



Is the U.S. Government Back in the Business of Regime Change?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

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Emma Ashford: Hey, Matt! Another two weeks of rarely leaving my house, and the news just continues to get stranger. I'm honestly a bit upset that I'm stuck inside while other Americans are—apparently—still out there doing fun things like getting haircuts, going to the beach, or invading Venezuela. How's life treating you?

Matthew Kroenig: Yes. Nothing like a good coup attempt to break up the monotony of quarantine. That was such a strange episode. Fortunately, by most accounts, the U.S. government was not behind the plot, but I do worry that this will strengthen Nicolás Maduro and undermine the opposition—and it could have implications for the U.S. presidential election given the large number of Venezuelan exiles in Florida. What do you make of it?

EA: Well, first of all, I highly doubt this was officially backed by the U.S. government. It's simply too incompetent. I mean, the coup plotters were live-tweeting their mission, for god's sake!

But it's the kind of thing that you wonder about in the Trump administration. Given President Donald Trump's admiration for this kind of retired special forces contractor, the administration's ties to people like Blackwater's Erik Prince, and its strong support for opposition leader Juan Guaidó, you have to wonder if these coup plotters somehow came to believe they had U.S. support.

Speaking of the November election, do you really think the Venezuelan vote is that important?

MK: It does seem as if the plotters thought they had U.S. support. Guaidó apparently even signed one of the documents in the possession of the plotters.

On the Venezuelan vote, I'll defer to experts on U.S. politics, but there are 200,000 voters with Venezuelan roots in Florida, the state was decided by fewer votes than that in 2016, and the race will hinge on a few swing states like Florida, so it could be significant. Do you think this episode will be a setback for Trump's Venezuela policy?

EA: A tough stance on Cuba helped Republicans in Florida for many years. But I think it would be hard to do much worse than existing Venezuela policy. Moreover, calling it Trump's policy is a bit misleading. Vice President Mike Pence has been taking the lead on this, coupled with Elliott Abrams, the special envoy for Venezuela. They're the ones pushing for a Guaidó government

and the overthrow of Maduro. For obvious reasons, including the fact that Maduro still has a strong base of support from the Venezuelan military, they've been entirely unsuccessful.

If nothing else, the coup plotters and the White House do seem to be operating from the same point of view: Both seem to believe that Maduro would be far easier to remove from power than he is in reality.

MK: Yes. He has been more resilient than many believed. I still think this is the right policy, however. Pence and Abrams are not alone—there is broad international support for Maduro's ouster and for recognizing Guaidó as the successor. And getting rid of Maduro would clearly be better for U.S. interests and for the Venezuelan people. Are you saying that Maduro can do a better job than the opposition?

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EA: Of course not. He's a dictator who helped wreck one of the strongest economies in Latin America. He proved incapable of keeping a petrostate solvent in an era of record oil prices. If that's not incompetence, I don't know what is.

But the question shouldn't be whether Maduro is good or bad. It should be: 1) whether it's in the United States' national interests to do anything about it, and 2) whether it's possible to remove him. The answers to both are probably no. Unless you think we should still be engaging in Cold War-style regime change?

MK: The benefits of having a friendly democracy in Venezuela are quite high, and the costs of providing diplomatic support to the opposition are low, so it seems like the right policy even if the prospects of toppling Maduro are uncertain.

On the broader question, regime change is not only a Cold War phenomenon. Great powers have attempted to support regimes in their own image since the Greco-Persian Wars if not before. U.S. adversaries, such as Russia and China, are currently messing around in democratic domestic politics. And autocracies are notoriously brittle. So I don't see why the United States should give hostile dictators sanctuary.

EA: You're not alone. Hal Brands, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, has an [article out this week](#) in which he argues that the U.S. government might want to consider covert regime change in certain countries in response to growing U.S.-China tensions. Here's the thing, though: There's a [decent set of academic works](#) on the topic, and they almost all conclude that regime change—covert or overt—typically fails.

Your policy preferences are more costly than you think. It does cost the United States when Washington engages in regime change; it can lead to civil wars and overspilling conflicts or even just suspicion and pushback from other autocratic states.

MK: There is great value to good political science research, but there are also limits. To be rigorous, it must zero in on a specific outcome, and it cannot cover the broad range of issues policymakers must take into account. Regime change may often fail, but making the attempt can still be in the U.S. national interest if the successes result in big payoffs. There might still be an

Iron Curtain across Europe if it hadn't been for Washington's consistent efforts to support freedom and democracy overtly and covertly during the Cold War.

EA: Come on, Matt! Even the CIA thinks covert intervention is a bad idea these days!

But we should probably move on. You might remember we spoke a few weeks back about Russia and its response to COVID-19? At the time, we had no good information about how the country was handling the pandemic, and the dubious data suggested just a few cases. As expected, we're now starting to learn more. And I'm finding it hard to believe just how poor the Kremlin's response to the pandemic is. Any thoughts?

MK: I guess I'm less surprised. Russia had a poor public health system to begin with. On many measures, it is closer to sub-Saharan Africa than to Europe. Russia's military forces are suffering because they are having such a hard time finding sufficient numbers of able-bodied young men. Did you expect Russia to perform better?

EA: Well, we've had prior conversations about whether autocracies are responding better to the pandemic. You were hopeful about the ability of democracies to handle the coronavirus, and I was concerned that autocracies seem to have the upper hand, at least in public relations terms. By now we can tell that it seems to come down more to state capacity than to regime type.

