchange for relaxation of U.S. and international sanctions.

At the time of Bolton's appointment in April 2018, Tom Countryman, who had been undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, as had Bolton, predicted to *The Intercept* that if Iran resumed enrichment after the U.S. left the deal, it "would be the kind of excuse that a person like Bolton would look to to create a military provocation or direct attack on Iran."

In response to ever tightening sanctions, Iran said on May 5 (May 6 in Tehran) that it would indeed restart partial nuclear enrichment. On the same day, Bolton announced the carrier strike group was headed to the Gulf.

Bolton Faces Resistance

If this were a normally functioning White House, in which imperial moves are normally made, a president would order

military action, and not a national security adviser. “I don’t think Trump is smart enough to realize what Bolton and [Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo are doing to him,” former U.S. Senator Mike Gravel told RT’s Afshin Rattansi this week. “They have manipulated him. When you get the national security adviser who claims that he ordered an aircraft carrier flotilla to go into the Persian Gulf, we’ve never seen that. In the days of Henry Kissinger, who really brought sway, he never ordered this, and if it was ordered it was done behind closed doors.”

Bolton claimed he acted on intelligence that Iran was poised to attack U.S. interests close to Iran. The intelligence alleged Iran was fitting missiles on fishing boats in the Gulf. Imagine a government targeted by the most powerful military force in history wanting to defend itself in its own waters. Bolton also said Iran was threatening Western interests in Iraq, which led eventually to non-essential U.S. diplomatic staff leaving Baghdad and Erbil.

It is the typical provocation of a bully: threaten someone with a cruise missile and the moment they pick up a knife in self-defense you attack, conveniently leaving the initial threat out of the story. It then becomes: “Iran picked up a knife. We have to blow them away with cruise missiles.”

But this time the bully is being challenged. Federica Mogherini, the EU’s high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, resisted the U.S. on Iran when she met Pompeo in Brussels on May 13.

“It’s always better to talk, rather than not to, and especially when tensions arise... Mike Pompeo heard that very

clearly today from us,” said Mogherini. “We are living in a crucial, delicate moment where the most relevant attitude to take – the most responsible attitude to take – is and we believe should be, that of maximum restraint and avoiding any escalation on the military side.”

The New York Times that day reported: “Privately, several European officials described Mr. Bolton and Mr. Pompeo as pushing an unsuspecting Mr. Trump through a series of steps that could put the United States on a course to war before the president realizes it.”

British Maj. Gen. Chris Ghika then said on May 14: “There has been no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq or Syria.” Ghika was rebuked by U.S. Central Command, whose spokesman said, “Recent comments from OIR’s Deputy Commander run counter to the identified credible threats available to intelligence from U.S. and allies regarding Iranian-backed forces in the region.”

A day later it was Trump himself, however, who was said to be resisting Bolton. On May 15 *The Washington Post* reported:

“President Trump is frustrated with some of his top advisers, who he thinks could rush the United States into a military confrontation with Iran and shatter his long-standing pledge to withdraw from costly foreign wars, according to several U.S. officials. Trump prefers a diplomatic approach to resolving tensions and wants to speak directly with Iran’s leaders.”

The *Times* reported the next day:

“President Trump has told his acting defense secretary, Patrick Shanahan, that he does not want to go to war with Iran, according to several administration officials, in a message to his hawkish aides that an intensifying American pressure campaign against the clerical-led government in Tehran must not escalate into open conflict.”

Then it was the Democrats who stood up to Bolton. On Tuesday Pompeo and Shanahan briefed senators and representatives behind closed doors on Capitol Hill regarding the administration’s case for confronting Iran.

“Are they (Iran) reacting to us, or are we doing these things in reaction to them? That is a major question I have, that I still have,” Sen. Angus King told reporters after the briefing. “What we view as defensive, they view as provocative. Or vice versa.”

Democratic Representative Ruben Gallego told reporters after the briefing: “I believe there is a certain level of escalation of both sides that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The feedback loop tells us they’re escalating for war, but they could just be escalating because we’re escalating.”

Pompeo told a radio interviewer after the briefing that the U.S. had still not determined who attacked two Saudi, a Norwegian and an Emirati oil tanker in the Gulf last week, which bore the hallmarks of a provocation. Pompeo said “it seems like it’s quite possible that Iran was behind” the attacks.

Bolton was conspicuously absent from the closed-door

briefing.

It's Up to Trump

Trump has pinballed all over the place on Iran. He called the *Times* and *Post* stories about him resisting Bolton “fake news.”

“The Fake News Media is hurting our Country with its fraudulent and highly inaccurate coverage of Iran. It is scattershot, poorly sourced (made up), and DANGEROUS. At least Iran doesn't know what to think, which at this point may very well be a good thing!” Trump tweeted on May 17.

The Fake News Media is hurting our Country with its fraudulent and highly inaccurate coverage of Iran. It is scattershot, poorly sourced (made up), and DANGEROUS. At least Iran doesn't know what to think, which at this point may very well be a good thing!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [May 17, 2019](#)

Then he threatened what could be construed as genocide against Iran. “If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!” he tweeted on Sunday.

If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [May 19, 2019](#)

But also last Sunday he [told](#) Fox News that the “military-industrial complex” is real and “they do like war” and they “went nuts” when he said he wanted to withdraw troops from Syria. Trump said he didn't want war with Iran.

On Monday he implied that the crisis has been drummed up to get Iran to negotiate.

“The Fake News put out a typically false statement, without any knowledge that the United States was trying to set up a negotiation with Iran. This is a false report...”

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– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [May 20, 2019](#)

John Bolton must be stopped before he gets his war. It is beyond troubling that the man we have to count on to do it is Donald Trump.

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Bolton Leading Trump on Reckless War Agenda

The president’s advisers are orchestrating policies that have quickly destabilized the world and jeopardized the security of the United States, says Colonel Ann Wright.

By [Ann Wright](#)

Special to Consortium News



For a person who claims to be a deal maker and business guru, President Donald Trump is getting rolled by John Bolton and Bolton's long-standing regime change and war agenda, which run in opposition to what Trump may have envisioned when he appointed Bolton as his national security advisor.

For decades, Bolton has railed against Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Cuba and now Venezuela. He was a major voice for the disastrous invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq during the Bush One administration.

Now Bolton has become the voice of Trump on very important and dangerous issues. Bolton, not Trump, is seen more and more on international networks on issues of Iran, Cuba and Venezuela.

Most recently, Bolton preempted Trump on announcing that the U.S. was sending an aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf "to defend U.S. interests and its allies." Trump might wish to double check Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statements on the threat coming from Iran's actions against interests of the U.S. and its allies. Special Envoy for Iran Brian Hooks on CNN on May 9 said that "the U.S. defensive actions of deploying an aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf area is for actions of Iran from 2009 to 2016." When challenged by the CNN anchor, Becky Anderson, Hooks was unable to name any threats from Iran for the past three years from 2016-2019. Instead he repeated Bolton's talking points for the day that there were "threats that U.S. must defend itself against."

However, should the U.S. or its proxy Israel attack Iran,

the U.S. installations in Iran's region that Iran could target in retaliation are many:

- Twenty major U.S. military installations and a large U.S. embassy compound in neighboring Afghanistan;

- The enormous Green Zone that contains the largest U.S. embassy complex in the world in neighboring Iraq;

- 17 U.S. military installations in the northern part of neighboring Syria.

There are U.S. targets for Iran in every country along the Persian Gulf:

- the forward headquarters of the U.S. Central Command located in Qatar;

- homeport of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain;

- U.S. contractors and U.S. military personnel in Saudi Arabia;

- U.S. military installations in Djibouti, the UAE and Somalia.

Bolton, Pompeo and Trump should be reminded that various groups in the region have retaliated against U.S. policies in the past:

In April 1983, the U.S. embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, was blown up and 63 embassy staff were killed. Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah claimed responsibility.

- In June 1996, 19 Americans were killed when the U.S. Air Force Khobar Towers barracks were blown up in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The U.S. government said Iran was responsible and

Iran said that al-Qaeda was responsible. In 2006, a U.S. District Court held that Iran and Hezbollah were responsible although Iran had no representation at the trial.

– In 2000 the USS Cole was blown up in Aden, Yemen, with 17 U.S. sailors killed. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility.

Bolton was one of the advisers to President George W. Bush who orchestrated the lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2002-2003 and the lies that Saddam Hussein's army in Iraq had thrown babies out of their incubators during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait that triggered Bush One to bomb Iraqi cities and send an armored force into Iraq in 1991 in Gulf War One.

Bolton and his gang demanded that President Bill Clinton impose land and air blockades on Iraq. The U.S. blockade caused over 500,000 Iraqi children to die and the 400,000 air strikes on Iraq in the next eight years targeted every important military installation. The events of Sept. 11, 2001, provided Bolton and his Neocon gang the opportunity to push President Bush Two to invade and occupy Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq two years later in 2003.

