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US-Russia Relations – Global Rivalry and Regional Interests

Agnieszka Legucka and Mateusz Piotrowski in Conversation with the Honorable Fred Fleitz, Vice Chair of the American Security at the America First Policy Institute

**Rozmowa Agnieszki Leguckiej i Mateusza
Piotrowskiego z Fredem Fleitzem,
wiceprzewodniczącym departamentu American
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The Honorable Fred Fleitz serves as Vice Chair of AFPI's Center for American Security. Fleitz served in 2018 as a Deputy Assistant to President Donald Trump and Chief of Staff of the National Security Council. He served in U.S. national security positions for twenty five years with the CIA, DIA, the Department of State and the House Intelligence Committee staff. Fleitz is a prolific writer who has written extensively on the Iranian and North Korean nuclear program, the growing threat to U.S. security from China, the politicization of U.S. intelligence and many other national security topics. He is the author or editor of seven books. Fleitz's last book, *An America First Approach to U.S. National Security*, was published in 2024. Fleitz holds a B.A. in Politics from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and an M.A. in Political Economy from Fordham University in New York.

Agnieszka Legucka & Mateusz Piotrowski: We would like to put the first question around what you were writing in your publications, that you were quite involved in the relations between the United States and Russia, and in which you were discussing the important way out for Putin in this potential negotiations. What conditions would in your opinion come in gently to discuss peace and how do you see the role of the United States in creating those conditions?

Fred Fleitz: Well, it's a pleasure to do this interview with you today. Poland is a very, very important American ally, and I know our government is working very closely with the Polish government on the problem of how to end the war in Ukraine. The issue we have right now is that Vladimir Putin doesn't want peace and he is accelerating the war. He's disrespecting President Donald Trump, who has given Putin an off-ramp, a way to end the war. He's offered to bring Russia into the community of civilized nations, bring it into Europe, because Russia is not an Asian state. It's an European state. It belongs in Europe.

We want a stable and peaceful Russia in Europe. That should be a long-term objective of all of our policies concerning Russia when this war is over. But Putin doesn't want that because of his fanatical views that Ukraine is not a state. He doesn't recognize Ukrainian nationality. He's paranoid about NATO and a NATO military presence in Ukraine. What we're looking at right now is that President Trump is going to have to implement very tough energy sanctions, followed by economic sanctions, and he's going to need Europe's help with this.

President Trump has asked Europe to stop buying energy from Russia. He wants Europe to join the U.S. in implementing very tough energy sanctions on Russia and secondary sanctions on anyone that buys Russian energy. That's how we can put the pressure on Putin to end this war. It's going to be hard, but this is the next stage in Trump's policy to end the war.

AL: Okay, that's very interesting, to deepen the sanctions and make them stronger as a next step. Do you think that those secondary sanctions can go on partners like China, India, and Turkey, which are buying the biggest amount of Russian energy supplies? I favor secondary sanctions on anyone who's buying Russian energy.

AL: Okay. I cannot agree with you more! However, when you look at Putin's actions right now, what kind of idea comes up from your perspective about Russia's goal right now and how we can respond on that strategic goals? Do you think that they've changed since the start of President Trump second term?

I believe this is a complicated problem. The war in Ukraine could have been stopped or significantly rolled back in 2022 if the U.S. and European states had given Ukraine the weapons it needed. But we didn't do that. This allowed the Russians to dig in. And U.S.-Russia relations deteriorated significantly because of Joe Biden's incompetence. He didn't talk to Putin after February 2022, after the invasion. Instead, he demonized Putin. He once compared Putin to Hamas. This made a bad situation worse. This is what Trump inherited.

This isn't to make excuses for Putin. The invasion of Ukraine was a gross violation of international law. What the Russians are doing in Ukraine is evil. Let's just be frank here. There's no justification for it. The invasion was completely unprovoked. The problem here is that we have a leader who's motivated by fanaticism and isn't listening to reason. That's why pain has to be inflicted upon Putin and his country to get him to change his policies. He doesn't seem to want to do that right now. I can't give you a rational reason for his policies other than paranoia. This is a war that's destroying Russia. They've have over one million injured and dead Russian soldiers. This has done enormous damage to the Russian economy and to Russia's reputation in the world. Trump has given Putin a way out but he hasn't decided to take this way out yet. I'm afraid it's going to take some pain on Russia to pressure Putin to do so.

AL: Pressure, sanctions, and what about any other meetings with Putin? Do you think that President Trump is still open to create a double-track policy towards Russia?

I don't really have much else to add besides that I'm sure there'll be a lots of meetings.