So the structural factors you point out are important, but I also think that President Vladimir Putin is somewhat trapped by his own mythology. If he steps up to manage the pandemic, he'll look weak and powerless to fix it. But leaving it to his governors just makes it look as if he just doesn't care.

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MK: You're right that some autocracies, like Vietnam, have done well employing extreme authoritarian social control measures—as an article in *Foreign Policy* this week pointed out—but I stand by my prediction that, with the benefit of hindsight, we will see that democracies performed better on balance. In fact, new data leaked this week shows that the true number of COVID-19 infections in China may be more than 10 times the official figures.

EA: Yeah, the data shows pretty much exactly what we all expected: China systematically altered its coronavirus case numbers downward. Hopefully, the leaked data will help researchers get a clearer picture of what happened there.

It's funny, though, we're comparing China, Russia, and Vietnam here, but I actually see stronger parallels between Putin's response and Trump's response. Both have tried to avoid responsibility for coronavirus failures by delegating down from the federal level. Both are relying on the idea of the “good tsar”—hoping that people will believe that they are not responsible and that they're being undermined by incompetent underlings.

But it's not working well in either case, and COVID-19 is now spreading inside the White House and the Kremlin.

MK: As I've said before, this is what makes this crisis different. Everyone, including top officials in the White House and the Kremlin, is vulnerable. Another leader addressing the

COVID-19 challenge is Iraq's new prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. His election is the first good news in Iraqi politics in some time. Do you think he can succeed in bringing order to the country and working with both Iran and the United States?

EA: I'm glad to see Iraq finally has a prime minister, but to be blunt, I feel sorry for him. He's drawn a very short straw: We're in a historically unprecedented oil price slump, and Iraq gets over 90 percent of its revenues from oil. Hard to see how he handles that, plus coronavirus, plus all of Iraq's other problems.

I did see an interesting article on the *Foreign Policy* site the other day suggesting that the best solution might be to "Finlandize" Iraq—in other words, to let it become effectively neutral in the U.S.-Iran confrontation. And I have to say, it might be best for the Iraqis themselves if that were the case.

MK: It's certainly an interesting proposal, but given Iran's interests and vast informal influence over Shiite militias in Iraq, I can't see Tehran abiding by such an agreement. The author argued this would be a way to avoid war with Iran, but I think the United States can also avoid war by deterring Iran and responding when it crosses U.S. red lines. Iran has been more cautious I would argue since the killing of Qassem Suleimani for example.

EA: It would definitely be difficult to ensure Tehran was abiding by such a deal, but it could still be worthwhile if it helps lower tensions. Perhaps the best hope for Iraq at the moment is that both the United States and Iran remain distracted by COVID-19 and leave it alone.

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MK: Trump would like to see a reduced U.S. role in the country, and Iraq is certainly not the central issue in U.S. politics that it was just a few years ago. Trade, however, will likely be a major issue in the presidential election. Did you see that the Republican Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley called for the United States to withdraw from the World Trade Organization (WTO)?

EA: I did. I thought it was a fascinating insight into how some conservative internationalists today actually view international organizations like the WTO. The idea is that these institutions improve global security. But we're increasingly seeing conservatives like Hawley turning against them when it becomes clear that Washington can't just enforce its will through them.

Republicans may be on firmer ground emphasizing trade in the election, though. The supply shortages caused by COVID-19 aren't just the result of globalized supply chains, but it's a plausible explanation that sounds good to voters and supports Trump's anti-trade arguments.

MK: The problem is not that the United States can't enforce its will. It's that these institutions are being preyed on by China, undermining the purposes they were intended to serve. Beijing used its influence in the World Health Organization to mislead the world on COVID-19, and it systematically engages in unfair trade practices inconsistent with WTO rules. It would not be wise, however, to abandon these institutions altogether. A better approach would be two-tracked, to reform them from within even as Washington builds new institutions with allies and like-minded states that work better.

EA: This may be the rare issue where I'm more hard-line than you. I don't think we should pull out of the WTO, but to me, institutions matter far less than power. I think NATO is outdated and needs reform, while the United Nations is a pointless talk shop.

Before we go, though, I saw you had [another article](#) on the *Foreign Policy* site this week. Writing without me to yell at you must be so relaxing. As you might expect, I don't completely agree with your argument about Russia and China. But before I shoot it down, why don't you tell our readers about it?

MK: Some big names in the foreign-policy world, including reportedly Henry Kissinger, have argued that the United States should seek to work with Russia to contain China; I think that's a mistake. Rather than rely on shifty dictators, the United States should work with its democratic allies to counter China and Russia at the same time.

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EA: I think it's unclear whether Russia would be a good partner for the United States. They have all those big structural economic and demographic problems we talked about earlier on. But if it's a choice between the small benefits of working with them and the much bigger costs of working against them, it's probably better to find common ground. To [paraphrase LBJ](#): Would you rather have the Russians outside the tent or inside the tent?

MK: Inside, in theory. But the concessions we would have to make to lure Putin in would be too great, and I wouldn't trust him once he was there.

EA: Well, with Putin's press secretary and his prime minister both now in the hospital with the coronavirus, who knows who you'll be dealing with when this is all over?

MK: It sounds like you're looking forward to a post-Putin Russia. See, maybe regime change isn't so bad after all.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy at the Cato Institute.

Matthew Kroenig is the deputy director in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council and an associate professor in the Department of Government and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.