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Wednesday, July 19

9:40 - 10:10 AM MST

Fireside Chat with James Cleverly

[James Cleverly](#), Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, United Kingdom

Moderator: [Martha MacCallum](#), Anchor and Executive Editor of The Story, Fox News

Martha MacCallum

I just want to say that I'm really honored to have an opportunity to interview the foreign secretary of the UK, James Cleverly who's joining us today so we want to get right to it. We don't have that much time so I want to let him jump in and say good morning to everyone and you had some something you wanted to say off the right off the top, sir.

James Cleverly

Thank you. And thank you all for joining. Thank you all for joining us this morning. It's a genuine pleasure to be here as the UK's Foreign Secretary. As you've heard, I've got a rather long and sprawling job title but I am the equivalent of your Secretary of State's foreign minister. And I also when it comes to the full spectrum of the work that you're discussing here, this, this gathering, I'm also responsible for our intelligence services both humans and SIGINT intelligence services, as well. And so my remit covers foreign policy. It covers intelligence. And obviously there are a number of issues which are at the forefront of my mind. As you've just heard, I've recently come back from NATO Summit in Vilnius. I went from there to the ASEAN summit in Jakarta. So I've been spending the last week thinking about the situation in the Ukraine, Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. I'd like to put on record the UK's huge gratitude for the role that the United States of America has played supporting Ukrainians in their self defense. And the point I've made over and over again, is it's not just about Ukraine, this is about all of us. And the reason this is so very, very important, is because what is at stake is not just the geography, the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but the UN Charter, the the message that we send to the world about West's resolve, and our willingness to defend our principles and those things that underpin freedom and democracy and the rule of law. And then of course, over in over in ASEAN, I was thinking very much about the nature of the relationship between the UK and South Asian countries, and China and our friends and partners in the region. And of course, I'm reminded having come this far west, I know not quite hitting the West Coast yet, but I'm reminded that the United States of America is of course a Pacific country, as well as an Atlantic country. So a lot of these things we've been working on I very much value the relationship that I have with my US counterparts. We work very, very closely and I like to make sure that I'm bringing value to the relationship and that's maybe one of the things that we can discuss whilst we're talking.

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Martha MacCallum

Great I'd love to start with Ukraine, as you mentioned, interesting piece this morning that quoted your head of MI6 Richard Moore. He says that there are quote, deep fractures in the elite circle around Putin and that the Prigozhin coup attempt was deeply humiliating to Putin. And yet Putin lets him roam free right now. So what's your assessment of that situation?

James Cleverly

So, Richard is the head of MI6, our intelligence agency, and I speak with him very regularly on these on these issues. And of course, if we cast our minds back to the start of this conflict, and the messaging that Putin was trying to put out, that the Russians were uniquely resilient that they had the real grit and the determination and the decadent, fickle West will ultimately lose interest and lose resolve. And yet what we're seeing is the first cracks are appearing on the Russian side rather than on our side. And it doesn't matter how Putin tries to spin it. An attempted coup is never a good look. And so, and so, and so, you know, what we are seeing is it's the Russian people that are increasingly frustrated with Putin. We are seeing this exodus of bright, talented, thoughtful, young Russians, entrepreneurs, technologists. Business people, they are leaving Russia in their droves. Richard also made the point that that will have intelligence implications. There are people who are Russians who now realize that Putin is doing more damage to Russia than he is to anywhere else, notwithstanding the terrible headlines that we're seeing about missile strikes overnight. Now, our view is that the leadership of the Russian Federation is exclusively an issue for the Russian people. But the bottom line is the Russian people are showing the world that they are increasingly frustrated with Putin

Martha MacCallum

I thought that was very interesting. He was almost calling for a Russian resistance and saying door's always open, and we would love to talk to you. If you'd like to bring the information our way. You made a strong speech at the UN and said to Putin that the war must end now that his troops must leave. But many who observe what's going on in the frontlines and in Ukraine, say that really, the lines have not moved much at all since November that he took about 17% of the country and the initial push and the weeks that followed, and that he still has 17% of the country. So in your assessment is the war at a stalemate right now?

