



January 21, 2022

Featuring Ambassador John Bolton and Reuel Marc Gerecht

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

**MAY:** John Bolton has had quite a few challenging jobs, among them: Presidential National Security Advisor, Ambassador to the United Nations, as well as several senior positions in the State Department. He's here today to chat with us about many issues, but particularly about his original and provocative new essay in *The National Review* on the so-called 'rules-based international order'. Who is 'we'? Reuel Marc Gerecht, Senior Fellow at FDD, formerly a case officer at the CIA, and yours truly, Cliff May, FDD founder and president. And of course, it's nice that you're with us, too, here on *Foreign Policy*.

Okay, so John, as I mentioned, you have a new piece in *National Review* that asks the question, is there a rules-based international order? Let me add, it's often called the American-led liberal rules-based international order. I guess your basic thesis is that it's a paper moon sailing over a cardboard sky. It's make-believe.

**BOLTON:** Well, I didn't have that metaphor, but I wish—

**MAY:** Next time.

**BOLTON:** —I had thought of that one. Part of the problem is, is it a rules-based international order? Is it a liberal rules-based international order? Is it a U.S. one? Nobody really knows. And in fact, the candid observation is people are willing to concede they don't know what the content is, but it sounds good. Therefore, among the high-minded of the world, in the U.S. and Europe in particular, they like to talk about it all the time.

Superficially, of course it sounds good. Who doesn't want a rules-based international order? The trouble is it just doesn't conform to reality. It's part of a long series of idealistic views of how to basically end war in the contemporary world. World federalism was a big thing after World War II. John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford in their early days as members of the House of Representatives all supported resolutions in favor of it.

But one decade after another has brought failure to each successive iteration, the rules-based international order is the most recent, and it ignores the most fundamental rule of international politics, which is that it's based on power. The international order is not the same as the domestic order in the United States or any other country, and when you make analogies between the two, you're making a fatal mistake.

**MAY:** Let me try this way of looking at it, which is not in contradiction, but is slightly different. Tell me if it's wrong. Particularly after World War II, but as you say, the League of Nations, Kellogg-Briand Pact, all that. There have been efforts. But after World War II, the great minds said, "Look, America doesn't want to run everything. We want to set up something that everybody will see as fair." So, you have the UN Human Rights Declaration, and the Soviets were brought in on that. You guys can accept this too, right, because it's not just a right to free speech, which you may not really believe in? It's the right to work, and the right to leisure and all kinds of socialist made-up rights and things like that. So, we'll have this basic idea that we can all buy into, and won't that be better?

Now, I would argue that when the U.S. is strong, like after the collapse of the Soviet Union perhaps, and we got the unilateral moment as Charles Krauthammer called it, you could say maybe that's working. But at a certain point, others, particularly the Chinese—but not just the Chinese—in Beijing said, "Okay, there is this architecture of an international order. It's rules-based. Why don't we just hijack it? Then we have the UN, then we have the UN Human Rights Council. Then we have the WHO, the World Health Organization. Then we have the International Criminal Court—We can make them dance to our tune instead of America's tune." And I would even go further and say they're more than halfway there at this point.



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**BOLTON:** Well, this is what happens, I think, when you try to over-conceptualize the real world, and believe in the picture that you've painted as opposed to what's actually going on. There is a kind of order in the world today. It's a jerry-rigged, Rube Goldberg kind of device. Nobody would plan it in advance. But it's basically the system of American alliances and power around the world. It is our order, but it's not rules-based other than in the sense of the golden rule, that is who has the gold makes the rules. It's an American order, and a lot of people don't like it, and there's no doubt about it. But it's not based on law, it's based on power.

**GERECHT:** Well, it's based on more than just power. I mean, I think that the Atlantic Alliance and NATO which are the most important parts of this post World War II liberal order are certainly based on an understanding that America isn't a predateous power. It does stand for certain values, and those values are certainly more or less shared by the Western powers. There are certainly strong disagreements amongst those powers, but I think there has been an acknowledgment that American hegemony is a good thing. The Americans I think are beginning to doubt that. The Europeans doubted when the United States was strong. They doubted less when the United States was weak.

**BOLTON:** Well, I think your last point is very important. If we had started out with this proposal having the power of Lithuania, we wouldn't have a lot of adherence to it now. Everything you've said about our view of the world, and the fact that as an imperial power, we are the least imperial power in human history, and all that sort of thing. I believe in, and I do believe in the morality of America's conduct in the world. But without the power, it would be a pretty pale picture.

**GERECHT:** Everything depends, it's dependent upon American hegemony. Unfortunately, on neither the left nor the right, I think do you find any enthusiasts in favor of that concept anymore? I have to say, I don't think the American political elite on left or the right has done a particularly brilliant job of articulating why American hegemony is a really, really good idea and why it's worth the money that you spend on it.

**MAY:** Well, I think the left in particular in this country—they're not supporters of the idea of American hegemony. I might go further and say that Americans in general, if they could give up primacy in the world, there's certainly an isolationist impulse on the left and the right to say, "You know what? It's not worth the trouble. Why can't we not do this? Why can't we be more like Denmark? Wouldn't that be much nicer?"

Okay, as you all know but let's remember, after World War II, the British that had been the preeminent power for a fairly long time, historically—not like the Roman empire, but a very long time—they were exhausted, so they said, "Okay, we can't carry this load anymore. We'll give it to the Americans."

But if the Americans don't want to carry the load, and they don't appear to, a lot of them, not me, not you, not any of us, then there's no good nation that is strong enough, and no strong nation that is good enough. Now then, a lot of people say, "That's why we need an international order. That's why we need—" and we're going to get to this because you talk about this — either a global government or a more euphemistically global governance, because then nobody's really in charge.

Of course, the Chinese, the Iranian regime, the Russians, they say, "Yeah, that's a lot of fun, but we do not obey anybody else's rules. We do it our way." So that, in other words, if America is giving up any ambition or the responsibilities of being the leading world power, then there's no good substitute. There's just bad substitutes.

