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## Bannon Down, Pentagon Up, Neocons In?

by Jim Lobe

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The apparent and surprisingly abrupt demise in Steve Bannon’s influence offers a major potential opening for neoconservatives, many of whom opposed Trump’s election precisely because of his association with Bannon and the “America Firsters,” to return to power after so many years of being relegated to the sidelines. Bannon’s decline suggest that he no longer wields the kind of veto power that prevented the nomination of Elliott Abrams as deputy secretary of state. Moreover, the administration’s ongoing failure to fill key posts at the undersecretary, assistant secretary, and deputy assistant secretary levels across the government’s foreign-policy apparatus provides a veritable cornucopia of opportunities for aspiring neocons who didn’t express their opposition to the Trump campaign too loudly.

Ninety days into the administration, the military brass—whose interests and general worldview are well represented by National Security Advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster and Pentagon chief Gen. James Mattis (ret.), not to mention the various military veterans led by National Security Council (NSC) chief of staff Gen. Kenneth Kellogg (ret.) who are taking positions on the NSC—appears to be very much in the driver’s seat on key foreign policy issues, especially regarding the Greater Middle East. Their influence is evident not only in the attention they’ve paid to mending ties with NATO and northeast Asian allies, but also in the more forceful actions in the Greater Middle East of the past two weeks. These latter demonstrations of force seem designed above all to reassure Washington’s traditional allies in the region, who had worried most loudly about both

Obama's non-interventionism and Trump's "America First" rhetoric, that the U.S. is not shy about exerting its military muscle.

Nor could it be lost on many observers that Bannon's expulsion from the NSC took place immediately after Jared Kushner returned from his surprise visit to Iraq hosted by Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford—reportedly the culmination of a calculated strategy of seduction by the Pentagon. Kushner has emerged as the chief conduit to Trump (aside, perhaps, from Ivanka). The timing of Bannon's fall from grace—and Kushner's reported role in it—was particularly remarkable given that Kushner and Bannon were allied in opposing McMaster's effort to fire Ezra Cohen-Watnick from the NSC just a week before Kushner flew to Baghdad.)

### **The Ascendance of the Military**

The military's emergence—at least, for now—has a number of implications, some favorable to neocons, others not so much.

On the favorable side of the ledger, there are clear areas of convergence between both the brass and the neocons (although it's important to emphasize that neither is monolithic and that there are variations in opinion within both groups). Although both the military and the neocons give lip service to the importance of "soft power" in promoting U.S. interests abroad, they share the belief that, ultimately, hard power is the only coin of the realm that really counts.

With substantial experience in counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine in Iraq and Afghanistan, both McMaster and Mattis appreciate the importance of politics in military strategy in principle. But they are ultimately military men and hence naturally inclined to look in the first instance to military tools to pound in any loose nails, whether in the form of failing states or failing regional security structures. (That hammer will likely look even more compelling as the Trump administration follows through on its budgetary proposals to deplete U.S. diplomatic and development capabilities.) Like neoconservatives, they also appreciate large military budgets, and although they certainly oppose, in principle, the idea that the U.S. should play globocop for fear of overextension, they have no problem with the notion of U.S. global military primacy and the necessity of maintaining hundreds of military bases around the world to uphold it.

Moreover, the military and neoconservatives share to some extent an enduring hostility toward certain states. The Pentagon is quite comfortable with an adversarial relationship with Russia, if only because it is familiar and ensures European adherence to NATO, which the United States will dominate for the foreseeable future. This applies in particular to McMaster, who spent the last couple of years planning for conflict with Russia. For similar reasons, the military is generally comfortable with a mostly hostile relationship toward Iran. Such a stance ensures close ties with Washington's traditional allies/autocrats in the Gulf (whose insatiable demand for U.S. weaponry helps sustain the industrial base of the U.S. military as well as the compensation for retired flag officers who serve on the boards of the arms sellers). And, as Mattis has made clear on any number of occasions, he sees Iran as the greatest long-term threat to U.S. interests in the region and welcomes an opportunity to "push back" against what he has claimed are Tehran's hegemonic ambitions there. All of this is clearly encouraging to neocons whose antipathy toward both the Islamic Republic and Russia is deeply ingrained and of long standing.

On the more negative side, however, the military as an institution naturally harbors a distrust of neoconservatives, a distrust established by the Iraq debacle in which the military still finds itself bogged down with no clear exit. “Regime change” and “nation-building”—much touted by neocons in the post-Cold War era—are dirty words among most of the brass, for whom such phrases have become synonymous with quagmire, over-extension, and, as much as they resist coming to terms with it, failure. Of course, many active-duty and retired senior military officers, of whom McMaster may well be one, consider the 2007-08 “Surge”—a plan heavily promoted by neoconservatives—to have been a great success (despite its manifest failure to achieve the strategic goal of political and sectarian reconciliation) that was undone by Obama’s “premature” withdrawal. But even the most ardent COINistas are aware that, absent a catastrophic attack on the U.S. mainland, the American public will have very limited patience for major new investments of blood and treasure in the Middle East, especially given the general perception that Russia and China pose increasing threats to more important U.S. interests and allies in Europe and East Asia, respectively, compared to five or six years ago.

The prevailing wisdom among the brass remains pretty much as former Defense Secretary Bob Gates enunciated it before his retirement in 2011: “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it.” The military may indeed escalate its presence and loosen its rules of engagement in Mesopotamia, Afghanistan, and even Yemen in the coming months, but not so much as to attract sustained public attention and concern, despite the wishes of neocons like Bloomberg columnist Eli Lake, Gen. Jack Keane (ret.), or the Kagans. The desirability of a “light footprint” has become conventional wisdom at the Pentagon, while some neocons still believe that the U.S. occupation of post-World War II Germany and Japan should be the model for Iraq.

