

A U.S. Army soldier in full combat gear is shown from the side, firing a Javelin anti-tank missile. The soldier is wearing a helmet and a tactical vest. The missile is held horizontally, and its launch sequence is visible. The background is a blurred outdoor training area with a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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A U.S. Army Soldier fires a FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank missile during exercise Saber Strike 16 at the Estonian Defense Forces central training area (Sgt. 1st Class Ben Houtkoope / Public Domain)

Where Are We Now? Important U.S.-Russia Geo-Strategic Flashpoints

A Conversation with Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas

Interviewed by Ryan Rogers

In January 2018, Dr. Farkas discussed a range of issues concerning Russia and the post-Soviet space with the *Fletcher Security Review*. The conversation took place in the run-up to the March 2018 presidential elections in Moscow and before President Putin's highly publicized Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, in which he unveiled a number of new nuclear weapon systems currently under development by the Russian Federation.

Fletcher Security Review: I thought maybe we could start with Ukraine and an issue you have personal experience with from your time in the Pentagon as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia — the decision to provide lethal aid to Ukraine. I know you recently took part in an extremely important and insightful panel at the Atlantic Council on the future of Ukraine and the situation in the Donbass, more specifically, where Ambassador Kurt Volker kicked things off by saying that 2017 had been the most violent year of the conflict. Since that panel, the Trump Administration has reportedly approved the sale of \$41 million of high powered sniper rifles and an export license for Javelin anti-tank missiles. It seems that there is some confusion amongst the expert community as to what this actually means in reality. Does this announcement directly translate into Ukrainian military units employing U.S.-made weapons on the battlefield in the near future and is this ultimately a wise policy to pursue on the way to achieving a settlement to the conflict?

Evelyn Farkas: Well first of all there has already been U.S.-made military equipment, if not weapons, being used on the battlefield. In terms of what it means, I think it provides a stronger deterrent for Ukraine against the Russians. That works as follows: if the Russians know that the Ukrainians have sniper capability, and more importantly the anti-tank capability through the Javelins, then they will think twice about using their tanks or using their forces to launch a new attack or offensive against Ukrainian territory. The Russians have demonstrated that they are sensitive to casualties. They

are sensitive to their public becoming aware of their casualties and if the casualties reach a sufficiently large number, there is no way to hide them from the public. As it is, journalists have been beaten up and forced to remain silent with regard to the casualties that have already resulted because of Russia's ongoing military campaign in Ukraine.

FSR: Do you see the critique that providing defensive lethal aid to Ukraine will escalate the conflict as valid criticism?

EF: No, I do not. The Russians understand that the capabilities that we will be providing the Ukrainian military do not change the military balance and they are not offensive. They are only a threat to the Russian military if the Russians take further action against the Ukrainians. It is not escalatory in nature nor will the Russians perceive it as such. Yes, they will throw up a great hue and cry about it, which they have already done, but I do not believe they will take any additional action because of this. In addition, I believe that these weapons not only strengthen Ukraine's deterrence, but strengthen Ukraine's hand at the negotiating table and that is where the action is right now.

FSR: A separate, but complementary, component to pressuring the Russians is obviously sanctions. Despite empirical evidence in the form of several economic indicators which suggest that the sanctions are having an effect, the Russian military remains in Ukraine. Why have sanctions not been enough to dissuade Putin from continuing to stoke the conflict and can they be improved or refined to increase leverage against the Russians going into possible settlement talks?

EF: First of all, it is important to recognize that the sanctions were designed not to punish the Russian people or Russia as a country, but actually to punish the Kremlin — Putin and his cronies. The Kremlin and its supporters. That includes oligarchs and others who are providing the economic and other support for the



44th President of the United States Barack Obama meets with President-elect Petro Poroshenko of Ukraine during a bilateral meeting in Warsaw, Poland, June 4, 2014. (Pete Souza / Public Domain)

Kremlin's military adventures. The pain is intended to be very targeted, targeted at those elites and the Russian government.

The reason it has not caused Putin to immediately reverse his policy vis-à-vis Ukraine is because, for the Russian government, what they are doing in Eastern Ukraine and Donbass to destabilize Ukraine and also what they are doing by holding onto Crimea (although its somewhat different) is aimed at essentially controlling Kyiv, at controlling the Ukrainian government and the state of Ukraine. That is something so important to Putin that he and his cronies are willing to put up with some level of pain, both economic as well as political, and personal inconvenience.

I would say that the new round of sanctions does need to be increased because it has not yet brought a result. Putin's seriousness is being tested right now in the ongoing negotiations that Ambassador Kurt Volker is conducting with regard to the new peacekeeping proposal that Putin put forth recently. But I believe part of what we need to do is threaten more sanctions if the Russians do not get serious about peace in Donbass and implementing the Minsk agreement. That still leaves the issue of Crimea and there are sanctions on Russia for their actions in Crimea as well as their actions in Donbass.