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Bolton is part of the swamp that I think Trump thought he was draining, yet Trump has allowed himself to be taken in by advisers who wanted Bolton, the swamp monster, into power again to wreak havoc on the world.

I resigned 16 years ago from the Bush W. administration in opposition to Bush's war on Iraq. Tragically another

administration led by the same swamp monsters are propelling the U.S. into an unnecessary and horrific military confrontation with Iran.

Trump probably does not know that Iran is a country of 80 million people that has withstood 40 years of sanctions from the U.S. after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and it has a military that has as much battle experience in Syria as the U.S.. Iran is a country that battled a U.S. sponsored war from Iraq from 1980-1988 and Trump probably doesn't remember that Donald Rumsfeld handed chemical weapons to Saddam to use on Iran. Iran suffered over 1 million deaths from that war.

Trump probably does not know that Iran is a large country, definitely not on the small scale of countries that the U.S. normally attacks, invades and occupies.

Iran is no Grenada that had 96,000 persons when the U.S. invaded in 1983

Iran is no Somalia that had a population of 6 million in 1993 when the U.S. invaded.

Iran is no Panama that had 2.5 million inhabitants in 1989 when the U.S. invaded.

Iran is no Afghanistan that had 20 million in 2001 when the U.S. invaded.

Iran is no Iraq that had 20.6 million persons in 2003 when the U.S. invaded.

Iran is no Libya with 6.2 million citizens when the U.S. and NATO bombed it in 2011

Iran is no Syria with 20.5 million citizens in 2011 when the U.S. began its war on the Assad government.

Looking at the Western Hemisphere, Trump's advisers have put him in a situation with Venezuela, a country with a population of 32.7 million in 2019, that should remind him of the disaster that President John F. Kennedy caused when his advisors told him in 1961 that the invasion of Cuba with a population of 7.2 million in 1961 would be a "cakewalk" to borrow a phrase from Bush One's advisers on the invasion of Iraq sixteen years ago.

Trump probably does not realize that the country of Cuba that seems to be a massive threat to the U.S. (or to the wealthy, influential Cuban-American exiles in Miami and South Florida) has a population in 2019 of only 11.3 million and a land area 89 times smaller than the U.S., about the size of Florida, and has been under the most severe sanctions and blockade the U.S. has put on any country, for almost 60 years.

Trump's advisers, headed by John Bolton, are taking over and orchestrating his policies that have quickly destabilized the world and has jeopardized the security of the United States.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the U.S. Army/Army Reserves and retired as a colonel. She was a U.S. diplomat for 16 years and served in U.S. Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the U.S. government in March 2003 in opposition to President George W. Bush's war on Iraq. She is co-author of "Dissent: Voices of Conscience."

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PATRICK LAWRENCE: A Week of Dangerous Developments from Iran to North Korea

The increasingly aggressive moves by Trump's hawkish advisers give the impression of a palace coup, writes Patrick Lawrence.

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



Neoconservative hawks in the Trump administration, led by National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, moved swiftly to usurp control of U.S. foreign policy last week. Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, China: In all four cases, the president has been effectively sidelined on defense and national security questions in what begins to resemble a palace coup.

Global tensions now escalate by the day; so does the risk of military confrontation, notably but not only with Iran. There have long been indications that President Donald Trump is at odds with many of his foreign policy advisers. This internal conflict broke into the open last Thursday, when the *Washington Post* published leaked accounts of White House warfare.

“The president's dissatisfaction has crystallized around

national security adviser John Bolton,” the *Post* reported, “and what Trump has groused is an interventionist stance at odds with his view that the United States should stay out of foreign quagmires.”

Immediately at issue between Trump and Bolton is the administration’s recently failed attempt to depose Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela’s president. To be clear, Trump is not the peacenik of the piece: As the *Post* reported, he is dissatisfied with Bolton because the planned coup in Caracas has not proven swift, clean, and risk-free, as the national security adviser apparently promised it would. A quagmire now beckons.

But the president’s feud with the Bolton–Pompeo axis and those in the Washington bureaucracy allied with it, extends well beyond Venezuela. The extremist neoconservatives among his advisers and elsewhere in his administration have consistently foiled Trump’s efforts to negotiate with Tehran and Pyongyang – for a revised nuclear accord with the former, a denuclearization agreement with the latter. Last week the administration’s hawkish wing made Trump’s chances of diplomatic settlements with Iran and North Korea even more remote. As he works toward a comprehensive trade accord with China, the Pentagon appears intent on provoking Beijing in the South China Sea.

Persian Gulf Deployment

Bolton opened the week with an announcement that a carrier group and Air Force bombers would deploy to the Persian Gulf “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.” Bolton cited “troubling and escalatory indications and warnings” without offering evidence of either.

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Two days later, Pompeo made an unannounced visit to Baghdad to brief Iraqi officials on the administration’s new move against Iran. Pompeo cited the same “credible threat” as Bolton – but again without offering evidence of it. In a statement released Friday, the Pentagon said it was also sending a Patriot antimissile system to the Persian Gulf and that the week’s activity was the start of a series of deployments in the region.

There is some informed speculation, as yet unconfirmed, that Israel – which has long wanted to draw the U.S. into an open conflict with Iran – provided the intelligence Bolton and Pompeo appeared to be acting upon. By Friday, *The New York Times* was citing “American and allied intelligence officials” in its news reports explaining the background of the new deployments.

It is almost pitiable to watch as Trump tries to hold his ground against the hawks who surround him. On Wednesday he announced broad new sanctions to block Iran’s exports of iron, steel, and other metals, which account for about 10 percent of Iran’s export revenue. It was a nonlethal, business-related tightening of the screw, and Trump made his intentions plain later in the week. “What they should be doing is calling me up, sitting down, and we can make a deal, a fair deal,” Trump said. That is a good description

of just what the Bolton–Pompeo axis is determined to prevent.

Tensions with North Korea also escalate. Pyongyang is still smarting from the failure of Trump's February summit with Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader – another Bolton–Pompeo design. Pyongyang tested short-range missiles twice last week. The Justice Department quickly announced that the U.S. was impounding a North Korean cargo ship that had allegedly violated sanctions when it carried a shipment of coal to Indonesia last year. It is difficult to imagine the Justice Department's timing was coincidental; whether or not it was an intentional response to the missile tests, the seizure pushed Trump's ambition to negotiate with Kim further into the deep freeze.

Challenging China

The China case is a big-screen variant of the others. While Trump is pressing Beijing hard for a trade deal – he announced additional tariffs on Chinese goods last Friday – the military appears to be escalating its challenges to China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. Last week two U.S. warships sailed waters over which China asserts jurisdiction, prompting Beijing to charge heatedly that the U.S. was violating its sovereignty. At best the Pentagon is indifferent to Trump's negotiating efforts; at worst it opposes them.

Bolton, Pompeo, and those in their camp have two apparent intentions as they effectively isolate Trump on the foreign policy side. One is to override international law with American diktats. The other – most evident now in the

Iranian case – is to provoke a retaliatory move that will serve as a *casus belli* justifying U.S. military action. Rarely in the postwar period, if ever, has Washington manifest this degree of undisguised belligerence in its foreign policy objectives.

It is safe to assume we are not on the precipice of immediate war with any of the nations Bolton and Pompeo have so far singled out. The *Washington Post* report on Bolton's contretemps with Trump indicates that administration hawks are turning leery of military intervention in Venezuela – even as they keep military intervention “on the table.”

Tehran announced last week that it would begin withdrawing from some of the commitments it agreed in the 2015 nuclear accord, but it has so far been careful to remain within the pact's terms. “Iran and the U.S. are not headed toward a war,” the *Financial Times* quoted an Iranian official as stating at the end of the week, “but we may witness some clashes that would then lead to negotiations rather than a full-scale war.”

That assessment holds for now but may prove too optimistic. The pace of policy escalation, now that Trump has lost control in his own administration, is quickening. Given what Bolton and Pompeo got done in a week, it is impossible to predict how aggressively they will make use of the latitude they have recently claimed for themselves.

It has been clear for some time that Trump's confrontation with his policy minders was inevitable from the start. He campaigned in 2015–16 on a disruptive foreign policy platform. Improved ties with Russia, an end to wars of

adventure, negotiations with adversaries rather than potentially explosive confrontations: These were among Trump's bedrock positions, and they provoked opposition within Washington's permanent bureaucracy – call it the Deep State if you like – as soon as Trump took the Republican nomination.

If there is a surprise in the administration now, it does not lie in the emergence of the Bolton–Pompeo axis. Something like it was never more than just beneath the surface in the Trump White House. The surprise lies in Trump's persistence in the face of unrelenting resistance from those wedded to the fantasy of eternal American primacy.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the *International Herald Tribune*, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is "Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century" (Yale). Follow him [@thefloutist](#). Visit his website [here](#). Support his work via [The Floutist](#).

