



WTH is going on with Russians paying to kill US soldiers? Is Putin paying the Taliban to kill American servicemen?

Episode #62 | July 8, 2020 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, and Fred Kagan

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, "What the Hell Is Going On?" Marc, what the hell is going on?

Marc Thiessen: Well, first, we're asking everybody to subscribe. If you're enjoying this podcast and listening to all these episodes, or even if this is your first time tuning in, subscribe, rate us, tell your friends. We love to have more listeners. So that's what's going on.

Danielle Pletka: Is there anything else in the world going on, Marc, or is that just what matters?

Marc Thiessen: Well, that's the most important thing, but I think what else is going on and what we're talking about today is that there's this big *New York Times* news report that Russia was paying the Taliban to kill American service members in Afghanistan, which created a huge firestorm and caused some people to doubt. Why would the Taliban need Russia to pay them to do what they do every day, have been doing every day for the last 20 years? But it's been a huge controversy. So what do you think of it?

Danielle Pletka: It's very interesting. I'm really looking forward to talking to our guest about whether this makes sense or not. I mean, I think we can all, sort of, twist ourselves into pretzels and make an argument about why this might be happening. Could be rogue elements of the Russian intelligence services, could be that the Taliban didn't want to attack during the peace negotiations with the United States and so they needed to be given money to attack. None of that makes a huge amount of sense. What seems pretty clear is that there isn't consensus behind this intelligence report, that in fact it may not be as solid as people think it is.

Marc Thiessen: Well, it's become a huge controversy here in Washington, everybody blaming Donald Trump for not taking this seriously enough and for him not being briefed on it or then saying it wasn't in his PDB, but then it was in the written part of the PDB, but then he didn't get that oral briefing on that. There's this whole mess about the Trump administration. If it was a serious Russian operation to kill American soldiers on which there was solid intelligence, then if the president wasn't briefed on it, it would be criminal. And if he didn't take some action to respond to it, then that would be criminal. But if it's not as big an operation or not as clear, then it's really not the controversy that's everybody's made it out to be.

- Danielle Pletka: I think the problem for us is that all things can be true. That, in fact, this intelligence that is being wantonly leaked by people who have sworn under a criminal penalty not to leak classified intelligence might be inaccurate. But that doesn't mean that the president's grasp of intelligence is good or that his policies are good. I mean, I think all of the above is true.
- Danielle Pletka: Part of the problem for us now is trying to separate out the Trump derangement in the reporting on this question from the facts.
- Marc Thiessen: A lot broader problem in Washington today that spreads beyond this story.
- Danielle Pletka: But I will tell you something honestly. I've read all of these stories, preparing for the podcast. I've talked to reporters about this. I don't know. I don't know if this story is true. It doesn't make a ton of sense to me. On the other hand, I can fully believe that Donald Trump didn't want to know something like this because for some reason he does have a soft spot for Russia and he shouldn't. For Putin, by the way. Not for Russia.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, first off, I don't think both things can be true. If it's not that big a deal, then you don't waste the president's time with it and it's not his fault for not wanting to know because he wasn't told about it. If it is a big deal and it's true, then there's a responsibility to brief the president. So I think we can't have it both ways to say, "We're not sure if the story is true, it may not be as big a deal as everyone makes it out to be, but either way, Donald Trump is wrong."
- Danielle Pletka: I want to just remind everybody of something that I think most of our listeners know, and I know you know, Marc. We invaded Iraq. Wise, unwise is not the conversation right now. We invaded Iraq in 2003. We invaded Afghanistan in 2001 after 9/11. In Afghanistan, the Iranians and the Pakistanis and others were helping our enemies, including the Taliban and al Qaeda, and were instrumental in the death of American soldiers. In Iraq, Iran was systematically supporting groups, including Sunni Islamist groups, that were directly responsible for the death of probably hundreds of Americans. So the notion that somehow this is the first time that countries have tried to target American soldiers and haven't been called to account is garbage. In fact, we don't call countries to account when they do this. Pakistan have been supporting the Taliban for the last 20 years.
- Marc Thiessen: No doubt. I agree with you a hundred percent, but that again, that's not a specific Trump problem. If anything, in a lot of ways, Trump has been tougher in response to some of those things that you specifically said. The Shia groups were killing Americans for years. I worked in the Bush administration—we would never take a target, their leadership, or impose any consequences on them outside of the borders of Iraq. It was not until Donald Trump killed Qassem Soleimani that we actually imposed a serious cost on them for it. We both agree that's not enough. We need a comprehensive policy, but that's a step forward. When it comes to Russia, it may have been unwilling, it may have been kicking and screaming, it may have been because of the Mueller probe, but Donald Trump has imposed a lot of costs on Russia in the past four years, three-and-a-half years.
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah, but he also wants to bring Russia back into the G7, make it the G8 again for absolutely no reason.
- Marc Thiessen: I disagree with that and I wonder if this will stop that. We'll see.

