DEFENSE FORUM FOUNDATION
Congressional Defense and Foreign Policy Forum

Urgent National Security Challenges Facing America

Speaker:  
Ambassador John Bolton

Introduction:  
Ambassador J. William Middendorf, II,  
Chairman,  
Defense Forum Foundation

Moderator:  
Suzanne Scholte,  
President,  
Defense Forum Foundation

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Suzanne and I and Chad had the great honor of organizing this wonderful group – and we’re so grateful that you came – of organizing this wonderful group many years ago, back in the ’80s. We were established with the specific purpose of giving congressional staff the opportunity to hear from our expert speakers on critical national security issues, primarily to do with our national security and defense of our country.

Over the years our leadership – under the leadership of President Suzanne Scholte here; Suzanne is our very beloved leader – we’ve focused on programs for freedom, democracy and human rights. She’s been – one of the greatest ways of measuring her greatness is that she’s now on a list to be exterminated by the North Koreans – (laughter) – she’s done so much work for human rights – human rights there. And she’s had threats on her life, by the way.

We’re very proud of our traditional of nonpartisanship because the very issues we address are of concern to all Americans. Today we focus on urgent national security issues with the new – that the new Congress will be addressing.

Before I introduce our distinguished speaker, I’d like to acknowledge – and he has to leave, but I would like to acknowledge one of our great living – great living American leaders – greatest living American leaders, serving on the Armed Services Committee and chairing the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, extremely knowledgeable on the Chinese threat that their missiles and their anti-satellite capabilities, their cyber war capabilities, their EMP threat. And they’re in every sense a growing threat to the – to CONUS and the free world, unrecognized because the Chinese lay low. The Russians are waving threats around about taking Europe in two days and what have you, but – with attack nukes and what have you, but he – the Chinese are the ones that we have to be concerned about, in my opinion, in the long run. We had a session on this. Our last session at the Defense Forum Foundation covered that issue with Bill Gertz, and I thought it was very successful.

So I’d like to introduce to you a great American, Congressman Trent Franks. Would you stand up, please? (Applause.)

Stacy Whitehouse, from the office of Congressman Rob Wittman, who helped make arrangements for the use of this room. Stacy, thank you so much. I appreciate it.

A great South Korean leader, whose successful efforts getting Congress to pass the resolution on comfort women, Professor Ok Cha Soh. If you could stand up. (Applause.) Thank you. Wonderful, wonderful. She’s also on the list of the North Koreans. (Laughter.)

And Counselor Mohamed Benazzouz from Embassy of Algeria. (Applause.) We’re very honored.
And also Ambassador Beisat of Western Sahara, we’re glad to have you here. (Applause.) I had the privilege a few years ago of riding around on a camel in that place. What you need is a few more water wells, I think. I’ve never seen such desert. It must go on for 500 – 800 miles, wouldn’t you agree? But at any rate, we’re so honored to have you here.

And also, one of our board members, Chadwick Gore, one of the founders of the organization. Chad’s one of our truly great patriots. Chad, so honored to have you. (Applause.)

And Jeb Carney, also a board member. Jeb, I’m sure, is known to all of you. But we’re so humbled. (Applause.)

Our speaker – an old friend for many, many years, we served in several administrations together – Ambassador John Bolton, served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and undersecretary of State for arms control and international security. During his U.N. tenure, he was a tenacious and outspoken advocate of U.S. efforts to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons – it’s current today, of course, and let’s hope his legacy continues. But I have great doubts: from what I see, this administration is not as strong as John was in his – when he was in a leadership position – to push Syria out of Lebanon and to bring African peacemakers into Somalia. He worked vigorously against North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile programs, moving very strong sanctions or resolutions through the U.N. Security Council. Working with the French ambassador, he led the Security Council’s efforts to approve a unanimous resolution to end the summer 2006 Hezbollah war on Israel, to authorize U.N. peacekeepers and to create an arms embargo against Hezbollah. He also assembled an international coalition that blocked the bid of Hugo Chavez to join the Security Council. He also advocated for human rights while serving at the U.N., arranging for the Security Council’s first deliberations on Burma’s human rights abuses, and also getting the Security Council’s approval to send in U.N. peacekeepers to Darfur.

We are honored to have him with us today. And before I have him come forward, I’d like to point out that in today’s issue of Newsmax he’s prominently mentioned as a potential presidential candidate, for very good reason I can say from many years’ experience with John.

John, it’s a great honor to have you with us. (Applause.)