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The Tragedy of Venezuela is the Tragedy of the US

Trump doesn't give a farthing about Venezuela and is letting his underlings let slip the dogs of war in so long as it secures Florida's electoral votes for Trump 2020, says Lawrence Wilkerson.

By Lawrence Wilkerson

Anti-War.com



Knowing what I know about my own administration's attempt to unseat Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in 2002, I was not surprised when the effort was recently renewed by the Trump Administration, particularly when such arch-defenders of Latin American rights as Elliott Abrams, Marco Rubio, and Rick Scott – not to mention John Bolton – began to appear on the White House payroll.

Knowing as well that Trump did not give a farthing for what happened in Venezuela but was concentrated on what he is always focused on, domestic politics, I knew these underlings would be allowed to cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war in Venezuela so long as doing it secured Florida's electoral votes for Trump in 2020.

What I did not know – but looking back to 2002, should have – is how utterly incompetent the CIA would be in pulling off the “soft coup d’etat” that its leaders promised Trump. The events of the past 48 hours have demonstrated that incompetence markedly, as well as the real motivations of Trump's lackeys on Venezuela, from the shrimp-lusting-after-Cuba Marco Rubio to the bombastic former governor of Florida Rick Scott, to the pardoned criminal Abrams, to the supine and totally incompetent Juan Guaido and his backer, Leopoldo Lopez in Caracas. What a crew the GOP can muster!

And they just might have let slip the dogs of war.

And they let them slip into a potentially first-class disaster – just like Somalia in 1992, Iraq in 2003, Libya in

2011, Syria in 2012, Afghanistan today and yesterday, and on and on.

I know the Venezuelan military; I've trained some of them. They are not your usual "I want to shower after meeting them" crowd, as I would describe for instance the Honduran military. Instead, they are reasonably professional, reasonably aware of Venezuela's historical commitment to democracy, and reasonably competent at their day jobs. They are proud of the fact that they are not Panama, i.e., a country into which the U.S. can send paratroopers overnight, kill several thousands, grab a narco-trafficker, and leave.

The majority of them, if the U.S. military arrives in Venezuela, will take to the hills – very formidable hills, with jungle-like backdrops – and they will harass, kill, take prisoner from time to time, and generally hold out forever or until the "gringos" leave. We might remember how the North Vietnamese and the Taliban accomplished this; well, so will the Venezuelans.

Were I looking down from Mars and with no dog in this fight, I might say that it would be suitable comeuppance for the sheer stupidity of the Trump gang. One might shout loudly as the quagmire develops, "Get elected now, Mr. Reality-TV man!"

But the bloodshed in Venezuela – military and civilian – and the dead and wounded U.S. Marines and soldiers will afford this old soldier no comfort at all. Instead such an outcome will make me regret even more profoundly our Founding Fathers' grievous error in creating the Electoral College because they feared the *demos* in democracy.

Keep going, Trumpster. You'll founder this ship of state soon enough.

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Larry Wilkerson is a retired colonel, U.S. Army (ret.), and former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State Colin Powell.

VIPS Urge Trump to Avoid War in Venezuela

VIPS warn that Trump's policies regarding Venezuela appear to be on a slippery slope that could take us toward war in Venezuela and military confrontation with Russia.

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Avoiding War with Russia over Venezuela

Mr. President:

Your Administration's policies regarding Venezuela appear to be on a slippery slope that could take us toward war in Venezuela and military confrontation with Russia. As former intelligence officers and other national security practitioners with many decades of experience, we urge you not to let yourself be egged on into taking potentially catastrophic military action in response to civil unrest in Venezuela or Russian activities in the Western Hemisphere. With the recent arrival of two transport aircraft and

enduring political support for the government of Venezuela, the Russians are far from crossing any “red line” emanating from the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

Unfulfilled Objectives in Venezuela

Inside Venezuela, U.S. actions have failed to do more than plunge the country into deeper crisis, cause greater human suffering, and increase the prospects of violence on a national scale. President Maduro’s mishandling of the economy and authoritarian reactions to provocations are impossible to defend, but they result in part from the fact that he has been under siege since he was first elected in 2013 and has faced sanctions aimed ultimately at removing him from office. In our view, the advice you’ve received from your top advisors – Florida Senator Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor John Bolton, Special Representative Elliott Abrams, and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo – was and apparently continues to be wrong.

- Recognition of Venezuelan National Assembly President Juan Guaidó as “interim president” did not prompt the military to rise up against President Maduro. Neither did attacking the officer corps as merely corrupt opportunists and drug-traffickers enriched through loyalty to former President Chávez and Maduro, nor did repeatedly threatening them with harsher sanctions. Those actions reflected a fundamental misunderstanding about the Venezuelan military, which has never been free of corruption and political compromise but has also never been so totally isolated from the Venezuelan people that it hasn’t felt their suffering. U.S. policies incorrectly assumed that the officers – while

probably fed up with Maduro's shortcomings – would support Guaidó despite his faction's commitment to dismantle *Chavismo*, which most officers believe brought historically necessary changes to the country, including enfranchisement of the poor.

Similarly, your Administration's repeated hints at military intervention have been counterproductive to your regime-change objectives. Your policy and intelligence advisors were correct in interpreting the disparate polling data showing popular support for Guaidó as actually being support for the U.S. to extricate the country from its crisis – the National Assembly President was a political unknown until the United States and others recognized his claim to the Presidency – but your team showed a lack of understanding of Venezuelan nationalism. Venezuelans do not welcome the destruction that would be caused by U.S. military attack; they recall the death toll of Operation Just Cause, when the United States killed more than 3,000 Panamanians (by its own count) to remove one corrupt authoritarian, Manuel Noriega. Threats of invasion have pushed people to circle around Maduro, however reluctantly, not reject him.

- Your Administration's strategy of punishing the Venezuelan people, including apparently knocking out their electricity, seems based on the false assumption that humanitarian crisis will prompt a coup to remove Maduro. In fact, the U.S. sanctions have allowed Maduro to shift blame from his own failings to U.S. malice – and it has left Guaidó, whom your advisors portray as the moral equivalent of our Founders, looking like a sell-out to Yankee imperialists at the cost of the

Venezuelan people's health and welfare and magnified civil disorder.

Lost Opportunity for Diplomacy

Senator Rubio, Mr. Bolton, Mr. Abrams, and Mr. Pompeo have also squandered a formidable moment to build on common values with allies in Latin America and Europe. Even though most Latin Americans find your aides' public assertion that the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well to be insulting, the right-leaning Presidents of most of South and Central America rallied with you to support Guaidó's self-proclamation. But Guaidó's lack of leadership – he appears totally scripted by U.S. Government agencies – his inflexibility on negotiations, his open call for U.S. military intervention, and your own Administration's dangling threat of war are rapidly alienating all but the most subservient to U.S. policy dictates. Negotiation proposals, such as those being developed by the International Contact Group, are gaining momentum.

Internationalizing the Conflict

National Security Advisor Bolton and others have sought to internationalize the Venezuela issue since before Guaidó's proclamation. Bolton's reference to a "Troika of Tyranny" in November – which he called "a triangle of terror stretching from Havana to Caracas to Managua" and "sordid cradle of communism in the Western Hemisphere" – was a veiled Cold War-era swipe at Russia and China. Mr. Bolton, Senator Rubio, and other advisors have made clear on numerous occasions that the overthrow of President Maduro would be just the first stage in efforts to eliminate the current

governments of the “Troika” and “Communist influence” in the Western Hemisphere.

- They have repeatedly asserted that Cuban advisors have been crucial to the Maduro government’s survival without providing evidence. Indeed, the reportedly “hundreds” of Venezuelan military defectors, including many managed by U.S. agencies, have not provided even credible hearsay evidence that Cubans are doing more than providing routine assistance. In addition, the threats coming out of Washington have preempted any willingness that Cuba might have had to contribute to a regional solution to the Venezuelan crisis as it has in similar situations, such as Colombia’s recent peace process, the Angola peace process in 1989-90, and the Central American negotiations in the early 1990s.

Provocative Rhetoric about Russia

Most dangerous, however, are aggressive statements about Russia’s engagement with Venezuela. Russian oil companies, particular Rosneft, have long been in Venezuela – bailing out the Venezuelan petroleum company (PDVSA) as its mismanagement and falling oil prices have caused production and revenues to plummet. Most long-term observers believe Rosneft’s decisions, including throwing good money after bad, have been motivated by business calculations, without a particularly ideological objective.

- Your advisors’ rhetoric imposing an East-West spin on the issue presented President Putin and his advisors an opportunity to try to poke the United States in the eye – especially as Administration efforts to remove Maduro

foundered and diplomatic support for Guaidó cracked. Maduro and Putin have not enjoyed particularly close personal relations in the past, and their shared strategic interests are few, but U.S. rhetoric and threats have given them common cause in tweaking us. A meeting in Rome between your special envoy, Elliot Abrams, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov achieved nothing amid further U.S. sanctions against Venezuela and continued threats that “all options” were on the table.

