



Is Belarus Putin's Next Target?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

August 14th, 2020

Emma Ashford: Hey, Matt, have you heard the good news? The Russians have a coronavirus vaccine, and I'm so excited that I'll soon be able to work somewhere other than my basement. Of course, it's completely untested, but it's not like the Kremlin has ever lied to us about important things before, right?

Matthew Kroenig: Exactly, we don't trust Russia to tell the truth on arms control agreements or cease-fires in Ukraine—I'm not about to trust it with global public health. I hope the vaccine proves effective, but I am skeptical.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow at the Cato Institute.

Matthew Kroenig is deputy director of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center. They debate foreign policy and the 2020 election.

EA: Well, at least if that doesn't cure the coronavirus, it's still a good time! Of course, with the people of Belarus protesting Lukashenko's brutal leadership and his coronavirus failures, I'm not too sure this is the answer either.

MK: There was some good news this week. Israel and the United Arab Emirates reached a surprise diplomatic breakthrough, making the UAE the first Arab country to establish normal diplomatic relations with the Israel in years.

This is also a major vindication of President Donald Trump's Middle East policy. Obama scolded the United States' Gulf partners and urged them to "share" the region with Iran. But Trump's approach of pressuring a longstanding enemy in Tehran and backing traditional partners in Israel and the Gulf has proved more effective. I hope this becomes the new bipartisan consensus on how to approach the region.

EA: It's a big announcement, but let's not get overexcited. I see three problems: first, this isn't a surprise to Middle East watchers. The Emiratis, the Saudis, and the Israelis have been quietly cooperating on security issues for a while now. Second, almost as soon as the White House made its announcement, the parties to the deal started to dial back their commitments. Mohammed bin Zayed's statement only said that they'll work towards setting up bilateral relations. And third, this announcement doesn't really solve the region's actual problems: the maximum pressure campaign against Iran is a failure, there's no prospect of a resolution for the Palestinian people, and wars continue to rage in Libya, Yemen, and Syria.

Obama scolded the United States' Gulf partners and urged them to "share" the region with Iran. But Trump's approach of pressuring a longstanding enemy in Tehran and backing traditional partners in Israel and the Gulf has proved more effective.

Back here in the United States, we finally have some news on the presidential election. Joe Biden announced that his running mate will be Kamala Harris. Of course, that doesn't help us foreign-policy specialists. Who can tell what Harris's foreign policy will look like?

MK: Yes. Big news. Despite much recent talk of the United States as an irredeemably discriminatory place, we have a Black, female child of immigrants nominated by a major political party for the second-most-important position in the country. The announcement shows that the American dream is alive and well.

Every international relations wonk in town will be scrutinizing her record to get a sense of her foreign-policy instincts. What have you found?

EA: Well, she has no significant foreign policy experience. It's not surprising that wasn't a prerequisite for the VP spot, given Biden's wealth of experience in that field. But we do have some statements, most notably from a [questionnaire](#) that the Council on Foreign Relations gave all the primary contenders. And I found her responses quite intriguing: She opposes military intervention in Venezuela, commits to withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, and opposes the Saudi-led war in Yemen—all priorities of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Did you spot anything interesting?

MK: Her work on the Senate Intelligence Committee is of course relevant, but since much of its work is classified, it is hard to learn much about her views from that source. According to reports, she really dug into the details of Russian election interference.

Her views may be more relevant than normal for a VP, as actuarial tables suggest she has a reasonable chance of becoming commander in chief in the coming years. She seems focused on human rights abuses in China and intent to return to a nuclear deal with Iran.

For a ticket devoted to turning Donald Trump out of office, however, there were some interesting commonalities between Harris's views and Trump's foreign policy: a skepticism of U.S. military engagements overseas and of free trade.

For a ticket devoted to turning Donald Trump out of office, however, there were some interesting commonalities with Trump's foreign policy: a skepticism of U.S. military engagements overseas and of free trade. On trade, she was opposed to both the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

EA: It's honestly difficult to separate her views from political necessities. She might be pro-trade but constrained by the leftward shift of the Democratic Party. She might be more hawkish personally but was trying to appeal to progressive voters. Only time will tell.

But Harris's pick isn't actually the most significant news at the moment. From a historically massive explosion in Beirut to rigged elections and protests in Belarus, it's been a busy week. Shall we take the crises in order?

MK: Let's do it. Starting with Lebanon, from what we can tell, the blast appears to have been an accident, not an attack as many had speculated at first. But I do think it underscores the

corruption in Lebanese politics and the malign influence of Hezbollah and Iran in that country and in the region.