**BOLTON:** Well, I think, I think this isolationism in the United States on both the left and the right is real. I don't think there's any doubt about that. I think the isolationism on the left is different from that on the right, in that the



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left really does yearn for global government. I mean, they yearn for bigger government. They don't like counties, they like state governments. They don't like states, they like the federal government. And a world government, "Oh, make my day."

But I also think there is a deep strain of feeling that American power is illegitimate, that we're no different from any of the rest of them, and that you can't trust us. So, for many of these people in international law circles, constraining the United States, is viewed as just as much of a problem as a China or a Russia problem. After all, it was not one of those two countries that French Foreign Minister Védrine called a hyperpuissance. We are the only one he deigned to give that title to, because that's the one they were most worried about.

I think on the right, the isolationism has a long history to it going back to pre-World War II. I think, though, today, the reason that it's more widespread is because political leaders have taken the cheap way out and have not explained we're not engaged in the world out of altruistic motivations. We're doing this for ourselves. We help a lot of other people, and a lot of times those people don't pay their fair share, which we should press them on. But we're not doing it to make their lives more comfortable, we're doing it to enhance our own. And if we give it up, there's nobody else that's going to do it for us.

**GERECHT:** I would add just quickly on that. I mean, I do think that President Trump, and this was something different about him, did introduce the idea of moral equivalence on the right. That he said the United States, too, was a predaceous power, the United States, too, did dark things, in that we were not special, which actually isn't that different from what Barack Obama said.

**BOLTON:** I think that's right. You know, there is this well-kept secret about the United States, which is it's filled with human beings who make mortal mistakes, and we'd be foolish not to acknowledge that. But I do think this was a problem of Trump's approach to the world. As he once said to the Russians, "Well, what's so good about us?" I think, with regard to Putin's conduct, that is the kind of thing that really characterizes the left in American politics, that we're no different from these other totalitarian states, in effect.

**MAY:** I'm reminded of John Kerry when he was Secretary of State announcing, "The Monroe Doctrine is over." I think what he meant by that was we don't want to interfere in the affairs of Latin America. "That was the wrong thing for Monroe and many of the presidents to do, but this administration is much more enlightened, so we won't." That was, of course, a green light, that since then, what we've seen – and I wrote a piece about this recently, and there's a few others who have, as well.

Latin America is being overrun with Chinese, Iranian, and Russian influence right now, and has been for the past few years. But he kind of gave a green light to it says it's not our problem. Now, he probably thought, "You guys can take care of yourselves." The problem is those guys can't take care of themselves without any help from a superpower if the predaceous powers of the world like China, like Iran are going to put their foot in there. They're going to do it.

**GERECHT:** That brings up a question. I mean, John, can you imagine, for example, a scenario and take those three revisionist powers. Take Iran, take China, and Russia. Can you imagine the scenario where the United States would be prepared to go to war, where it actually would draw a red line and mean it to stop them?



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**BOLTON:** Well, I think our objective, as really it has been since 1945, is to avoid war, but preserve our interests. And therefore, to constrain adversaries who don't wish us well, you want structures of deterrence in place that convince them that the cost to them of taking any kind of belligerent action would be far greater.

**GERECHT:** It has to be credible.

**BOLTON:** Absolutely.

**GERECHT:** I mean, they have to believe that you're willing to kill and bleed for a red line.

**BOLTON:** Yeah.

**GERECHT:** Some principle.

**BOLTON:** But I think so many steps over the past, I'll just say, 15 years to maybe 16 to give the last two administrations, not counting Biden, the full scope of it, we've done one thing after another that has significantly undercut the feelings of deterrence that we've built up over a long time. I think the withdrawal from Afghanistan probably ranks right at the top of that. I think we see the consequences of it now. That goes to the issue of America's order overall, because when we withdraw from Afghanistan, no better order replaces it, it only gets worse.

**MAY:** I want to go back. I want to talk more about Afghanistan, but one quick digression that's relevant. With Venezuela, because I mean, this is a country where millions of people have fled from poverty. It's a dreadful situation. We had in the last administration, Elliot Abrams, a very smart, experienced guy, as a special envoy there. We were going to do something about this terrible humanitarian and political situation, really in our backyard, one of, if not the largest oil producer. Of course, as far as I can see, we've made no progress whatsoever.

**BOLTON:** No, look, I was very much involved in supporting Juan Guaidó and the opposition. I think we did the right thing. Our problem was we didn't do enough. We didn't follow through on some of the things that might have made a difference in Venezuela. Speaking of a moral case for the assertion of American power, you've got a twenty plus year dictatorship in Venezuela that has driven oil production in this potentially very rich country, down to one third of the level it was in the late 1940s. So, no surprise the country is a lot poorer, in part because the leadership is stealing the money that does come in, profiting from drug trafficking. Yet I think because of the legacy of the Obama administration, we couldn't summon up the strength to follow it through consistently. It's just getting worse in Venezuela.

**GERECHT:** Could I ask you, John, if you could – I mean, it's always fun – historical hindsight – but if you could rewind the tape on Venezuela, what would you have done differently?

**BOLTON:** Well, I think if you go back to the George W. Bush administration, there was a moment when Hugo Chavez was in custody in Venezuela from a coup d'état, or maybe a kind of accidental thing, and we stepped back and said, "We're not going to interfere." That was the moment, I think, where it might have made a difference.

In terms of what happened in early 2019, honestly, we followed the views of the people, the opposition in Venezuela. They thought the moment had come, and we were wrong on that. There was probably more we could have done to assist them that we didn't do.



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I think it's something we'll review for a long time, but the point is, one of the reasons we focused on it was not altruism because we wanted a democratic government for the Venezuelans, but precisely the point that you both have been making, that in Venezuela, we saw a heavy Russian presence, a heavy Chinese presence, and a heavy Iranian presence, supporting a heavy Cuban presence. The Venezuelans were not being governed by a Venezuelan government. They were being governed by a surrogate of outside powers, and that remains today. It's even more entrenched.

**MAY:** By the way, am I overstating the case to say that, right now, Cuba – terrible little dictatorship, poor, under sanctions – is more influential in Latin America than the United States is?