Publicly available information is insufficient for us to know exactly what was aboard the two Russian aircraft that landed at Maiquetía last week – two months after your Administration publicly proclaimed its intention to remove Maduro – but precedent suggests Moscow had two main objectives.

- One, and probably primary, is to embarrass your Administration by defying your rhetoric, just to rub your nose in Moscow’s sovereign right to have the relations, including military liaison, with whomever it pleases. In this sense, Russian behavior resembles its intervention, at Bashar al-Assad’s request, in Syria. And it is not a far cry from Moscow’s reaction to the Western-supported coup in Kiev.
- Another objective, if press speculation about the Russian advisors and equipment aboard the aircraft is correct, would be to shore up Venezuela’s ability to warn of and respond to a U.S. military strike. Your Administration has publicly asserted that the Russians are helping repair S-300 surface-to-air missile systems,

which have a *purely defensive* purpose. There is no evidence, not even circumstantial, that Russia has any offensive objectives in this relationship.

The U.S. reaction has suggested a much greater chance of military confrontation. Mr. Bolton “strongly caution[ed] actors external to the Western Hemisphere against deploying military assets to Venezuela, or elsewhere in the Hemisphere, with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations.” Without defining what activities he would object to, Mr. Bolton said, “We will consider such provocative actions as a direct threat to international peace and security in the region.” Your Special Representative said the “Russian presence” is “extremely pernicious.” Your Secretary of State said, “Russia’s got to leave Venezuela.” You said, “Russia has to get out” and reiterated that “all options are open” – including presumably forcing the Russians out militarily. And we note that Russia has not closed its embassy in Caracas as your Administration has.

Avoiding the Slippery Slope

As intelligence officers and security experts, we have given many years to protecting our nation from a host of threats, including from the Soviet Union. We also believe, however, that picking fights, including ousting governments, blocking negotiated settlements, and threatening other countries’ sovereign decision to pursue activities that do not threaten our national security – is rarely the wise way to go.

We repeat that we are not defending Maduro and his record, while at the same time pointing out that many of his

troubles have been exacerbated by U.S. policies and efforts to oust him. We believe that due process and practical, realistic policies better protect our national interests than threats and confrontational rhetoric. It strains credulity to believe that your advisors picked this fight with President Maduro without realizing that Venezuela would seek help fixing its defensive capabilities.

Moreover and very seriously, rhetoric challenging Russia could all too easily lead to a much more consequential confrontation.

- Invoking the 1823 Monroe Doctrine is unhelpful. For Russia to provide assistance for purely defensive purposes to a country in which we seek to create regime change and threaten military attack would not be widely seen as violating the Monroe Doctrine or crossing a “red line.”
- We realize that some in the media are trying to egg you on into taking forceful action, perhaps even of a military nature, to punish Russia in any case. We urge you not to fall into this trap. This is not 19th century Latin America, and it is a far cry from the Cuba missile crisis of 1962.
- The best way to prevent dangerous miscalculation would be for you to speak directly with President Putin. Washington’s energies would be better spent clearing up differences, adjusting failed policies, and promoting a peaceful resolution in Venezuela.

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

Fulton Armstrong, former National Intelligence Officer for Latin America & former National Security Council Director for Inter-American Affairs (ret.)

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Richard H. Black, Senator of Virginia, 13th District; Colonel US Army (ret.); Former Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of the Judge Advocate General, the Pentagon (associate VIPS)

Marshall Carter-Tripp, Foreign Service Officer & former Division Director in the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (ret.)

Bogdan Dzakovic, Former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security, (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC, Iraq; former Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Larry Johnson, former CIA Intelligence Officer & former State Department Counter-Terrorism Official, (ret.)

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, USAF (ret.); ex-Master SERE Instructor for Strategic Reconnaissance Operations (NSA/DIA) and Special Mission Units (JSOC)

John Kiriakou, former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and

former Senior Investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Karen Kwiatkowski, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

Clement J. Laniewski, LTC, U.S. Army (ret.)

Linda Lewis, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret.)

Edward Loomis, NSA Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

David MacMichael, former Senior Estimates Officer, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA presidential briefer (ret.)

Elizabeth Murray, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East & CIA political analyst (ret.)

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Peter Van Buren, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Larry Wilkerson, Colonel, U.S. Army (ret.), former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State; Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary

Sarah Wilton, Commander, U.S. Naval Reserve (ret.) and Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

Ann Wright, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S.

Diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) is made up of former intelligence officers, diplomats, military officers and congressional staffers. The organization, founded in 2002, was among the first critics of Washington's justifications for launching a war against Iraq. VIPS advocates a US foreign and national security policy based on genuine national interests rather than contrived threats promoted for largely political reasons. An archive of VIPS memoranda is available at Consortiumnews.com.

PEPE ESCOBAR: Empire of Chaos in Hybrid War Overdrive

The Trump administration's foreign policy may be easily deconstructed as a crossover between The Sopranos and late-night comedy, writes Pepe Escobar.

By **Pepe Escobar**

in Bangkok

Special to Consortium News



Is this the Age of Anxiety? The Age of Stupidity? The Age of Hybrid War? Or all of the above?

As right populism learns to use algorithms, artificial intelligence (AI) and **media convergence**, the **Empire of Chaos**, in parallel, is unleashing all-out **hybrid** and **semiotic war**.

Dick Cheney's Global War on Terror (GWOT) is back, metastasized as

a hybrid mongrel.

But GWOT would not be GWOT without a Wild West scarecrow. Enter Hamza bin Laden, son of Osama. On the same day the State Department announced a \$1 million bounty on his head, the so-called “UN Security Council IS and Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee” declared Hamza the next al-Qaeda leader.

Since January 2017, Hamza has been a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the State Department – on par with his deceased Dad, back in the early 2000s. The Beltway intel community “believes” Hamza resides “in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.”

Remember these are the same people who “believed” former Taliban leader Mullah Omar resided in Quetta, Baluchistan, when in fact he was safely ensconced only a few miles away from a massive U.S. military base in Zabul, Afghanistan.

Considering that Jabhat al-Nusra, or al-Qaeda in Syria, for all practical purposes, was defined as no more than “moderate rebels” by the Beltway intel community, it’s safe to infer that new scarecrow Hamza is also a “moderate”. And yet he’s more dangerous than vanished fake Caliph Abu Baqr al-Baghdadi. Talk about a masterful example of culture jamming.

Show Me The Big Picture

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Hamza bin Laden is the son of deceased former al-Qa'ida leader Usama bin Laden and is emerging as a leader in the al-Qa'ida franchise. He has released audio and video messages on the Internet, calling on his followers to launch attacks against the United States and its Western allies.

The U.S. government is offering rewards for information about Hamza bin Laden. Absolute confidentiality is assured and relocation may be available. If you have information, please contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate or info@rewardsforjustice.net.

Hamza Bin Laden



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A hefty case can be made that the Empire of Chaos currently has no allies; it's essentially surrounded by an assortment of vassals, puppets and comprador 5th columnist elites professing varied degrees of – sometimes reluctant – obedience.

The Trump administration's foreign policy may be easily deconstructed as a crossover between The Sopranos and late-night comedy – as in the whole episode of designating State Department/CIA regime change, lab experiment Random Dude as President of Venezuela. Legendary cultural critic Walter Benjamin would have called it “the aestheticization of politics,” (turning politics into art), as he did about the Nazis, but this time it's the Looney Tunes version.

To add to the conceptual confusion, despite countless “an offer you can't refuse” antics unleashed by psychopaths of the John Bolton and Mike Pompeo variety, there's this startling nugget. Former

Iranian diplomat Amir Moussavi has revealed that Trump himself demanded to visit Tehran, and was duly rebuffed. “Two European states, two Arab countries and one Southeast Asian state” were mediating a series of messages relayed by Trump and his son-in-law Jared “of Arabia” Kushner, according to Moussavi.

Is there a method to this madness? An attempt at a Grand Narrative would go something like this: ISIS/Daesh may have been sidelined – for now; they are not useful anymore, so the U.S. must fight the larger “evil”: Tehran. GWOT has been revived, and though Hamza bin Laden has been designated the new Caliph, GWOT has shifted to Iran.

When we mix this with the recent India-Pakistan scuffle, a wider message emerges. There was absolutely no interest by Prime Minister Imran Kahn, the Pakistani Army and the Pakistani intelligence, ISI, to launch an attack on India in Kashmir. Pakistan was about to run out of money and about to be bolstered by the U.S., via Saudi Arabia with \$20 billion and an IMF loan.

At the same time, there were two almost simultaneous terrorist attacks launched from Pakistan – against Iran and against India in mid-February. There’s no smoking gun yet, but these attacks may have been manipulated by a foreign intelligence agency. The Cui Bono riddle is which state would profit immensely from a war between Pakistan and Iran and/or a war between Pakistan and India.