- Danielle Pletka: No, because he called it a hoax.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, we don't know. Whether he is an exquisite consumer of intelligence or not, he has access to more of it than you and I do, so it's entirely possible that he's right. But we just don't know what we don't know.
- Marc Thiessen: And I'm willing to call out Donald Trump when he does the wrong thing. I called him out for inviting the Taliban to Camp David. I'm against the Afghanistan withdrawal. I criticized him for withdrawal from Syria. I praise him when he does the right thing. I call him out when he does the wrong thing. But-
- Danielle Pletka: In this case, it's ambiguous,
- Marc Thiessen: ... in this case it's ambiguous, and just everything is — the problem... This is a big problem for our foreign policy, because you and I care about foreign policy, but it's a broader problem with all policies, is that everything, everything in Washington today is wrapped up in Trump derangement and Trump outrage. And everything that Donald Trump does, if it's even an accusation, people attack him and go after him. And so his reaction is that people are attacking him to say, "No, it's all a hoax." He pushes back, and this is just not a good way to conduct foreign policy. We have to-
- Danielle Pletka: And I think the bigger problem here, so again, I'm trying to be more fair than I think *The New York Times* and the other main newspapers are-
- Marc Thiessen: That's a low bar.
- Danielle Pletka: That's true, but I'm trying to be more fair here.
- Marc Thiessen: Sure.
- Danielle Pletka: Bottom line, though, is that I think that all of this conversation about what Russia is up to in Afghanistan is focusing on the small ball and not focusing on what the Russians are up to all around the world. And I mean, that's really what we need to talk about because that's not just a Donald Trump problem. That's an America problem. We have, I would say since the rise of Vladimir Putin, and when — when George W. Bush saw into his soul, and I understand why he said it and I also understand that he regretted having said that, but ever since that moment, we have underestimated the Russians, we have underestimated Putin, and we have underestimated the challenge that this represents to us. And that is something we need to spend a lot more time on. Lot less time focusing on who said what to Donald Trump when, and a lot more time focusing on what the Russians are up to.
- Marc Thiessen: And then another thing we need to talk about is would this be or will this be any better in a Biden administration? I mean, do you think Joe Biden is going to halt the withdrawal from Afghanistan? Is the Democratic Party going to stand up for American internationalism and engagement in our interests in Afghanistan? Is Joe Biden, the guy who said that Mitt Romney, his policies are buried in the Cold War and he doesn't know what he's talking about back in 2012, going to be the guy who's going to get really tough with Russia? I don't know that these policies that we disagree with in the Trump administration change for the better, no matter who gets elected.