MP: Okay, great. I think it would be natural to ask right now about the role of Congress in approach to Russia. I remember from President Trump's first term a significant role of Republicans

in Congress in creating the U.S. policy towards Russia. Right now, both Chambers of Congress have been ready for several months to vote on new sanctions and tariffs related to Russia. However, for now U.S. lawmakers are awaiting a clear signal from the White House on the right time to do so. In that sense, what do you think may appear first in the coming weeks – clear change of President Trump approach and a call for tougher sanctions on Russia or would it be the Congress who will be the first to pave a way for such an approach?

My understanding is that the vast majority of Republicans in Congress are supporting President Trump's approach. There's going to be some who would like it to be stronger or would like to pursue some other method of ending the conflict. I think the Republicans are pretty strongly in favor of what Trump wants to do and the Democrats are appreciative of his effort to find a way to negotiate an end to the war.

Of course there is impatience by some in Congress. They would like to see sanctions implemented immediately. Trump doesn't want to do that if he doesn't have to. He's kept the door open to negotiations with Putin. I guess some members of Congress would like to close this door sooner. But the majority in Congress are with the president.

AL: What I understand from Russian perspective is that it would be great to deepen economic cooperation with the United States. And when I look from the Kremlin perspective, I see reasons why they want to have the U.S. as a partner, because from their perspective, they see that U.S. and Russia are equal. I know that they're not, but it looks like this from their perspective. And of course there are reasons why they are doing that, as they want to create a divisions and fractions in European-U.S. relations. What I do not see, and it's hard for me to understand, what is the interest of U.S. to have a stronger economic relations or investment with Russia? Or maybe there are no such ideas for that, regarding the American-Russian cooperation?

I believe Trump addressed this in his speech in Saudi Arabia a few months ago, in which he said that he doesn't want our country to have permanent enemies. He reiterated Ronald Reagan's motto of peace through strength, but also changed it. President Trump said, let's have

peace through strength and commerce. That is, make peace deal with us and we'll all become prosperous. That's Trump's approach here. I think it's a very innovative approach. It is an approach that is attractive to many Russians. The Russian people could live much better lives if Putin would make a deal with Trump. Unfortunately, he's not, because of his fanaticism about Ukraine, Ukrainian nationality, and Ukrainian cooperation with NATO. Trump has to get Putin past this he can do better for Russian people.

MP: To me, the approach of looking for the economic prosperity on both sides is completely understandable. But what we need hear is to also hear the perspective on relations regarding Ukraine. Let's say that this conflict between Russia and Ukraine is solvable in the medium term of a few years, that it would be manage to stop fights between Russia and Ukraine. If that happens, what could be the future United States' involvement in security support for Ukraine, but also in terms of economic development, reconstruction and investment? What do you think the future cooperation between the government of the United States and Ukraine could and should look like? And just to already follow up on that, what should Ukraine do in terms of the reforms that also are necessary for Ukraine to join the EU in the future? What changes in Ukraine should happen to safely call the United States a partner in the future?

I would start off by saying that the U.S. is not going to send troops into Ukraine. That's off the table. I believe that Ukraine should be armed to the teeth. These demands by Putin that Ukraine be disarmed or that Ukraine can't receive armed support after a peace agreement are ridiculous. Ukraine will never agree to that. Ukraine has to be armed to the hilt, so Russia will not invade again and if it tries to, it will pay a very high price. This means providing all kinds of defensive weapons that would do enormous damage to the Russian army if it invades in again and violates a ceasefire.

Unfortunately, I don't see any chance for some type of European security assurance force in Ukraine with troops on the ground. I believe that goes against Putin's paranoia about NATO and Ukraine. I am hoping

we will get a ceasefire with both sides agreeing to neutral peacekeepers to observe a possible demilitarized zone or a ceasefire line. There are many nations with experience in peacekeeping. India is an example, Ireland and Egypt are example. I believe a likely peace agreement will involve an armistice that will be in place for a long time.

Unfortunately, due to significant differences between the two nations, I don't believe a final, comprehensive settlement of this conflict is possible in the foreseeable future. I hate to put it that way, because the fault is entirely on the Russian side. A peace agreement that completely resolves this conflict may not be possible until Putin leaves the political scene. We therefore may have an armistice like the Korean peninsula that has frozen this conflict in place since 1953 with a very dangerous border between North and South Korea. That would be an imperfect solution, but much better than the current war. This certainly would not be ideal for the people of Ukraine, but they would get their country back and have the opportunity to rebuild their country and become a dynamic and prosperous democracy. That should be the goal.

I'd like to see Ukraine get Crimea back. I don't see that happening in the foreseeable future, but I do not want Ukraine to give up its rights to Crimea. I just think that to get a peace agreement, this issue has to be delayed until a future time. The objective here should be what Trump is saying: let's stop the killing. That's the objective. And it means that the main things that Ukraine will need to agree to, at least temporarily, will be borders that it knows are unfair, but can't change them right now. I believed there will be pledges by European states to make sure that Ukraine gets the weapons it needs. But I'm very concerned that European states keep talking about sending in ground troops to enforce a ceasefire. Putin will never agree to that. The more that the French and the British and the Germans bring that up, the harder they're making it to negotiate a ceasefire.

