

# Bolton's exit shows Trump remains his own man in US foreign policy matters

*In any White House battle over the direction of American foreign policy, Mr Trump is always going to emerge victorious*

CON COUGHLIN

The addition of John Bolton, the former US national security adviser, to the long list of distinguished American foreign policy experts who have lost their jobs during Donald Trump's presidency demonstrates that, for all his lack of experience in the world of foreign diplomacy, the American president is not a man to be trifled with.

Prior to Mr Bolton's precipitate departure from the White House earlier this week, the Trump administration had presided over a steady stream of high-profile national security officials leaving their jobs, including former defence secretary James Mattis and Mr Bolton's immediate predecessor, HR McMaster.

In each case the departures have occurred because sharp differences of opinion have emerged between the president and his key advisers over the direction of American policy.

In both instances one of the reasons given for the breakdown in relations between both Mr Mattis and Mr McMaster and the Oval Office was their more robust approach to national security issues, especially American policy towards Afghanistan.

Having held senior command positions during America's long-running military engagement in Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 attacks in 2001, both men felt strongly that America should continue to support the democratically elected Afghan government in its continuing battle against the Taliban

and other Islamist terror groups such as ISIS that are operating in the country.

They were firmly of the view that, after the loss of more than 4,000 American lives in Afghanistan and a military campaign that has cost an estimated \$1 trillion, it was very much in America's national interest to ensure that, following the withdrawal of the bulk of US troops at the end of 2014, the country did not once again fall into the hands of the Taliban and become a safe haven for Islamist terror groups to plot attacks against the West.

Mr Bolton, whose involvement in the Afghan issue dates back at least to the Bush administration, had a similar outlook on the issue. His preference was for maintaining a significant American military presence – the number of US forces currently based in the country stands at around 15,000 – in support of the government of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

Afghanistan's fledgling democracy is, after all, one of the few tangible gains of the US-led military intervention in the country, one that allows ordinary Afghans a say in the way their country is governed for the first time in their history. And, as a prominent supporter of the neo-conservative movement, which campaigns for the introduction of Western-style democracy in countries with no tradition of democratic rule, Mr Bolton was committed to supporting the Afghan government.

The other important national security consideration from Washington's point of view is that sustaining a democratically



John Bolton's desire to maintain support for the Afghan government was at odds with

electing government in power in Kabul is the best way of preventing the country from being overrun by Islamist terror groups.

The problem for Mr Bolton, as well as other distinguished US national security experts like Mr Mattis and Mr McMaster, is that their desire to maintain support for the Afghan government was at odds with Mr Trump's desire to end America's involvement in costly and politically damaging overseas military adventures.

Mr Trump's preferred outcome, so far as Washington's involvement in Afghanistan is concerned, is to negotiate a deal

that ends the country's long-running civil war, one that allows remaining American forces in the country to return home – preferably in time for next year's presidential election contest.

And it is to this end that Mr Trump has encouraged Zalmay Khalidzad, the Afghan-born US diplomat, to engage in talks with the Taliban aimed at ending the conflict.

Indeed, such was the president's enthusiasm for the process that he even decided to invite a group of Taliban leaders to Camp David earlier this week in the hope of securing a deal.

# Whether Netanyahu wins Israeli elections or

BEN WHITE

Just days before going to the polls for the second time this year, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced, to much fanfare on home turf, that he planned to annex the Jordan Valley region of the occupied West Bank should he secure another term in office.

It was a move intended to rally right-wing voters behind his party, Likud, which remains in close competition with the opposition Blue and White list. Having failed to form a government in April's election and with corruption charges looming over him, the stakes have never been higher for Mr Netanyahu.

Describing the reportedly pending peace plan of the US administration as an "historic opportunity", Mr Netanyahu said he would seek to "apply sovereignty in the communities and other areas" – the euphemistic language used to describe annexing settlements – in co-ordination with the US. In his crosshairs is one quarter of the occupied West Bank, where thousands of illegal Israeli settlers already live.

Yet even if Mr Netanyahu fails to emerge as head of a right-wing government after Tuesday's vote and the coalition talks which will follow, or ultimately ends up being forced out of politics on a criminal indictment, none of the possible outcomes of this election favour Palestinians.

With or without Mr Netanyahu, Likud as a party and its senior

figures are opposed to Palestinian statehood, a policy of rejection shared by the main opposition list. One has only to observe how the Blue and White party's response to Mr Netanyahu's promise to annex the Jordan Valley was to accuse him of stealing their policy rather than condemning it altogether.

Appealing to his base, Mr Netanyahu is hoping to do what he failed to in April's election, when both Likud and the rival Blue and White party tied for 35 seats each: namely, to form a stable coalition government. Then, to thwart the possibility of opposition parties forming an alternative coalition, Mr Netanyahu opted instead to dissolve the Knesset and push for fresh elections.

Yet with just days to go, it remains unclear whether this election re-run will produce a drastically different result from the previous time, let alone a majority coalition for his Likud party.

The long-serving prime minister's natural partners are parties further to the right, such as the Yamina alliance headed by former justice minister Ayelet Shaked, and the two parties representing the interests of ultra-orthodox Jewish Israelis, Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ).

According to the polls, however, Likud and its allies will struggle to cross the 60-seat threshold needed to form a majority in the Knesset.

This was, in fact, precisely the problem in April, when Mr Netanyahu found himself needing the support of right-wing former minister Avigdor Lieberman.



A Likud party election campaign banner depicts Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump in Jerusalem.

The Yisrael Beiteinu party chair, however, refused to budge on his demand that ultra-orthodox students do military service, setting up an irresolvable clash with Shas and UTJ.

With polls predicting a similar outcome to April, when Likud and the opposition list Blue and White secured just over a quarter of the Knesset's seats each, the stage is set for Mr Lieberman to play the role of kingmaker.

For his part, Mr Lieberman is

heading into the new elections calling for a unity government to include Likud, Blue and White and his own party, as a way of excluding ultra-orthodox factions from gaining power.

Meanwhile, Blue and White's leader, Benny Gantz, a former head of the Israeli military, has declared that he will only sit in government with Likud if Mr Netanyahu is replaced as party leader.

Such a message resonates with many Jewish Israelis, for whom

the looming corruption indictment faced by Mr Netanyahu means that Israel's longest-serving prime minister is no longer fit for office.

Mr Netanyahu faces charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases in which he is accused of offering favours in exchange for gifts, and promising privileges to media outlet owners in exchange for more favourable coverage.

A pre-trial indictment hearing will take place in early October, the

*Likud, the party in power, and the Blue and White opposition are both opposed to Palestinian statehood*