

## **Fighting to Win in American Foreign Policy**

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and war.

Today's topic is Fighting to Win in American Foreign Policy.

Our speaker is John Bolton who served as the US Ambassador to the UN under George W. Bush and as US National Security Advisor for Donald Trump. John published his memoir *The Room Where It Happened* about his time working in the Trump Administration.

I want to learn from John what he would advise the Israelis to win its war in Gaza. What Zelensky should do to turn around the conflict in Ukraine, and how Taiwan can deter Chinese aggression.

Buckle up!

John, if you were advising the Israeli government today, what would you recommend them to do next in Gaza?

John Bolton:

The important strategic contest for Israel and for the United States is to see that this is a struggle not just against Hamas but against Iran, and what Hamas instituted on October the 7th was a part of the Revolutionary Guard's Ring of Fire strategy around Israel.

I do not think this strategy is going well for Iran because of how effective the IDF has been against Hamas in the campaign in Gaza. It is important for Israel to continue the campaign against Hamas's military capability and its political leadership. And despite all the pressures that have been brought to bear on the Israeli government to have a ceasefire, to consider the exchange of hostages, but the central strategic reality for Israel is to do what the government said it wanted to do and eliminate Hamas's military and political capabilities. Delaying that or acknowledging that you are willing to achieve less than that would be a huge mistake.

Larry Bernstein:

How do they win the peace?

John Bolton:

First, you must win the war, and I define that as finishing what Netanyahu said they're well on the way to accomplishing. He said they have eliminated 8 of Hamas's 12 combat battalions that means there are four to go. Many of those people remain, but they are combat ineffective at this point. It means getting more of the Hamas political leadership and destroying, physically, every square inch of the tunnel system under Gaza.

People say you can defeat Hamas, but you cannot defeat an idea. I do not buy that. We defeated the government of Germany in World War II and Nazism. There is a huge question of what to do with the population of Gaza, and that is a big subject to discuss, but eliminating the terrorist threat always was a legitimate objective, and it should not be compromised.

Larry Bernstein:

If you were going to advise Zelensky in the Ukraine, what advice would you give him?

John Bolton:

I would say grit your teeth and continue to push for American military assistance. Try to keep your population's morale up, discouraged as they must be, watching Washington's inability to come to a decision on the aid package. And think about how you are going to resist not just the Russian military, but the coming Kremlin diplomatic effort to try and put the war on ice and allow Russia to consolidate its territorial gains.

Sadly, Russia's making territorial advances, small, but not enough to convince Putin that it is time finally to accept the diplomatic outcome. But that time will come. And the pressure on the United States in an election year to have a ceasefire in Ukraine. This is a difficult period for the Ukrainian people and for their government, but it is not a time to despair. It is time to toughen up and hope that European and American resolve lasts through the American election. Beyond that, I cannot really predict.

Larry Bernstein:

What would you advise the Europeans on the Ukrainian conflict?

John Bolton:

The Europeans have said things about supporting Ukraine and providing economic assistance. President Emmanuel Macron of France just said that he would not rule out supplying military forces to Ukraine. And that is something frankly, that if Joe Biden had left open before the Russian invasion in February of 2022, along with some other steps might have deterred the Russians. If they had to worry about NATO forces on the ground in Ukraine, it would be a very different war. I am not suggesting we do it immediately, but I think we have made a mistake in

not letting the Russians worry about it. The possibility of a wider war could well have had the effect of deterring the Russians.

Larry Bernstein:

I had Hal Brands on a podcast a couple of weeks ago, and he recommended asymmetric warfare. Ukraine to sabotage Russian infrastructure. US policymakers were afraid of escalation and did not want to encourage this behavior. What would you suggest to Zelensky about asymmetric warfare?

John Bolton:

He should be engaged in it. Certainly, cyber offensive operations make sense, but this is part of the way that we have prevented the Ukrainians from carrying out a coherent strategy by our unwillingness to give them the military means in a timely manner for them to do it.

Consider the debate over Abrams tanks, over ATACMS missiles, over F-16s. You would not need to use asymmetric warfare if you had the capability to go after the Russians directly. And it has only been within the past 10 days or so that senior NATO officials have acknowledged that attacking targets inside Russia was permissible. Again, the White House was deterred by the fear of a wider war. So, it is okay for the Russians to pound Ukraine into the sand, but it is not okay for Ukraine to hit targets in Russia. What kind of logic is that? What kind of self-defense is that? Sadly, by our unwillingness to supply what Ukraine needed in a strategic and coherent fashion, we have made it harder for them to win the war. And so, the resort to asymmetric warfare is an option that they probably should have taken long ago.