AMBASSADOR JOHN BOLTON: Well, Bill, thank you very much for those kind words. And thanks to you and Suzanne and Defense Forum Foundation for inviting me. It’s always a pleasure to be here. I’ve worked with Bill over the years in many capacities, and with Suzanne beginning when we started on the Western Sahara problem, an issue I’ve worked on for close to 25 years now, still without a satisfactory solution.
One of those things that really I think it’s an obligation to the United States to help resolve, to give the people of the territory of the Western Sahara the opportunity to vote in a referendum on their own future. How’s that for a start? (Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah!

MR. BOLTON: Something the United Nations has failed to do these last 23 years, unfortunately. But thank you all for coming today and I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

I want to talk about some of the issues that Congress – the new incoming Congress will face on the national security front. But I think it’s important to start, before we survey the situation internationally, to talk a little bit about the new Congress and how they got here and what it means for the future. And I think there’s a very important domestic American political issue here, one that was important in the 2014 cycle and that I think is going to be more important in the 2016 cycle.

And that is that a lot of the freshmen House and Senate members, in my view, owe their election in substantial part to their strong advocacy of American national security. I think a number of factors in the external world help propel national security back into the public attention. ISIS beheading Americans caught a lot of people’s attention.

But I think also the people in the country are ahead of their would-be leaders here in Washington. I think they have a deep sense of the importance of protecting the country, of the risks that we face around the world, of the dangers of a weak and ineffective American leadership. And I think it’s a continuing reputation of the political conventional wisdom in Washington.

You know, if you listen to the political operatives and many in the media, they’ll say foreign policy doesn’t matter. Nobody cares about national security. It doesn’t affect their daily lives. They don’t vote on the basis of foreign policy. They vote on the basis of any of a dozen other issues. And it turns out – I think that conventional wisdom is wrong. Even if it weren’t wrong, it would be disastrous for the country if it were true, to really believe that the American people don’t understand that the protection of our way of life depends on a strong American presence in the world.

But in any event, it’s as I say, the people have more commonsense than many of their leaders. And I think it’s going to be evident in the 2016 cycle that national security will be at the center of the debate, for some of the reasons I’m going to explain. The
international environment is going to get more perilous of the next two years. And I think that if candidates for the Republican nomination or the nominee of the Democratic Party – I think we know who that’s going to be at the moment – but if we’re not prepared to have a debate on America’s grand strategy, it’s going to place the nation in even graver danger.

I think the fact is right now our situation has deteriorated around the world and confronts Congress with some very, very difficult policy decisions because we have an administration and a president who don’t give national security the kind of priority it deserves. It may sound counterintuitive, but I think President Obama pays less attention to foreign defense policy issues than any American president since Pearl Harbor.

I don’t think he wakes up every morning and has as his very first thought: What threats does the United States face around the world? I think that’s evident in a whole series of his policies and in the implementation of those policies. And the consequence has been diminished American influence and a diminished American ability to protect our interest, our citizens and our friends and allies around the world.

The president has revealed this lack of interest in a lot of different ways. Some of the things that he said about America’s role in the world I think reflect – I’m being polite here – a deep ambivalence about American power. He said in his State of the Union message last year, for example, that long-term deployments of American forces around the world risk inciting extremism – which is the word he uses because he doesn’t use the word terrorism when he can avoid it.

But think about that for a minute. That’s a statement that the deployment of American forces is the problem. Tell that to Germany and Japan and South Korea, where the long-term deployment of American forces has not only been critical to our national security, but I think has helped in measurable ways create a democratic climate in those countries, and a climate that’s respectful of civilian control over the military, something that’s extraordinarily important. We haven’t fostered extremism in Germany, Japan and South Korea. And yet, the president said that and nobody in the media commented on it.

He said very early in his term of office, when asked if he believed in American exceptionalism – can you imagine, this is the first person who has to be asked that question? But he said, yes, I believe in American exceptionalism, just as the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.

Now, if you parse that question, what he says in the first third, that he believes in American exceptionalism, he takes away in the second two-thirds. You know, there 193 countries in the U.N. He could have gone on – just as the Burkina Fasians believe in Burkina Fasian exceptionalism, just as the Ecuadorians believe in Ecuadorian exceptionalism, you get the point. If everybody’s exceptional, nobody is.

And yet, our president doesn’t have confidence in the American role in the world. And to see that you can’t have a strong and sustained American economy without a
sustained and strong American presence internationally. And obviously the reverse is true as well. You can’t have that strong international presence if you don’t have a strong domestic economy.

And just as the aphorism predicts, today we have a weak economy and a weak presence in the world. And every risk of the next two years, our adversaries, who can read calendars just as well as we can, will try to take advantage of that. They don’t know who will be elected in 2016, none of us do, but they know that Obama has two more years.