**BOLTON:** Yeah. Look, every new president comes into office saying, "I'm going to pay more attention to Latin America. I'm going to make it a higher priority." Nobody ever does, and as a consequence, we are where we are. It's very interesting the Biden administration has not, in Cuba at least, tried to roll all the way back to the Obama policy.

Cuba is another case where, during the Trump administration, we didn't go far enough. We should have derecognized the government. I think if you look at the demonstrations on the island today, Cuban exiles or descendants of exiles in America today say they've never seen anything like it on the island. The extent of the demonstrations among the young people. People that have never known anything other than the dictatorship are saying, "We've had enough of it." There are so many cases like this around the world where some small amount of assistance to people who want to be free, that kind of thing, could produce enormous benefits for them and for us. Yet, we're unwilling to do it.

**MAY:** One more quick thing before we go to Afghanistan. Reuel, probably Robert Kagan is the guy who is the biggest champion of the American-led international rules-based order. He's written books on it. If we don't have that, *The Jungle Grows Back*. You are probably better than anybody other than Robert Kagan to explain his view and what's right and wrong. Just channel Bob Kagan for a second.

GEECHT: Well, that's challenging.

**MAY:** You can do it. You're up to the challenge.

**GERECHT:** I think Bob would start first with the notion of American hegemony. Everything has to come under that umbrella.

**MAY:** Can an American president, if he said this, I haven't seen it, say, "America is going to be the global hegemon. Get used to it, everybody. Everybody else is worse than us, so let's do it."

**GERECHT:** I think Bob would suggest that you don't dictate it quite in such a tone. One reason, again, to restate what I said earlier, that the Europeans have more or less been satisfied with American leadership, is that it's not very heavy handed. If you go to NATO, you'll discover that the Americans usually hold back. They try to get the other Europeans to come forward and do things. It's usually when they don't do things and they get stymied, do the Americans intercede and exercise leadership.

The idea is to be fairly light in your approach. Now, I think he would also say that as alliances, by definition, you do have to tie yourself down a bit. You can't exercise unilateral authority all the time. You have to be careful the way you treat others. You have to share your toys. The basic idea, I think, behind Bob would be that he certainly believes that America needs to be a global cop.



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Now, you get to choose where you're going to exercise that authority, and exercising that authority is always going to be messy, and that there isn't a clean approach to this, and you can't escape wars. Wars are a defining part of history. No matter how you try, you have to be prepared to fight them. Sometimes when you fight them, they're going to be messy. The leadership needs to explain that, that in fact, you're going to have to prepare people for the long haul, not the short haul. You're going to have to suggest to them that it's not going to be in quick, that this is a long-term affair, and we have to be prepared to spend the money and bleed for it.

**MAY:** Right. I would say that I would love to hear what you have to say about this, John, but it sounds more like the world according to Reuel Marc Gerecht than the world according to Robert Kagan.

**GERECHT:** No.

**MAY:** It's certainly not what his wife, a high official in the State Department, she's not taking his advice in this administration.

**GERECHT:** Well, one, I mean, I think if you're a high official in the State Department, you follow the President's directive. I think John could speak to that issue of how you get to exercise your independence.

**MAY:** Just influence, I would be—

**GERECHT:** I'm sure that Victoria's doing her best, but I think if you were to have Bob in this room, he would emphasize the preeminent importance of the United States engagement. Part of engagement is ineluctably tied to American power. The most important thing you can do is certainly to keep American defense spending up. If you collapse defense spending, if it contracts, American willpower will go with it, the two are tied.

**MAY:** I want to hear anything you have to say about this, but let me throw out another question too, that you can bridge to which is if you're talking about doing that the last thing you want to do is abandon your allies in Afghanistan, in the midst of a war and say, "We are pulling out by about high noon, and I don't know what you guys are going to do, but good luck," because that's what we did to our allies in uniform in Afghanistan with a withdrawal, with a surrender to the Taliban 20 years after their allies al-Qaeda attacked us. They're doing it in a way that leads billions of dollars, more military aid to be given to the Taliban than probably any other nation on earth right now.

That's what the Biden administration did. Yes, I agree. This is probably what Biden wanted to do, but my God, some deputy should have said, "This is a bad idea." Some deputy, maybe General Milley, who is responsible, should have said, "Sir, I can't do this. I have to resign and let somebody else do this because I can see what's going to happen, and it's going to be catastrophic. If you have any faith in me, you'll take my advice. If you don't, it was a pleasure."

**BOLTON:** Well-said on Afghanistan. I think the question I would ask Bob Kagan is how does it feel after 40 years of worrying about the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua to know that they're still in power? For those who say America has a heavy hand anywhere in the world, and particularly in the Western hemisphere, there's the disproof of that right there.

**MAY:** Making common cause with Beijing right now.

**BOLTON:** Look, I don't like the hegemony idea because I think it's too much work. What I want is just to have things bubble along on their own. There are some circumstances where you have to take a more substantial position. That's



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what NATO was all about during the Cold War. That's why the American order in the world is so jury-rigged, it's not by design. It's almost like they say about the British Empire. We put it together in a fit of absence in mind. There's nobody who would ever start from scratch and build –

**GERECHT:** It's better designed than the British.

**BOLTON:** Well, let's see how long it lasts.

**GERECHT:** I know.

John **Bolton:**

That's the test. I think the proof of the pudding really of a lot of this is in Afghanistan. As I've said, and others have as well, the Biden withdrawal and it was botched almost beyond belief, but the Biden withdrawal, I think, would not have looked too different from a Trump withdrawal, had he won a second term. He wanted out.

**MAY:** He wouldn't have listened to his generals if they said, "Hey, we can't do this in this timeframe. Okay. We can do it, but not in this timeframe?" I mean, you know, you because you talked him out of some other withdrawals.

**BOLTON:** I was going to say there have been occasions where the pace has been pushed back, but in his mind, because of Rand Paul and others who kept saying, "You've got to end these endless wars." He wanted to be able to say zero troops in Afghanistan. There were points, he wanted to say zero troops in Syria. He never got to that point, thank goodness. I think on Afghanistan, days before I resigned, he was about to invite the Taliban to Camp David to seal the deal. What he didn't want to do was look foolish politically in the United States, but I think he would've gotten out. What does that represent? All the things you said, plus creating a strategic hole, a vacuum, right in the middle of Central Asia.