Larry Bernstein

Trump said he could solve this war in 24 hours. This is not meant to be serious, but what is he contemplating?

John Bolton:

What he has said during the campaign is that, of course, if he had been president, the Russians never would have invaded, which is a hard proposition to prove or disprove, but he says it with great political effect.

He would just get Zelensky and Putin in a room together and solve it in 24 hours. That is ridiculous. And he may be the only person on the planet who is even willing to say that. But let's say he did get Zelensky and Putin in a room together and tried to bring the conflict to a quick conclusion. He would fail because the parties and the circumstances are not going to permit that. Now, that would be failure.

But we know Donald Trump never fails. So that would mean that responsibility rests on one of the other two people in the room. And here is where I worry about Trump's fascination with Putin, that Putin would know how to work Trump in a way that would be entirely to Zelensky's disadvantage. And Zelensky would get the blame and Putin would benefit. It is a very dangerous scenario for Zelensky, and I hope they're thinking about how to play it if Trump does get elected.

Larry Bernstein:

This week Sweden joined NATO. Does this benefit US interest?

John Bolton:

It absolutely does. And Finland joining shortly before that, they applied together. Sweden was kept out by a combination of Hungary and Turkey. That opposition, illegitimate as it was, has finally been overcome. Sweden already spends more than 2% of its GDP on defense. Finland spends a little bit less. They will be over 2% very quickly. Despite their neutralist foreign policies for many years, they have exceptionally fine militaries. And as the Finns demonstrated in the Winter War before the main outbreak of World War II, they know how to fight the Russians very well. We should be proud and happy that they finally joined NATO. It is a tragedy it took the invasion of Ukraine to do it, but this is entirely to our benefit.

This is one of the worst setbacks for the Russians in the two-year course of this war. After 75 years of neutrality, to bring Finland and Sweden into NATO is a huge accomplishment, and it shows what we have said all along. Russia's afraid to cross the NATO boundary, and these two countries concluded that it was only by getting behind a NATO boundary that they could be safe.

Larry Bernstein:

President Trump was asked by a reporter would he defend Montenegro if attacked under Article 5? And he said, no, it would not be in US interests. How do you think about that in the context of expanding NATO surrounding Russia? Does it hurt us to extend the Article 5 protection?

John Bolton:

Where NATO can be faulted was not considering the potential implications of leaving a gray zone between the eastern border of NATO and the western border of Russia. The one we are obviously concerned with right now is in Central Europe with Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. We did not extend the NATO alliance to encircle Russia. We extended the NATO alliance because the countries of Eastern and Central Europe having been first overrun by the Nazis in World War II and then overrun by Soviets in the immediate aftermath, wanted security. They did not want to be at anybody's mercy again. They came and were pounding on NATO's door almost from the minute that the Berlin Wall began to fall. And Hungary was ironically one of the first to come and join NATO. We were not seeking them out. They were clamoring to get into foreign ministries all over the existing NATO alliance so they can join. And it was the right thing to do to

take them in from an American point of view because it extended the space of countries that were part of our alliance, meaning it was that much harder for Russia or anybody else in the future to cause harm to the body of NATO itself.

Where NATO failed, however, was in not following through on the logic of its expansion. George W. Bush proposed in April of 2008 to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO on a fast track. That would have closed the gray zone for a good part of the border of the area between NATO's eastern border and Russia's western border. If Ukraine had become a NATO member in 2009, 2010, I do not think there ever would have been an invasion in 2014 and certainly not in 2022. But we left a gray zone, and that was an invitation to meddle especially in Ukraine, which in the Putin mind is part of greater Russia. It is not just Putin's war, but what they are recreating the Russian empire. This is not recreating the Soviet Union. This is recreating the idea of a Russian civilization and they want Ukraine, Belarus, and many of the other territories now independent to be part of it. We did not anticipate that, and we left Ukraine vulnerable.

When Bush proposed bringing them in 2008, France and Germany objected, and that was the end of it. That was a big mistake then. And we have got other countries, Moldova is a good example, the Caucasus countries, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan still vulnerable to Russian interference. We need a more coherent policy. We have plugged some of the doughnut holes with Sweden and Finland coming in. We need to think through what else we need to do.