James Cleverly

Be under no illusion Russia is losing. Ukraine is winning. And I've said this, I've said this a number of times I absolutely stand stand by this. We have got to remember that this is not a film, this is not an action movie. In films is really, really simple. In the first act, the aggressor swarms across the border, and the plucky Ukrainians defend themselves against the odds. In the second act of the film, is this diplomatic effort and international coalition of support we give arms equipment and training to the Ukrainians and then third act, they get this decisive breakthrough. They get to the Azov Coast or the Black Sea coast. And, and the credits roll and the you know, the leading actors kiss and you know, we wait for Oscar night. It doesn't work like that in the real world. In the real world, the Russian forces have

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spent the winter digging in. They've been riddled the South and the SouthEast of Ukraine with minefields with trade systems with physical barricades, and the Ukrainians are getting regaining territory over the course of weeks. That Russia took months to acquire. Russia is losing on the battlefield, and we mustn't allow ourselves to be seduced by the Russian propaganda somehow this is a stalemate. It is not. We have a choice therefore do we stay with it and give the Ukrainians what they need to continue to make gains? Or do we drop the ball? Do we, you know, prove Putin, right. And the choice is entirely in our hands. And I think what we should do is we should demonstrate to Putin and anyone else that is watching that we have the grit the we have the determination that we have the strategic endurance, and the things we are defending. We don't defend for only 18 months, maybe 24 months at approach. We defend them until they are secured. And I think that's the message that we need to get across and what we have seen is with the Prigozhin situation. It's fragile. Russia is fragile. Ukrainians took a lot of punches over the last 18 months, and now they're dishing some back out again. And the Russian military weren't expecting it. They don't like it and those cracks were appearing.

Martha MacCallum

So given that it's been interesting to watch, because in many of the moves that have been made in this war, the UK has been in the lead in terms of tanks in terms of long range missiles in terms of training pilots, and then the US sort of comes along over time. So if you're characterizing a very critical moment right now, is there anything that you believe we need to push for right now in terms of air cover, because some of the soldiers on the ground in Ukraine say they feel like they're riding a bike without pedals because they don't have appropriate air cover?

James Cleverly

Well, thank you. For the comments you made about the UK contribution to this. And in terms of our proportion of GDP, the UK, the US in a number of other countries are very much in the lead in our support to Ukraine. But I think we should, you know, we got to recognize the fact that the United States of America has been the key military supporter of the Ukrainians. I'm incredibly grateful I speak to the Ukrainian government brave President Zelensky himself but more regularly, Dmytro Kuleba my my Ukrainian opposite number. And there is a huge amount of gratitude for the amount of support that the US has been giving. The UK is very proud of the fact that we act quickly. We act decisively we gave those NLAWS, the light antitank weapons that were so decisive at the beginning part of the conflict. We made the decision first to donate battle tanks, we made the commitment to train fast jet pilots, and I know the Ukrainians are after F16s we don't hold F16s it's not a platform that we utilize. But we've donated huge numbers of 155 artillery systems on a gunner officer and I'm very proud of the fact that the guns 155 artillery is making a decisive effect on the battlefield. And we do what we do because we believe it to be the right thing to do. Other countries work with us working with the Ukrainians, I say the US has done an incredible amount. And my observation is that, you know, we we ultimately I think have to stick with Ukrainians until they are victorious. I think there is a real incentive to do as much as we can as quickly as we can. Because my my good friend I think he's gonna be coming here later on today and tomorrow, Tom Tugendhat, who's the security minister, very close friend of mine, he made an incredibly important point. In a fair fight is the worst fight. You don't want it to be evenly matched because that

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means it takes longer and more people suffer. What you want is a decisive level of overmatch. And that's what we should try and achieve With Ukraine. We have more material than Russia has our military production capabilities greater than Russia's. We have an international coalition that is supporting Ukraine, Russia is finding itself increasingly isolated on the world stage having to rely on Iran for military equipment, and therefore it is in our gift to overmatch or help the Ukrainians overmatch the Russians and I think we should look very seriously at how we do that.