**GERECHT:** I think it's important to note that the American presence in Afghanistan, by the time Biden withdrew really wasn't terribly costly.

**BOLTON:** Oh, absolutely.

**GERECHT:** When you add the dollars and if you either look at our GNP or our deficit, either it's not a big percentage of what we spend.

**BOLTON:** No. The situation, while far from perfect, was stable before Trump started talking to the Taliban. Once that got out and people knew that we were headed for the exit, I think that destabilized the situation in and of itself, and that led to the rapid collapse.

**MAY:** Encourages corruption, by the way.

**BOLTON:** Everybody heading for the exits.

**MAY:** If you're heading for the exits, you better make sure you got a thick wallet in your pocket before you get to Tajikistan or someplace like that. Those who didn't are now literally impoverished and begging on the streets.

**GERECHT:** Corruption wasn't a problem in Afghanistan. I mean, let's just say.



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**MAY:** It wasn't, but it gave justification for it, let us say. It was more rational than ever to be corrupt.

**BOLTON:** In Afghanistan, our having been there for 20 years means there's nobody, let's say under 25 or 30, who remembers Afghanistan without the United States. They remember it now. They will pay a price for it. I think that's when other allies – treaty allies, Japan, NATO members, South Korea – look at that and say, "My God, they did that in Afghanistan. What will they do in our time of troubles?"

**BOLTON:** I believe if you look at the circumstances in Eastern Europe today, with Ukraine, if you look at the danger in the South China Sea, or Taiwan, or a host of other things around the world, the specter of what went wrong in Afghanistan is causing us to pay a very high price.

**GERECHT:** John, if I can ask you, to take Ukraine, what would you do now to ensure that Putin doesn't eat it?

**BOLTON:** Well, I think at some point there needed to be a broad conversation about the countries and what I call 'the gray zone' — Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia – left between NATO's eastern border, in effect, and Russia's western border. We should do that right now, because all the rest of that is at risk. It's not time for an academic exercise. We're in trouble in Ukraine right now.

What would I do? I would change the nature of the deterrence that we're trying to create. All that Biden has done is threaten economic actions after Russian troops crossed the border. I don't think Putin believes those threats for a whole variety of reasons, not including the taking of Crimea and not bearing a particular cost, but even if Biden is serious, and it's not clear that he can deliver the Europeans on a lot of these things, Putin may not believe him anyway because of that lack of credibility.

I think rather than rely on deterrence based on the threat of something happening after the troops cross the border, you've got to do things right now, before that happens. First of which would be to say, "No natural gas is going to flow through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline unless and until all Russian forces outside their border in countries that don't want them return to bases." That's to start with. I would, as the White House has now announced – I feel like they've been listening to what I've been saying – they're apparently going to push more lethal weapon assistance into Ukraine right now.

**MAY:** That was under Trump. Trump was at least even pushing lethal weapons into Ukraine to help them defend themselves. Right?

**BOLTON:** Well, Congress pushed that. He accepted it. As I was leaving, he was accepting the latest shipment of them, but a lot more can be done right now. And I would, if they don't have COVID, I would send Secretary of Defense Austin, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Milley, to Kyiv. I would put more American forces and more NATO forces in right now, working with the Ukrainian army, not to fight necessarily.

**MAY:** Train, assist.

**BOLTON:** But to show, and the image I would leave is the idea of Russian generals looking across the border through their field glasses, seeing American flags on the other side, say, "Good God. I wonder what that means." If you don't change the cost benefit analysis to Putin right now, then I think the risk of some kind of military encouragement is very high. The other risk is he's playing a shell game. While we focus on Ukraine, he's looking at something else,



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or he's looking at less than all of Ukraine. What I worry about is let's say he takes more in eastern or southern Ukraine, Europeans, the Biden White House say, "Oh, well, thank God. It could have been so much worse. No need to do anything."

**MAY:** He didn't take Kyiv. He just took Odessa.

**GERECHT:** Incremental collapse.

**BOLTON:** Exactly. That's a terrible lesson for Putin to get.

**MAY:** Quickly, people not focused on Kazakhstan, but Putin did send troops into Kazakhstan. By the way, I saw a lot of normally smart people saying, "Oh my God, if he's involved in Kazakhstan, he can't get involved." I thought, no, this is a guy who knows how to juggle multiple balls. You're kidding yourself if you think he can't do both. Has he succeeded already?

**BOLTON:** Absolutely. This was a zero-cost demonstration to the five Central Asian republics, former republics of the Soviet Union. We can do this to you in a heartbeat. Putin had 2,500 troops from Moscow to Kazakhstan in a matter –

**MAY:** Troops?

**BOLTON:** – of hours. Yeah.

**MAY:** I think 3,500 in the end, which is about what we had in Afghanistan.

**BOLTON:** Right.

**MAY:** By the way.

**BOLTON:** He's gotten them out, and he has this strange little alliance he put together, his work. He's strengthened a pro-Russian government in Kazakhstan. It all shows to everybody that he's on the move in the space of the former Soviet Union.

**GERECHT:** Rewind the tape to Syria, when Putin committed to Syria. It was quite common to hear Obama officials say that, "Oh, that's a serious strategic mistake."

**MAY:** Obama himself said it. He said, "Mr. Putin," because he knows, I mean, he's Obama.

He said, "Mr. Putin." And because he knows. I mean, he's Obama, and this is just Putin. "Mr. Putin you understand you're getting yourself into a quagmire. Trust me." I think Putin said, "You know what? I have Wellington boots, and you're barefoot." So –

**GERECHT:** I mean, everybody mirror images, but I think the Americans do it with perhaps more gusto than others.

**BOLTON:** Well, John Kerry said at that point, "You know, the Russians have had a naval installation at Tartus for a long, long time." But they began building an air base at Latakia, and a reporter asked John Kerry, "Well, what do you make of this air base?" And Kerry said, "I think it's just for force protection purposes." Well, what forces were they



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protecting? Why didn't they stay in Russia? They're pretty safe there, too. I mean, that's the kind of mindset that says to Putin, "I have a free hand here."