Larry Bernstein:

Ukraine, as part of the ultimate diplomatic peace negotiations, will demand being included in NATO to garner that Article 5 protection. Is that something the United States should do in that post-war period or not?

John Bolton:

NATO has a longstanding tradition that it does not admit countries that have part of their territory occupied by foreign adversaries, because that would mean that you are admitting a country that's at war with another country bringing war to NATO. And that is why we need to be clear that the legitimate Ukraine objective here is a restoration of full sovereignty and territorial integrity. We should be pursuing a strategy to do that, and that means including the Crimea.

Larry Bernstein:

Isn't that off the table? If Putin said, "I'm going to keep Crimea," I think the Ukrainians would accept that that is no longer Ukrainian territory, and I want Article 5, and I want to be a member of NATO. So, they deal with those limitations.

John Bolton:

Well, I think it exposes why Ukraine is in a very vulnerable position diplomatically and why I am somewhat surprised that Kremlin has not pushed this effort already to partition the country along a ceasefire line along the current front lines, which would roughly double Russia's control of Ukrainian territory. I am very much opposed to what some people call a Korean solution to acknowledge the Russians have control of a certain amount, Ukraine has control of the rest of it and will admit the rest of it to NATO because you may have noticed the Korean peninsula has been divided since 1945. So, if you are telling the Ukrainians, you have got 75 years at least of division of your country ahead of you if you take the Korean solution, they are not going to accept it. They are fighting for their independence. And what we are fighting for is to show that the unprovoked aggression that Russia initiated in 2014 is not going to succeed on the European continent. And right now, we are not doing a particularly good job of that. So, we either ought to get serious about we say is our objective, restoration of full sovereignty and territorial integrity, or get in a different line of work.

Larry Bernstein:

What would you advise the leadership of Taiwan to reduce the prospect of a Chinese conflict?

John Bolton:

We have got a new administration in Taiwan, the Democratic Progressive Party, which is the one most strongly opposed to being dominated by China. They have got to do more to strengthen Taiwanese defenses in a strategic way to deter a possible Chinese attack or blockade, which I think is the more likely approach Beijing would take to isolate the island. But they have also got to do more with others in East and South Asia, with Japan, with South Korea. We are seeing a real acknowledgement of the Chinese threat along China's Indo-Pacific periphery. And Taiwan must be more integrated into that. The Biden administration, I will say, has done some very positive things there. Taiwan has a real opportunity to take advantage of it. They have got a guard against the possibility of a Trump desire to have big trade agreements and others with China that may leave Taiwan in the lurch. Trump used to say when he was president, he would take a Sharpie pen and point to the tip and he would say, see that, that's Taiwan. Then he would point to the resolute desk in front of him and say, see, that's China. That is what he thought of Taiwan.

Taiwan is very important to the United States, both economically and politically. And I have said for many years, we should provide diplomatic recognition to Taiwan that would help deter China from taking belligerent action against Taiwan.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that blockade is the most likely military action. What can Taiwan do to undermine a potential blockade?

John Bolton:

The most important thing is to develop more self-sufficiency to last during the time it might take to break a blockade. We are a long way away. We do not know what Japan and others would do to help us out. So, you cannot come to Taiwan's aid very quickly. And so, their ability to withstand that blockade, remember what happened in Berlin when the Soviets cut off land access. I am not suggesting that a Taiwan airlift would solve the problem. It is much more difficult. So, they need a capacity to last for the time it may take for us to break the blockade. We ought to think about ways to deter China from even thinking about a blockade. And one way that might be helpful would be to announce that we are going to home port several American military vessels in Kaohsiung, the biggest port in Taiwan at the southern part of the island, so that the Chinese would know that it is not just a question of blockading Taiwan, they'd be blockading Americans. That might be the thing that pushes the Chinese back, not just from outright invasion, but from the blockade alternative as well.

Larry Bernstein:

Blockades take time. They probably need a year's worth of food. It is not easy for those Chinese naval vessels to be too close to Taiwan because it opens it up from missile actions from the island itself. And if Taiwan expanded their submarine force, it would be challenging for the Chinese to do much.

Do we see Taiwan doing those actions? And if not, why not?

