



Is Trump Touting His Diplomatic Achievements to Get Reelected?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

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Matthew Kroenig: Hey, Emma! How are you? I'm sleepy. I'm not used to staying up until 11 p.m. every night to watch television, but I didn't want to miss the Democratic and Republican national conventions.

Emma Ashford: If I wanted to stay awake, I'm not sure I'd watch these speeches! Conventions are useful for political parties to present their message, but you rarely get any concrete policy announcements. Did anyone impress you?

MK: It has been light on policy, and even lighter still on foreign policy. Joe Biden and the Democrats understandably focused more on COVID-19, the economy, and race.

There were, however, several speeches devoted to foreign policy. Former Secretaries of State Colin Powell and John Kerry spoke on behalf of Biden. And current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley gave speeches at the RNC. They were all fine for what they were. I found the Pompeo and Haley speeches most persuasive.

EA: I didn't find any of the speeches particularly revelatory, though I guess it was notable that Powell once again endorsed the Democratic candidate rather than the Republican.

The big problem, however, was Pompeo's speech. It might have been illegal, it was certainly a violation of the norm that secretaries of state are above politics, and it was an impressively tasteless use of government resources for campaign benefit. Speaking on the roof of his hotel in Jerusalem? He couldn't have pandered more to evangelicals if he tried.

MK: It is certainly out of the norm, but it is hardly the biggest issue facing the country. I didn't even know this was unusual until this week's controversy. And, while the secretary of state doesn't usually speak at a convention, a sitting U.N. ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, gave her famous "Blame America First" speech at Ronald Reagan's 1984 convention. And George W. Bush was even criticized in 2004 for not having Condoleezza Rice or Colin Powell on the agenda. During that convention, the New York Times even called the stated justification about diplomats staying out of partisan politics "improbable" and hinted that racism was the real motive. I guess I can't help but feel like this is a bit of a manufactured crisis.

EA: Fair enough. I believe the argument is that the secretary of state needs to be nonpartisan to act as America's voice in the world. With the Trump administration already blowing apart the idea that foreign policy should be nonpartisan, though, this is hardly any worse.

But it does highlight a bigger problem: Trump routinely uses foreign policy for personal and political gain. Pompeo's speech from Jerusalem was a reminder that Trump moved the embassy there at the urging of evangelical voters and top donors. Pompeo also highlighted the recent Israel-United Arab Emirates deal, which looks increasingly like a political stunt rather than a real diplomatic achievement. It's disturbing the extent to which Trump is weaponizing foreign policy to try to ensure reelection.

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MK: Foreign policy is featuring more at the RNC for good reason. The Pompeo and Haley speeches remind me of the significant foreign-policy wins in this administration: beating the Islamic State, tougher approaches to China and Iran, getting out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and providing arms to the Ukrainians. And, yes, the UAE-Israel deal, which can be both a real diplomatic achievement and good for reelection at the same time.

EA: Don't you mean beating the Islamic State (by finishing up the Obama administration's plan), keeping the United States mired in Syria, a failed policy of maximum pressure on Iran, a damaging trade war with China, undermining global arms control, and prolonging the war in the Donbass?

But I do think the RNC speeches highlighted that Trump's foreign policy is now more coherent than it was at the start of his administration. Big public spectacles like the UAE-Israel deal, or the North Korea summits, ripping up international deals, imposing sanctions that don't achieve very much, and claiming victory before it's actually achieved.

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MK: On the DNC side, Powell and Kerry made some good points. I think it is the case that a Biden administration would seek to repair relations with treaty allies, especially in Europe.

The constant refrain that doesn't resonate, however, is that Biden would stand up to dictators. Obama and Biden passed on plenty of opportunities to punish autocrats in their eight years of office, from refusing to arm Ukraine in its fight against Vladimir Putin's Russia, to maintaining "strategic patience" with Kim Jong Un in North Korea, to backing down from striking Bashar al-Assad for his chemical weapons attacks in Syria. Why are we supposed to believe that next time will be different?

EA: In many situations, I think "standing up to dictators" is just code for refusing to work through hard problems diplomatically. It might be satisfying to denounce foreign leaders, but it doesn't actually help achieve foreign-policy goals. One area where I'll give Trump credit is his

willingness to talk to leaders like Kim Jong Un. I'm worried that Biden will try to out-hawk Trump during the campaign—and make diplomacy harder if he's elected.

MK: Yes. You had a nice piece this week in the New York Times about your concern that Biden will return to an overly expansive overseas U.S. role. What's your main worry?

EA: Thanks. It was mostly an expression of my frustration. The Democratic primaries were—for once—full of foreign-policy debate. There were a range of opinions and great new ideas. And yet, the Biden campaign appears to be mostly aiming just for a return to the pre-Trump status quo in foreign policy. Neither Biden nor his running mate Kamala Harris even mentioned foreign policy in their convention speeches, and when you look at the campaign's top advisors, I worry that a Biden campaign will ignore the opportunity to reorient U.S. foreign policy.

Would you be happy with a return to the status quo? Many in Washington would be.

