



Did John Bolton Transform U.S. Foreign Policy or Enable Trump's Transgressions?

Emma Ashford, Matthew Kroenig

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Matthew Kroenig: Hi, Emma, I heard there is some new book by a guy named John Bolton. Have you heard anything about this?

Emma Ashford: Sorry I'm late. I was busy listening to Stephen Colbert interview Bolton about his book, and couldn't stop laughing at how ridiculous Bolton's talking points are. His mustache is very impressive, though.

MK: Ridiculous? Why?

EA: We all know that memoirs are often self-serving attempts by former officials to write a first draft of history that makes them look good. But even though Bolton's book is full of juicy tidbits about the Trump administration, you can't exactly escape the fact that his tenure as national security advisor was largely disastrous. He refused to testify at impeachment, and he seems to just be trying to profit from publishing this now. Or do you disagree and see Bolton as a hero of the resistance?

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

MK: I have a lot of respect for Bolton's intelligence and experience and think he is often unfairly maligned. And there are certainly some new revelations in the book.

I'm somewhat critical for another reason. I don't think the book tells us anything about the president that we didn't already know. Donald Trump isn't a longtime student of foreign policy, and he makes decisions based on instinct. In addition, I'm not sure it is good for the country to have a recent senior official write a tell-all memoir while the president is still in office.

EA: Well, the first part is certainly true. I don't know if Bolton's revelations would have carried more weight if he'd actually testified under oath during the impeachment hearings back in January. But at this point, I'm not sure how much worse revelations like this could make the president look. Since impeachment, the president has failed to deal with a pandemic, an economic collapse, and mass protests, even as he's found time to continue to undermine the rule of law.

Frankly, I find it disturbing that most people are so inured to Trump's transgressions at this point that lots of readers just looked at Bolton's revelations about the president—that he didn't know the United Kingdom has nuclear weapons, that he asked China for electoral help—and just shrugged. What does it say about America that we're all just unable to be shocked by Trump anymore?

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MK: While people may not be shocked, I think it could have some marginal electoral consequences. Bolton is a longtime Republican, and he's respected in the party. He was never a Never Trumper. He worked for Trump, saw him up close, and now says he will not vote for him in November. That could encourage some other committed Republicans to do the same.

EA: I'm not so sure. I think Bolton may find that he has less pull in the Republican Party than he used to; it's Trump's party now. But the main reason I'm so dismissive of this book is that Bolton largely got what he wanted in foreign policy during the Trump administration. He got a withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and a more aggressive Iran policy. He got an extremely confrontational approach to Venezuela. He got to kill a bunch of arms control treaties, which—as one author noted this week in *Foreign Policy*—could lead to a nuclear arms race.

Certainly, you can see why the president's penchant for befriending dictators annoyed Bolton, but he chose to enter the Trump administration to achieve his own goals, and he stayed as long as the White House would let him. It was self-serving from beginning to end, and it's been costly for U.S. foreign policy.

MK: I think you meant selfless and advantageous? Bolton is the rare senior official who has a clear worldview and cares deeply about policy. Apparently, one of the few mementos he took from his office was a copy of the president's order to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal.

In my view, that was the right policy. The Iran deal had too many irredeemable flaws, including lifting an arms embargo on Iran after only a few years. The Trump administration now has to introduce a U.N. Security Council resolution to try to keep Iran from buying advanced conventional weapons from Russia and China.

EA: Sorry, Matt, I almost forgot you were one of the few people who don't think Bolton is too hawkish by far. Look, I don't deny he's effective. He achieved many of his foreign-policy goals during his time as national security advisor.

And I'm sure Bolton is still happy with the administration's Iran policy: a continued maximum pressure campaign. But the failure of that campaign is already pretty obvious. The U.N. Security Council resolution you mention is likely to be vetoed; it might not even get the necessary votes to advance to the veto stage! That's not the picture of a policy that's winning friends around the world, is it?

