

The following is a transcript of an interview with CIA director William Burns that aired on "Face the Nation" on Sunday, Feb. 26, 2023.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Mr. Director, thank you for making time.

CIA DIRECTOR BILL BURNS: Nice to be with you, Margaret.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You've got the whole world to watch right now, so I know you're a busy man. I want to start on Ukraine and Russia with this anniversary. On the cusp of Russia's invasion, you flew to Kyiv and you told President Zelenskyy, tell me if this is right, the Russians are coming to kill you. Was that the very first thing you said?

DIRECTOR BURNS: It wasn't the very first thing I said to President Zelenskyy, but President Biden had asked me to go to Kyiv to lay out for President Zelenskyy the most recent intelligence we had, which suggested that what Vladimir Putin was planning was what he thought would be a lightning strike from the Belarus border to seize Kyiv in a matter of a few days, and also to seize an airport just northwest of Kyiv called Hostomel, which he wanted to use as a platform to bring in air- airborne troops, as a way again, of accelerating that lightning conquest of Kyiv. And I think President Zelenskyy understood what was at stake and what he was up against. Our Ukrainian intelligence partners also had good intelligence about what was coming as well. But I do think that the role of intelligence in this instance, what we're able to provide to President Zelenskyy, not just on that trip, but you know, throughout the course of the war, have helped him to defend his country with such courage and tenacity. And I think that made a contribution early, you know, just before the war started.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Being able to share that intelligence?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Yes.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You also have said, and tell me if this is correct, that it was only a group of about three or four people around Vladimir Putin, who knew that he was actually planning this invasion?

DIRECTOR BURNS: No, I think that's true. I mean, I had watched over the years, especially over recent years, as Putin had narrowed his circle of advisers, and it was a circle in which he prized loyalty over competence. It was a group of people who tended to tell him what he wanted to hear, and- or at least had learned over the years that it wasn't career enhancing to question his judgments as well. And so that was one of the deepest flaws I think, in Russian decision-making just before the war as it was such a close circle of people reinforcing one another's profoundly mistaken assumptions.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Does he take counsel from anyone these days?

DIRECTOR BURNS: I think he's become increasingly convinced that he knows better than anyone else what's at stake for Russia. I think his sense of destiny, and his appetite for risk has increased in recent years as well. And I think he had convinced himself by the fall of 2021, a few

months before he launched his invasion, that his strategic window was closing for asserting control over Ukraine, which he thought was absolutely essential to Russia's future as a great power and to his future as a great Russian leader as he saw it. And so he had also convinced himself that early 2022 was a favorable landscape, tactically, for Russia to launch such an invasion.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Why?

DIRECTOR BURNS: He believed that Ukraine was weak and divided, he thought the West was distracted, and he thought he had modernized the Russian military to the point where it was capable of a quick, decisive victory. Of course, it turned out that each of those assumptions was profoundly flawed.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You recently went back to Kyiv and you met with President Zelenskyy. And three months ago, I understand you met with Russia's top spy chief. Is there any kind of opening that you are finding here? Any kind of opportunity?

DIRECTOR BURNS: No, I mean, the conversation that I had with Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia's external intelligence service, was pretty dispiriting. You know, my- my goal was not to talk about negotiations, that's something that Ukrainians are going to need to take up with the Russians when they see fit. It was more than anything else, what the President asked me to do, which was to make clear to Naryshkin and through him to President Putin, the serious consequences should Russia ever choose to use a nuclear weapon of any kind as well. And I think Naryshkin understood the seriousness of that issue and I think President Putin has understood it as well. I think it's also been very valuable that the Chinese leadership, that Prime Minister Modi in India have also made clear their opposition to any use of nuclear weapons.

MARGARET BRENNAN: And you made clear to him that a nuclear weapon of any kind, a tactical nuke on the battlefield, would be treated by the United States with the utmost severity?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Absolutely, absolutely. And we've continued to make that very clear. And I think that direct message is going to continue to be important, as are the messages that come from other world leaders, whether it's President Xi or anyone else.

MARGARET BRENNAN: There's not a lot of contact with Russia right now.

DIRECTOR BURNS: There's not a great deal, you're right.

MARGARET BRENNAN: But you still have that line of communication with your counterpart?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Yeah and I- and I think even in the most deeply adversarial relationships, and that's certainly what our relationship with Russia is today, it's important to have those lines open, and the President believes that.

MARGARET BRENNAN: What do you walk away from those conversations with? You said it was dispiriting, why?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, because I think the, you know, it's- there was a very defiant attitude on the part of Mr. Naryshkin as well, a sense of cockiness and hubris. You know, a sense, I think, reflecting Putin's own view, his own belief today that he can make time work for him, that he believes he can grind down the Ukrainians that he can wear down our European allies, that political fatigue will eventually set in. And in my experience, Putin's view of Americans, of us, has been that we have attention deficit disorder, and we'll move on to some other issue eventually. And so Putin, in many ways, I think, believes today that he cannot win for awhile, but he can't afford to lose. I mean, that's his conviction. So instead of looking for ways to either back down or find a famous off ramp, you know, what Putin has done is double down. At each instance notwithstanding, you know, what is by any objective measure a strategic failure so far for Russia.