FSR: That leads me to my next question. You get the sense that when the majority of people talk about com-

ing to a settlement in Ukraine and Russia recognizing the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine, it is limited to Donbass. You have made the point, along with Ambassador Volker, that we should not be turning the page on Crimea. Are we at a point where U.S. policy may be in fact turning the page on Crimea if there is an opportunity to end the violence in the Donbass and if so what are the implications of treating these two issues as separate and distinct?

EF: Well look, the reality is people are fighting and dying in Donbass everyday so that is the more urgent situation from the perspective of the government of Ukraine and the United States as well as its allies, the NATO countries who are supporting Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. That is the urgent situation. The situation in Crimea is one where Crimea is effectively fully occupied by the Russians. Crimea is controlled by the Russian government right now. That situation is one that I would argue is frozen for another day and the international community will have to provide support to the Ukrainian government to resolve that in a manner that is acceptable to the government of Ukraine. That could take a long time.

We have the example that I think Kurt and others would point to of the Baltic states. During the Cold War, we never recognized that they were part of the Soviet Union and therefore there was no issue for the United States when the Soviet Union collapsed in terms

of recognizing those states as independent states. I think Crimea will ultimately be resolved satisfactorily to the Ukrainian government, whatever that means. Whatever is satisfactory to them will be acceptable to the United States and the international community but I do not believe that it is realistic that we can resolve that situation right now. Again, the priority has to be Donbass because that is where people are fighting and dying every day.

If I could also say something about the Minsk process. The Minsk process is aimed at resolving the situation in Donbass. The situation in Donbass is kind of like an experiment that went bad, frankly speaking, for Russia and for Putin. Yes, through it he continues to destabilize and put pressure on President Poroshenko and on the Ukrainian government, but he initially thought that many more of the oblasts, the regions in Donbass, would actually rise up and somehow support the separatists. It turns out what the Russian government was trying to foment was not popular among the Ukrainians even though they did not love their government in Kyiv either. I just want to make that point that he has a mess right there that he is dealing with. It serves his purposes for now but I think in the long run it is also not in Russia's interest to keep funding this ongoing war but it is manageable. The Kremlin can live with it, and they think what they will do is just wear out the Ukrainian government.

FSR: More recently we are not talking about Syria as much. The physical caliphate of ISIS is all but destroyed and the focus has shifted to post-conflict reconstruction and political settlement. It would seem that Russia and those involved in the Astana process have the upper hand in determining what the future of Syria will look like. Do you see Russia as the arbiter of what the future of Syria looks like? What are their interests?

EF: Well first of all the Russian interests are to maintain their influence over the government in Syria. That is their strategic, political goal. Their other objective is of course to maintain operational access to, and use of, the port in Tartus and the airbase at Hmeymim. Those are their interests. They would like to continue to have influence throughout the Middle East to demonstrate that Russia is a power to be reckoned with, and that Russia is great again. That is part of Putin's bargain now with the Russian people. This is linked to, although it is not intuitive perhaps, Russia's domestic situation. For Putin now, his argument to the Russian people is "keep

me in power because I keep things stable at home and I have made Russia great again and will continue to make Russia even greater." It is a nationalist kind of bargain that he is offering them; whereas previously when he first came to power, and for many years thereafter, he was offering an economic bargain. Using Syria to increase Russia's influence in the Middle East is also part of Putin's domestic agenda.

FSR: Do you see a situation where the United States and Russia could cooperate on a future political settlement in Syria, especially as we see an emboldened Iran perhaps overstepping their original expectations coming out of Astana?

EF: I am not optimistic because the Russians have gotten into bed with the Iranian government in Syria and they have some leverage over the Syrians. However, if Syria, with Iranian assistance, can hold the territory that Russian airpower helped them regain, then they do not need the Russians anymore, and therefore, the Russians lose their leverage. Every day that the Syrian regime grows stronger, the Russians lose influence. That said, I do not see the Russian government breaking with Iran either. Right now, it does not seem to be in their interest.

FSR: Zooming out past some of the geographically focused issues we have just discussed, there is significant concern about the state of the nuclear arms control framework that has been the cornerstone of the relationship between the United States and USSR and, of course, later the United States and Russia. Both countries are undergoing significant nuclear modernization efforts and the future of the INF Treaty [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty] is in serious doubt. It seems like the United States is extremely concerned about the future of the INF Treaty but Europe less so, is the potential end of the INF Treaty a serious concern?

EF: I think it should be because it means that our European allies are at greater risk of some kind of Russian, god forbid, nuclear action. I think it affects deterrence in Europe. The Russians believe that this is not the case because they think our AEGIS system could be used to achieve somehow the same objective. I think the INF Treaty has and would continue to serve a useful function. But the Russians have broken out. They are violating it. We need to reestablish deterrence. Now whether that is by deploying weapons or threatening to deploy



Photograph of President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev signing the INF Treaty in the East Room of the White House (White House Photographic Office / Public Domain)

weapons there again as we did in the 80s — which is how we got the treaty in the first place in 1987 — or through another means, I do not know what the answer is. Clearly the Russians do not feel inclined to negotiate any kind of agreement so they would rather spend their money continuing to deploy these weapons

FSR: Steven Pifer from Brookings has written about this idea of “multilaterizing” the response to the reported INF Treaty violation by the Russians and it speaks to this general sense that Europe is less concerned. Why is Europe not as up in arms about this as the United States?