So just looking at the array of issues that we face in a short survey, I think we can see, unfortunately, the grave consequences that the United States and its friends and allies face because of the president’s policy of weakness, inattention, lack of involvement, lack of resolve, lack of resources for the military. Let’s just start in Eastern and Central Europe, with what’s happening in Ukraine and the threats that other nations in the region face.

You know, in 1945 we thought we had resolved the question, after two deadly world wars, that military force was no longer going to be used on the continent to change international boundaries. And in fact, we went on to a third world war, in the Cold War, to prevent that from happening as well. And at the end of the third world war of the 20th century, when the Soviet Union collapsed, many people say peace is at hand, it’s the end of history. We don’t have anything else to worry about.

What we’re seeing in Ukraine today is that history never ended, or if it did it has certainly returned with a vengeance. Crimea has been annexed by Russia. They are in the process of increasing their military control over provinces of Ukraine. I don’t know where this is going to end. I don’t believe that the agreement that was signed in Minsk a few days ago will hold for a long period of time. It’s not that much different from the agreement announced in September which broke down. So in three or four months we’ll see if this one doesn’t break down as the territory that Moscow effectively controls in Ukraine continues to exist.

And it’s not just what’s happening in Ukraine that’s a problem. I know there are some people who say, you know, it’s a struggle in a country far away among peoples of whom we know little. Some of you in the room will know that phrase, that’s what Neville Chamberlain said about the Sudetenland in September of 1938. But it goes well beyond Ukraine. What has happened here is that Putin has driven a wedge into the NATO alliance.

I think he sees the prospect for an outcome for Russia far beyond territorial aggrandizement at the expense of Ukraine. I think he sees the possibility – unthinkable a few years ago – of shattering the NATO alliance because it may well be that his next targets could be the Baltic republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. We know the Russians have in years gone by already engaged in cyber warfare against those countries. They have large ethnic Russian populations.
And I think if Putin believes that at relatively low cost he can take aggressive action against one or more of those countries, and NATO fails to respond for the first time ever when a NATO country was in peril, that the alliance itself could collapse, because there’s no American leadership.

This deal just signed in Minsk was notable by the absence of the president of the United States. We are the leaders of the NATO alliance. If the president doesn’t want to lead the NATO alliance, he might do us the courtesy of telling us that. Of course, he’s not going to. That would impolitic. And if there’s one thing that is consistent in the president’s foreign policy it’s his concern for the domestic political implications of what he does.

But make no mistake about it, I think the Europeans – and I mean specifically Chancellor Merkel of Germany – have looked at the situation and said: We’re not going to see American leadership for the next two years. In Germany they’ve got their own problems – economic dependence on Russian oil and gas, a crisis in the eurozone, a general disinclination to use Germany power for good and sufficient historical reasons. They rely on American leadership.

And when it’s not forthcoming, I think Chancellor Merkel has decided she’s going to look out for German interests and cut a deal that even she may consider unsatisfactory in order to try to stabilize the situation in Ukraine until such time as America gets a president who’s prepared to try and prevent the use of military force in Europe to change boundaries.

Now, you know, there’s nobody watching what happens in Ukraine, I think, more carefully than the leadership in Beijing, because they’re seeing the world’s preeminent political-military alliance responding ineffectively in Ukraine. And there is no comparable alliance structure in East and Southeast Asia. So in China today, although the conventional wisdom in the United States is that China’s undergoing a peaceful rise and it will be a responsible stakeholder in world affairs, that’s only one potential scenario. It may be the most desirable, but it’s certainly not the most likely.

As well as its economic strength, China’s engaged in a massive buildup of its ballistic and nuclear forces. It’s building a blue-water navy for the first time literally in 600 years. As Bill Middendorf said, it has advanced cyber warfare capabilities, anti-satellite capabilities, area-denial and anti-access weapons systems. It’s modernizing the People’s Liberation Army ground components. And it’s essentially now making assertive, almost belligerent, territorial claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

Now, once again, many people in the United States may say, but that’s so far away – all these islands that are three inches above the water on a good day. What possible interest can they be to us? Well, the interest to us, I think, is palpable, because not only are there potentially important mineral reserves in and around the East and South
China Sea, but what the Chinese are doing – and they’ve said it publicly – is they intend to make at least the South China Sea into a Chinese lake.

They’ve claimed the borders that go back – they claimed those back some time. They’ve now established a provincial capital, if you can believe it, on one of these islands that’s three inches above the water. They’re confronting the Philippines and Vietnamese in the South China Sea. And our response is to call on all sides to negotiate the competing territorial claims peacefully. That’s a little bit like praying that the claims are resolved peacefully. It’s very admirable, but it’s not going to guarantee an outcome that we or the others see as satisfactory.