- Danielle Pletka: Oh, I don't think there's any question about that. Once the object of their derangement is gone for the Democrats, I think we go back to the exact same laissez-faire policies on Russia that we've embraced. You and I have talked about this a dozen times. This is the problem for us, is that the isolationist wing of the Republican Party is just as bad as the isolationist wing of the Democratic Party, and in the Democratic Party, that wing is ascendant. The notion that Joe Biden is going to walk in and reverse our troop withdrawal from Afghanistan? What, are you freaking kidding me? Not a chance.
- Danielle Pletka: Anyway, we've got a great colleague to help us sort all of this out and understand better what the hell the Russians are up to not just in Afghanistan, but everywhere. Frederick W. Kagan is the director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute. He's the author of numerous, numerous works, including "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq." He's written about how we actually could win, God forbid we ever try to do that in Afghanistan and in Syria. He's got a Russia tracking project that he does in concert with the Institute for the Study of War, and that has really helped inform a lot of his thinking. So, yay, Fred Kagan.
- Marc Thiessen: Fred, welcome back to the podcast.
- Fred Kagan: Thank you, Marc. It's great to be with you again.
- Marc Thiessen: Excellent. So there are all these stories about how Russia is providing bounties to the Taliban to kill American soldiers and Americans are completely confused about what the hell is going on. Fred, tell us what the hell is going on.
- Fred Kagan: Well, Marc, the Russians have been reportedly supporting the Taliban for a while, and it's part of a larger effort that Putin is engaged in to drive the US out of any kind of military activity basically anywhere. It's all part of an effort that Putin is engaged in to constrain us and shrink us back to what he thinks is our proper role, which is basically doing nothing in the world and understanding that we're the source of all the world's problems.
- Marc Thiessen: But, when we started the War on Terror, Russia was sort of on our side, weren't they? Because at the time they were dealing with Islamist insurgents in Chechnya and they sort of had a confluence of interests with us, and so they were helping us. When did this change? When they switched from — were they ever helping us in any real sense and when was the switch and what precipitated it?
- Fred Kagan: Well, so first of all, there's no such thing as Russia. There was Yeltsin and then there was Putin. And now there will always be Putin, apparently. So Putin took over at the end of 2000. And, in 2001, he was new in the job. And he was always pretty suspicious of the US and pretty hostile. But he was not initially focused on that aspect of things. And, yeah, I think that the Russians generally were supportive under Putin early in the War on Terror.
- Fred Kagan: But there is a change in Putin's view of us that occurs starting in 2004 and then going on as you start to see the so-called color revolutions occur in the former Soviet states. And Putin and his cronies believe that we caused those revolutions to happen, and saw those revolutions as evidence that we were working to take control over the former Soviet states and hem Russia in.

- Fred Kagan: And so you start to see Putin's rhetoric and behavior change which is capped with his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, which has just a fire breathing denunciation of NATO and the United States, and a clear delineation of the complete turnaround that he's undergone, and that he's been then pursuing ever since.
- Danielle Pletka: So, Fred, tell me if I'm wrong in the way that I think about this right now.
- Marc Thiessen: You're wrong.
- Danielle Pletka: I said, "Fred, tell me."
- Fred Kagan: You're wrong.
- Marc Thiessen: Sorry, Fred, that's my job on this podcast, is to tell Dany why she's wrong.
- Danielle Pletka: Oh, right.
- Marc Thiessen: Don't start —
- Danielle Pletka: Just what I need.
- Marc Thiessen: — trying to usurp my role, okay?
- Fred Kagan: Okay. Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.
- Danielle Pletka: Two Marcs. No, no, no, no. But is it wrong to think about this, that Putin is fundamentally opportunistic? That he sees where the US is in retreat, or where the US is perceived to be in retreat, and he sticks his finger in, whether it's in Syria, or even in Venezuela, or in Afghanistan? It's sort of a reverse Reagan Doctrine, if you will. And it does seem to be working. Am I wrong thinking about it that way? Now's your chance.
- Fred Kagan: Yes, you are wrong, fundamentally, Dany. It's a widely held belief, but building on the fantastic work that Nataliya Bugayova and the Russia team at the Institute for the Study of War have done, showing that Putin actually has a strategy, he has an overarching series of objectives, and he has a way in which he wants to approach things.
- Fred Kagan: One of the things that he's doing is trying to reestablish the Soviet footprint. And so trying to reestablish Russian bases where there had been Soviet bases, and trying to reestablish Russian clients where there had been Soviet clients. And he has also defined for himself specific Russian spheres of interest and dominance and so forth that are immutable, in the sense that he would care about them whether or not the US was involved.
- Fred Kagan: So he actually is pursuing a plan and a concept. But he is very tactically agile and opportunistic in that sense, that when an opportunity arises that advances his larger aim and objective, he seizes on it, like anyone who's any good at this sort of thing. But one of the things that he's remarkably good at is cloaking the overarching theory and strategy and helping us to persuade ourselves that it actually really is all just

opportunism, when in fact there really is a pretty clear defined set of end states that he's pursuing.