Besides Iraq’s legacy, the military has other reasons to resist neocon efforts to gain influence in the Trump administration. As successive flag officers, including one of their heroes, Gen. David Petraeus (ret.), have testified, the virtually unconditional U.S. embrace of Israel has long made their efforts to enlist Arab support for U.S. military initiatives in the region more difficult. Of course, like Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, neocons argue that circumstances have changed over the last decade, that the reigning regional chaos and the fear of a rising Iran shared by both Israel and the Sunni-led Arab states have created a new strategic convergence that has made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict virtually irrelevant. According to this view, Washington’s perceived acquiescence in, if not support for, expanding Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and its quarantine of Gaza are no longer a big deal for Arab leaders.

But this perception runs up against the reality that the Pentagon and CENTCOM have always faced in the region. Even the most autocratic Arab leaders, including those who have intensified their covert intelligence and military cooperation with Israel in recent years, are worried about their own public opinion, and, that until Israel takes concrete steps toward the creation of a viable and contiguous Palestinian state pursuant to the solution outlined in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API), their cooperation will remain limited, as well as covert. In the meantime, the ever-present possibility of a new Palestinian uprising or another armed conflict in Gaza threatens both continuing cooperation as well as the U.S. position in the region to the extent that Washington is seen as backing Israel.

There are other differences. Despite the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, neocons have long believed that states necessarily constitute the greatest threat to U.S. national security, while the military tends to take relatively more seriously threats posed by non-state actors, such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda or, for that matter, al-Shabaab or Boko Haram to which neocons pay almost no attention. Although some neocons are clearly Islamophobic and/or Arabophobic (in major part due to their Likudist worldview), the military, as shown most recently by McMaster's opposition to the use of the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism," sees that attitude as counter-productive. And although neocons and the military share a strong antipathy toward Iran, the latter, unlike the former, appears to recognize that both countries share some common interests. Mattis, in particular, sees the nuclear deal as imperfect but very much worth preserving. Most neocons want to kill it, if not by simply tearing it up, then indirectly, either through new congressional sanctions or other means designed to provoke Iran into renouncing it.

The military tends to appreciate the importance of mobilizing multilateral and especially allied support for U.S. policies, especially the use of force. Many neocons, however, don't accord such support so much importance. Indeed, some are openly contemptuous of multilateralism and international law in general, believing that they unduly constrain Washington's freedom of action (to do good for the world). Neocons see themselves above all as moral actors in a world of good and evil; the brass is more grounded in realism, albeit of a pretty hardline nature.

Thus, to the extent that the military's worldview emerges as dominant under Donald Trump, neoconservatives may have a hard time gaining influence. However, on some issues, such as lobbying for a larger Pentagon budget, taking a more aggressive stance against Moscow, aligning the U.S. more closely with the Sunni-led Gulf states, and promoting a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis Iran in the Middle East, neocons may gain an entrée.

### **Other Avenues of Influence**

Just as the Pentagon deliberately courted Kushner—who appears, like his father-in-law, to be something of an empty vessel on foreign policy issues despite the rapid expansion of his international responsibilities in the first 90 days—so others will. Indeed, Abrams himself appears to have gotten the message. In his interview last week with Politico, he unsurprisingly praises Trump's cruise-missile strikes against Syria and Kushner's modesty. ("I don't view him at all as an empire builder.") At the end of the article, the author notes,

*As for his own future with Trump, Abrams teased that it may still be in front of him, depending on how things shape up with Bannon and Kushner, **the latter of whom he kept going out of his way to praise.** [ Emphasis added.]*

Although the deputy secretary of state position now appears to be taken, Abrams was also careful to laud his erstwhile promoter, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Now reportedly coordinating increasingly with Mattis and McMaster, Tillerson seems to have gained significant ground with Trump himself in recent weeks. Neocons may yet find a home at State, although I think Tillerson's initial promotion of Abrams as his deputy was due primarily to the latter's experience and skills as a bureaucratic infighter rather than for his ideological predispositions. Meanwhile, UN Amb. Nikki Haley, who was promoted to the NSC's Principals Committee on the same day

that Bannon was expelled, appears to have become a neocon favorite for her Kirkpatrickesque denunciations of Russia, Syria, and the UN itself. That she initially supported neocon heartthrob Sen. Marco Rubio for president and has been aligned politically with Sen. Lindsey Graham, who stressed Haley's commitment to Israel when she was nominated as ambassador, also offers hope to neocons looking for avenues of influence and infiltration.

Yet another avenue into the administration—indeed, perhaps the most effective—lies with none other than casino king Sheldon Adelson, the single biggest donor to the Trump campaign and inaugural festivities (as well as to Haley's political action committee). As we noted in January, Kushner himself, along with Israeli Amb. Ron Dermer, had become a critical, pro-Likud conduit between Trump and Adelson beginning shortly after Trump's rather controversial appearance before the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC) at the beginning of the presidential campaign. Although Adelson has maintained a low profile since the inauguration, he clearly enjoys unusual access to both Kushner and Trump. Indeed, the fact that Sean Spicer reportedly apologized personally to Adelson, of all people, almost immediately after his "Holocaust center" fiasco last week serves as a helpful reminder that, as much as the various factions, institutions, and individuals jockey for power in the new administration, money—especially campaign cash—still talks in Washington. This is a reality that neoconservatives absorbed long ago.