Now, what difference does it make if China asserts and can maintain sovereignty over the South China Sea? Every barrel of oil that goes to Japan, South Korea and Taiwan from the Middle East passes through the South China Sea. A huge amount of international commerce generally goes through that and the Straits of Malacca. So if the Chinese can turn the South China Sea into territorial waters, they will have their hands around the throats of key economies in East Asia, key trading partners and friends of the United States – resulting in a huge strategic shift in the region.

And yet, we have a president who, despite a much-trumpeted pivot toward Asia, has done essentially nothing in response to these potential Chinese threats. No, nobody is looking for a hostile relationship with China – quite the contrary. But the way to avoid a difficult, fraught relationship, or an even more perilous one, is to have the United States in a position of strength. And instead, we are in a position of weakness.

It was an issue during the 2012 campaign when Governor Romney, for example, pointed out that at that time, with about 287 ships at sea, the United States Navy was at its lowest level since 1916 – 1-9-1-6. It goes along with President Obama’s budget for the Army, where – for this fiscal year – where we’re projected to have a ground force level equal to the force level of our Army in 1938 – another good year.

This is a reduction in American capability that will not be made up overnight, even with the right kind of president elected in 2016. And there’s every prospect that the downward trend of our capabilities will increase unless Congress steps up and does what some consider a politically unpopular thing of defending and expanding the military budget in a time of tight fiscal constraints.

But I think – I think it’s critical that we do that. And I think we should do it unashamedly and fully defending the reason why we need to get the military budget up. Just as Ronald Reagan did when he took office after the Carter administration in a time of economic difficulty, he said to Cap Weinberger, the defense secretary – expenditures for defense are not just a budget line item. And that’s exactly the attitude that we’ve got to follow.

Now, I mentioned that President Obama had bragged about his pivot from the Middle East toward Asia. And I suppose that’s because he thought things were going so
well for us in the Middle East that we could afford to turn our attention away. In fact, they weren’t at the time and things are in even worse shape now. In country after country across the Middle East and North Africa, what has been a crisis here and a crisis there and a crisis in the next country has merged together. And we have the entire region slipping into chaos.

You can see it in the disintegration of national governments around the region. It began certainly before the Obama administration, but I think it’s accelerated dramatically since the Arab Spring, which the president badly misread, to the detriment of many American allies in the region – allies who were, concededly, not Jeffersonian democrats, but who at least had the virtue of upholding deals they had made, like Hosni Mubarak with the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and others.

And instead, we’ve got a region where terrorists and warlords are increasingly taking root, threatening their neighbors, destroying existing governments, and ripping up boundary lines that have been in place since the end of World War I. This really began in Somalia back in the early 1990s, but we see this problem continuing in the Sudan and across North Africa, Libya being the prime example of a country that’s just disintegrated since the overthrow of Gadhafi.

We’ve got Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, declaring its own caliphate. It’s not attacking Cameroon and Niger and probably elsewhere across the region. We’ve seen terrorists nearly topple the government of Mali. We’ve seen terrorist attacks against oil and gas facilities in Nigeria. It got little attention in this country, but was one of the worst terrorist incidents there. In Egypt we’ve seen the Muslim Brotherhood come to power and nearly snuff out the opposition, had there not been a military coup against it.

Even today no one is in control of the Sinai Peninsula. And it’s a highway for extremists and terrorists and traffickers in drugs and human beings. Nobody’s got control over it. If you’ve just been reading in the newspapers recently, Yemen has collapsed as a state. Allies of Iran and the al-Houthis now control Sana’a, the capital – another capital where our embassy officials have had to flee because we can’t protect them.

And so in what used to be the country of Yemen, you have both al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula as a base, and a surrogate for Iran now right at the backdoor of Saudi Arabia and the other oil producing monarchies of the peninsula – this, the country that the president called an example of a success story of his counterterrorism policies.

And just moving to the north, obviously you have ISIS literally creating a new state out of the remains of what used to be Syria and Iraq. I think we’re at the point where realistically you have to say that the country of Iraq as we have known it since the breakup of the Ottoman Empire doesn’t exist anymore. I don’t see the Kurds ever going back into a country that looks like what Iraq used to. They’re de facto independent and I think only force would change that, which they would resist to the end.
The Sunni Arabs of what used to be Iraq are not going to go back into a country dominated by political forces that operate under the will of the ayatollahs in Tehran. Syrian has come apart. The Kingdom of Jordan is threatened and only there, because of the latest act of brutality by ISIS, we’ve seen the king step up and act like a real leader, to the embarrassment of many people in the United States who wish that we had a leader of that kind of strength. But the fact is, that ISIS continues to develop support all around the world. It’s a threat in the region. It’s a threat to Jordan, obviously. But again, it too is a threat to the oil producing monarchies.