EA: I think it says a lot about how we view Lebanon that many of the initial responses were conspiracy theories about Hezbollah or about Israeli sabotage, when the reality is almost certainly incompetence and corruption. But Lebanon's leaders have simply been too busy looting the country to bother about improper storage of the ammonium nitrate that ended up leveling half the city. Even if Hezbollah was siphoning off the ammonium nitrate for weapons, the ultimate blame lies with the Lebanese government.

But I don't think we disagree on that. What do you suggest that the United States should do about it?

MK: I think it does present an opportunity to try to turn opinion in the country and the world against Hezbollah and Iran by reminding everyone of their corrosive effect on everything they touch. Some talk about Iran's attempts to exercise control in places like Lebanon and Yemen, but in reality Iran and its proxies thrive in chaos.

The dysfunction in Lebanon has allowed Iran to extend its influence there and maintain Hezbollah as a deterrent against Israel. The Trump administration is preparing targeted anti-corruption sanctions against select, pro-Hezbollah politicians and businessmen in Lebanon, and I think that could be a valuable step.

EA: But unless the sanctions are focused on Swiss bank accounts, they'll probably end up hurting the average Lebanese citizen more than leaders. Look at the sanctions on Syria: They're meant to hurt the Bashar al-Assad regime, and they're mostly hurting average Syrians instead.

I think it says a lot about how we view Lebanon that a lot of the initial responses were conspiracy theories about Hezbollah or about Israeli sabotage, when the reality is almost certainly incompetence and corruption.

MK: The idea would be to prohibit travel to the United States and freeze assets in U.S. jurisdictions, so they would be targeted. And the United States has carrots as well. Lebanon is badly in need of financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund and development aid from the World Bank, and the U.S. government and its allies can use their influence in those organizations to condition aid on anti-corruption reforms. The aid could even be provided directly to NGOs to bypass the corrupt government. Ultimately, however, I don't think this problem can be fully resolved as long as Iran and Hezbollah remain active in the country.

EA: Hey, you know what would probably make Iran less likely to meddle in regional states using proxies? A less aggressive U.S. policy in the region. There's a reason that Iran mostly uses proxies: It couldn't possibly stand up to the United States and its regional partners on a conventional basis.

Honestly, proxies are just a fact of life in the Middle East. The Saudis use them in Yemen and Syria, the Emiratis in Libya, and the Qataris in Syria. Heck, Emirati-backed proxies in the south of Yemen are close to declaring independence! As I see it, in Lebanon and elsewhere, the point is not to bemoan the use of proxies but to think whether there are ways Washington can help the people of these countries to undermine that foreign influence.

MK: The timeline of events just doesn't support the notion that the United States is responsible for Iran's bad behavior. The Islamic Republic was created for the purpose of resisting the United States and exporting revolution. If Tehran wants better relations with the United States, it can give up its nuclear and missile program and stop supporting terrorism. As Henry Kissinger once said, Iran's leaders need to decide if they want to be a country or a cause.

EA: Have you ever considered trying honey rather than vinegar? Demands that Iran stop meddling in its neighbors—or give up missiles—haven't got us anywhere. Instead, look at the example of Lebanon: One of the reasons that Hezbollah is so popular is that it manages a network of social services that the regular government has failed to provide for its people.

One of the reasons that Hezbollah is so popular is that it manages a network of social services that the regular government has failed to provide for its people.

Humanitarian aid and capacity-building in Lebanon, not more sanctions, is probably the quickest way to undermine Hezbollah.

One of the reasons that Hezbollah is so popular is that it manages a network of social services that the regular government has failed to provide for its people.

But Lebanon isn't the only place with a totally unaccountable government. Let's get back to Belarus?

MK: Yes, it has been a dramatic story. The man referred to as “the last dictator in Europe,” Aleksandr Lukashenko, faced a serious electoral challenge from a 37-year-old woman, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Some thought that he may have been swept from office. Instead, he rigged the elections, sent in security forces to beat protesters, and, after being detained by government forces, Tikhanovskaya fled the country. It is a disappointing but not surprising outcome.

What do you make of it?

EA: I suspect anyone surprised that Lukashenko rigged the election doesn't know much about Belarus. But then, practically no one does. Belarus is a post-Soviet republic so unreconstructed that its security services are literally still called the KGB.

What I think we need to be careful about is framing this as another Russia-versus-the-West conflict like the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine. It's almost the opposite here: Lukashenko had been making overtures to the European Union, and Vladimir Putin had been getting increasingly upset with him.

Anyone surprised that Lukashenko rigged the election doesn't know much about Belarus.

