

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



## Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

*Intel for Advocacy*

DATE: 10/2/2020

SL: Trump's October surprise?

### **The Takeaway:**

- The history of U.S. presidential elections is fraught with last-ditch efforts to garner support via foreign policy “October surprise” – a symptom of the prevailing tendency to treat foreign lives as mere political pawns.
- Aggressive rhetoric, deadly sanctions, and proxy conflict – Trump seems to be laying the groundwork for his own October surprise in the form of war with Iran.
- War with Iran would be catastrophic at any time. In the run-up to this contentious election, it could fuel the demise of the U.S. political system. We must be prepared to stop it.

## **An ‘October Surprise’ We Should All See Coming**

Today we woke up to what some are viewing as the big October Surprise: Donald and Melania Trump have Covid-19 – adding even more uncertainty and chaos to the country 32 days before Election Day. But, really, the surprising thing is that it didn't happen sooner. The Trump Administration's reckless handling of the pandemic has already been acutely felt by the country and the world for the nearly 7 months since the crisis first hit the United States.

And yet, another threat – another October surprise – long set in motion by this administration lurks around the corner: the threat of Trump-instigated war with Iran. We must do all that's in our power to prevent it.

### **The Foreign Policy “October Surprise”**

In the course of U.S. electoral history, October surprises – breaking news or events meant to influence elections at the last minute – have taken [many forms](#): from a forged document showing that President Garfield supported immigration (scandalous!) to 2016's “Comey letter”. But especially often, these surprises have come in the realm of foreign policy. In October of 1968, Henry Kissinger worked with the Nixon campaign to [sabotage](#) the Johnson administration's peace talks in Vietnam in the hopes of ensuring Nixon's election. The United States remained in the war for five more years. Similarly, rumors have swirled for decades that the 1980 Reagan campaign covertly undermined a negotiated end to the Iranian hostage crisis – rumors that seem to be [supported](#) by documents made public this year. This history of

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



foreign meddling makes one thing all too clear: far too often, U.S. foreign policymakers treat the lives of those in other countries as expendable pawns on the path to political power.

## Trump's Long War Against Iran

Trump — no stranger to reckless, ego-driven foreign policymaking — may look to do the same. If so, his four years of aggressive, bellicose foreign policy point to one most likely target: [Iran](#).

- In 2018, Trump unilaterally [withdrew](#) from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran nuclear deal, despite it being a landmark achievement in improving relations between participating nations, and all evidence pointing toward its efficacy.
- Withdrawal came with the reimposition of [deadly](#) U.S. sanctions that had been suspended under the JCPOA, bolstering a devastating sanctions regime that has suffocated the people of Iran for decades.
- In January, Trump [engaged](#) in a series of escalatory tit-for-tat military actions culminating in the illegal and unauthorized assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani during a visit to Iraq, launching the countries on a path to war that was only narrowly avoided.
- Despite widespread [demands](#) to ease sanctions as the COVID-19 crisis devastates Iran, Trump has consistently refused to make concessions.

## Growing Tensions

Now, there are troubling signs that the threat of an October surprise might become [reality](#). After repeatedly bringing us to the brink of war with Iran, Trump is once again ramping up his efforts to stoke conflict:

- This summer, Iran was [racked](#) by a series of deadly explosions at weapons complexes and a nuclear facility — [apparent](#) Israeli attacks likely conducted with the Trump administration's tacit consent.
- Trump then [tapped](#) noted criminal and warmonger Elliot Abrams to be his new special envoy to Iran. Soon thereafter, the United States [seized](#) multiple Iranian cargo ships.
- In September, Trump [threatened](#) to attack Iran in response to [flawed](#) intelligence that Iran had considered assassinating a U.S. ambassador.
- The Trump administration has fought to invoke the JCPOA's [snapback sanctions](#), despite the obvious lack of legal standing to do so and overwhelming global opposition, in a transparent effort to destroy the remaining framework of the agreement.
- Horrifying new reports [indicate](#) that the Trump administration may be considering even more [deadly](#) sanctions on Iran, this as the country enters a [third wave](#) of COVID-19.
- Now, Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo are [pressuring](#) the *Iraqi* government to take greater military action against Iranian-linked militias, a sign the administration is seeking to further ramp up the ongoing U.S.-Iran proxy war in Iraq.