EF: That is a really good question. I am constantly asking our European colleagues why they are not more worked up about it. I honestly do not understand. I think they should be, but they have effectively deputized the problem to us. I guess as long as they think we are going to handle it for them they do not worry. Again, I think they should [worry] because they are giving Russia leverage if they ignore this violation. I think in a way it is probably a failure of U.S. diplomacy. We need to bring the Europeans along, educate them, and get them involved. Even though this was a bilateral agreement, it was essentially hammered out in order to protect the Europeans not the United States, although it does protect U.S. forces in Europe obviously.

FSR: Many look at the developments around the INF Treaty, especially in the wake of the most recent *Zapad* exercises, as evidence of a nuclear threshold for the Russians that is lowering, especially surrounding the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Do you get the same sense?

EF: I have written about this repeatedly and find it incredibly alarming. The Russians have increased their rhetoric surrounding their nuclear weapons, of course more recently our president has started to do this as well, which is also alarming, but the Russian government started it and I think it is very important to maintain a nuclear taboo. The fact that they discussed their nuclear arsenal and started verbally to play fast and loose with it is alarming enough, but they also have a doctrine where they escalate a situation in order to — in a kind of Sun Tzu fashion — persuade the opponent to leave the battlefield, and this is colloquially called the ‘escalate to deescalate doctrine.’ It is basically a doctrine whereby the Russians would escalate the use of weapons or they would threaten to use nuclear weapons in order to get the United States or another adversary to walk away from the battlefield. I find that highly dangerous and disturbing because while the escalatory doctrine does not necessarily mean it is going to be nuclear, it could be cyber or something else, but the possibility that it could be nuclear is alarming.

FSR: Dima Adamsky makes an interesting argument saying that Russian nuclear deterrence and regional nuclear deterrence specifically is inextricably linked to the nonnuclear and informational components of the Gerasimov doctrine. Looking at the informational component of the Gerasimov doctrine, is the United States doing enough now to counter this element of Russian military strategy, perhaps in the Baltics, and if not what steps need to be taken by the United States government to meet this head on?

EF: I think we clearly need to do more with law enforcement and social media against the disinformation component of what the Russians are doing in Europe and elsewhere. We need to do a better job of making sure Russian disinformation does not bleed over into legitimate media and mislead the populations in NATO and EU countries. We need to do a better job of making sure law enforcement is aware of Russian agents and instigators who are operating in NATO and EU countries, especially of course in the Baltics, and in places where there are ethnic Russians or Russian speakers that could be manipulated or misused by the Russian government. In those cases, the governments where those people are citizens should do a better job of addressing legitimate grievances and making sure that the rights of ethnic Russians and/or Russian-speakers are respected, making sure as minorities that they are given equal opportunity and access politically, economically, and culturally.

FSR: Regarding the [Russian] presidential election, obviously the result is not really in question. But there

are some that are suggesting there may be a perceptible change in Russian foreign policy after the election: that perhaps Putin could afford to more fully explore an exit strategy in Ukraine after the March election. Do you get the same sense or can we expect more of the same in terms of the same level of aggression in Russian foreign policy that we have seen?

EF: I mean, it is possible that Putin could decide: “you know what, I want to wrap this up.” But look, he has not wrapped up the situation in Georgia where the Russian military continues to occupy 20% of the territory, where Russia moved the boundary line arbitrarily. They continue to find it useful to meddle in their neighbors’ affairs by occupying part of their territory, so I am skeptical, given Putin’s perspective on the geopolitics of Europe and beyond, that he is going to change his policies. It could happen but he would almost have to take a page from Gorbachev and reform the system in Russia, and I do not see that happening because he is basically a beneficiary of the current system, which is a corrupt, oligarchical, totalitarian system. I do not see him taking the Gorbachev approach, and therefore, he only knows one way to stay in power and alive and that is to maintain the current system. He could decide to ease things in Ukraine and he could decide to rollup Donbass, but he is never going to give back Crimea. I think that is going to be up to whoever succeeds him to resolve.

FSR: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today Dr. Farkas.

Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas

Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, and a national security analyst for NBC/MSNBC. She served from 2012 to 2015 as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia, responsible for policy toward Russia, the Black Sea, Balkans, and Caucasus regions and conventional arms control. From 2010 to 2012 she served as senior adviser to the supreme allied commander Europe and special adviser to the secretary of defense for the NATO Summit. Prior to that, she was a senior fellow at the American Security Project, and executive director of the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism. From April 2001 to April 2008, she served as a professional staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Asia Pacific, Western Hemisphere, Special Operations Command, peace and stability operations, combatting terrorism, counternarcotics, homeland defense, and export control policy. Dr. Farkas obtained her MA and PhD from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. She is a member of the board of trustees of Franklin & Marshall College and Aspen Institute Socrates Seminar, and Harold Rosenthal Fellowship advisory boards. She has received several Department of Defense and foreign awards and an honorary doctorate from Franklin & Marshall College.