John Bolton:

Those are certainly reasonable things to do. And I would consider them part of establishing deterrence against the invasion itself. There are a lot of reasons why I do not think the Chinese will physically invade. Number one, Taiwan is a hundred miles away across open ocean in the Taiwan Strait. I mean, the Russians had trouble walking across the Russian-Ukrainian border. It is a lot harder for the Chinese, and I do not think the Chinese want to grind Taiwan into the dust. They want that productive capacity, amazing industrial base, specifically the chip manufacturing fabs. They want all of that to fall into their lap like a piece of ripe fruit. They do not want to have a war on Taiwan. So, if they threw up a blockade, the moment we might seek to break that blockade needs to be a moment when we think we can break it entirely. You do not want a long-protracted conflict.

I do not think the Chinese do either. So, if they are not willing to risk that, then that helps indicate that we do have the possibility of deterring the blockade in the first place, but we need to do a lot more.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think Japan's response will be in that situation?

John Bolton:

It depends 90% on American leadership. If we lead effectively, I think the Japanese will follow. They have had an amazing debate in Japan over the past 30 years about becoming a normal nation, and they've concluded that they should defend themselves and look out for their interest in their region, especially against North Korea and China. Japanese Prime Minister Kishida came to Washington last year and promised to double Japan's defense spending from one to two percent of GDP over five years. It would make Japan the third biggest military in the world after the U.S. and China. Think about that. Now that would be a huge plus for Taiwan. Getting Taiwan closer with South Korea, Japan, Australia, Singapore should be a high priority for the new administration in Taipei.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think the South Koreans will participate in this conflict as well?

John Bolton:

It's something we should be pushing for. I would give the Biden administration credit for a three-way conversation, Japan, South Korea, and the US. It is a lot of historical animosities between the Koreans and the Japanese. For all of us to function more effectively, everybody has got to turn the page. We need South Korea and Japan and the US more integrated into an alliance like our NATO partners are in the North Atlantic. We still have a long way to go there, but we have seen some important early steps, and I would get Taiwan involved in that as soon as possible.

Larry Bernstein:

Victor Cha wrote a book explaining why Asia is not like NATO, that the animosity between the countries make alliances much more difficult. How do you think about the lack of alliances and then how do you incorporate places like Australia and India into that situation?

John Bolton:

Asia's not Europe. Okay, now we have got that out of the way. France and Germany managed to get over it, and so can the Koreans and the Japanese and everybody else. It is going to be complex. It will not follow the same pattern as NATO. It will go in fits and starts. There will be different pieces to it. As long as we're moving at a fast enough pace, that the combination of these actions forms effective deterrence against Chinese aggression. But we are still behind where we need to be.



Larry Bernstein:

And what reminds me of NATO and Russia and Southeast Asia versus China is the Germans very much wanted to trade with Russia but wanted the US to defend it against potential Russian aggression. And here is the same thing in Southeast Asia, all these countries desperately wanted to maximize trade and economic opportunity with China, but they do not want Chinese to be aggressive and are hoping the US would step up and protect each individual country.

How should we think about us being the sheriff in town? This is something that Trump is opposed to, he expects you to defend yourself first and not rely on the United States's efforts to protect you.

John Bolton:

We should ask, what are the U.S. interests at stake here? And we are not in the business of renting our capability to defend people, nor are we doing it as an act of charity to Ukraine, to the Philippines, to Taiwan, or anybody else. We do it because it increases security for the United States and for our broader alliances. And that must be the terms on which other countries associate with us in political military alliances. We have tried it in Southeast Asia before. It did not work back during the Cold War. Circumstances are very different. And you see in a lot of countries the increasing understanding that China is a real threat. As they see what China's doing directly affecting the countries around the South China Sea. They will move in our direction. It is not going to happen at the same pace it did in Europe after World War II, but if they see evidence, and I don't think it'll take much of actual Chinese aggression along that Indo-Pacific periphery, it could have a galvanizing effect very quickly.

Larry Bernstein:

Use the Philippines as an example. When China was not a threat, the Filipinos asked the Americans to leave Clark Air Force Base to leave the major naval base there. And then as soon as the tide turned, how we're going to defend ourselves? Hey, America, would you be willing to build at your expense a new airfield and a new naval base?

In your book, *In the Room Where It Happened*, you mention Trump's frustration that there were American troops in South Korea, for example, and that it was costing America a lot of money. And he was always questioning, is this in America's interest? It is very expensive. You are a wealthy country. I don't understand. Why aren't you paying for this?