This will not be an ideal short-term outcome. But we know from history when parties stop fighting and agree to a ceasefires with peacekeepers, this can work and lead to long lasting peace. It worked in Cambodia. It worked in the Iran-Iraq war. It worked in Cyprus. But can we get Putin to make an agreement like this that he will honor? Right now, I would say no, but that should be the objective.

AL: If we may just follow up on this question, because it's very interesting and I think that you point very important elements, I would like to get into more specifics. From my talks and my expertise, I do see that Ukrainians are also exhausted with the war and they are ready for the ceasefire. Russia is actually not so because they didn't transform more to the national identity factor and it's very hard even for now Putin to reject the war. But I would like to deepen the question about the peacekeepers. I agree with you that for now, Putin will not agree on that, but what do you think should be the frame for the peacekeepers mission? Should it be held under a United Nations or European Union mandate or called by some countries as a coalition of the willing?

It's a good question. The Russians have raised the absurd idea that this peacekeeping force should be made up of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, meaning Russia would send troops to Ukraine to defend against a Russian invasion of Ukraine! It also raised the participation of Chinese forces. I believe Chinese participation is a bad idea, but Russian peacekeepers in Ukraine just makes no sense. That's why the Ukrainians killed that idea a few years ago. That's why I'm not sure there will be a UN force.

I don't think Russia will agree to an EU force either. There are precedents for other organizations. The Multinational Force and Observers in the Middle East, for example, that was a way where an ad hoc non-UN organization was set up for peacekeeping. CSCE has successfully done peacekeeping. So I think there are other mechanisms or *ad hoc* organization that could be put together to verify this. It doesn't necessarily have to be done by the UN or the EU.

MP: That's probably true, especially that Russians are looking for assurances regarding the Ukraine's independence. And I agree with you that the biggest assurance for Ukraine security is actually their own army. We cannot allow Putin to reduce it because he will take the advantage and will be able again to move the borderline. But if I may just follow up on China – could the United States government agree to the China participation to push the negotiations forward into the ceasefire or its participation is a bad option in all kinds of scenarios?

I think this is a bad option for many reasons. I don't think the Chinese participation will be a U.S. objective. I don't believe letting China have a troop presence in Europe is something that any European state should favor. But it's not a deal breaker. If this is what has to be done to get Russia to agree to a *bona fide* peace deal, I think the U.S. would probably go along with it. But China would certainly not be America's first choice to send peacekeepers to Ukraine.

MP: Absolutely. Thank you. That was what I was trying to get answered as well. The next question, if I may, I would like to ask about the role of NATO and the European Union, and of course the role of Poland, which we are really interested in, in the U.S. policy towards Russia. So the question would be how allies could more closely cooperate with the United States government on the joint approach to Russia and how we could be more decisive in actions towards Russia in the coming future?

You know of the new initiative right now under which the U.S. is selling weapons to NATO to get them to Ukraine. This solves a number of political problems for President Trump at home, and it was very generous of NATO states to agree to this. This is a way that the U.S. and Europe can cooperate so Ukraine can get the weapons that it needs.

Ukraine is not going to be a member of NATO for the foreseeable future. That's not a major concession to Putin. We know the Hungarians will veto that. There may be other European states that would veto it, too. "The Economist" and other Western magazines think this is a terrible concession, but realistically, it is not really a concession because it is not possible. So we should stop talking about this idea. But I think NATO has to be prepared to send Ukraine the weapons it needs to defend itself after a ceasefire, so it can thoroughly defend itself.

I also believe that NATO states should be pressuring Russia to agree to a ceasefire. There should be efforts by European leaders to talk to Putin. I know a few states have tried that, but Trump has mostly been doing this on his own. The more dialogue we can get, the better.

AL: Can I quickly jump into that? We are talking about the ceasefire and also we are talking that Putin is not happy with the ending of war right now. So if we will assume for now that

this war can last for years, do you think that countries of NATO should take into consideration that this war can last longer and we would have to support Ukraine as long as it takes?

Well, that was Joe Biden's position that he was going to arm Ukraine for as long as it takes. That didn't go anywhere. There has to be a peace process of pressing both sides to agree to end the war and agree to a ceasefire. But we should be providing Ukraine with the weapons it needs to defend itself. In the meantime, peace process has to proceed.

The peace process will become more difficult if Trump moves forward with tough economic and energy sanctions. That's going to set the peace process back, at least for a while. But I think that will be necessary. Russia will come back to the negotiating table eventually. This will be a hard process, but I think that's what we're going to have to do. This U.S. will need to turn economic and energy sanctions, at least in the short term, and keep arming Ukraine.

