
U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR JOHN BOLTON VISITING THE CAUCASUS

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30.10.2018

Georgia Today (26 October 2018)

United States National Security Adviser John Bolton is in Tbilisi today. He spent October 24 in Baku, and the 25th in Yerevan. It marks the highest-profile visit from a Trump administration official to all three South Caucasus countries. None of the three countries currently have a U.S. ambassador.

Bolton's visit has focused mainly on regional security, particularly in relation to dealing with major regional players Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Bolton has long been a staunch opponent of Iranian nuclear ambitions and pushes against the country's attempts to gain influence and power.

Eurasianets Joshua Kucera writes, that Bolton is expected to try to enlist the region's three governments in Washington's campaign of isolating Iran. But leaders in the Caucasus, wary of confronting Tehran, will likely instead be promoting their own interests to an administration that has thus far largely neglected the region.

During a press briefing in Tbilisi, Bolton announced, "We have invited President Putin to Washington after the first of the year for, basically, a full day of consultations." He says no date has been set yet, but noted that Trump and Putin are also planning to meet in Paris on November 11 at events marking 100 years since the end of the first World War.

Eurasianet quotes the director of the Georgian Institute of Politics, Kornely Kakachia, as explaining that Georgian government officials are likely to steer conversations towards issues such as security cooperation rather than being drawn into a U.S.-Iran conflict. Georgia remains a steadfast supporter of U.S. initiatives. However, due to permanent pressure from Russia it can't endanger its national interest, which seeks pragmatic and balanced relations with Iran. So, as in the last decade, Tbilisi will try to find a delicate balance between its regional interests and those of the West, said Kakachia.

While in the Georgian capital, Bolton met with Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze, Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Gakharia, and Defense Minister Levan Izoria, among other senior officials.

After their meeting, Bakhtadze tweeted: I just met with good friend of #Georgia @AmbJohnBolton. We are grateful for his steadfast support. The #Georgia-#US relationship is at an all-time high and we are further exploring opportunities to strengthen existing #Synergy.

According to Bakhtadze, the meeting focused on the possibility of the Georgia-U.S. free trade

agreement and the most painful issue for Georgia, the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Georgian occupied regions, as well as the peace initiatives [offered by the central Georgian government] which are meant to help us, the Georgian government, respond to existing security challenges. He said Bolton was supportive, and promised that Georgia is highly strategically important to the U.S.

Speaking with reporters, Bolton also mentioned that he was told [by representatives from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce] that there is a certain level of corruption in Georgia, but this level is the same as in many other developed countries, in the US among them.

Earlier in the day, Bolton met with Georgian Defense Minister Levan Izoria to discuss the 2016-2019 agreement between the Georgian Defense Ministry and the US Defense Department.

Bolton plans to leave the Caucasus tomorrow.

<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/12929/U.S.-National-Security-Advisor-John-Bolton-Visiting-the-Caucasus>

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