Danielle Pletka: So that's very important. I appreciate the insight. And I think that Leon Aron's work as well at AEI has really underscored that Putin has a strategy. And that, in some ways, his foreign policy also represents his domestic strategy, which is to distract the Russian people away from the fact that he hasn't delivered at home to Russian greatness abroad, or Russian-quasi-Soviet greatness abroad.

Danielle Pletka: But wasn't part of the problem for the Soviet Union, in its last days, its overextension everywhere? Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Syria — they were everywhere. Is that something sustainable? If this is in fact a strategy and not a set of tactics, and you make a very persuasive case for that, how does Putin do that?

Fred Kagan: Yeah. No, that's a great question. And, unfortunately, he's figured that out. So the approach that Putin is using relies on using relatively inexpensive undertakings to generate really nonlinear effects. Because, again, pointing to Nataliya's work, he cares most about perception. He cares least about reality.

Fred Kagan: So he sends a small number of forces to Syria and generates an outsized effect. He has the GRU pay bounties to kill Americans in Afghanistan, trying to generate an outsized effect that doesn't cost him very much. It's the exact opposite of the Soviet experience, right? The Soviets sent 110,000 troops into Afghanistan, and look at how that ended for them.

Fred Kagan: Putin is going to pay a price for this because there's another phenomenon I'd love to talk with you about, related to what happens when his covert operations get blown. But this was a very small investment. And, in general terms, almost everything that he's engaged in have been small investments.

Fred Kagan: The exception is really Ukraine, where he got drawn into making a much heavier investment than he wanted to. But he seems to have learned from that experience. And he's now doing things that are not going to get him into that kind of situation or expense. So I think what he's doing actually, unfortunately, is sustainable.

Marc Thiessen: So if Putin's strategy is to push the US out of Afghanistan, isn't this sort of backfiring on him? I mean, the Trump administration was bending over backwards to reach an accord with the Taliban. Paying Taliban fighters during those negotiations to kill Americans would disrupt the fig leaf of a peace accord that the administration was trying to negotiate so they could get out. So it just sort of doesn't make sense, unless you can give me another rationale for it.

Fred Kagan: We have seen other cases where Putin's way of running things leads to local guys doing things that actually don't make sense at the particular moment from a larger geostrategic perspective. Putin is generally not a micromanager. And so it's perfectly possible that the GRU had a sort of a general license to hunt out there for a long time and was just carrying on, because that's what they were doing and nobody thought to bring them in.

Fred Kagan: So, we do need to be careful. And this is, of course, one of the reasons why people decide that he's just an opportunist and doesn't have a strategy. Sometimes the enemy makes mistakes too. And it's possible that this was a mission that needed to

be called off or suspended, and that they just didn't. And I don't know the details.

- Fred Kagan: But I will make a larger and somewhat more distressing point, which is that the administration has pretty much already made it clear that they actually have no intention of calling off the talks or the withdrawal, regardless of whether people kill American soldiers. I mean, that happened once. The president suspended the Camp David meeting back in 2019.
- Danielle Pletka: Let's remind everybody, the Camp David meeting with the Taliban, the guys who hosted Osama bin Laden, that he had scheduled for September 11th of 2019.
- Marc Thiessen: With Taliban leaders who had been released by President Obama from Guantanamo Bay.
- Danielle Pletka: It's always important to underscore just how outrageous this whole thing was.
- Fred Kagan: Right. Not to put too fine a point on it, right. Yeah. And then the Taliban killed Americans, and then he suspended that. But subsequent Taliban violence and attack has not generated that effect. And even the US administration's response to this revelation seems to indicate that there is no interest in rethinking the agreement, or pulling out based on this. So, I think Putin may well have calculated, or the GRU gods may well have calculated, they can go ahead and still do this and it won't matter.
- Marc Thiessen: Is it possible that what Putin is doing is anticipating a US withdrawal and a vacuum in Afghanistan that he can somehow fill by improving his relations with the Taliban?
- Fred Kagan: Putin doesn't hold grudges like that. He mainly holds grudges against us. And he will work pragmatically with people that he thinks he needs to work with, including the Taliban. And I think you're right. He is thinking about how to position himself in Central Asia, in general, and Afghanistan, in particular, when we have pulled out. He does have the interest there. And, yeah, I mean, buttering up to the Taliban at this time, our policy has made that look like an attractive thing to do, unfortunately.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, and there's nothing, of course, stopping him from using this tactically to advance, even if it is part of a larger strategy. Let me ask you a little bit about some of these details.
- Danielle Pletka: One of the most common questions that's been asked in coverage of this is, why do the Russians need to pay the Taliban to do something the Taliban seem to be so enthusiastic about doing anyway? Do you have a theory?
- Marc Thiessen: It's like having someone pay me to argue with Dany.
- Danielle Pletka: That's what AEI does. But we digress. No, but a serious question.
- Fred Kagan: I don't honestly know how to read that. You could imagine that he wanted to make sure that they would continue to focus on trying to kill us, or that elements in the organization would continue to focus on trying to kill Americans, when the group leadership had made it clear that they were going to try not to kill Americans because they wanted the deal to go through. And, in that sense, I suppose you could see it as working against the deal, although I don't think that he was trying to