Trump is putting us on the path to war with Iran. Again.

## Sliding into Authoritarianism

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



In this particularly contentious election — with the very prospect of a peaceful democratic transition of power in question — an October surprise takes on a risk far greater than a bump in the polls. For as long as democratic elections have been around, people have sought to subvert them — and one of their tried-and-true tactics for doing so is by instigating foreign conflict. By stoking conflict with a foreign enemy, real or imagined, would-be authoritarians can not only rally additional support, they can use the supposed threat as a pretext to contest the results of the election, or to justify the repression of domestic dissent. Conflict with Iran would be catastrophic at any time. In 2020, it could spell the end of the U.S. political system.

## **Solidarity and Resistance**

But in trying to rally support through saber-rattling, Trump is forgetting one thing: the people are tired of endless war. A [majority](#) of the U.S. public does not approve of Trump's handling of Iran thus far, and [less than a quarter](#) support taking military action. Neither do the people of Iran: despite the claims of U.S. warmongers, U.S. aggression adds another hurdle that people in Iran have to overcome on an almost daily basis. The continued resistance in Iran in the face of both authoritarianism at home and imperialism from abroad deserves our deepest admiration — and solidarity. Through grassroots, people-powered movements, working in tandem here and abroad, we can stop the march to war — and defeat the threat of an October surprise.

---

## **Beyond Iran**

Iran isn't the only possible target of an October surprise. Trump and the GOP have long made it a priority to [stoke fear](#) about the rising influence of China — a tendency that Democrats have [fed into](#) more than not. While all-out war with China seems unlikely at the moment, the risk of small-scale [conflict](#) — or, at the least, further aggressive rhetoric and sinophobic [jingoism](#) — remain high. Just as we say no to war with Iran, we say: no to the new Cold War with China.

---

## **BURIED LEDES**

**London Mayor Sadiq Khan has [revoked](#) his participation in the Urban 20 mayor's virtual summit, hosted this year by Saudi Arabia.** He is the latest of mayors from across the globe to do so in protest of Riyadh's many human rights violations.

A new front in Trump's adversarial approach to China: As [PPE shortages continue](#), **Mike Pompeo [pressured](#) Latin American countries to buy their ventilators and PPE from the United States instead of China.**

This happened just as **Speaker Pelosi [signaled](#) the unlikelihood of clinching a COVID-19 relief deal.** Trump and McConnell once again prove their utter disregard for human life...

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



...Something of a theme for the White House this week. In a clumsy and dangerous attempt to [pressure Russia into renegotiating an arms control treaty](#), **the administration asked the military how quickly it could pull nuclear weapons out of storage and load them onto bombers if Moscow didn't comply.**

In further heavy-handed negotiation tactics: John Bolton [explained](#) this week that **Trump would pull the United States out of NATO if members failed to increase their military spending in line with his demands.**

Foreign policy and domestic policy are linked. **Violent militarization abroad and violent militarization at home are [two sides](#) of the same coin.**

In a battle over a strategy document on combating gender-based violence, **the administration is [pushing back](#) against the use of phrases such as “gender identities” and “sexual orientation.”**

But as Trump officials try hard to curtail the protection of human rights, there is some hope: **a new [bill](#) aimed to address sexual harassment at the State Department will ban forced nondisclosure agreements and increase sexual assault prevention and advocacy training.**

And finally, we imagine that we're not the only ones shocked (to say the least) by the first presidential debate. [Here](#) are some of our favorite takes.