The bottom line: hiding in the shadow of plausible deniability – according to which what we understand as reality is nothing but pure perception – the Empire of Chaos will resort to the chaos of no-holds-barred hybrid war to avoid “losing” the Eurasian heartland.

Show Me How Many Hybrid Plans You Got

What applies to the heartland of course also applies to the backyard.

The case of Venezuela shows that the “all options on the table”

scenario has been de facto aborted by Russia, outlined in an [astounding briefing](#) by Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, and then subsequently [detailed](#) by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj at a crucial RIC (part of BRICS) summit in China, Lavrov said, "Russia keeps a close eye on brazen US attempts to create an artificial pretext for a military intervention in Venezuela... The actual implementation of these threats is pulling in military equipment and training [US] Special Forces."

Lavrov explained how Washington was engaged in acquiring mortars and portable air defense systems "in an East European country, and mov(ing) them closer to Venezuela by an airline of a regime that is... rather absolutely obedient to Washington in the post-Soviet space."

The U.S. attempt at regime change in Venezuela has been so far unsuccessful in several ways. Plan A – a classic color revolution - has miserably failed, in part because of a lack of decent local intelligence. Plan B was a soft version of humanitarian imperialism, with a resuscitation of the nefarious, Libya-tested [responsibility to protect \(R2P\)](#); it also failed, especially when the American tale that the Venezuelan government burnt humanitarian aid trucks at the border with Colombia was a lie, exposed by *The New York Times*, no less.

Plan C was a classic Hybrid War technique: a [cyberattack](#), replete with a revival of [Nitro Zeus](#), which shut down 80 percent of Venezuela's electricity.

That plan had already been [exposed](#) by WikiLeaks, via a 2010 memo by a U.S.-funded, Belgrade-based color revolution scam that helped train self-proclaimed "President" Random Dude, when he was just known as Juan Guaidó. The leaked memo said that attacking the Venezuelan power grid would be a "watershed event" that "would

likely have the impact of galvanizing public unrest in a way that no opposition group could ever hope to generate.”

But even that was not enough.

That leaves Plan D – which is essentially to try to starve the Venezuelan population to death via viciously lethal additional sanctions. Sanctioned Syria and sanctioned Iran didn’t collapse. Even boasting myriad comprador elites aggregated in the Lima group, exceptionalists may have to come to grips with the fact that deploying the Monroe doctrine essentially to contain China’s influence in the young 21st century is no “cakewalk.”

Plan E—for extreme—would be U.S. military action, which Bolton won’t take off the table.

Show Me the Way to the Next War Game

So where do all these myriad weaponizations of chaos theory leave us? Nowhere, if they don’t follow the money. Local comprador elites must be lavishly rewarded, otherwise you’re stuck in hybrid swamp territory. That was the case in Brazil – and that’s why the most sophisticated hybrid war case history so far has been a success.

In 2013, Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks revealed how the NSA was spying on Brazilian energy giant Petrobras and the Dilma Rousseff government beginning in 2010. Afterwards, a complex, rolling judicial-business-political-financial-media coup ended up reaching its two main objectives; in 2016, with the impeachment of Rousseff, and in 2018, with Lula thrown in jail.

Now comes arguably the juiciest piece of the puzzle. Petrobras was supposed to pay \$853 million to the U.S. Department of Justice for not going to trial for crimes it was being accused of in America. But then a dodgy deal was struck according to which the fine will be transferred to a Brazilian fund as long as Petrobras commits to relay confidential information about its businesses to the United States government.

Hybrid war against BRICS member Brazil worked like a charm, but trying it against nuclear superpower Russia is a completely different ball game. U.S. analysts, in another case of culture jamming, even accuse Russia itself of deploying hybrid war – a concept actually invented in the U.S. within a counter-terrorism context; applied during the occupation of Iraq and later metastasized across the color revolution spectrum; and featuring, among others, in an [article](#) co-authored by former Pentagon head James “Mad Dog” Mattis in 2005 when he was a mere lieutenant general.

At a recent conference about Russia’s military strategy, Chief of General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov stressed that the Russian armed forces must increase both their “classic” and “asymmetrical” potential. In the U.S. this is interpreted as subversion/propaganda hybrid war techniques as applied in Ukraine and in the largely debunked Russia-gate. Instead, Russian strategists refer to these techniques as “complex approach” and “new generation war”.

Santa Monica’s RAND Corporation still sticks to good ol’ hot war scenarios. They have been holding “Red on Blue” [war games](#) simulations since 1952 – modeling how the proverbial “existential threats” could use asymmetric strategies. The latest [Red on Blue](#) was not exactly swell. RAND analyst David Ochmanek famously said that with Blue representing the current U.S. military potential and Red representing Russia-China in a conventional war, “Blue gets its ass handed to it.”

None of this will convince Empire of Chaos functionary Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who recently told a Senate Armed Services Committee that the Pentagon will continue to [refuse](#) a “no first use” nuclear strategy. Aspiring Dr. Strangeloves actually believe the U.S. can start a nuclear war and get away with it.

Talk about the Age of Hybrid Stupidity going out with a bang.

Pepe Escobar, a veteran Brazilian journalist, is the correspondent-at-large for Hong Kong-based [Asia Times](#). His latest book is ["2030."](#) Follow him on [Facebook](#).

Is War With Iran on the Horizon?

Despite growing Trump administration tensions with Venezuela and even with North Korea, Iran is the likeliest spot for Washington's next shooting war, says Bob Dreyfuss for TomDispatch.

The Trump Administration is Reckless Enough to Turn the Cold War With Iran Into a Hot One

By [Bob Dreyfuss](#)

[TomDispatch.com](#)



Here's the foreign policy question of questions in 2019: Are President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, all severely weakened at home and with few allies abroad, reckless enough to set off a war with Iran?

Could military actions designed to be limited – say, a heightening of the Israeli bombing of Iranian forces inside Syria, or possible U.S. cross-border attacks from Iraq, or a clash between American and Iranian naval ships in the Persian Gulf – trigger a wider war?

Worryingly, the answers are: yes and yes. Even though Western

Europe has lined up in opposition to any future conflict with Iran, even though Russia and China would rail against it, even though most Washington foreign policy experts would be horrified by the outbreak of such a war, it could happen.

Despite growing Trump administration tensions with Venezuela and even with North Korea, Iran is the likeliest spot for Washington's next shooting war. Years of politically charged anti-Iranian vituperation might blow up in the faces of President Trump and his two most hawkish aides, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, setting off a conflict with potentially catastrophic implications.

Such a war could quickly spread across much of the Middle East, not just to Saudi Arabia and Israel, the region's two major anti-Iranian powers, but Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the various Persian Gulf states. It might indeed be, as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani suggested last year (unconsciously echoing Iran's former enemy, Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein) the "mother of all wars."

With Bolton and Pompeo, both well-known Iranophobes, in the driver's seat, few restraints remain on President Trump when it comes to that country. White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, President Trump's former favorite generals who had urged caution, are no longer around. And though the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution last month calling for the United States to return to the nuclear agreement that President Obama signed, there are still a significant number of congressional Democrats who believe that Iran is a major threat to U.S. interests in the region.

During the Obama years, it was *de rigueur* for Democrats to support the president's conclusion that Iran was a prime state sponsor of terrorism and should be treated accordingly. And the congressional Democrats now leading the party on foreign policy – Eliot Engel, who currently chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Bob

Menendez and Ben Cardin, the two ranking Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – were opponents of the 2015 nuclear accord (though all three now claim to have changed their minds).

Deadly Flashpoints for a Future War

On the roller coaster ride that is Donald Trump's foreign policy, it's hard to discern what's real and what isn't, what's rhetoric and what's not. When it comes to Iran, it's reasonable to assume that Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo aren't planning an updated version of the unilateral invasion of Iraq that President George W. Bush launched in the spring of 2003.

Yet by openly calling for the toppling of the government in Tehran, by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear agreement and reimposing onerous sanctions to cripple that country's economy, by encouraging Iranians to rise up in revolt, by overtly supporting various exile groups (and perhaps covertly even terrorists), and by joining with Israel and Saudi Arabia in an informal anti-Iranian alliance, the three of them are clearly attempting to force the collapse of the Iranian regime, which just celebrated the 40th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

There are three potential flashpoints where limited skirmishes, were they to break out, could quickly escalate into a major shooting war.

The first is in Syria and Lebanon. Iran is deeply involved in defending Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (who only recently returned from a visit to Tehran) and closely allied with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite political party with a potent paramilitary arm. Weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu openly boasted that his country's air force had successfully taken out Iranian targets in Syria. In fact, little noticed here, dozens of such strikes have taken place for more than a year, with mounting Iranian casualties.

Until now, the Iranian leadership has avoided a direct response that would heighten the confrontation with Israel, just as it has

avoided unleashing Hezbollah, a well-armed, battle-tested proxy force. That could, however, change if the hardliners in Iran decided to retaliate. Should this simmering conflict explode, does anyone doubt that President Trump would soon join the fray on Israel's side or that congressional Democrats would quickly succumb to the administration's calls to back the Jewish state?