MK: Yes. Neither Lukashenko nor the Belarusian people like being completely under Putin's thumb. It would be good for U.S. interests, and the ability of NATO to defend its members, if Belarus became less of a Russian puppet and pursued a more autonomous foreign policy.

EA: We've got to remember two things, though. The first is that Belarus genuinely isn't totally independent of Russia. They both belong to an EU-style customs union that allows for free movement of goods and people, and there have long been plans for firmer economic and political union. It hasn't happened yet, but that's not to say it couldn't.

And second, I think it's unfortunately the case that the United States or the EU kicking up a fuss about this election is the most likely thing to actually push Lukashenko back toward Moscow. After all, if he has no other prospects, what else is he going to do?

MK: Well, a government in Belarus led by the opposition would likely do more to advance U.S. values and interests, as I suspect that a new government would be even less keen to turn back to Moscow.

EA: Tikhonovskaya or her husband, maybe. But the other main opposition leaders in Belarus—the ones who fled the country before the election—fled to Moscow. I wouldn't be so sure that an opposition government in Belarus would be either democratic or pro-Western.

MK: We should not underestimate Belarus's strategic importance, however. If Putin can easily station and operate forces from Belarus, NATO's task of defending vulnerable front-line states is much harder.

If Putin can easily station and operate forces from Belarus, NATO's task of defending vulnerable front-line states is much harder.

Russia could move forces from Belarus to the exclave of Kaliningrad, cutting off the Suwalki Corridor, which is strategically vital because it is the only land bridge between the Baltic states and the rest of NATO. He could also attack Eastern Poland from Belarus to tie down NATO forces there.

If Putin can easily station and operate forces from Belarus, NATO's task of defending vulnerable front-line states is much harder.

If, on the other hand, Putin cannot count on Belarus as a staging ground, NATO will be safer.

Yes, there are surprisingly big protests—like those that rocked Kyiv six years ago—being met with brutal crackdowns. But Belarus is a whole different story.

EA: This is the problem with war-gaming. You get too caught up in the possibilities without considering whether they're likely. Russia is pretty damn unlikely to engage in a ground invasion of NATO.

But here's a more likely scenario that I think should give you pause: a rerun of Crimea in 2014. When it looked like a new government in Kyiv would shut off Russia's contracted access to its naval base in Sevastopol, Putin just invaded and seized the region.

When it looked like a new government in Kyiv would shut off Russia's contracted access to its naval base in Sevastopol, Putin just invaded and seized the region.

What makes you think that wouldn't be his response to a Belarus that was leaning toward the EU?

When it looked like a new government in Kyiv would shut off Russia's contracted access to its naval base in Sevastopol, Putin just invaded and seized the region.

MK: It goes to show the state of Russian soft power today. The only way Putin can keep neighboring countries from turning against Moscow is by invading them. It's no wonder that he is promoting untested vaccines in a bid to salvage Russia's reputation. We have come a long way

from the hope at the end of the Cold War that all of Europe, including Russia, would soon become whole and free.

Indeed, perhaps we should end by commemorating a person who helped bring the Cold War to its peaceful conclusion. Brent Scowcroft, the only person to serve as national security advisor to two presidents, passed away last week at the age of 95. He had a long and distinguished career of nonpartisan service, and it is notable, in this divided country, that no one seems to have a negative word to say about him.

EA: I find the longevity of some of the great minds of U.S. foreign policy to be amazing. George Kennan died at 101, having seen the First World War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Scowcroft died at 95; he was a teenager during World War II and lived to see the age of Trump. It's quite amazing to think about the changes they saw during their lifetimes.

But on Scowcroft, I find the most impressive thing about him to be that he was willing to challenge the beliefs of even his close friends when he thought it would make better U.S. foreign policy: He spoke out publicly against the Iraq War, and he even criticized NATO expansion.

MK: I had the chance to meet him as an employee of his namesake Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. I was struck by his intelligence and conviction, but also by his humility. I think he was so effective in those demanding roles because, despite his position and accomplishments, he had no discernible ego. I hope we see more public servants like him in the future, but I fear that he may be the product of a bygone age in U.S. politics.

EA: Finally, an area where I'm less of a pessimist than you! I thought the outpouring of anecdotes about Scowcroft after his death was a good sign: People are looking for a better U.S. foreign policy and a politics that is focused less on insults and more on concrete policy debates. Maybe there's hope for us all after all?

***Emma Ashford** is a research fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy at the Cato Institute. Twitter: [@EmmaMAshford](https://twitter.com/EmmaMAshford)*

***Matthew Kroenig** is deputy director of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council and a professor in the Department of Government and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Twitter: [@matthewkroenig](https://twitter.com/matthewkroenig)*