



Letter to the President-Elect

By John R. Bolton

President-elect Barack Obama faces many challenges as he forms his administration and then assumes office next year. With many global threats, including nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, the president's job is to defend and advance our interests and values.

Congratulations, Mr. President-elect, on your victory. After the longest presidential campaign in our history, you now have fewer than seventy days to prepare to govern. While foreigners might see ten weeks as an eternity, you know only too well that it is precious little time to select your top advisers and subject them to our cumbersome FBI and ethics screening of their backgrounds, their finances, their potential conflicts of interest, and whatever skeletons are hanging in their closets.

Then they need to learn the intricacies of their respective responsibilities and, for many, begin the U.S. Senate confirmation process, which may take months. Time is already growing short.

The current economic turmoil will consume a significant amount of your transition team's time and effort, and properly so. But in the wider world, our adversaries and even our friends are actively considering how to advance their interests as the inauguration approaches.

You will have four full years of foreign policy issues and problems—the rise of China and India, the decline of the European Union, the role of Russia, and others—but I suggest the following as priorities in your first one hundred days: you are the decider.

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Although President George W. Bush tried to make this his mantra, his administration was plagued in its first term by incoherence in national security decision-making. Crisp decisions were not made, strong differences of opinion among cabinet secretaries were not resolved, and policy too often oscillated between conflicting options with no consistency or direction.

Ironically, the Bush administration's second term erred in the opposite direction, almost eliminating differences in advice to the president until there was only one voice in his ear at critical points. You must avoid both pitfalls, and you must make that immediately clear. You must resolve disagreements among your advisers, not allow drift, and insist on discipline once you make a decision.

If anyone disagrees with this approach, you may invite them to do the honorable thing and resign, or not sign on in the first place. Tehran's ruling mullahs have no intention of affording you a "honeymoon" period. They will move quickly to test your resolve both on their rapidly progressing nuclear weapons program and on their massive support for international terrorism.

Nearly six years of European diplomacy have failed to slow Iran's nuclear program. Five United Nations Security Council resolutions demanding that Iran halt uranium enrichment—and imposing risibly weak sanctions—have had essentially no effect.

Russia in particular is using Iran as the sharp tip of the spear to disrupt our foreign policy throughout the Middle East. Moscow will watch what you do just as intently as Tehran will. Any new President will be advised to engage in at least some renewed diplomatic effort. But do not be fooled. Insist on three months of intense, good-faith negotiations and we will find out if Iran is serious.

If not, which I believe is the case, quickly suspend negotiations. Then, ratchet up efforts on the only options—unattractive as they are—that have a chance of stopping Iran from acquiring deliverable nuclear weapons: regime change or the targeted use of military force against their nuclear program. If you wait longer, you will surely have the worst of all worlds: Iran with nuclear weapons and an even greater threat of nuclear proliferation as other Middle Eastern states draw the appropriate conclusions from its success at thwarting our nonproliferation efforts.

We are kidding ourselves if we think North Korea will ever voluntarily give up its nuclear weapons program. Even during the campaign, as the Bush administration was squandering our negotiating leverage, North Korea continued to try to proliferate ballistic missile technology.

As with Iran, there is essentially no chance that Pyongyang will be talked out of its nuclear weapons. Moreover, with the world in near-complete ignorance about the state of Kim Jong Il's health or plans for regime succession, even more uncertainty surrounds the intentions of this prison camp of a country. Expecting that the long-running six-party talks will "solve" the North Korean problem is a delusion.

Instead, you must deal directly with China as the highest priority in our bilateral relationship. You must insist that we act together to eliminate the current regime in Pyongyang and its nuclear program and ultimately reunite the Korean Peninsula.

China needs to understand that leaving North Korea with nuclear weapons is not an option and that

its inaction will have an increasingly negative impact on our bilateral relationship. Beijing alone can change North Korea, and it needs to get started.

Do not let global "public opinion" about the United States—from Albania to Zimbabwe—dissuade you from doing what you think is right for America. Your job is to defend and advance our interests and values, a task that invariably will displease our adversaries and even many of our friends, especially those who wish we were more European in our behavior and attitudes.

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What we must do, however, is more effectively advocate the policies you will be pursuing. Failure at the political level in Washington and abroad and at the level of the career Foreign Service made the Bush administration one of the most tongue-tied in our history. We should try to shift international public opinion to support our policies, not modify our policies to try to satisfy international public opinion. The Department of State will not understand this distinction, but you must.

Many U.S. and foreign commentators have been quick to tell us that America is in decline and that our role in the future will not be what it once was. They will be correct only if you fall prey to their pessimism.

If you do, rest assured that they will shortly turn critical of "American isolationism," just as they have been critical in recent years of "American unilateralism." You will never satisfy these critics. Defend America and its friends; the rest will take care of itself.