Martha MacCallum

So does that mean that you would be urging the US to pick up the pace recognizing that we, you know, the United States is obviously in terms of dollars, the dominant supporter of Ukraine, do you think that would you like to see faster decision making and faster material getting to the battlefield on our part?

James Cleverly

so I'm not singling anybody out. Now The US is contribution is decisive, no doubt about it. But as I say, the US has moved quickly. Funnily enough. Last year, I was having conversations with members of the administration and I said you are doing a huge amount. You're being incredibly impactful in Ukraine self defense, but there seems to be a was a resistance to talking about that. The American people didn't know how much the American people were giving and how much influence positive influence America was having. I think now America is more comfortable with talking about what it's doing, and it should rightly proud of what it has done what it currently is doing. And I'm saying that that we all all of us have got to stick with it. And have got to keep supporting Ukrainians in their self defense. If I single If I single the USA out at all I single it out because it has done so much. And I single it out for praise rather than criticism. The point is we've all got to continue. We all got to stick with it. We've all got to demonstrate that grit and determination.

Martha MacCallum

One last question on Ukraine because I want to talk to you quickly about AI in China as well. But with regard to the different barriers that we have seen fall in terms of what we would never commit tanks who would never commit long range missiles, we would never commit something that would take out you know where the missiles are coming from on the Russian side. We have now sent president sent 3000 troops to Europe, US troops to Europe as sort of, you know, a backstop. Do you think we will ever see a day when US or UK troops are on the ground in Ukraine?

James Cleverly

Well, I hope not. I don't expect so I genuinely don't expect it. But I do you think we need to make it absolutely clear. And this was this was a conversation that my good friend, Tobias Billström, who's the Swedish Foreign Minister, something he said when I when I was over in Sweden not so long ago, which really struck me he said one of the reasons why Sweden was so determined to join NATO after decades of neutrality. Is he said at the start of this conflict, the Swedish people recognized something that NATO supports is friends. But NATO defends its allies. And that subtle but significant difference was really, really key. That is why Sweden, so determined to become an ally. And what the US have done with

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regard to the forward positioning of troops what the UK has done in Estonia, where we have troops only a few miles from the Russian border, helping to support the Baltic flank, is that we make it very clear that we are supporting Ukraine in Ukraine self defense, but we are absolutely ready to defend our NATO allies. That's a different relationship. A significant and important difference. NATO is the cornerstone of the Euro Atlantic defense structure. We defend our allies and we do so robustly, but we continue to support our friends.

Martha MacCallum

Okay, so we've talked a lot about sort of conventional warfare, but one of the things that you brought up at the UN this week was AI and the role that it could play. You said it speed and scale and spread of disinformation is potentially hugely harmful for democracies all around the globe. And that it can aid in the reckless quest for weapons of mass destruction by state actors and non state actors. Tell us your thoughts on what we need to know about this.

James Cleverly

Well, the AI is evolving in such a huge pace and I know it was touched on I heard some conversation about in the previous session. And what we learn from technological advances is that they amplify and they accelerate. It is not that AI creates fundamentally new challenges or presents fundamentally new opportunities, but it accelerates and amplifies. Now that can be turned and I have no doubt that it will be turned to good I think AI is ability to assist research, whether that be in disease alleviation, whether that be in health more broadly, whether that be in environmental protections or climate change or whatever. There's a load of areas where just the volume and speed with which AI can help us think and decide on research, I think is absolutely key. But we also have to realize that research is a completely neutral activity and research can be utilized for good but research can also be utilized for malign activity, as well. What we need to do is we need to recognize that that's why I hosted that's why I chaired the first ever UN Security Council discussion, debate on AI. We had speakers from all over the all over the world and I and then my Prime Minister recognize that if we're going to if we're going to successfully harness the benefits, we have to successfully mitigate and limit the DIS benefits and we are going to have to do that internationally and collaboratively. That's why I'm initiating conversation at the UN Security Council that's why we're hosting the AI Security Summit in the UK in the autumn. That's the fall for you lot. I just want to make sure we've not crossed wires on that, so we'll be hosting that be we recognize. So the UK you know we've always been at the forefront of technology Alan Turing was a Brit obviously the Internet, the World Wide Web was was a British invention.