**MAY:** You mentioned Nord Stream 2. That's meant to bring fossil fuels, because we all know how important fossil fuels are, into Germany. If the U.S. said, "Okay, the oil and gas is not going to be flowing if Putin – " Are the Germans going along?

Which raises the larger question of the Europeans, from two points of view. One is, you say there are times when the Europeans accept American hegemony as such, and there are times when they rebel. The French call it hyperpuissance which is kind of pejorative.

But two things. One is, the Europeans don't have much military capability, and this gets into another subject I want to talk about. They believe in diplomacy, 'relentless diplomacy', whatever that means, which we should discuss. And they believe in surrendering sovereignty and global governance, both in terms of the EU but also in terms of the UN. You see them constantly –

**MAY:** And try to push the U.S. to do that.

**GERECHT:** You have to be careful there. You don't want to overdo it. I mean–

**MAY:** Overdo what?

**GERECHT:** Well, I mean, the French aren't known for surrendering sovereignty. That concept appeals in certain circumstances, particularly if it has to do with sort of tying down the United States and allowing the Europeans to have more input.

But when it comes to their own actions, I don't really see say the French really surrendering much of their sovereignty. Some of their economic sovereignty, because I think they realize the Germans do a better game than they do.

The Germans have a harder time because they have so little military power. Essentially, the German military forces are, in any effective sense, they're nonexistent. The Germans are in a somewhat different situation. You have to be careful lumping all the Europeans –

**BOLTON:** But–

**GERECHT:** -- in together.

**BOLTON:** –I think the Europeans are separated, in a sense. I think the Eastern and Central Europeans –

**GERECHT:** Yeah. Absolutely.

**BOLTON:** – are scared to death of what's going on–

**GERECHT:** Absolutely.



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**BOLTON:** – and very much on our side. I think Western Europe is in a real state of crisis at this point. The new German government, after 16 years of Angela Merkel, we don't know what they're going to do. It doesn't look very promising, I have to say. They are not willing to live up to the pledge they voluntarily agreed to about spending –

**GERECHT:** The 2% pledge. Yeah.

**BOLTON:** – on defense, 2% of GDP pledge. This new government, in their coalition agreement, doesn't even include that. France is about to go into a presidential election. Very hard to see what the outcome of that is. Boris Johnson's government in the United Kingdom is hanging, I think, nearly by a thread as we speak. And the Biden administration is not exactly providing leadership.

This is a real problem, and I think the Russians see that, and I think that's one reason Putin is pushing ahead now, because he sees weakness, uncertainty, and division in the U.S. and in Europe.

**MAY:** Yeah. I mean, the French have some military capabilities. The British, some, not huge. The Germans, as you say, almost nothing. And many of the others in NATO don't. You see this reflected in, well, NATO guarantees our security, which means the Americans guarantee our security, which is not a good thing if you're talking about collective security.

**GERECHT:** Well, no. That was part of the World War II deal. I mean, there was an understanding, and I think it was a fine understanding, that the United States carries the heavy load here. Now, it's become increasingly difficult after the collapse of the Soviet Union for the United States to carry that load, not because we don't have the capacity, but I think we lack the argument. We made the wrong arguments, in many ways, during the entire Cold War, so –

**MAY:** Okay. But there's a corollary here, which is if you don't have a hammer, no problem looks like a nail. In other words, you have the Europeans not having military power and deciding, and you hear this all the time, that the answer to everything is diplomacy.

**BOLTON:** Yeah. Well, this is –

**MAY:** “There must be a diplomatic solution.”

**BOLTON:** – this is the rules-based international order, because–

**GERECHT:** Exactly.

**BOLTON:** – you agree on something, and everybody lives happily ever after. If you tried that in Warsaw today, they would throw you out of the room, because they can hear the rumble of the tanks, literally probably. This is a, I think, a crisis for NATO. I don't see any indication the Biden administration has thought this through, but I think one of the problems we see there is that there's no strategy at all.

**GERECHT:** Yeah.

**BOLTON:** I could understand a strategy that I disagreed with, but I don't see a strategy. I see kind of stumbling from one thing to another.

**GERECHT:** Well, your ultimate objective is to retrench. It's hard to have a forward-leaning strategy.



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**BOLTON:** Yeah. Well, and I think their argument, it was certainly true for the withdrawal from Afghanistan, it's true about a reduced emphasis on the Middle East and trying to do something to avoid more fuss in Europe, is they want to focus on China. That's their excuse.

But the fact is, you're sort of squeezing a pillow. You focus on China. Where are they now? They're into Afghanistan. There are rumors about them having access to Bagram Air Force Base, which is a cruel irony.

The Chinese and the Russians are doing joint naval maneuvers in the Eastern Mediterranean. They're all over the Middle East. They're a huge oil energy importing country. They want it from wherever they can get it.

The fact is, the United States is a global power. We do have global capabilities, if we have the will, we have the attention span. To say we're going to pull back here to concentrate over in this other place is simply an invitation to somebody else to go into the place that we've pulled out of.

**GERECHT:** If you had plenipotentiary authority, what would you do to protect Taiwan?

**BOLTON:** Well, I think we should have done a lot earlier. But given that we are where we are today, I think at a minimum—we should torque up the relationship with Taiwan politically and diplomatically.

I've often wondered what would really happen if the United States just simply recognized Taiwan as an independent country, said we were going to exchange ambassadors, have full diplomatic relations. Are the Chinese really going to expel our ambassador from Beijing, forever downgrade the relationship?

I think there are steps less than that you can take, like meeting with Taiwanese diplomats in official U.S. government buildings. Can you imagine the shock in Beijing when we do that?

But I think we've got to do more. I think we've got to make it clear that Taiwan is not outside the famous line through the Pacific of what we're going to defend. I would put American forces there on an essentially permanent basis. I can think of home-porting some navy ships so we're right there in the Taiwan Strait.

I don't think China wants war over Taiwan. I think they want it to fall into their lap like a piece of ripe fruit, so they don't inherit an island of smoking rubble.