Next, consider Iraq as a possible flashpoint for conflict. In February, a blustery Trump told CBS's *Face the Nation* that he intends to keep U.S. forces in Iraq "because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran because Iran is the real problem." His comments did not exactly go over well with the Iraqi political class, since many of that country's parties and militias are backed by Iran.

Trump's declaration followed a *Wall Street Journal* report late last year that Bolton had asked the Pentagon – over the opposition of various generals and then-Secretary of Defense Mattis – to prepare options for "retaliatory strikes" against Iran. This roughly coincided with a couple of small rocket attacks against Baghdad's fortified Green Zone and the airport in Basra, Iraq's Persian Gulf port city, neither of which caused any casualties.

Writing in Foreign Affairs, however, Pompeo blamed Iran for the attacks, which he called "life-threatening," adding, "Iran did not stop these attacks, which were carried out by proxies it has supported with funding, training, and weapons." No "retaliatory strikes" were launched, but plans do undoubtedly now exist for them and it's not hard to imagine Bolton and Pompeo persuading Trump to go ahead and use them – with incalculable consequences.

Finally, there's the Persian Gulf itself. Ever since the George W. Bush years, the U.S. Navy has worried about possible clashes with Iran's naval forces in those waters and there have been a number of high-profile incidents. The Obama administration tried (but failed) to establish a hotline of sorts that would have linked U.S. and Iranian naval commanders and so make it easier to defuse any such incident, an initiative championed by then-Chairman of the

Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen, a longtime opponent of war with Iran.

Under Trump, however, all bets are off. Last year, he requested that Mattis prepare plans to blow up Iran's "fast boats," small gunboats in the Gulf, reportedly asking, "Why don't we sink them?" He's already reinforced the U.S. naval presence there, getting Iran's attention. Not surprisingly, the Iranian leadership has responded in kind. Earlier this year, President Hassan Rouhani announced that his country had developed submarines capable of launching cruise missiles against naval targets. The Iranians also began a series of Persian Gulf war games and, in late February, test fired one of those sub-launched missiles.

Add in one more thing: in an eerie replay of a key argument George Bush and Dick Cheney used for going to war with Iraq in 2003, in mid-February the right-wing media outlet *Washington Times* ran an "exclusive" report with this headline: "Iran-Al Qaeda Alliance may provide legal rationale for U.S. military strikes."

Back in 2002, the Office of Special Plans at Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon, under the supervision of neoconservatives Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, spent months trying to prove that al-Qaeda and Iraq were in league. *The Washington Times* piece, citing Trump administration sources, made a similar claim – that Iran is now aiding and abetting al-Qaeda with a "clandestine sanctuary to funnel fighters, money, and weapons across the Middle East."

It added that the administration is seeking to use this information to establish "a potential legal justification for military strikes against Iran or its proxies." Needless to say, few are the terrorism experts or Iran specialists who would agree that Iran has anything like an active relationship with al-Qaeda.

Will the Hardliners Triumph in Iran as in Washington?

The Trump administration is, in fact, experiencing increasing

difficulty finding allies ready to join a new Coalition of the Willing to confront Iran. The only two charter members so far, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are, however, enthusiastic indeed. Last month, Prime Minister Netanyahu was heard remarking that Israel and its Arab allies want war with Iran.

At a less-than-successful mid-February summit meeting Washington organized in Warsaw, Poland, to recruit world leaders for a future crusade against Iran, Netanyahu was heard to say in Hebrew: “This is an open meeting with representatives of leading Arab countries that are sitting down together with Israel in order to advance the common interest of war with Iran.” (He later insisted that the correct translation should have been “combating Iran,” but the damage had already been done.)

That Warsaw summit was explicitly designed to build an anti-Iranian coalition, but many of America’s allies, staunchly opposing Trump’s decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear accord, would have nothing to do with it. In an effort to mollify the Europeans in particular, the United States and Poland awkwardly renamed it: “The Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East.”

The name change, however, fooled no one. As a result, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo were embarrassed by a series of no-shows: the French, the Germans, and the European Union, among others, flatly declined to send ministerial-level representatives, letting their ambassadors in Warsaw stand in for them. The many Arab nations not in thrall to Saudi Arabia similarly sent only low-level delegations. Turkey and Russia boycotted altogether, convening a summit of their own in which Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Iran’s Rouhani.

Never the smoothest diplomat, Pence condemned, insulted, and vilified the Europeans for refusing to go along with Washington’s wrecking-ball approach. He began his speech to the conference by saying: “The time has come for our European partners to withdraw

from the Iran nuclear deal.” He then launched a direct attack on Europe’s efforts to preserve that accord by seeking a way around the sanctions Washington had re-imposed: “Sadly, some of our leading European partners... have led the effort to create mechanisms to break up our sanctions. We call it an effort to break American sanctions against Iran’s murderous revolutionary regime.”

That blast at the European allies should certainly have brought to mind Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld’s disparaging comments in early 2003 about Germany and France, in particular, being leaders of the “old Europe.” Few allies then backed Washington’s invasion plans, which, of course, didn’t prevent war. Europe’s reluctance now isn’t likely to prove much of a deterrent either.

But Pence is right that the Europeans have taken steps to salvage the Iran nuclear deal, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In particular, they’ve created a “special purpose vehicle” known as INSTEX (Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges) designed “to support legitimate trade with Iran,” according to a statement from the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Great Britain. It’s potentially a big deal and, as Pence noted, explicitly designed to circumvent the sanctions Washington imposed on Iran after Trump’s break with the JCPOA.

INSTEX has a political purpose, too. The American withdrawal from the JCPOA was a body blow to President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and other centrists in Tehran who had taken credit for, and pride in, the deal between Iran and the six world powers (the United States, France, Germany, Britain, Russia, and China) that signed the agreement. That deal had been welcomed in Iran in part because it seemed to ensure that country’s ability to expand its trade to the rest of the world, including its oil exports, free of sanctions.

Even before Trump abandoned the deal, however, Iran was already finding U.S. pressure overwhelming and, for the average Iranian, things hadn’t improved in any significant way. Worse yet, in the

past year the economy had taken a nosedive, the currency had plunged, inflation was running rampant, and strikes and street demonstrations had broken out, challenging the government and its clerical leadership. Chants of “Death to the Dictator!” – not heard since the Green Movement’s revolt against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reelection in 2009 – once again resounded in street demonstrations.

At the end of February, it seemed as if Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo had scored a dangerous victory when Zarif, Iran’s well-known, Western-oriented foreign minister, announced his resignation. Moderates who supported the JCPOA, including Rouhani and Zarif, have been under attack from the country’s hardliners since Trump’s pullout. As a result, Zarif’s decision was widely assumed to be a worrisome sign that those hardliners had claimed their first victim.

There was even unfounded speculation that, without Zarif, who had worked tirelessly with the Europeans to preserve what was left of the nuclear pact, Iran itself might abandon the accord and resume its nuclear program. And there’s no question that the actions and statements of Bolton, Pompeo, and crew have undermined Iran’s moderates, while emboldening its hardliners, who are making I-told-you-so arguments to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country’s supreme leader.

Despite the internal pressure on Zarif, however, his resignation proved short-lived indeed: Rouhani rejected it, and there was an upsurge of support for him in Iran’s parliament. Even General Qassem Soleimani, a major figure in that country’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the commander of the Quds Force, backed him.

As it happens, the Quds Force, an arm of the IRGC, is responsible for Iran’s paramilitary and foreign intelligence operations throughout the region, but especially in Iraq and Syria. That role has allowed Soleimani to assume responsibility for much of Iran’s

foreign policy in the region, making him a formidable rival to Zarif – a tension that undoubtedly contributed to his brief resignation and it isn't likely to dissipate anytime soon.

According to [analysts](#) and [commentators](#), it appears to have been a ploy by Zarif (and perhaps Rouhani, too) to win a vote of political confidence and it appears to have strengthened their hand for the time being.

Still, the Zarif resignation crisis threw into stark relief the deep tensions within Iranian politics and raised a key question: As the Trump administration accelerates its efforts to seek a confrontation, will they find an echo among Iranian hardliners who'd like nothing more than a face-off with the United States?

Maybe that's exactly what Bolton and Pompeo want. If so, prepare yourself: another American war unlikely to work out the way anyone in Washington dreams is on the horizon.

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The Problem of International Law

Modern institutions that hold back the rise of barbarism are being weakened, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By **Lawrence Davidson**

To the Point Analysis.com



Several recent events suggest that global warming is not the only thing threatening our future. As if they are running on parallel tracks, some of the modern institutions that help make for stable societies – the ones that hold back the rise of barbarism – are being weakened even as the atmosphere is heating up and the oceans swell. In pursuit of short-term state or personal interests, some national leaders are violating or ignoring international law and, by doing so, putting us all at long-term risk.

The first example is the subverting of the International Criminal Court.