MK: Not winning friends? Two dozen of America's friends voted against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors last week, with only Russia and China in opposition. But, to be sure, we are in a tight spot due to the flaws of the Iran nuclear deal. It was naive when the deal was signed in 2015 to think that the United States could trust Iran—an anti-American, terrorist-sponsoring, revisionist, autocratic power—to buy advanced conventional weapons after only five years.

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Now it's up to the Trump administration to try to clean up the mess. Or are you comfortable with Iran buying advanced weapons that will threaten U.S. partners, forces, and bases in the Middle East?

EA: Well, at least you're not emulating Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and using misleading charts to suggest that Iran could suddenly threaten Europe and Asia.

Look, I'd love to live in the world you're talking about, where if Americans don't like something—such as Iran buying weapons—Washington can just stop it. The choice in 2015 wasn't the deal or continued sanctions, it was the deal or potential sanctions breakdown as other countries decided to sell them weapons anyway. The choice today isn't between selling Iran weapons or not; China and Russia are almost certainly going to do that no matter what the United States does.

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MK: There was a U.N. arms embargo on Iran, and it is set to be lifted as part of the nuclear deal. Diplomacy requires compromise, but the U.S. government shouldn't compromise on core national security interests. No one forced Washington to sign the deal. It was an unforced error.

EA: It's funny you should say that. My colleague John Glaser and I wrote a policy paper a few years back titled "Unforced Error." It was about the risks of pulling *out* of the Iran nuclear deal. The fact is that we're already seeing what happens in a world without the deal. It includes an Iran that's closer to China and Russia, more able to buy arms, and more likely to enrich uranium without proper safeguards and inspections.

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Though I seem to recall you making the case for such a conflict in the past. If the nuclear deal is so bad, is the alternative war?

MK: No. The alternative is maximum pressure in pursuit of an agreement that, unlike the 2015 deal, actually advances U.S. interests. Like Presidents Barack Obama and Trump, I still believe a nuclear Iran is unacceptable and the military option should be on the table as a last resort. And you say that pulling out of the deal would allow Iran to buy arms and enrich uranium without limits, but that is precisely what the deal permitted over time due to its sunset clauses.

EA: That discussion of sunsets is a bit disingenuous. I'd like to remind both you and Bolton that even when the nuclear deal's provisions expire, Iran agreed to continue to be bound by the

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and subject to its rules on inspection and enrichment. That's hardly "without limits."

But at least Trump has found a way to distract himself from Bolton's revelations. He finally got back to his favorite pastime: holding campaign rallies, in this case a rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma—an event intended to prove that the coronavirus was gone and the economy was roaring back. It didn't exactly go well. Did you get a ticket?

MK: Iran's NPT commitments (which it repeatedly violated) are not enough to solve this problem. If they were, then the entire Iran nuclear crisis, including the deal, would have been unnecessary.

I didn't make it to Tulsa, but I was in the Midwest last week and it was striking how different the attitude there is toward the pandemic. In this particular town, there were zero confirmed cases of COVID-19, and people are tired of having their lives and business affected by lockdowns. Most people were not wearing masks, and restaurants were open for inside dining despite the stated restrictions. The response to the coronavirus and whether it is time to lift restrictions is shaping up to be a major national cleavage. I take it you did not attend the Tulsa rally either?

EA: I didn't, and most Oklahomans didn't either. It was striking how empty the arena was: The Tulsa fire marshal confirmed that it was only about one-third full, and the campaign had to cancel the outside overflow area that it had set up. That's notable because it implies that despite the supposed partisan split on reopening, most people still aren't willing to risk their health personally.

The country has to find a smart way to reopen the economy. Look at Singapore or South Korea, where effective quarantines combined with masks and other public health initiatives have kept case numbers low and allowed for life to go on. Here, in contrast, what we've been seeing is foolhardy things like the rally, or states reopening bars and restaurants. The result has been a big surge in cases.

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