do that.

- Fred Kagan: I think it may be part — And I'm really speculating here. I don't know. But I am concerned that as we are pulling out of places and making it clear that we want to pull out, there is a tendency among some of our adversaries to want to be able to say that they are the ones who drove us out. And to have been shooting at us on the way out in some way, so that they can claim credit for the kill. And it's conceivable that he wanted to be able to do that. But he also wanted to make sure that it looked like we were withdrawing under fire, and not just withdrawing on our own terms. I'm totally speculating, but that wouldn't be inconsistent with his thinking and with other behavior that we've seen by other actors.
- Danielle Pletka: Is it possible that — part of the problem in Washington nowadays is that the instinct, certainly of the news media, is to basically say, "Well, Donald Trump doesn't think it's true, and therefore not only is it true, but it's," if I may use the famous expression, "a slam dunk of intelligence." Isn't it just possible that actually this intel isn't correct? Because it is a little hard to explain. And I'll say something else. It's not low cost. There was just a little squib in the paper that said, and I'll just quote it, "Early 2020, SEAL Team 6 raids a Taliban outpost and recovers \$500,000 in cash, an event which affirmed the intelligence community's suspicions about Russia paying bounties." I'm sorry. Those aren't little bounties. That's a shit ton of money.
- Fred Kagan: Well, it isn't, actually. I mean, it's not a large amount of money for a state. And the Russian economy is small, but it's not that small. And I mean, they haven't killed that many Americans, so it's not like they're paying out hundreds of bounties. Taliban have not been killing a lot of Americans; a lot of Americans haven't been dying. So that's still kind of peanuts to me, honestly.
- Danielle Pletka: But what about the quality of the information? I mean, do we actually think it's true?
- Fred Kagan: Yeah. Look, there's nothing inconsistent about it. We've had consistent indication for years that the Russians are supporting the Taliban. We've been hearing that for a long time, and I haven't heard anybody persuasively say "No, no, no, no. That's not true." So it's not inconsistent with what the general consensus seems to have been. Look, we always get into this problem, because you and Marc know so well, Dany. Anytime you start talking about classified information, we have the problem that somebody leaks something, and then we start to have a conversation, the intelligence community says, "We can't talk about it," and until all the documents are made available, you can't know.
- Fred Kagan: Listening to the way unidentified officials in the intelligence community are speaking, and recognizing that this is congruent or consistent with what ought to be a Russian pattern in Afghanistan, I don't have any reason to think that this is made up or unreliable. I think different agencies are going to put different confidence assessments on intelligence.
- Fred Kagan: Look, as you know, but your listeners may not be tracking on, one of the reasons why we have all the different intelligence organizations offer assessments on the same piece of information or idea is that they bring different capabilities to the table. So, the CIA has the human intelligence, the spy networks. The National Security Agency has the technical intelligence, who listens to cell phones and stuff. There are other organizations that have other specialties. And they will each make an assessment of the credibility of any particular piece of information based largely on what their kind

of intelligence shows. So if you have intelligence that — If we have signals intelligence and we have some kind of communications intercept, the NSA is going to say, "Well, we have high confidence in this, because we have the high confidence signals intelligence intercept." If the CIA's human networks didn't pick it up, the CIA is going to say, "We don't have high confidence, because we don't have our own sources that do that."

