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How Russians Are Reading Bolton and Trump

John Bolton suggests that Putin can play Trump like a fiddle. The truth is that under the forty-fifth U.S. president, the bilateral relationship with Russia is now as bad as at any time since the early 1980s.

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John Bolton

Reading John Bolton's book on his short stint as Donald Trump's national security adviser, one can't help thinking that he came to serve in the White House precisely with this memoir in mind. He chronicled the details of "chaos as a way of life" — this is a title of a chapter — in high places, and picked up bits and pieces of Trump's private talk, all of which would be worth a fortune amid the frenzy of the election campaign.

The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir is immensely rich in minute details of U.S. foreign policy making and how the political sausage is now made in Washington. It's a bleak and unpromising picture: of a perfectly incompetent, widely ignorant, and gut-led president; a kaleidoscope of often-replaced senior aides, mostly engaged in bureaucratic battles; an opposition hell-bent on destroying the president; and a mostly hostile and essentially partisan media.

For Russians, the apparently new revelations will need to be cross-checked with the Kremlin's accounts, if those ever come to light. These include Bolton's accounts of his conversations with Vladimir Putin, and Putin's revelations that in 2014 Barack Obama allegedly promised to limit the damage to U.S.-Russian relations if the Kremlin didn't advance beyond Crimea.

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Russian readers will also note information that confirms what they have known for some time. Chiefly, that while there is a strong consensus within the administration — and indeed within the U.S. body politic as a whole — that Russia is an adversary alongside China, Iran, and North Korea, Trump's main obsession is with China. So his outreach to Russia, from the early days of his administration to the recent invitation to Putin to attend the G7 summit as a guest, stems from his ambition to create an anti-Beijing coalition and draw Russia into it.

Russia is of course not taking the bait, and would be crazy to fall for Trump's entreaties — even if he did have something to offer in return. In reality, all Trump has done is sign American sanctions against Russia into law, which has made them virtually eternal; seek to derail the North Stream 2 project; and dismantle the last surviving elements of arms control. America's current focus on China has not eased the pressure on Russia; it is practicing dual containment.

Bolton, recognizing Putin's competence, ruthlessness, and sense of purpose, says that he was afraid to leave Trump one-on-one with the Russian leader when the two met in Helsinki in 2018. No wonder: by Bolton's own account, Trump had a weird view of Europe, in which Germany was "totally controlled by Russia," and Finland was either part of Russia or its satellite. He further intimates that Trump was surprised to learn from then UK prime minister Theresa May that Britain was a nuclear power.

The rest is well known: to Trump, the European Union was to be treated as an economic adversary like China; NATO, which Trump had first considered "obsolete," was later viewed as an instrument to make the Europeans pay America protection money; and Ukraine, to Trump, was little more than a very corrupt place where he could send his trusted lieutenant to dig up dirt on a political opponent.

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John Bolton also suggests that Putin can play Trump like a fiddle. This may or may not be true in their personal contacts, but the truth is that under the forty-fifth U.S. president, the bilateral relationship with Russia is now as bad as at any time since the early 1980s. Bolton

himself contributed to this by his spirited offensive against the vestiges of U.S.-Russian arms control, from the now-defunct INF Treaty to New START, whose fate is now hanging in the balance. He also roundly rejected the Russian vision of strategic stability.

There is nothing Russia can thank Trump for, except for the tips about terrorists poised to strike in St. Petersburg in 2019.

Much is made in the United States of Trump's reluctance to blame Russia for its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Bolton explains this reticence by the president's fear of exposing himself as a beneficiary. This may or may not be plausible.

As a candidate, Trump did publicly call on Russia to interfere in the election. There is little doubt that Moscow, since the early 2010s, has pursued a much more active, even offensive, information policy against the United States. The Russians used some new tools such as social media, and Putin admitted later that patriotic Russian hackers were active in 2016 and that he himself had then been rooting for Trump. It's not at all clear, however, that this has helped Russia's interests in the United States.

Yet, influencing a target country's electorate is one thing; actually interfering in the vote-counting system is another. In today's global information commons, everyone can influence everyone else, there is just no stopping this. Conceivably, one can agree not to trespass into countries' "political bedrooms," where votes are being cast, processed, and counted.

One can fight back against "disinformation," but one should not expect this to have much of an effect. In 1984, the Soviet Union's geriatric leadership with ailing Konstantin Chernenko as its figurehead mounted a short-lived campaign called "counter-propaganda" aiming to thwart Western narratives about Soviet problems.

This effort failed utterly and completely. The only meaningful way of dealing with adversarial (dis)information attacks is fixing the vulnerabilities of one's own system that invite such attacks.

The United States is going through several crises simultaneously. None of these will be resolved in the November 3 election, whatever its outcome. The rest of the world now needs to anticipate political and social instability in the world's leading country as an important geopolitical, geoeconomic, and security risk.

If history is any guide, Americans can still overcome their most pressing problems and reinvent their country yet again. Adapting to the changing world rather than hoping and trying to make the world adapt to American ways will be particularly challenging, but this seems inevitable in the long run. John Bolton's memoir, long on detail and very short on reflection, is a testimony to the pain of this adaptation.

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