I think if Xi Jinping thinks he can get capitulation because of indications of weakness, he will press. But if he sees the possibility of resistance, not of victory on our side, but simply resistance, I think he'll pull back, because a failure to get Taiwan easily could be endangering to his regime.

**GERECHT:** I would just say one thing. I mean, I think in this sense, the tide is going against China in that the Kuomintang mentality is much weaker on Taiwan than it was in the past.

**BOLTON:** Yeah. The statistics and polls show that. There's a 30-year-long series of polls in Taiwan asking people what their identification is. Are you Chinese? Are you Taiwanese? Are you Taiwanese-Chinese?

The numbers, and I don't have this exactly, but Chinese 30 years ago was quite high. It's down to 2% now. The number of Taiwanese was 4% or 5%. It's over 50%. The rest identify as Taiwanese-Chinese.



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That number of Chinese identifiers will go down to zero because of the silent artillery of time, as Abraham Lincoln said and the number who say Taiwanese is going up. They think of themselves as different, and they act differently, and the world should treat them as different.

**MAY:** It has to be said, even if they thought of themselves as Chinese, which I think, which they don't, as you say. I think there's questions whether Taiwan is really Chinese, historically. But that doesn't mean they need to submit to a one-party system on the mainland. That doesn't follow from that.

**BOLTON:** It's like saying in 1776, "But you people aren't American. You're British. Why don't you just enjoy it? The king rules." You don't have to accept that, and they don't.

**MAY:** Or America saying, "Canadians may think they're different from us, but frankly, they're Americans just like we are, so we're going in there."

**BOLTON:** Yeah. Call up the National Guard.

**MAY:** Call up the National Guard. Hong Kong, we should mention, because I think it makes your point, and maybe makes my point, too. In this international rules-based order, you have international law, which I know, as a lawyer, you're also dubious about. I kind of want to hear you talk about that.

The basis of international law is a treaty. That's the most solid thing. Everything else, you can conjure up, but a treaty is a treaty. It's a contractual obligation.

Well, there was a contractual obligation, a treaty, between the British and the Beijing government. Okay. We're going to get out of Hong Kong. You can have it, but you agree for 50 years, two different systems. You're not going to deprive the people of Hong Kong, who have gotten used to a certain number of rights, of their rights.

And of course, Beijing deprived them of that, did so violently. And within this rules-based order, there's been no punishment for this behavior.

**BOLTON:** Yeah. Yeah. If you want to see what the rules-based international order looks like in practice, ask the people of Hong Kong. If China treats international obligations, it incurs that way, in full public view of the whole world, how will it treat its other international obligations? And there's a whole long list that we could go through there. But I think they saw, during the Trump administration and during the Biden administration continuing, they would get no pushback—and they were right, unfortunately.

**MAY:** I want to just mention this. We talked about diplomacy. Biden speaks often. The phrase he uses, I've noticed, is, "relentless diplomacy," which sounds good. But if you think about it, what does it mean? It means you just talk, talk, talk relentlessly until your opponent falls asleep or walks out of the room, and then at the UN—

**GERECHT:** It sounds like death in Brussels.

**MAY:** Right. Right. And at the UN General Assembly, when Biden made his first speech there last year, he declared a new era of U.S. diplomacy. Oh. How is diplomacy going to be different?



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If you send diplomats abroad with no coercive powers to try to persuade representatives of the Supreme Leader of Iran to give up nuclear weapons, this is the new era of relentless And you're going to persuade them on what basis?

The Kerry basis of, "Hey, just a reminder, we're not in the 19th century. We're in the 20th century, or the 21st century, and therefore, your behavior should accord with the calendar." It makes no sense—I mean, really, this is not even serious thinking.

**BOLTON:** Yeah. It's not part of the American national character. We are an impatient people. That's good and bad, in some respects. We like to solve problems. We don't like to manage them.

The Germans have a word -- sitzfleisch -- which means exactly what it sounds like, and we don't have sitzfleisch so what is happen--

**MAY:** Sit on your backside, I guess.

**BOLTON:** Something like that.

**MAY:** Yeah. I saw that. Right. Right.

**BOLTON:** So, what has happened with respect to the Iran nuclear deal? The Biden administration wants to get back into it. They want to roll back to 2015.

What's been happening in Vienna for now very nearly 12 months is the United States has made one concession after another to the Iranians, and the Iranians are still negotiating, asking for more concessions. The most outrageous of which is to say the United States would irrevocably commit to going back into this deal and could never withdraw. Well, that just doesn't happen. Any nation in the world that would make that obligation isn't fit to lead and so--

--That probably means the Biden administration will give it away, but the Iranians have no incentive to come to a conclusion at this point.

**MAY:** Well, and this also gets back to your argument, because the way you could do that is theoretically through a treaty, and the treaty says, "We will not do this." That makes it very hard.

Now, Obama didn't want the JCPOA to be a treaty, the Iran deal, because it would never pass. He didn't have congressional approval. So, what did he do? He thought, "I don't need congressional approval."

**GERECHT:** Yeah. I'd say I think he made a strategic error. There was a possibility. If you go back, and you look at, from 2012 and the interim agreement, to 2015 and the JCPOA, I think Obama and his primary polemicist, Ben Rhodes, actually had the Republicans on the run. I think they were scared, and the warmongering arguments were effective. There was a chance. I don't know how big of a chance. There was a chance he could have maybe gotten a treaty if he'd had the guts to actually push for it.

**MAY:** Well, it's interesting. Counterfactual, of course. Biden could do the same thing now. He could say, "Okay. I can do this for you guys, but I've got to make this a treaty."



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My point there was, what did Obama do? This gets back to your arguments. He said, "I'll just go to the UN. If I get the UN's endorsement, that's more important than Congress's endorsement." Because he, Obama, is a believer in global governance, if not global government.

Transnational progressivism is his ideology, even if people don't know that phrase. He wants the U.S. to cede power to international organizations, whether it's the International Criminal Court, whether it's the UN entirely. He wanted that to happen and sort of said it.