One of the most hopeful developments to follow the catastrophe that was World War II – the war that brought the world the Holocaust, the Blitzkrieg, the carpet bombing of Europe and the use of nuclear bombs against large cities – was the extension and strengthening of international law. In 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations, seeking to give such laws real force, called for the establishment of an international criminal court. That call triggered resistance because such a court would necessarily impinge on nation-state sovereignty. It took 54 years before the court was finally convened in order to enforce laws against the committing of war crimes and other evils, such as genocide.

Still, there are some nations that refuse to recognize the court's jurisdiction. Often these are the states most addicted to the barbaric behavior that came close to

destroying a good part of the globe during the 20th century. These governments now threaten the very workability of the court. Thus, on Jan. 28 it was reported that “A senior judge has resigned from one of the international courts in The Hague” due to interference and threats coming from both the U.S. and Turkey. The judge’s name is Christoph Flügge.

In the case of the United States, the problem began when the International Criminal Court at the Hague decided to investigate allegations of war crimes, specifically the use of torture, committed by U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

At that point President Donald Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton (who reminds one of a modern Savonarola when it comes to ideological enforcement), publicly threatened the court’s judges. “If these judges ever interfere in the domestic concerns of the U.S. or investigate an American citizen,” he said, “the American government would do all it could to ensure that these judges would no longer be allowed to travel to the United States – and that they would perhaps even be criminally prosecuted.”

It must be said that (a) torturing Afghans is not a “domestic concern of the U.S.” And, all too obviously, (b) Bolton is a deplorable one-dimensional thinker. Bound tightly by a lifelong rightwing perspective, he has never been able to get past the concept of nation-state supremacy. This means his perspective is untouched by those lessons of history which have shown the nation-state to be a threat to civilization itself. Thus, when in 2005, President George W. Bush appointed John Bolton ambassador to the United Nations, it was with the prior knowledge that the man felt nothing but contempt for this international organization and would

disparage it at every turn. At present Bolton has turned out to be just the kind of fellow who fits into the reactionary White House run by Donald Trump.

Turkey Ignores Diplomatic Immunity

The leaders of the United States are not the only ones who can purposely undermine international courts. Christoph Flügge tells of another incident wherein the government of Turkey arrested one of its own nationals, Aydin Sefa Akay, who was a judge on the international court at the Hague. At the time, Akay had diplomatic immunity by virtue of his position, a fact that the increasingly statist government in Istanbul ignored.

Akay's crime was to be judged insufficiently loyal to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Flügge and his fellow judges strongly protested the Turkish actions, but they were not supported by the present UN secretary general, António Guterres (who is a former prime minister of Portugal). And, without that support, Akay lost his position as judge and was, so to speak, thrown to the dogs of nation-state arrogance.

Upon resigning, Flügge had some seminal words of warning about the fate of international law. "Every incident in which judicial independence is breached is one too many." The cases of Turkish and U.S. interference with the International Criminal Court set a fatal precedent, he continued, "and everyone can invoke it in the future. Everyone can say: 'But you let Turkey get its way.' This is an original sin. It can't be fixed."

Commenting on the threat leveled by Bolton, Flügge said,

“the American threats against international judges clearly show the new political climate. ... The judges on the court were stunned.” Yet, this behavior was quite in accord with nation-state aggrandizement and American exceptionalism; national sovereignty stands above international law.

Suborning of Interpol

It is not only the world's international laws and international court that are being undermined, but also Interpol, the world's international police force. Nation-state leaders, particularly the dictators who place their interests and preferences above even their own domestic law, now seek to suborn Interpol and use it as a weapon to silence their critics.

The latest example of this comes out of Bahrain, a wealthy monarchical dictatorship in the Persian Gulf. It is run by a Sunni elite minority which systematically represses the country's Shiite majority. By doing so, its major “achievement” to date has been to give the religion of Islam a bad name. It is also a staunch U.S. ally, and the U.S. 5th fleet is based in that country. If you want to know where much of the U.S. naval forces supporting the Saudi destruction of Yemen come from, it is Bahrain.

So how is the dictatorship in Bahrain corrupting the world's international police force? One of the players on Bahrain's national soccer team, Hakeem al-Araibi, vocally expressed his dissent over the way Bahrain is run. He was then framed for “vandalizing a police station” even though he was playing in a soccer match, broadcast on TV, at the time of the incident. He was arrested, beaten up in jail, yet still

managed to escape to Australia, where he was granted asylum.

At this point Bahrain managed to have Interpol issue a fraudulent arrest warrant. When al-Araibi showed up in Thailand on his honeymoon, he was taken into custody and now awaits possible extradition back to Bahrain, where he may well face torture. By the way, it is a violation of international law to extradite someone to a country where he or she risks being tortured. So far Thailand has not taken advantage of this legal and moral reason to defy the Bahraini monarchy.

This is not an isolated problem. The watchdog organization [Fair Trials](#) has documented multiple cases of the corruption and abuse of Interpol by “governments” which do not feel themselves bound by the rule of law.

21st Century Assaults

There is little doubt that the 21st century has begun with an assault on both the climatic and legal atmosphere that underpins the world's stability.

Before 1946 the world was a mess: one hot war after another, economic recessions and depressions, imperialism, colonialism, and racism galore. All of this was grounded in the nation state and its claim of sacred sovereignty. The world experienced a sort of climax to this horror show in the form of Nazi racism and the Holocaust, the use of nuclear weapons, and Stalinist Russia's purges, mass starvations and Gulag exiles.

After World War II, things got better in a slow sort of way. The trauma of the recent past spurred on the formation of

international laws, international courts, a universal declaration of human rights, civil rights movements and the like. We also got the Cold War, which, for all its tensions, was a big improvement on hot wars.

Now things are falling apart again, and rest assured that U.S. leaders and their less-savory allies abroad are doing their part in the devolution of peace and justice. Shall we name just a few U.S. names? Well, there is Donald Trump and his minion Bolton. They go gaga over thugs passing themselves off as presidents in such nation-states as Egypt, the Philippines and that pseudo-democracy, Israel. There is also Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, who has turned into the U.S. version of Cardinal Richelieu when it comes to Washington's South America foreign policy. He is the one pushing for the overthrow of the legitimate government in Venezuela while simultaneously calling for close relations with the new **fascist president** of Brazil.

And the list goes on. How do we do this to ourselves? Is it short memories of the wretched past or almost no historical memory at all? Is it some sort of perverse liking for group violence? This is an important question and a perennial one. But now, with global warming upon us and lifestyles soon to be under threat, things are going to get even messier—and messy social and economic situations are usually good news for barbarians. More than ever, we are going to need uncorrupted international laws, courts and police.

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PATRICK LAWRENCE: In Venezuela, US Forgets What Century It Is

Destabilizing other nations in gross violation of international law will no longer go unopposed, writes Patrick Lawrence.

By **Patrick Lawrence**

Special to Consortium News



The Venezuela crisis worsens by the day. Early last week the U.S. sanctioned PdVSA, the state-owned oil company, by sequestering income from U.S. sales in a blocked bank account. On Sunday President Donald Trump confirmed in a television interview that deploying American troops is “an option.”

Little of what Washington has done in the weeks since it recognized an opposition legislator, Juan Guaidó, as Venezuela’s “interim president” has any basis in international law. But there is much worse to come and much more at risk if the U.S. follows through with its recently disclosed plans to reshape Latin American politics to its neoliberal liking.

Administration officials now advertise the effort to depose the government of Nicolás Maduro as merely the first step in a plan to reassert American influence among our southerly neighbors. The next two targets, Cuba and Nicaragua, are what John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, calls

the continent's "troika of tyranny."

"The United States looks forward to watching each corner of the triangle fall—in Havana, in Caracas, in Managua," Bolton said in a not-much-noted [speech](#) in Miami late last year. "The troika will crumble." There is cold comfort to derive from knowing this forecast reflects the single most deranged worldview of anyone now active in the Trump White House.

But therein lie considerable dangers. In effect, Trump and his policy minders intend to revive the Monroe Doctrine, in which the fifth U.S. president effectively declared the Western Hemisphere America's to manage however it wished. But it is 2019, not 1823, when James Monroe made his case in a State of the Union speech to Congress. It is frequently remarkable how blind Washington is to the limits the 21st century imposes on its power, and we are about to watch it crash into two of them.

Era of Coups Is Over

For one thing, the long era of U.S.-cultivated coups—"regime changes" for those who cannot quite face this aspect of America's conduct abroad—is over. First in Ukraine and a year later in Syria, Moscow has put Washington on notice: Destabilizing other nations in gross violation of international law will no longer go unopposed. One way or another, this will again prove true in Venezuela.

The Ukraine case ranks among the worst foreign policy calls former President Barack Obama made during his eight years in office, and there are many from which to choose. State Department-sponsored NGOs and "civil society" groups such as the [National Endowment for Democracy](#) had been up to their

customary chicanery in Kiev for years before Obama took office. But it was Obama who green-lighted the operation that led, five years ago this month, to the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich as Ukraine's duly elected president and the division of the country into pro-Western and pro-Russian halves that remain at war with one another.