Fred Kagan: Now, there are exceptions, as Marc knows well. You do too, Dany. That the CIA is supposed to be making its assessments based on all sources and not just its own human intelligence, but the truth is that it does tend to privilege its sources. So I think we need to be really careful if we say, "Well, some agencies had high confidence, but some agencies had lower confidence." That doesn't actually tell me very much about the actual credibility. It just tells me that it was picked up on some sources and systems and not as much on others.

Marc Thiessen: But you make an important point, and Dany does too, which is that there's so much nuance in this that we don't know because it's classified, right? So, it could be, as you suggested, it could be local GRU operatives who are just sort of given a green light and they did it without orders from Putin, or it could be orders from Putin. It could be a large-scale program, or it could be a very limited scale program that was not directed from the Kremlin. There's so many layers of this that would go into assessing both the credibility of the intelligence, and also how serious a threat this was in the context of what you point out is the larger Russian policy of supporting the Taliban and funding the Taliban. That it's just not clear that this was the big, front page news story that it was made out to be.

Fred Kagan: No. Right. And we're not going to know what the details were until the stuff gets declassified, and even then, I'm sure we'll be arguing about it. But look, there's one thing that's really clear from this. And some people really need help getting this through their minds. Putin identifies the United States as Russia's enemy. He identifies his overarching objective as being to destroy the global international order that the United States created and replace it with a multipolar world order in which he, and the Chinese, and the Iranians, and the Venezuelans, and the North Koreans, and everybody else all sit around the table with the United States as equals, and our voice weighs no more than any of theirs. And in which the United States does not conduct military operations outside of its borders, does not express opinions about things that go on in other countries, whatever people do to their populations, and so on and so on.

Fred Kagan: If you just read what Putin says, if you read his statements, if you read the official policies and doctrines of the Russian Federation, and if you look at what he's doing, that's what Putin is doing, and that's who Putin is. And this is just another data point with whatever confidence you want to ascribe to it that reaffirms something that is very well known and very well documented. And it is important that we focus on that, because there are still people who are saying, "Well, we can work with the Russians here. Maybe we can work with the Russians over there. We understand that, but we have to have some common interests with them." No. We don't have common interests with a country that identifies us as an enemy to be defeated.

Danielle Pletka: John Kerry, Fred is speaking to you. One thing that is absolutely clear from what you're describing, is that while there's been an evolution over the last, let's say, 17 years or so, in reality, Russia has increasingly been playing this role. Not simply during the Trump administration, but during the Obama administration, and even

during the Bush administration. That this is a long-term project for Vladimir Putin, right?

Fred Kagan: It is. And the US response has also been pretty consistent throughout that period, starting with the Bush administration's extremely limited, I'm being generous here, response to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008.

Danielle Pletka: Right. I mean, we've basically gone from Georgia to Crimea, the rest of Ukraine, Syria, now in Afghanistan.

Fred Kagan: Libya.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah.

Fred Kagan: Right?

Danielle Pletka: Right. We've been pretty weak kneed about all of this. Now, there's another element here that's been written about. There was an interesting article in *Foreign Policy* that asked, I love the title of it too, it's called, "What's this unit of Russian spies that keeps getting outed?" And it talks about this unit 29155 —it always sounds so much better when it has a number attached to it. It could be completely made up. But these are the guys who were responsible apparently for the botched effort to assassinate Sergei Skripal, the Russian defector in the UK. They sound like a bumbling mass of idiots-

Marc Thiessen: A little bit more Austin Powers than James Bond.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah, exactly. But they're also the ones who are operating in Afghanistan. Is this something we should be more worried about? We spend a lot of time focusing on Putin himself, but we don't focus a lot on what Russian elements are doing in these various countries.

Fred Kagan: Nope. I mean, we do kind of follow it. We follow the Russian proxies. We follow the various elements that the Russians create to pretend that they have some kind of plausible deniability, you know, Wagner and stuff. And we know what the FSB is doing, and we know what the GRU is doing in various different ways. I think the mistake that we make is if we imagine that these organizations are doing things that are fundamentally at odds with what Putin wants to have happen; that they're fundamentally freelancing. That's not the way that this is working. They are pursuing activities that are coherent and consistent with Putin's overarching end state and desires. They will take actions based on their situation and their judgment and sometimes they will blow things.