Martha MacCallum

Not AI Gore.

James Cleverly

So we have a part to play but none of us in the UK pretend that we're going to do this on our own without attempting to do this on our own. We're going to use our convening power, the clustering of

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really really clever bright thinkers in the UK and that we can bring to the UK to help thrash out how as I say how we make the most of the positives and protect ourselves from the potential negatives.

Martha MacCallum

And one question I wanted to add to on NATO because in the US there is some there's a lot of criticism actually of who's putting in their their 2%. And I think as we look towards the election, we see growing sentiment, about questions about how much money is being spent on the war. I think it you know, the numbers say that the majority of Americans still support the war, but the numbers have come down a little bit and I think it will be a major discussion in the presidential election cycle. So do you think there needs to be a firmer message to Germany to Italy to the other countries in Europe? That are right on the border of this whole thing that they must do their 2% commitment that they made?

James Cleverly

The UK feels very strongly on this. We've been a 2% contributing NATO ally for I lose track for as long as I can remember and the commitments that were made at the White House on it are ones that we are very, very comfortable sticking to. Our position is clear that all NATO allies should contribute at least 2% to potentially a floor, not a ceiling. We are reminded that NATO matters as I say my the conversation with the Swedish Prime Minister really, really stuck with me that NATO is the ultimate form of defense because it's the ultimate form of deterrence. For a deterrent to be credible. It needs to be modern needs to be well funded. It needs to be effective. That's why the 2% matters. It's not an arbitrary figure it is an important figure. The US again, once again on the single us out for for praise has consistently been way above 2%. We're all very grateful for that. I think all of us have to step up to the plate and I reminded when I was in London Government, I ran the Fire Authority. So there's a thing in old London buildings if you go around with some of the old older buildings that are you know, a couple 100 years old. There are things called fire marks there are these metal plates on the walls of old buildings and those were the buildings that were insured and insured buildings, the firefighters would come to those buildings, if a building caught fire and would put the fire out and they would also put out the fire if the building next to an insured building was was on fire. And the reason they did that is because if you're if your buildings insured if you're paying to protect your building and the house next door is on fire, it is in your interest to deal with the fire there, rather than wait for the fire to come to your house. And this whole situation we're discussing is like those fire marks. A the moment. The US, UK, our friends around the world we are watching a fire and our neighbor's house. We can do one of two things. We can put it out there. Or we can sit and watch until that fire engulfs our house. And if we do that it will be more expensive. It will be more painful, it will be more difficult. So so we should deal with a problem that exists now. before it becomes a bigger problem closer to home and that's why those people I understand here we got bills to pay. The bills are getting bigger and we recognize here in the US just as in the UK and many other parts of the world. You know wages are not catching up with the increase in bills that hurts. We totally get that and we are working. I know in the UK and other governments around the world. We're working to address that. But the answer is not to drop the ball on this issue. Because if we do whatever comes next will be more expensive and more painful and more damaging to our economies. That's why it's not just the right move. But the smart move.

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Martha MacCallum

The former President Trump who obviously is running again, was very outspoken on this issue of getting people to 2%. And it did increase the funding for NATO in those years. He is the front runner right now. Do you think you know what is your thought on what would happen if he were reelected? And would it changed the dynamic that we're talking about here? And if so in what way?