And then you had Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, among others, saying, "Once the UN endorsed the JCPOA, it's international law, and they're violating international—We're not violating international law. The Americans are." And plenty of people said, "Oh, yeah. That makes some sense."

**BOLTON:** Yeah. Well, that's why the whole thing is kind of a gossamer web of logic, but they believe if you say it often enough, you can make it true. But it points to the importance of understanding that our ability to persuade others depends largely on the strength of our political, economic, and military position around the world. It's very persuasive when you say "the United States believes X" if people think that the full weight of the country is behind you. By the way, one thing the treaty process is designed to do by requiring a two-thirds majority is to make sure there really is consensus within the country. It's counter majoritarian. How about that for those who simply won 50% plus one to have everything? The framers of the Constitution knew what they were doing. They knew these international commitments could be very serious. They wanted broad agreement within the population.

**MAY:** This is also a strange thing I'd love for you to comment on, again, it's a bit of a digression. All these negotiations, the P5 plus one, that's the U.S. saying, "Oh, we should have Russia and China involved in this, because they're useful and good actors and they care about the same things we do," which has turned out not to be true. By the way, the other thing, in terms of our allies, we said, "Oh, the nation's most directly, imminently, most existentially threatened by the regime in Iran—Israel, of course, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates—we're not going to have them. We'll tell them what we've decided and what we've done, and they'll accept it as good enough for them, even if they think it endangers their very existence." In other words, that in itself is a capitulation to one's adversaries and a betrayal of one's allies. Isn't it? I've heard this mentioned, but not much.

**BOLTON:** No, it's really incredible that they want to say to Ukraine, "We will not talk about you without you." Well, ask the Israelis and the Saudis and the Emirates how they feel about being talked about their future without even being in the room.

**MAY:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. If I'm Vladimir Putin—maybe we'll have one or two more subjects to discuss, because I see this is going fast because it's interesting—if I'm Vladimir Putin, I think two things. One is, "I'm a czar and I want to do what all czars did, which is expand— or in my case, restore—the Russian empire. I want to be the czar of all the Russias and all the Russias means not just Novorossiya Russia, but Belarus, white Russia, and Malorossiya, which is the Ukraine—I'm going to do that and then maybe the Slavic empire, more generally, and Central Asia too." That was part of it, and he's made progress, but then I'm sure he also thinks, "If I could collapse NATO, I'd really be earning my pay, wouldn't I?" And that's not impossible. If that's his goal, I can see multiple ways for him to collapse NATO over the next couple years.

**BOLTON:** Well, I think what has happened in the past few weeks is he's laid out a theoretical framework for how to do that. I don't think he expects it's going to happen this month or next month. But I think it's again by expanding the scope of what he's after, if he simply takes less than that, people will say, "oh, we dodged the bullet that time, didn't



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we?” And Putin has two qualities which are rarely found together, but he’s got them, he’s both patient and agile—and that makes him very dangerous.

**GERECHT:** Also, he does have serious influence in Eastern Europe. So, as he eats more, as he gets more of his way, those that represent Putin’s interests in Eastern Europe grow in power. So, it is possible to undermine Eastern Europe from the inside by these sorts of peripheral pressure campaigns and all I can say is thank God the Baltic Republics got into NATO, otherwise, I think they would be on the plate.

**MAY:** But the Baltic Republics could be on the plate, it seems to me.

**GERECHT:** If NATO collapses, they’re absolutely on the plate.

**MAY:** Even if Putin is triumphant in Ukraine and the things he’s doing there, I can imagine him saying, “We have a substantial Russian ethnic and Russian-speaking population in the three Baltic countries, and I have to protect them because they’re being oppressed.

**BOLTON:** He believes that, but the one thing they haven’t done is cross a NATO border. Now, they’ve attacked the Baltics in cyberspace. Of course, they’ve attacked us in cyberspace, too. So, I don’t put that beyond him, but I think that’s why this gray-zone of countries we left between NATO and Russia are so particularly vulnerable.

**MAY:** Well, what other topics do you want to bring up? There’s a million of them, but we can’t do them all today, but we’ll definitely want to have you back, but go ahead. Anything else you want to make sure we touch on?

**GERECHT:** Well, again, for me, I think the primary concern is— can you think of a subject that you can gain, now, consensus between Democrats and Republicans overseas when it comes to either the use of force, when it comes to covert action, when comes to any of those instruments where the United States is going to engage in politik can we reach any consensus? You don’t have that consensus effective in the long term?

**BOLTON:** Well, I think there’s a chance when it comes to China, which I regard is the existential threat of the 21st century. I think America was late to the party. I think we were late to understanding fatal mistakes made in our diplomacy toward China for the last 40 years or so since Deng Xiaoping came to power there, but I think it’s growing. I think people look at Huawei as an instrument of Chinese state power, not a telecoms company. They’re beginning to wake up.

So, I think the possibility is there, but it requires a president with real leadership to pull that together domestically and internationally. Now, I give Biden credit. He did have an in-person meeting of the leaders of the Quad countries, Japan, Australia, India, and the US. That’s a step forward. The AUKUS deal to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. I don’t know how he agreed to it, but I’m certainly glad that he did. These are bits and pieces of putting together a big-picture strategy. I think it’ll be interesting in the 2024 election if dealing with China isn’t a big issue. I think that possibility is there. I don’t think you can predict—

**GERECHT:** I agree with that completely. I do think what you said earlier is pretty important and that these things are all intertwined. So, you don’t just get to work on China. If the other fronts collapse and that if you lose with Iran, if you lose with Russia, the impact of that elsewhere is substantial because they—



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**BOLTON:** No doubt about it. No doubt about it. That's Afghanistan. Depending on what happens in Ukraine and Eastern Europe that could have huge ramifications worldwide. Certainly, China is watching what's happening in Europe now very, very closely.

**GERECHT:** I'm just deeply suspicious when people use the phrase "pivot to Asia."

**BOLTON:** Bad phrase, no doubt. We can't pivot. We are a global power and we are affected, our interests are affected everywhere.