Fred Kagan: It's always hard to tell how good an adversary intelligence organization is, because you tend only to read about it when they screw up. Because if the covert organization is doing its job properly, you don't even know that it was there. If you're hearing about it, then something went wrong. So I wouldn't read too much into the fact that we've had blown missions and things about their overall capacity. Although, as I said earlier, and it is important, we shouldn't attribute omnipotence and omniscience to them, either. They are going to blow things. They do blow things. And that actually creates opportunities for us.

- Fred Kagan: Because, if you ask a question, "Has Putin gained from all of the activities that he has been pursuing over the last 20 years?" The answer is yes and no. He gained part of Ukraine, but not what he was going for, which was much more of it, and which was in fact regaining control over political decision making in Kiev, which he really hasn't done. But he's paid a fearful price for it, and he paid a fearful price because he tried to sneak it in and he tried to do it as if it weren't a Russian operation, and it was blown.
- Fred Kagan: And similarly with his intervention in the 2016 election. He tried to conduct a covert operation, which may or may not have affected the outcome of the election. I don't actually think that it did, but it was blown. And when it's blown, he actually pays a very big price as people get angry when they see that he was playing a game and then he got caught.
- Fred Kagan: I call it the blowback phenomenon. It's what happens when you try to do these kinds of covert operations, and then they get blown. And then you get sanctioned, you get all kinds of people angry and stuff. If you think about it, what was the overarching effect of his interference in the US election? He has cemented a notion that Russia is an adversary, that Russia has to be mistrusted, particularly within the Democratic Party, which until that happened in 2016 had been much more inclined to be "Let's work with the Russians, the Russian reset," various other things like that-
- Marc Thiessen: "Hey Mitt Romney,"
- Fred Kagan: ... all because of the-
- Marc Thiessen: ... "The 1980s called. They want their foreign policy back."
- Fred Kagan: Right. Right. It is an opportunity for us every time one of these things gets blown. And we need to start to get more strategic about how we're going to capitalize on these opportunities as they come up.
- Danielle Pletka: Last question for you from me as well. We've talked about what we're doing wrong. We're skedaddling from Afghanistan. We're letting the Russians get a foothold in all of the places where Putin feels that the Soviet Union was unjustly pushed out. Russia has got a reasonably — certainly successful if you look at where their influence has grown to — foreign policy. What should our foreign policy be?
- Fred Kagan: We have imposed sanctions on the Russians that are hurting very badly. The sanctions hurt particularly because the Europeans also have imposed tough sanctions on the Russians. The European sanctions, which in many respect matter more than ours, are under constant threat. Putin is working tirelessly to find ways to neutralize those sanctions, to pick off EU countries, to get them not renewed. We need to fight that. We need to continue to fight that, and we need to make it a priority to strengthen our relationships with our European partners as best we can and fight against these various Russian attempts to pick the EU and NATO and the US apart and find ways to neutralize those sanctions.
- Fred Kagan: This has got to be a priority, and I think that we run risks if we assume that the Europeans have no alternative but to do what we want them to do because that is not always going to be the case. One thing is, we really have to focus on making sure that those sanctions remain in place as long as the crimes that triggered them,

which was the invasion and annexation of Crimea in the first instance, continue to be in effect. Then beyond that, we need to recognize that having the Russians involve themselves in Syria was a disaster, having them continue to be in Syria is a disaster. It means, among other things, the US Navy and Air Force have to worry about operating in contested airspace in the Eastern Mediterranean for the first time since the Cold War, and it's given him the ability now to expand into Libya. I think if you watch, we'll probably see him expanding into Egypt.