James Cleverly

I saw for the life of me I can't remember who was interviewing him and he was asked about that, you know, bring the war to a conclusion in 24 hours. You know, and and and you know, he did a very, you know, President Trump kind of, you know, he was it was a it was a punchy, kind of bombastic, passionate statement. But he also made the point that you know, Putin didn't, I don't want to misquote him so probably best that you you look at the footage, but he said you know he would call upon Zelensky to do a deal he would call upon Putin to do a deal and if Putin didn't do a deal, I think the line he said it was then I would give more to the Ukrainians than they have ever had. So you know, he is I think he and I haven't had a chance to discuss this with him we're not that close. But But yeah, he's making it he strikes me that he understands the importance of this. And the point is, in terms of, you know, whoever the American people choose to be the next president. In the UK, we have a strong track record of working very, very closely and very very effectively with the person the United States put into the White House. And that doesn't track you know, party to party. Basically, the relationship between the UK and the US is is long standing and it's robust and it's resilient and it will be an effective partnership, irrespective of which individual or which party happens to be in the White House, or in number 10 at any given point in time. That's why history shows us at least.

Martha MacCallum

I have a couple minutes left but a friend of mine here wanted me to ask you about about Iran because obviously we're so focused on China and Russia right now. But their ballistic missile system is growing in strength. There are signs that it could reach all of Europe. What are your and they're their army, Russia, obviously. What can Europe do and what can the UK do in the neighborhood to be more forceful to keep Iran in check? And why isn't it happening?

James Cleverly

Well so I can really legitimately speak about the UK and the UK we have remained absolutely robust in our decision to work with our our friends in the region to ensure that we never see a nuclear armed Iran. We have been subject to a very, very high level of aggression directly into the UK from Iran. Our security services have interrupted at least 15 attempts in the UK mainland to to murder or kidnap individuals. So we have we've recently put again Tom who will be here later on today took through a piece of legislation massively toughening up our national security architecture. I two weeks ago put forward another round of sanctions against individuals in Iran because of the brutality that they're

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meting out to their own people, particularly women and girls. Their support for Russia through armed drones and the the other actions that they're taking, the IRGC is sanctioned by the UK in its entirety, as are certain leadership figures within the IRGC and some of those people in the Arabian judiciary, who've been bringing these fake charges brutalizing their own women and girls are also under sanction from the from the UK so we maintain a tough and robust position towards Iran. And that's, you know, that will remain our position. I said this when I when I put forward the statement in the House of Commons. And If Iran does not like UK his response, then Iran needs to change his behavior. Our actions are in response to their behavior. And if they don't like it, they can and should change their behavior, but we will remain we will maintain a very firm and robust position. And we will of course, continue working with our allies both here in the US and across Europe, and in the region within so often when we have this conversation we forget about the neighbors in in the region, whether they be Israeli or their Arab and Muslim neighbors, they are as uncomfortable with Iran's position as anyone else. We will continue working closely with them as well.

Martha MacCallum

Just ask question. I know they're wrapping me up but lot of reports lately about your future Ben Wallace is stepping down as the defense secretary and many reports that perhaps you might take that position. Do you care to respond to those reports?

James Cleverly

All appointments are in the hands of the Prime Minister. Actually all appointments are in the hands of His Majesty the King on the advice of the Prime Minister. That's the way our system works. Look, I adore being foreign secretary. I. I think that my observation is that you become better at the job The more you do it, the more relationships are able to build. If anyone if anyone in the UK is watching, listening, particularly you Prime Minister, I very much want to stay put. I very much want to stay put. I don't know if his majesty watches the Aspen conference but but I very much want to stay put as Foreign Secretary. It's a job that I love. I think it's an important job. I've been I've been in our Foreign Service. I've been a minister in our Foreign Department now since February of 2020. So this is this is the job I know the job I like to think I'm good at and the job that I absolutely adore. So my plan is to stay put I'm going to be dragged at some point in the future you'll see the nail marks down the down the parquet flooring in my office. If anyone tries to drag me out. I actually want to stay put.

Martha MacCallum

Well I believe you're on your fourth Prime Minister if I'm right. So it's, you know, good luck. Good luck to you. I really want to thank you Foreign Secretary Mr. Cleverley It's been a pleasure to meet you here in Aspen and wonderful to talk to you.