We’ve got in Pakistan Taliban simply waiting for the ultimate American withdrawal. Many of you have probably heard the famous Taliban saying, referring to us. They say: You have the watches, we have the time. They’re right, at least under this administration. And if Afghanistan falls to the Taliban again, it will not simply put that country back to where it was before 9/11, but it will be a major threat to the stability of the government of Pakistan. And if that government were to fall to the radicals, not only would it also be a base for international terrorism, but with its supply of nuclear weapons it would be an Iran on steroids right now, a grave threat not only on the subcontinent but for terrorist attack around the world.

And then of course, I’ve saved the best for last, Iran, which is a state-sponsor of terrorism. It has been since 1979 the largest source of financial support for terrorists around the world. And it’s on the verge of developing nuclear weapons. So of course, the Obama administration is looking to reach an agreement with them on their nuclear weapons program, abandoning the basic premises of an acceptable agreement that the Europeans had pressed for, for over a decade, that Iran would have to give up uranium enrichment. That – their uranium enrichment capability – will be legitimized by this deal.

And the substance of the deal itself, I think when we finally see it announced, is simply a deal that will try and maximize the amount of time that we have to find out when Iran violates the agreement. That’s what this boils down to. And I think it will be a destabilizing event all over the region. I think other countries will accept that Iran is on an inevitable track toward nuclear weapons. They will try and get nuclear weapons as well. And this already volatile region will be even more dramatically at risk.

We do have allies in the region. We have Israel. Its prime minister is coming here to this Congress in less than a month to speak about the threat of Iran’s nuclear weapons. The president of our country will not receive this leader of one of our closest allies. What signal does that send to the terrorists, to the state sponsors of terrorism, to nuclear proliferators? What signal does it send to our friends who say if this is the way the United States now treats its closest allies, how will it treat us when our time of trouble comes?

It really is a low point, I think, in recent American history, although I’m sad to say there’s a lot of competition for that dubious honor. And I think the low point to date, to come back to Libya, has been the events before, during and after the attack on our
consulate in Benghazi on September the 11th, 2012. Obviously, we weren’t ready for it. Whether we were able to or not, we didn’t do anything on the date of the attack to save those four Americas, or to do anything else to protect other Americans in the region who were at risk and potentially in danger for days thereafter.

But worst of all, from the point of view of American national security, look at how little we have done since that attack in Benghazi. The administration has arrested one person, brought them to the United States after some unknown amount of interrogation and will now try them in a full due-process criminal trial in U.S. courts. No retaliation. No retribution to the terrorists – a criminal trial in the United States for one person.

The lesson I think that Benghazi sends, and the administration’s performance, is that – you know, an ambassador is the president’s personal representative in the country to which they’re accredited. The lesson is that under Barack Obama, you can kill the personal representative of the president of the United States, and do it with impunity. And that really is the low point. The president doesn’t seem to understand that.

So that’s why I think it’s important to have this broad national debate on what America’s role in the world is. Do you believe, as I think the overwhelming percentage of Americans do, that we are a strong and positive and benign force in the world? Or do you think America is too pushy, too successful, too assertive, and that a more withdrawn America will make a peaceful world?

I think that’s the way the president looks at it. I think it’s like looking through the wrong end of the telescope. But that’s the debate we’re going to have. I think we will have that debate in 2016. And I think the candidates who are likely to win are the candidates who can explain why supporting a strong American presence in the world is critical to our liberty here at home. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

Thank you. So, Suzanne, we have time for some questions? Is that –

SUZANNE SCHOLTE: Yes.

MR. BOLTON: Great.

Yes, sir.

Q: Could you touch briefly on Turkey? With their proximity to the mayhem in northern Iraq, it seems very tempting for them to get involved.

MR. BOLTON: Well, I think Turkey has been increasingly a problem for the Western alliance over this past 10 or 15 years. I think we first saw it back in the run-up to the second Gulf War when we couldn’t get the requisite parliamentary majority in Turkey to allow the transit of American military units across the country into northern
Iraq. You know, Turkey is – was then and still is – a NATO ally and this conflict was on their border.

But I think it’s certainly gotten worse under Prime Minister-now-President Erdogan. I think he’s made a very clear decision to move Turkey away from the Kemal Ataturk vision of Turkey as a secular, Westernizing country. He’s done this a whole variety of ways – purging the military, purging courts, suppressing domestic dissent. And I’m very worried about the direction Turkey is taking, moving further away from the West.