MARGARET BRENNAN: He doesn't seem to have that assessment, though, I mean, 97 percent of his ground forces in Ukraine. It's a meat grinder, does he just look at his population and say, I have enough young men I can continue to send off to die? I mean, what is the price that makes him change his mind?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Putin is certainly not a sentimentalist about the loss of Russian life or, you know, the huge losses that he's taken in terms of Russian armaments, as well during the course of the war. But there's a lot of hubris that continues to be attached to Putin and his view of the war right now. And I think, what's going to be critical as we look ahead in 2023 and provide all the material and intelligence support that we can for our Ukrainian partners, is to puncture that hubris on Putin's part and regain momentum on the battlefield. Because I really do believe, much as a- as a recovering diplomat, I'd like to see opportunities for negotiations. I don't think the Russians are serious today. And I think, you know, it's only progress on the battlefield that's going to shape any improved prospects for negotiations down the road. That's going to be the Ukrainians call. I think, as the President has made clear, it's our job not just as an intelligence community, but as a government to provide all the support we can to the Ukrainians, so that they can strengthen their hand on the battlefield and ultimately at the negotiating table.

MARGARET BRENNAN: So Russia controls 18 percent of Ukraine. At what point does Putin say I can't win?

DIRECTOR BURNS: I think--

MARGARET BRENNAN: You must have gamed that out.

DIRECTOR BURNS: I think Putin is, right now, entirely too confident of his ability, as I said before, to wear down Ukraine, to grind away and that's what he's giving every evidence that he's determined to do right now. At some point, he's going to have to face up to increasing costs as well, in coffins coming home to some of the poorest parts of Russia because many of the conscripts, you know, who are being thrown as cannon fodder in the front and the Donbas as well, come from Dagestan and Buryatia, the poorest parts of Russia as well. There's a cumulative economic damage to Russia as well. Huge reputational damage, I think to Russia. It has not exactly been a great advertisement for Russian arms sales. So this is going to build over time, but right now, the honest answer, I think Putin is quite determined.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You said- I want to ask you about what appears to be potentially a new line of ammunition weapons for Russia. It looks like the U.S. was caught by surprise that China was actually considering providing lethal support. You said as recently as February 2, that Xi Jinping was reluctant to provide military assistance. What changed?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, I mean, I think this is something we watch very carefully. And I think, you know, the Chinese weigh very carefully this issue. And we've certainly made very clear the seriousness of the consequences for our relationship, and I think for China's relationship with our European allies as well.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Sanctions?

DIRECTOR BURNS: This is an issue that we watch very, very carefully. You know, and as Secretary Blinken has said, publicly, you know, we have begun to see- we have begun to collect intelligence suggesting that China is considering the provision of lethal equipment. That's not to suggest that they've made a definitive conclusion about this, that they're actually begun to provide lethal equipment, but it's obviously something that we take very seriously and watch very carefully.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Secretary Blinken said that the U.S. had picked up information over the last couple of months. But picking up information over the last couple of months to thinking they're actively considering it- I mean, how confident are you in the intelligence that this is something Xi Jinping himself may change his mind about?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, we're confident that the Chinese leadership is considering the provision of lethal equipment. We also don't see that a final decision has been made yet, and we don't see evidence of actual shipments of lethal equipment. And that's why, I think, Secretary Blinken and the President have thought it important to make very clear what the consequences of that would be as well-

MARGARET BRENNAN: To deter it.

DIRECTOR BURNS: Yeah, to deter it, because it would be a very risky and unwise bet.

MARGARET BRENNAN: So why would Beijing risk a tailspin in its relationship with the United States and with Europe by crossing this line?

DIRECTOR BURNS: It's a good question, and that's why I hope very much that they don't.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Because it doesn't necessarily seem in his best economic interest, certainly, if sanctions are the consequence. Do you think that Beijing benefits from having the West distracted and involved in a prolonged conflict in Europe?

DIRECTOR BURNS: I mean--

MARGARET BRENNAN: That that's the aim?

DIRECTOR BURNS: It's conceivable, but I think, there's no foreign leader who's watched more carefully Vladimir Putin's experience in Ukraine, the evolution of the war, than Xi Jinping has. And I think in many ways, he's been unsettled and sobered by what he's seen. I think he was surprised by the very poor military performance of the Russians. I think surprised also by the degree of Western solidarity and support of Ukraine. In other words, the willingness of not just the United States, but our European allies as well to absorb a certain amount of economic cost in the interest of inflicting greater economic damage on Russia over time. So all of that, I think, has sobered Xi Jinping to some extent.