John Bolton:

Well, that is because for Trump, everything was totally transactional and because he thought he understood balance sheets, dollars and cents appealed to him and broader strategic questions passed by without much mention. You must look at any alliance through the prism of what is in America's interest. And our continuing presence in Japan and Korea has been very important to

us over the years. And if China insists on hegemony in the Indo-Pacific as a first step and global hegemony as a second step. We must look at a counterstrategy. And it is unfolding as we speak. There is no single formula that gives the answer. But we must be sure that countries, when they ask for our help, understand that we have some requirements, too.

Sometimes it is easier to see them in retrospect than it is in the short term, but they recognize we have no hegemonic or territorial ambitions in Southeast Asia. We have been there before. It is China that's the threat, and they can't move out of China's neighborhood.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you spent a significant time talking about the process of decision-making in American foreign policy in the Trump administration. How would you contrast the Biden administration's process for how decisions are made, and is that process a good one?

John Bolton:

The Trump administration, it was hard fought to get it done. In the Biden administration, much like the Obama administration, processes are God, and they meet, and they meet, they send papers back and forth, and it impedes decision-making. There's no right formula here, but while one can fairly say decision-making on national security in the Trump administration was chaotic far too often, what we tried to do is keep it running on essential issues at the cabinet level and hope that it didn't break down completely. Whereas in the Biden administration, it's much more centralized in the White House. And process often drives decision making into gridlock.

Larry Bernstein:

It seems to me that the State Department at all levels seems to be generally on the same page as the President, in contrast to the Trump administration where it seemed that members of State were opposed to what President Trump was wanting to do. How do you govern if your state department is opposed to what you are trying to accomplish?

John Bolton:

Well, it's very hard and other presidents have seen it too. The State Department, like all government departments has a culture of its own. I do not call it the deep state, but there are bureaucratic cultures. Public economics theory teaches us this. And the State Department culture is different from the Treasury Department culture or the Defense Department culture. What I have said based on all of my years at State and different positions, what we need a president and a secretary of state who will begin a cultural revolution at the State Department against the problems of what they call "clientitis," which means favoring the foreign country at the expense of the United States or going native as they sometimes call it. And the problem of moral equivalency or mirror imaging where country X has its point of view, the US has its point of view. Maybe the truth is somewhere in between. I am not looking for platonic theorists at the

State Department. I want advocates for the United States. And it would take a cultural revolution and it would take more than one administration, but it is long overdue. And in the Trump administration, we missed an opportunity to get started on it.

Larry Bernstein:

There was a group of anonymous young people at the State Department that drafted a letter to the Biden administration saying it was opposed to the war in Gaza. Was that appropriate for those members of the State Department to behave that way?

John Bolton:

Absolutely not. If they were political appointees of the Biden administration, they should go to their superiors and tell them that privately and if need be, resign. And if they are careerists, they're entitled to express their opinions up the chain, but they're not entitled to be separate from the political leadership of the country. The State Department, it turns out, like the rest of the federal government, works for the president. And if they are career people and do not like the policy, they can resign too.

We are not conducting experiments in democratic theory within the State Department bureaucracy, and they need to get used to it.

Larry Bernstein:

How did this happen? And why weren't they expelled?

John Bolton:

Well, I think in part because although you said rightly, the State Department is more in sync with Biden than it was with Trump, or any Republican president for that matter, the State Department, large chunks of it, are to the left of the Biden White House. And you saw a manifestation of that with that letter.

Larry Bernstein:

Would it be appropriate for the Biden administration to do a search of their emails and figure out who these people were and then fire them?

John Bolton:

It is probably too hard to do, but I would find a few people who are political appointees and say, look, I respect your opinion, and you should resign out of a sense of your own integrity. Have a few of them resign and say, you do not have to have a job in the State Department. There is no constitutional right to it, and if you do not want to get with the program, fine, leave.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each podcast with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to American foreign policy and security interests?

John Bolton:

It is always a bad bet to vote against the United States. And I am a fond admirer of a statement that Winston Churchill once made. He said, you can always count on the Americans to do the right thing, usually after they have tried everything else. And so, while you are going through the trying everything else process, it can get tedious, but don't bet against America.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, John, for joining us today. If you missed our previous podcast the topic was Forget the Two State Solution.

Our speaker was Elliott Abrams who is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Elliott served as deputy assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor for George W. Bush, where he supervised U.S. policy in the Middle East for the White House, and as Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela for Donald Trump.

Elliott explained why the Biden Administration and European leaders continue to pursue a two-state solution after the violence of 10/7 even though the Israeli public abandoned this concept a decade ago.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website [whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.