I don’t know whether he has Ottoman-style ideas or whether – as some think he does – or whether it’s more focused on Turkey. But I do know that when he was mayor of Istanbul, Erdogan said the following: Democracy is like a streetcar. You ride it to the stop you want, and then you get off. And I find that a pretty chilling proposition. And I just – I worry when I read that Erdogan is considered to be Obama’s best friend among foreign leaders.

I think we should be very vigorous in our diplomacy with Turkey. I think we’ve got to do what we can, which is limited. But I think we’ve got to try to bring them back toward the West and to maintain them as a strong member of the NATO alliance. I’m very much afraid they are slipping away.

Yes, ma’am.

Q: A question on the Minsk peace process. There have been some statements from the right sector saying they won’t even observe the ceasefire. I mean, is this something that’s in control of the – of the government of Kiev? And then also, the secretary general of the OSCE, who is overseeing this process, said that while there were some Russian soldiers identified in eastern Ukraine, they could find no evidence of the Russian military. So how do you – how do you parse – oh, sorry. That was – that was silly. They could find no evidence of heavy military equipment in there. So?

MR. BOLTON: Yeah. Well, they didn’t look very hard, did they? You know, look, I think this deal is very shaky. I think the odds of it being sustained are small. And I think Putin obviously has been pursing a strategy of fight and talk. And I honestly don’t know what is ultimate objective is. Certainly this conflict and even the annexation of the Crimea represent only a small percentage of the total territory in Ukraine you might expect a real Russian irredentist to want to carve out of the country.

So I don’t know whether it’s because Putin is not – doesn’t feel he’s capable of going as far as he might, but I think that because of the price of oil in international markets, Russia’s been very badly harmed. And I think Putin may feel that he needs a respite from the fighting in short term for the Russian economy to recover, maybe get some of the sanctions lifted. But that’s why I don’t have any confidence it’s going to be sustained.
Certainly since the last settlement or the last ceasefire, along the lines of the September principles, was signed and then broken, Russia’s territorial control in the disputed eastern provinces has grown very considerably. So if you just do that every three or four months, pretty soon the amount of territory effectively under Russian control will be much more substantial.

I think the really worrisome aspects about the deal in Minsk are the political questions, below the level of the ceasefire. What it means for autonomy in the eastern provinces – the two eastern provinces, and what it might serve as a precedent for – from Putin’s perspective, for increased autonomy from Kiev for other provinces that he considers in the Russian sphere of influence.

So I think this is a – this is an effort to gain a breather on the part of Russia. I think it’s satisfactory to France and Germany. They want a breather too. They’ve got to figure out what to do with Greece and the crisis in the euro. And as I said earlier, they don’t see the United States playing a role at all. So I think their strategy here may be just to try and freeze the problem in Ukraine until they can deal with their other problems, and then hope that America comes to its senses.

But I don’t think this is over in Ukraine by a long shot. And I very much fear it’s not over in other countries once part of the Soviet Union.

Yes, sir.

Q: John, Chuck Downs here.

You have just outlined a number of specific instances in which the Obama administration has made things that many of us would consider to be mistakes given American strategic objectives and principles around the world. I’m always shocked by the statements that every once in a while float out from the White House that suggest there’s an ideology behind it.

If you think that global warming is something that has more impact on more people than the murders of a few Americans being held hostage by ISIS, then you probably don’t think that the loss of people in Benghazi – the few Americans serving in Benghazi, even if they’re representative of the president – falls – you probably also think that that does not come up to a major point of concern. And in fact, the State Department at the time of Benghazi was, I think, too often heard saying, those people knew what they were getting into when they signed up for overseas assignments, which is really a shocking thing.

Throughout your career, you have always focused on some very specific, and sometimes very small issues. You’ve defended the situation of the Sahrawis in Western Africa. You were very much involved in the Lockerbie crash. What does it take for America to be shaken out of ideological drift that basically makes us think foreign policy doesn’t matter? It’s only Crimea. They’ve had the Ukraine since Alexander Nevsky.
We all know it because we know music. (Laughs.) You know, at what point do
Americas become alert to the fact that these individual little particles actually form
together to a mass that really matters?

MR. BOLTON: Well, I think it happens from time to time. I think it certainly
happened on 9/11. And what’s amazing to me is that 13 years after 9/11, we appear to
have forgotten about it – or, at least some people appear to have forgotten about it. I
don’t doubt the president’s policy is driven in large part by ideology. A lot of people
have theories on it.

My theory’s actually fairly simple. He went to Ivy League schools. He actually
believed what he was taught. He’s not the first person to hold those views. If you went
to the faculty lounges of our great universities today he’d just slip right into the
conversation. He just happens to have been elected president. And that’s what the
danger is.