**MAY:** Well, it's also unstrategic in that it doesn't recognize the fact that our enemies are very clearly making common cause. Russia, Iran, China, North Korea –they make common cause, they cheer each other's victories, and they build on those victories one after the other. They're doing this economically, they're doing this militarily – it's right before our eyes. They're not hiding the fact that the authoritarians, the totalitarians are making common cause. Doesn't mean they don't have differences among them, but they're smart enough to say, "That's later. That's later." If you're Beijing, if Russia takes Ukraine, "Eh, that's okay." Now Central Asia, "We may have something to say there, but we can wait on that because they're being strategic." I'm not sure, and I don't know if you want to comment on this, you don't have to, but do we think that Biden or that Tony Blinken or Jake Sullivan, are they strategic thinkers? Do they have the wrong strategic thinking, or do they have no strategic thinking, they're just kind of trying to hit the balls as they pass over the plate?

**BOLTON:** Well, I think they've tried to make foreign policy an adjunct of domestic policy, a foreign policy for the middle class. I completely agree, you can't have a strong foreign policy without a strong American economy. They're a connection that too many people don't pay attention to. But when you try and sort out exactly what their priorities are, they come back to the rules-based international order and, as you say, diplomacy. So, it's a process question for them and process doesn't trump aggressive, indeed, belligerent adversary powers advancing their own interest around the world. Our friends and allies, particularly those who are most threatened, the Southeast Asian countries, South Korea, Japan with respect to China, Eastern and Central Europe with respect to Russia. A lot of our friends in the Arab world, in Israel, in the Middle East are consumed with worry now that we're not going to stand by them. That's why they're beginning to hedge their bets. And that's a bad thing.

**GERECHT:** The example which reveals, I think, how difficult this is going to be is that it was a pretty easy call –should have been a pretty easy [call] —for President Trump to assassinate Qassem Soleimani. I believe John had recommended that action earlier. The repercussions, the ramifications in Iran, in Iraq, elsewhere in the Middle East were downed to our advantage significantly. They still do, yet every single senior official in the Obama administration publicly condemned—

**MAY:** Obama or Biden?

**GERECHT:** I mean Biden, sorry.

**MAY:** You repeat yourself.

**BOLTON:** Easily done. Easily conceived.

**GERECHT:** Condemned that action. That was an easy call.



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**MAY:** Have they learned anything from what happened in Yemen? Because Yemen is an example where they said, “We’ll use diplomacy, not force.”

**BOLTON:** Yeah, there’s your relentless diplomacy. What has happened?

**MAY:** Let me just finish so people know what I’m talking about – we’ll take the Houthis off the terrorism list as a concession to them. I’m sure they’ll reciprocate in some way. We’ll hold back the Saudis and I’m sure the Houthis will say, oh, okay, now maybe we can find common ground. Of course, the Houthis are now shooting weapons at the Emirates, at Dubai.

**GERECHT:** The United States’ residual powers are enormous, and it’s regularly underestimated by the left and the right I think in the United States. So, our capacity to recover from our mistakes is significant. But eventually, you do have to show that you are capable of killing something, to put it crudely, I mean, it’s like that scene in *Sand Pebbles* with Steve McQueen where he finally just screams out, “Shoot something!” You do have to, if the other side is testing you, you do have to eventually demonstrate that you are willing to use lethal force.

**MAY:** So, this, it’ll be my exit question unless there’s other things you want to bring up today, but we will have you on again and it’s very relevant and that’s North Korea. Why do I bring up North Korea here? Because North Korea, it’s a small actor, but it’s a pretty nasty one. Most importantly, diplomacy was supposed to solve that in 1994. Clinton came out and said, “We’ve got now, with the agreed framework, my best negotiators” – including Wendy Sherman, now in the current administration – “they’ve worked this out. We’re giving them some things. They’re giving us some things. We’ve solved this problem.”

Of course, today, North Korea is a nuclear power with missiles, increasingly sophisticated to target them. Listen, President Trump tried some stuff. I didn’t think it was wrong for him to try. He said, “Wonderful things I can give you if you cooperate.” I don’t think that appealed much to Kim as he thought about it. “Terrible things I can do to you.” The video of missile striking. I don’t think he was really scared by that for long. But there’s an example of a problem that has lasted for more than a generation that we have not been able to solve through diplomacy and we have not found another way to deal with it.

**BOLTON:** Look, North Korea is the embodiment of Winston Churchill’s comment about “the confirmed unteachability of mankind.” For 30 years, people said, “Oh, don’t think about using force. Don’t think about regime change. We don’t want them to have nuclear weapons. It’s unacceptable and we’ll work it out through diplomacy.” Well, 30 years later, we’re at the verge of having to accept what everybody said was unacceptable. I’m not sure we can stop North Korea at this point given current circumstances. I at least hope those who said “Let’s try diplomacy for 30 years” are held to account because that ultimately is what we need to do with the U.S. public.

We’ve had a long period of time since 9/11 really without full discussion at a broad political level about what are America’s interests in the world and how to protect them. I think the absence of that debate hurts us politically. Americans are impatient. You have to explain and justify when you want to do something internationally. If you don’t take the time in advance to make that case, it’s much harder later. We’ve got, unfortunately, three years until the next presidential election. I think would-be presidential candidates need to put a much higher priority on discussing American national security with the people they want to lead and explain what’s necessary to make the country safe.



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**GERECHT:** But John, don't you think it's a bit tricky for Republicans to do that, assuming you can find the Republicans who are willing to do it if Donald Trump can sort of rise up at any moment and say, "I don't like that."

**BOLTON:** I think Trump's power is way overstated. My Super PAC's been issuing polls that showed declining support for Trump among actual Republican voters. I think that's going to continue. I don't think he's going to run in 2024. I think a lot of other Republicans, although they won't say it publicly right now, are going to run whether he runs or not.

**GERECHT:** As they say in Arabic, maktub. So let it be written, so let it be done.

**MAY:** We'll end on that wonderful note. This has been fun and fascinating, and I do hope you'll come back because I learn a lot from these discussions and enjoy them. Thank you, Reuel. Thank you, John. And thanks to all of you for being with us a little longer this time, here on *Foreign Podicy*.