It is now de rigueur in the Western press to date the Ukraine crisis—and the sanctions regime that remains in place—to Russia's re-annexation of Crimea after a referendum held in March 2014. This is ahistorical nonsense. It is a matter of record that Vladimir Putin convened his national security advisers the night of Feb. 22, a day after Yanukovich was forced to flee Kiev. By dawn on the 23rd, the Russian president had decided there was no alternative to reclaiming Crimea if Russia was to prevent NATO from assuming control over its only warm-water naval base.

A middling graduate student in international relations could have told the State Department's Victoria Nuland and Vice President Joe Biden, who carried the administration's Ukraine portfolio, that precipitating a coup in Kiev was a reckless, amateurish business. And so it has proven.

In the Syrian case, the U.S. had been training, arming, and financing radical Sunni jihadists since 2012 at the latest. But it was only in September 2015, a year after the Ukraine debacle, that Moscow—at the invitation of the Assad government in Damascus—entered the conflict militarily. The result speaks for itself: The Syrian Arab Army is now finishing its mop-up phase and the European powers, along with Turkey and Russia, are negotiating a variety of political, social, and economic reconstruction plans.

It is stunning, in the context of these two events, that the U.S. now proposes to embark on a series of three coup operations in Latin America, the first of which unfolds as we speak. But learning from past errors has never been among Washington's strong suits, to put the point too mildly. The Maduro government warns the U.S. of "another Vietnam" if it intervenes militarily in Venezuela. Moscow warns of "catastrophic consequences."

Let us not misread this last remark. It is highly unlikely, if not unimaginable, that Russia would counter direct U.S. intervention in Venezuela through military support. Moscow has all but said as much, indeed.

Russian and Chinese Interests

But we now come to the second limitation on American power in the 21st century. In an era of virtually unlimited economic interdependence, Russia and China have considerable interests in Venezuela, and you can bet your last ruble or renminbi that they will exert themselves to protect them.

China has developed a series of oil-for-loans agreements with Venezuela over the past dozen years, and these total more than \$50 billion in value. At this point Caracas is some \$20 billion in arrears on these deals, according to official Chinese sources as quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*. Russia has also invested many billions in Venezuela since the years of the Hugo Chávez presidency. Logically enough, both Moscow and Beijing question whether a post-Maduro government would honor these obligations.

China and Russia are also Venezuela's largest arms suppliers, and both have intelligence-gathering

installations on Venezuelan soil. Two days after Washington recognized Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim leader, reports surfaced that Moscow had dispatched a team of private contractors—read: mercenaries—to support the Maduro government.

The Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank known for its anti-Russian biases and its close ties to various intelligence agencies, put out a paper over the weekend suggesting that the Venezuela crisis marks the beginning of “great-power competition” in Latin America. For once, the council seems to have gotten it roughly right.

No, this is not likely to resemble the Cold War in its superficial aspects. While Washington appears likely to fight it with hunger-inducing sanctions, semi-covert subterfuge, and possibly armed interventions, Russia and China will rely on diplomatic and possibly military support, economic aid, and investment. Both Moscow and Beijing continue to back the Maduro government and have encouraged political negotiations between the Venezuelan president and his adversaries.

The best way to read this competition at the moment is to recall the years prior to the Obama administration's diplomatic recognition of Cuba (which the Trump administration has all but officially dismantled). Obama was more or less forced to act, because decades of merciless economic embargo and non-recognition had thoroughly alienated the rest of Latin America. Depending on how events turn in Venezuela, Trump and his policy minders could easily land Washington back in the same unenviable predicament.

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Second-Round Stakes Higher for Trump and Kim

The North Korea leader obviously wants a deal, writes Patrick Lawrence, which gives the U.S. a historic opportunity next month.

[By Patrick Lawrence](#)

Special to Consortium News



President Donald Trump’s announcement late last week that he will meet North Korea’s Kim Jong-un next month promises a significant result whether the encounter succeeds or fails. In the intervening weeks, we have two questions to ponder.

No. 1: what will this second summit accomplish? The first Trump–Kim meeting last June in Singapore was about establishing rapport and can by this measure be counted a success. Something of substance, however modest, needs to get done this time.

No. 2, and just as important, will Trump’s foreign policy minders undermine this encounter before it takes place? The record suggests this is a serious possibility.

A month ago, Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. special forces from Syria. The howls of protest, Capitol Hill Democrats often the shrillest, have not ceased. And troops have not started to pack their duffle bags.

But the Syria decision may prove a turning point, given that Trump directly confronted the policy clique – segments of the Pentagon and State Department bureaucracies, as well as members of the National Security Council –who have been sabotaging his objectives since his first day in office two years ago.

Steve Bannon, once and briefly Trumps’ strategic adviser, put it this way after the withdrawal announcement: “The apparatus slow-rolled him until he just said enough and did it himself. Not pretty, but at least done.”

Will the second Trump–Kim summit prompt another such showdown with “the apparatus” around Trump?

It could. John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, is a hyper-hawk on North Korea. Behind him, the Pentagon finds the prospect of lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula a threat to its immense presence in Northeast Asia. Be wary in

coming weeks of vaguely sourced press reports citing newly discovered North Korean treachery, betrayals, and deceptions.

More For, Than Against

On balance, however, Trump and Kim appear to have more going for them than against them this time.

Now that the policy cliques and the press have run out of playground epithets for Kim—monster, merciless murderer, and so on—it is generally acknowledged that however autocratic, he is a young but capable statesman. In his new year's message, he confirmed that national policy has now shifted decisively toward economic development as the North's top priority.

While Washington and its clerks in the corporate press give Kim no credit, he has already made numerous gestures intended to appease American hawks such as Bolton, build confidence, and signal his desire to be, in effect, a modernizing dictator somewhat in the mold of China's former leader, the late Deng Xiaoping.

Kim has halted all nuclear and missile testing, destroyed a nuclear-testing site, offered to pull back artillery from the 38th parallel, which now divides North and South Korea, and returned the remains of some American soldiers killed in the 1950–53 war. North and South have also demilitarized a "truce town."

Kim wants a deal—there are no serious grounds to question this—and is surely smart enough to know he has to bring something impressive to the table next month. Just what this will be is not clear. It is easier to anticipate what he

will not concede: the reciprocal diplomatic process that Moon Jae-in, South Korea's president, calls "action for action." It is the only rational, workable way to go forward after almost seven decades of mutual distrust and animosity.

Development Planning

Moon has remained remarkably energetic in behalf of a North–South settlement. His country, along with Russia and China, have drawn up development plans to connect the North and its neighbors – rails, roads, airports, seaports, power plants, refineries, and so on – that has something for everybody: The North acquires the foundation for a modern economy, South Korea gains land routes to Chinese, Russian, and European markets, Russia develops its Far East, and China can do more business with both North and South. A [map](#) of this plan shows three development belts: Two are to run down the Korean Peninsula's western and eastern coastlines from the Chinese and Russian borders respectively. The third will run west to east across the 38th parallel. Moon wants these links eventually [to connect South Korea](#) to the Trans-Siberian Railway.

The numbers bandied about are extraordinary. While Seoul has allocated a modest \$260 million to improve cross-border rail links this year, that is merely the beginning. The Korea Rail Network Authority, a government agency, [estimates](#) that upgrading the North's roads and rails alone will cost roughly \$38 billion before it is done. At the time of the first Trump–Kim summit, Citicorp put the cost of rebuilding all of the North's infrastructure at \$63 billion.

These plans have advanced steadily since the first Trump–Kim meeting. But coverage in the mainstream American press is far from abundant.

By all appearances, the U.S. is simply not interested in a constructive settlement in Northeast Asia, even as other nations proceed to develop one. This is a perfect illustration of what happens when a nation is intent only on the projection of its power.

It is anyone's guess what Trump will bring to his summit with Kim. But it is clear what would produce a breakthrough if Trump truly wants one. First, he can exempt some of Moon's cross-border development plans from sanctions that now inhibit them. Second, he can relax the ridiculous demand that the North completes its denuclearization before Washington concedes anything. "Give us all we want and then we negotiate" is not a position from which to expect any gains.

Given Kim's aspirations and the diplomatic efforts of Seoul, Moscow, and Beijing, the opportunity for a settlement of the Korean question has not been this promising since the [1953 armistice](#). At the same time, Washington has rarely been so uncertain of its power—and hence so eager to display it—and we have a president surrounded by advisors given to neutralizing his better policy objectives.

If Trump and Kim get something done a month from now, we could be on the way to peace in Northeast Asia after 66 years of high tension. If they fail, or if Trump gets the Syria treatment, many years are likely to pass before a moment this propitious comes again.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author and lecturer. His most recent book is "Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century" (Yale).

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