MP: The next questions touches the broader area of the U.S. military presence in Europe. We are still waiting for the outcome of the "Global Posture Review" in the Department of War and how this will affect the military presence in Europe. From what we've heard, and what some media reports are indicating, is that there could be some lowering of the military presence in Europe. Do you think that this approach that the United States needs to slash the presence in Europe by a few thousand troops or even more at the moment, do you see that as a sustainable in the next few years, in a sense that Russia will probably remain the greatest threat to NATO, regardless of the outcome of the situation with Ukraine?

President Trump has made it clear that he supports alliances like NATO, but he would like to see European members of NATO take primary responsibility for defending Europe and for defending Ukraine. He would like to move resources from Europe to the Asia-Pacific theater because he believes that China is a much more serious security threat globally and to the United States. I don't know what the outcome of this policy review is going to be.

I expect that any drawdown troops will be fairly minor. You may hear disparate voices on this within the Trump administration, but policies

like this are primarily being driven by Secretary of State Rubio. Rubio is the president's top national security adviser. Rubio is very pro-NATO. He's very pro-Poland.

Sometimes, when you see these policy documents, they get revised. The principals look at them and say, that's not what we're going to do. But I'm confident the outcome will be positive due to Rubio's influence.

AL: Okay. You probably heard about the Russian violations of airspace in Poland and Baltic States in recent days. Do you think that those kind of provocations or escalations from Russia that may follow will push the U.S. to more active approach towards Ukraine? There's been several provocations like this and I think they're outrageous. I believe Putin is trying to intimidate NATO and Ukraine to break their resolve and agree to a bad deal in the war. I don't think this means that Russia is planning or has any intention of invading NATO states. I know there are people who believe that, but the Russian army, is pretty beat up. I also don't think Putin wants to risk a nuclear war with NATO. But apparently he's decided that he can play these games by violating Estonian, Polish and other NATO members airspace.

I think there's going to be a lot of pressure on Putin from NATO members and from the U.S. over this. I anticipate he'll continue to play these games. They're dangerous because, you know, these drones and missiles could land somewhere in your country or in another NATO country and people could be killed. This really has to stop.

MP: I think we also have a follow-up on this. If the U.S.-Russian relations are about to warm up, do you see any kind of possibilities for that? And in your opinion how it can affect the NATO Eastern flank? What I want to ask is if there might be in a same time a warm-up between the United States and Russia in their relations, for example in the economic cooperation like you said and on the other hand, could there still be a close security cooperation with Eastern Frank countries like Poland, meaning also the energy cooperation and investment from the U.S.?

I believe that in the immediate future, relations between the United States and Russia are going to get worse, at least for a while, because of the additional economic pain the U.S. will need to put on Russia to change its

stance on the war and on a ceasefire. I believe this is going to set back the peace process, at least for a while. I hope there are other things we can do to get the Russians to cooperate. I hope the Indians start cooperating. I don't know whether China's going to cooperate. China has been a problem by giving Russia the economic lifeline it needs to get past sanctions from Europe and the U.S. I think we're going to see a bad period. I hope it doesn't last long. The door to diplomacy will remain open. Trump will still want to meet with Putin. But I don't think Putin will respond well when these sanctions begin.

AL: The final question we have, is obviously focused on Poland. How do you see Poland in this regard pressuring Russia and opening the door for negotiations? Do you see any particular role that Poland can play in such a scenario?

The Polish government has to be commended for its principled stand against Russia in the war, for generously taking in so many Ukrainian refugees, displaced persons. Poland really has done more than its part, and has spent a huge amount of money in providing weapons and aid to Ukraine. This is a model for many NATO members who have not done their part, who have not done a proportionate amount to stand with the people of Ukraine and help defend it. So I assume you will keep doing what you're doing.

The U.S. is going to be teaming up with Poland to try to come up with strategies to end this war. And frankly, the Trump administration can use ideas because I think Trump really is pretty angry at Putin right now because he did put out the hand of friendship. He gave Putin extraordinarily generous opportunities that he did not deserve to end this war and to end Russia's isolation. But Putin said no. The way I try to explain this to a lot of people in the U.S., who want to blame Trump for Putin's decision to continue the war – that's not the right way to look at this. God made us with free will. That means we have the ability to make right choices and wrong choices. Putin has chosen, when given some very good options, to do the wrong thing, to choose the wrong choice. You can't fault Trump for giving him an opportunity to end the war, to do the right thing for his people, the people of Ukraine, the people of the world. Trump will keep pushing ahead to give Putin an opportunity, but there's going to be pain on Putin to get him to the position where he will negotiate in good faith to end this war.