MK: I said it was a nice piece, but I didn't say I agreed! I would hope that a Biden administration would continue the United States' traditional leadership role, which I think has been good for the world and for the American people for the past 75 years. But it is not 1945 or 1991 anymore. The global system needs to be revitalized and adapted for a new era, but U.S. global leadership must remain the central pillar.

EA: "Leadership" is a nice word. It can mean whatever you want it to mean. For many in Washington, I fear that "American leadership" actually means "everyone else should do what I want." I think Biden should listen more to other countries.

But a more important question is how the United States engages with the world. When I hear Biden say "return to leadership," I worry that he'll do what every U.S. president in the last 30 years has done and focus only on military leadership. The country is fighting a war on terrorism in over a dozen countries right now, and Biden hasn't even clarified if he plans to continue that.

MK: It would be nice if the terrorists operated in fewer places, but, unfortunately, they are spreading to new areas. Under pressure in the Middle East, the Islamic State made a conscious decision to move into North Africa, including Mali. There was a coup there last week (the second in a decade), and I am afraid it might jeopardize U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the country.

EA: We define terrorism too broadly. If you look at all those places in Africa where U.S. troops are deploying, from Mali to Cameroon to Niger, what you find is militant groups who've adopted the al Qaeda or Islamic State brand, but who have predominantly local goals. To put it another way: A lot of these conflicts aren't about America. They're local affairs.

And Mali is a case in point. I'm certainly no expert on the country, but this is the second military coup in recent years. The country has a problem with corruption, poverty, and poor education. I'm still doubtful that the involvement of Western troops there does much—if anything—to improve the situation. And it certainly doesn't make Americans at home safer.

MK: What happens in the caliphate doesn't stay in the caliphate. The lesson from pre-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria in the early 2010s is that when these violent extremists groups

are given safe havens, they will eventually use the platform to strike against the United States. What happens in the caliphate doesn't stay in the caliphate. The lesson from pre-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria in the early 2010s is that when these violent extremists groups are given safe havens, they will eventually use the platform to strike against the United States, Europe, and other allies.

The United States, the U.N., and France had good counterterrorism cooperation with the civilian government in Mali, but the U.S. government has now announced a suspension of military aid in the wake of the coup. I think it is the right decision, but I hope for a swift return to civilian rule and a continuation of the security relationship.

EA: I think you're making part of my point for me. If Washington's biggest concern when it comes to Mali isn't the corruption, poor governance, or ailing economy, but just that the United States gets to maintain its security relationship and fight militants, there's something wrong with the approach. Continuing to fight an incredibly broadly construed war on terrorism around the world drives the U.S. government to prop up a variety of unsavory leaders who oppress their own people or take questionable steps to maintain their hold on power.

And that's why I'm upset about both campaigns this year. Trump promised to end the wars; there are now more U.S. troops fighting abroad than in 2016. Barack Obama promised to end the wars; he invaded Libya and surged troops in Afghanistan. George W. Bush promised a humble foreign policy, and we all saw how that turned out. Americans need a campaign that wrestles with how to end the war on terror, so that the country can get out of some of these toxic security relationships.

MK: Propping up unsavory leaders is not nearly as satisfying as bringing them down, which brings us to Belarus. The opposition to longtime President Aleksandr Lukashenko is much larger and more resilient than many realized, raising big questions about how Putin and the West will respond. Some are saying that Washington should strike a deal with Putin in which the U.S. government promises that a free Belarus would never be part of NATO or the European Union. But I think that is not for outsiders to decide right now and that the people of Belarus should have a say.

EA: Lukashenko has certainly been leaning into this debate. He's trying to bait Putin into supporting him by talking up the threat from NATO and implying that only he can hold the line. If Washington were willing to say now—categorically—that Belarus could never join NATO, the U.S. government could deny him that tool.

And I think it's rather foolish to suggest that membership in a defensive alliance should be the choice of prospective member states, rather than the existing members. Of course prospective members are keen to obtain free security! That doesn't mean it's good for the alliance.

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MK: Of course existing members would be essential to any decision to expand NATO. But if you take principles of sovereignty and self-government seriously, then a future democratic government in Belarus should be able to decide its own foreign-policy orientation. It is not up to Washington and Moscow to decide over the heads of the Belarusian people.

EA: This is what got us in trouble before. The assertion that states should be able to choose whether to join NATO sounded good in the idealistic 1990s, but it ended up producing today's disastrous relationship with Russia. And in Ukraine, Sam Charap and Tim Colton have argued that it created the impression that states can't stay neutral. If states think they have to choose, it can cause domestic turmoil and even conflict.

By far, the best thing we can do in the case of Belarus is stay out of it so that it doesn't become another Russia versus NATO dispute.

MK: I strongly disagree. NATO expansion has been a major achievement. While I am sure Putin is angered that Russia cannot lord it over his neighbors anymore, appeasing him with a sphere of influence is not good for U.S. interests or for the people in Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics.

And while NATO might not expand anytime soon, my workload is about to. The unofficial end of summer might not be until Monday, but I have to teach my first classes at Georgetown this afternoon, and my syllabi are not quite complete. Until next time?

EA: Don't let the undergrads party too much, or we'll all be back in lockdown soon!

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