I’m very worried that if we don’t look at events around the world and draw what
seem to me to be clear conclusions, that it will take another tragedy, a tragedy of great
dimensions, to bring America back to its senses. And I have feared for many years that
that next tragedy involves a weapon of mass destruction. It’s why I’ve focused on Iran’s
nuclear weapons program all these years, North Korea and the risk of proliferation
generally.

If the terrorists could get their hands on a nuclear device, God knows the North
Koreans will sell anything to anybody for hard currency. You know, how will that – how
will that play out for the United States? And I just think that the risk of this kind of
terrorist attack is so acute that people have to be – we have to have this debate to make
people aware of it. And if we do have the debate, it will come out the right way.

Yes, ma’am.

Q: Yes. Last year I was monitoring a hearing up here in the House. The
witnesses were General Kelly, commander of SOUTHCOM, and then Admiral Papp,
who was then the commander of our Coast Guard. They were discussing the national
security threat coming from the south, the absence of our military assets in the Caribbean
and Central American region.

And more accurately, General Kelly was saying: We have the communication
assets, we can hear what’s going on, we’re hearing in the comms, Chinese, Arabic. It’s a
new environment now in the Caribbean – Russian activity. And in summary, he basically
identified what was going on south of our border in that region as an existential threat.
Could you address his comments?

MR. BOLTON: Well, you know, Secretary Kerry has taken all that into account.
He’s decided the Monroe Doctrine is outdated and doesn’t apply anymore. I mean, I
think obviously we are threatened by a lot of interests, by adversaries and potential
adversaries in the Western Hemisphere. And I think we’ve got governments all around the Western Hemisphere – like in Cuba, like in Venezuela, like in some of – like in Nicaragua, like in other South American countries – that would be receptive to these sorts of overtures from these adversaries.

You know, even the Obama administration indicted high officials of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps a few years ago for conspiring to murder the Saudi Arabian ambassador in Washington by infiltrating assassins through Mexico into the United States. It’s a pretty stunning document when you read it. And yet, the president’s response to all this is to throw away half century of American strategy and, in effect, try to get open, full diplomatic relations with the Castro regime in Cuba. This is another signal to our adversaries that everything’s up for grabs.

And I think ignoring the geostrategic realities that we face in our own hemisphere is something that we do at our peril. It’s a problem for the United States. Every president comes in and says we need to spend more time on the Western Hemisphere. And then every president doesn’t do it. And we really do need to spend more time and more concern with the threats we may face here in the hemisphere, or one of them will in fact materialize. So I am quite concerned about it.

The trouble is – and as I think my entire remarks demonstrate – there are so many problems that have festered for six years because the president won’t address them, that when you lay them all out it sounds pretty gloomy. And in fact, it is pretty gloomy. So if we, if we’re not prepared to face up to it as a country, or even if we faced up to a limited number of these problems, others would still remain to endanger us or our friends and allies.

And it’s not going to get any better. The president’s simply wrong if he believes that not talking about foreign threats and challenges is going to make them easier to resolve. It doesn’t. It obviously makes them harder.

I’ll take one or two more here. Yes, sir.

Q: My name is Peter Kang, Korean Freedom Alliance.

You – first of all, I would like to say that I was really moved by your excellent description of the failure of Obama administration. I think if you become the president, I think it would solve the national security problem of the United States.

I noticed that you haven’t mentioned much about North Korea. My concern is generally focused on that issue. I think that problem – North Korean problem as well can be solved by exerting pressure, which the Obama administration is failing to do that because he’s afraid of war, like in Crimea, Ukraine problem.

When United States says that we don’t want war, war is too dangerous, then the enemy can win without fighting a war at all. So if we pressure North Korea not afraid of
war, then that’s a way to solve the problem – no war and, you know, win over North Korea. You know, the worst dictatorship –

MR. BOLTON: Yeah, well it’s a very important question. I certainly didn’t mean to slight North Korea. As Chuck Downs will tell you, I’ve spent a lot of time worrying about the North Korean problem and was duly insulted by the rulers of North Korea in my time and still view it as quite an honor that they attacked me.

My view is that the only long-term solution to the North Korean nuclear weapons threat is to merge the two Koreas. That’s what we said we were going to do in 1945. The division of the peninsula was supposed to be temporary. Obviously a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then, but I think the moment is at hand to make the argument to China.

If they are serious that the North Korean nuclear capability endangers stability in East Asia, impairs China’s economic growth and risks the peace, which I think is all true, then China needs to do what it has the unique capacity to do and bring that regime down. It supplies 90 percent of North Korea’s energy. It supplies incredible amounts of food and other humanitarian assistance into North Korea, largely to keep the regime in power and to keep the North Koreans on their side of the border.