- Fred Kagan: We have to push back on this, and we have to push back, again, with sanctions and by engaging ourselves in some of these conflicts, at least enough to stop presenting Putin with the opportunity to involve himself at very low cost. That's one of the problems with our general withdrawal is we keep creating opportunities for him to involve himself at very low cost, and we don't really do anything to raise the cost to him. That's what needs to change. We need to start in various actions that can raise the cost and force him to decide and choose and prioritize, which will mean that he will have to choose not to do some things.
- Danielle Pletka: Awesome. Fred, thank you so much for taking the time. We're always so happy to have an AEI colleague on. Thanks a ton.
- Marc Thiessen: Thanks, Fred.
- Fred Kagan: Thanks, Marc and Dany.
- Marc Thiessen: Okay, Dany, so what should we be doing about this problem?
- Danielle Pletka: I like the way you leave the easy questions for me. Look, I think Fred laid it out. I had a piece yesterday in [The Dispatch](#) in which I talked about my favorite thing, which is the Reagan Doctrine. I always say Barack Obama did a huge disservice by forcing us to think of foreign policy as a binary choice: either do everything, half a million troops, or do nothing. That was his approach to Syria. That was his approach to Libya after we toppled Gaddafi, and that was his approach to a lot of foreign policy problems.
- Danielle Pletka: The reality is that we have so many allies in the world who believe in the same things we do, who have the same values that we have, and they need our help. They don't need troops, but like the Ukrainians –
- Marc Thiessen: Some do.
- Danielle Pletka: Some do, some do. Look, in Syria, we needed to do the training, we needed to be partly on the ground. In Iraq, we've really helped stave off increasing Iranian influence, the return of ISIS. All of these things matter a great deal, but I agree, we can't be everywhere. When we can't be certain places because the American people don't want to, because we can't articulate an interest, we should be helping people on the ground who want to get rid of the Russians, want to get rid of the Iranians, want to get rid of the Venezuelans, or the Cubans, or whoever the bad guys are out there. We should be doing what Reagan did, which is helping people who are ideologically aligned with us against our common enemies.
- Marc Thiessen: Or at least people who don't wake up in the morning thinking America is what's wrong with the world.

- Danielle Pletka: We'd need to get rid of half of Washington at this point.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, that's true, but no, I agree with you 100% that the Reagan Doctrine is the model going forward, and it came at a similar historic moment because Ronald Reagan came into office less than a decade after our withdrawal from Vietnam when there was no appetite in America for major troop deployments anywhere in the world. We now are in a very similar political moment where there's just not an — after-Iraq and Afghanistan and 18 years in Afghanistan and all the casualties and all the costs and everything like that. There's no appetite for major troop deployments. I just don't understand the drive of the Trump administration to get to zero.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, I believe that for the president, it's a talking point. In other words, it gives him the ability to go out in Tulsa or Mount Rushmore or wherever it is... He's having a rally, I guess, next week in New Hampshire... and say, "Barack Obama said he was going to end wars, but he started them. I said I was going to end wars, and I did," and of course never remembering the dictate you don't end wars. You win, or you lose.
- Marc Thiessen: No, that's true, and also the enemy gets a vote in all of these things. Donald Trump doesn't get to decide whether the war is won. The Taliban has a say. ISIS has a say. Iran has a say, when it comes to the militias in Iraq and all the rest of it. I mean, you can say that you ended the war with a small deployment of troops that is there advising and helping local forces fight your enemies. I mean, the reality is, is that these dangers don't go away just because we want them to. And at very small cost, financial and risk-wise, we have the power to enable forces around the world who are willing to take on our enemies and keep our enemies at bay in Syria, in Afghanistan, and other places. It seems to me such a no-brainer to want to help them-
- Danielle Pletka: But look how long it took us to actually arm the people of Ukraine who wanted to fight off the Russians. I mean, and again, credit-
- Marc Thiessen: Which Donald Trump did.
- Danielle Pletka: Right, and credit to the Trump administration.
- Marc Thiessen: Biden gave them MREs. Trump gave them RPGs.
- Danielle Pletka: Right. Nice. I can see you've been working on that little bumper sticker there.
- Marc Thiessen: That's why I was a White House speechwriter.
- Danielle Pletka: No, no, look, I mean, this is my biggest fear is that, yeah, Trump's not been great, yeah, if the story is true about the Taliban and the Russians paying to kill American troops, that is an outrage, notwithstanding all of the question of leaking. But, I don't think the other side is animated by anything other than doing the opposite of Donald Trump or doing the opposite of what Donald Trump is being perceived to do. I don't think anyone is interested in standing up to the Russians in a way that will actually push Putin back.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, that's a good optimistic note to end on, Dany.

Danielle Pletka: Yes, it is. Hey, folks, if you have ideas, if you have suggestions, if you have complaints as usual about Marc, and get in the line, let me tell you. Then let us know. Don't forget to subscribe. Tell your friends, tell your enemies, tell everybody, and have a great week.

Marc Thiessen: Take care.