

Sen. Lindsey Graham Warns Putin Could 'Explode Tactical Nuclear Device' in Ukraine

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL – Did the government of Ukraine really try to assassinate Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday using two killer drones?

Or was this a Russian “false flag” operation—the intelligence industry’s equivalent of “fake news”—designed to give Putin the public and global justification he feels he needs to dramatically intensify his military’s attack on the sovereign country of Ukraine?

We recently reported on ALL ISRAEL News Moscow’s allegations of an “assassination plot” against the Russian president, noting the headlines seemed like something ripped right out of my 2018 political thriller, “The Kremlin Conspiracy.”

We also reported that Kyiv is strenuously denying it sent the drones at all, or that it has tried to assassinate Putin in any way.

In my column, I also promised that “this is a story we’re going to continue to track” because “Russia is a major power with nuclear weapons” and “any effort to remove the Russian premier, much less assassinate him, could be highly destabilizing because if it’s not successful, the question is: What will Putin do next?”

Less than an hour after that column was published, I spoke to U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham by phone.

Graham, a U.S. Air Force veteran, is one of the leading Republican experts on foreign policy and national security.

He was emphatic in telling me three key points.

First, the senator doesn't buy for one minute the Kremlin's account that Ukraine sent drones to kill Putin, calling the story a "ridiculous allegation" and added that "Putin is trying to justify some future action here" against Ukraine.

Second, the senator told me the prospect of Putin exploding a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine is very real and that the U.S. needs to make it crystal clear to Putin that using nuclear weapons in Ukraine would be regarded as an attack on NATO, because the radioactive cloud would affect NATO countries. It's critical, he said, that the Biden administration effectively deter Putin from going nuclear.

Third, the senator said he expects all viable Republican presidential candidates to take a hard line against Putin, noting that if they can't stand up to Putin, they will have a hard time standing up to communist China.

The following is a transcript of Part One of our conversation, lightly edited for clarity.

ROSENBERG: I want to ask you about Russia, Ukraine and now this story that's breaking in which the Kremlin is accusing Ukraine of sending killer drones to assassinate President Putin. The Ukrainian government says they don't know what Moscow is talking about. What's your take on this?

SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM: I think it's a ridiculous allegation. Putin is trying to justify some future action here.

But you know what? This was supposed to be a 4-day war. But it's turned into the 400-and-some-days war. I think it's in America's interest to stop Putin in Ukraine. Ukrainians are fighting like tigers. And the money we're spending now will ensure a more stable Europe in the future.

This idea that Ukraine is using drones to assassinate Putin, it's just—again—the way he sets up justification for actions to come later.

The Ukrainians have decimated the Russian military.

If we don't get Ukraine right, China will be much more likely to invade Taiwan.

From our national security perspective, we need to stick with Ukraine and be very cautious of any accusations being made by Putin.

ROSENBERG: Do you think that there's a real risk that Putin might actually, in fact, use tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield because he's being humiliated?

What other options does he have, or does he see that route of going nuclear as a legitimate option?

SENATOR GRAHAM: That's actually a very good question.

Crimea is going to be a red line, I think, for Putin.

And here's what I want the people to understand. I think it was 1994 or 1995, I can't remember the exact date, but the Ukrainians had 1,700 nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil. They gave those weapons back to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union with the promise that their territorial sovereignty would be respected by Russia. The agreement was signed by the United States and Great Britain. The map used for that transfer included Crimea as part of Ukraine.

But I could see an effort by Putin to explode a tactical nuclear device to back the West off, if Crimea gets in jeopardy of being taken by the Ukrainians.

And my point is, that would be an attack on NATO—and we need to make it clear to Putin that if he explodes a nuclear weapon in Ukraine, what will happen is that the radiation will go to NATO nations and we should consider that as attack on NATO itself, which would, I think be a deterrence to that action.

ROSENBERG: And that's the key, right? It's not that we want to

get in a nuclear war with Vladimir Putin. We want to deter one from starting.

SENATOR GRAHAM: Yes. What we want to do is make sure that people with nuclear weapons can't extort the world and have their way. I mean, you're going to have to stand up to these bullies sooner rather than later. And if we can, if Ukraine continues to defeat Putin on the battlefield and the Russian army continues to collapse, I think eventually the Russian people will replace Putin. It is very important we get this right.

ROSENBERG: Do you see viable Republican presidential candidates taking a strong enough line against Putin, in your view?

SENATOR GRAHAM: Support for continued aid to Ukraine will continue by Republicans and Democrats. If you know anything about World War II, you don't want to let one nation rewrite the map of Europe by force of arms and get away with it.

Putin is trying to reconstruct the former Russian empire, which includes Georgia and Moldova and some of the Baltic nations. So, his ambitions are far beyond Ukraine.

So, let's stop him now.

Republican candidates for president are going to have to show a willingness to stand up to Putin because if they can't stand up to him, then I doubt they can stand up to China.

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