I think among younger Chinese leaders there’s an increasing recognition that the North Korean regime is a pretty ugly piece of baggage and that ultimately it is in China’s interest to see the two Koreas united. I think unfortunately much of the problem is in South Korea, which sees unification as a costly burden to them. I think that’s a bad reading of what happened with the reunification of the two Germanys. I think this would be an enormous accomplishment if we could reunify the two Koreas. I think it would actually help Korean economic development overall, North and South. And I think it would stabilize the region. But it takes time. The Chinese have to be talked to at some length.

We have to talk about what to do with the American forces on the Peninsula. I’d be happy to move them from the 38th parallel, where they’d no longer be needed, to a base near Pusan where they would be available throughout Asia. The Chinese see the threat of Americans along the Yalu River. They saw that movie in 1950. They didn’t like it then. They don’t like it now. I don’t want to be on the Yalu River.

But we can – we can find a way to work this out with China. But it takes time. And we’re not even approaching it. As you, I think, alluded to, instead we’ve just ignored North Korea these last six years. That at least is better than making concessions to the North Koreans in hopes that they’ll give up their nuclear program, which is no more likely than Iran giving up its nuclear program.

But six years of ignoring the North doesn’t mean they’ve been sitting there. They’ve made six more years of progress. And if you don’t think that North Korea isn’t a global threat, ask yourself why North Koreans were in Syria building a nuclear reactor
that was a clone of their own reactor at Yongbyon until the Israelis destroyed it in September of 2007. That is the very definition of a global threat.

And I think the relationship between the Iranian nuclear weapons program and the North Korean nuclear weapons program is one of the issues that nobody wants to talk about, but I’d be amazed if there weren’t substantial work between the two of them. We know they’re cooperating on ballistic missiles. It would be remarkable if there wasn’t cooperation on the nuclear front as well. And that ought to be troubling to everybody.

So maybe we’ll take one more here, if there is. Oh, I’m sorry. I apologize. You’re too far to the right. (Laughter.)

Q: Interesting problem to have. So the concern that I have is that for as important as it is for the U.S. to have enough military power to defend its interests overseas, it seems as though a large number of our allies take our strength for granted and aren’t spending enough for their own defense. What can we do to ensure that our allies hold up their end of the bargain?

MR. BOLTON: Well, I think it’s a very legitimate question. And it’s a question that’s been asked for a long time, since in the NATO circumstance, for example, the downward trend in defense expenditures by NATO allies has been going on for a long time. And I think what’s required is [for them to increase their defense budget share] – and perhaps it’s happening now. Unfortunately if there is a silver lining in this debacle in Ukraine, it’s that at least in Eastern and Central Europe they understand what’s at stake for their own safety’s sake, and what happens when the United States fades away.

But Americans for a long time have said we’ve got to tell the NATO allies to do more. And we do, and they don’t, and we just act like it doesn’t make any difference. So I think a new president would have to take a very strong line inside the NATO alliance to say we’re not going to do this as business as usual again. And I think there’d be a lot of support for it. This goes to the critical question of American leadership. If you don’t lead, don’t expect the others to follow if you’re not out there.

Now, by contrast, on the Pacific side, I think the Japanese are engaged in a very important and legitimate debate about their post-World War II constitution, what it means to be a normal nation. And I think they can safely say they are a normal nation. Shouldn’t a normal nation provide for its own self-defense? So I think that debate – the Japanese will have that debate. But I think it’s going in the direction of a logical conclusion that they’re going to have to be more active, especially if the United States is not.

So the circumstance is different in different parts of the world. We could have a fascinating discussion about India in that regard too, and how they see events playing out on the subcontinent and in Asia generally. But all of this says something about what happens when America withdraws from the world, when it doesn’t play the role we need to play, not because we’re altruistic. We’re not out there doing this for these other
countries for their benefit. We’re doing it for our benefit. And if we don’t do it, nobody else is going to do it for us.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MS. SCHOLTE: Thank you all very much for joining us for this program.

And I did want to make one quick announcement when talking about North Korea. Next Wednesday is the Korean New Year. And we do a radio broadcast into North Korea every day. On that day, we especially send messages from members of Congress. So if there are any members of Congress, if people that are here, if you want to send any special messages, we’re gathering those together. It’s a really uplifting way to show the North Koreans what Americans really care about. And if you want to participate in our program, we’re getting those messages gathered in the new few days.

Thank you all for being here. And we’ll look forward to seeing you at our next forum. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)