MARGARET BRENNAN: So you think this public- do you think the policy decision of public- publicly embarrassing the Chinese by saying we know what you're thinking, why do you think that that will make a difference in Xi Jinping's calculation?

DIRECTOR BURNS: I don't think it's a question of embarrassing anybody. It's just a question of being very clear and direct about the seriousness of our concerns, as well--

MARGARET BRENNAN: Publicly.

DIRECTOR BURNS: Publicly as well. And privately because that's a message that's been delivered, you know, on a number of occasions before this.

MARGARET BRENNAN: What are the consequences for the conflict in Ukraine if this does happen? What does more ammunition and more weapons mean? Does this- Is it a game changer?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, I mean, obviously more ammunitions to the aggressor in this conflict to Vladimir Putin's Russia, wherever it comes from, and we also have evidence that the Iranians are providing, you know, lethal equipment and munitions, that the North Koreans are doing the same thing as well. So wherever that lethal assistance comes from, it prolongs a vicious war of aggression.

MARGARET BRENNAN: German press is reporting China's considering kamikaze drones, replacement parts for jets, other weaponry. Secretary Blinken just said ammunition and weapons, do you view those things differently in terms of- I mean, obviously, they're used differently in the battlefield, but where is that line that they are crossing?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well I mean I can't comment on the specifics of what was reported in the German media as well. All I can say is, you know, we remain seriously concerned should China provide lethal equipment to Russia. As I said, we don't have evidence of a final decision to do that today, we don't have evidence that there's actually been a transfer. And so all we're trying to emphasize is the importance of not doing that.

MARGARET BRENNAN: The U.S. does have evidence that Chinese companies have been providing non-lethal support to Russian mercenaries, but it's, you know, satellite imagery that helps target weapons. Isn't that an indication of where their thinking is on this conflict, that they're not actually peace brokers, but a party to it?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, I think it's an indication that, you know, there is a strong partnership between China and Russia as President Xi, and- and Putin proclaimed just before the war started at the beginning of February. But I think the Chinese are also trying to weigh the consequences of, you know, what the concerns we've expressed are, you know, about providing lethal equipment as well. And weighing carefully, you know, where's the point at which, you know, they would run into some pretty serious consequences and that's what we've tried to make clear.

MARGARET BRENNAN: So this was testing the waters, in other words, for U.S. reaction to satellite imagery. To see if they can then go onto weapons--

DIRECTOR BURNS: Right, I mean, there's a big distinction, in our view, and this is what U.S. policymakers have made clear between, you know, non-lethal equipment and lethal equipment as well.

MARGARET BRENNAN: So, how good is our visibility into Xi Jinping's thinking and his decision-making process?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Oh, it's always the hardest question for any intelligence service as well. You know, in- in an authoritarian system where power is consolidated so much in the hands of one man, but it's something we work very hard at, and try to provide the President with the best insights that we can.

MARGARET BRENNAN: But you had such exquisite intelligence when it came to Russia and Vladimir Putin and his inner circle. Do we have that for Xi Jinping?

DIRECTOR BURNS: We work very hard to develop that.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Working on it?

DIRECTOR BURNS: I think we work very hard to develop the very best intelligence we can.

MARGARET BRENNAN: But I wonder if, when you're talking about his thinking, and his decision making, if he suffers from the same kind of "Yes, man" culture that you said Vladimir Putin does. Because Xi Jinping got rid of a lot of people in his government.

DIRECTOR BURNS: Margaret, it's a concern in any authoritarian system, and I think what we've seen in Beijing is President Xi consolidating power at a very rapid pace over the course of the more than a decade that he's been in power as well. And as we've seen in, you know, in where Putin's hubris has now gotten Russia, and the horrors that he's, you know- you know, brought to the people of Ukraine. In that kind of a system, a very closed decision-making system when nobody challenges, you know, the authority of their insights of an authoritarian leader, you can make some huge blunders as well.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You've said Xi Jinping told his military to be prepared to invade Taiwan by 2027. The intel community seems a little bit more ambiguous in its conclusions here. Do you think it's an outright invasion? Or do you think China's more likely to slowly strangle

democracy in Taiwan?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, first, I think we need to take very seriously Xi's ambitions with regard to ultimately controlling Taiwan. That doesn't, however, in our view, mean that a military conflict is inevitable. We do know, as has been made public, that President Xi has instructed the PLA, the Chinese military leadership, to be ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan, but that doesn't mean that he's decided to invade in 2027 or any other year as well. I think our judgment at least is that President Xi and his military leadership have doubts today about whether they could accomplish that invasion. I think, as they've looked at Putin's experience in Ukraine, that's probably reinforced some of those doubts as well. So, all I would say is that I think the risks of, you know, a potential use of force probably grow the further into this decade you get and beyond it, into the following decade as well. So that's something obviously, that we watch very, very carefully.

MARGARET BRENNAN: I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you when the intelligence community will have some insight into what Beijing was collecting with that spy balloon over the U.S.?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, I think we've already- I mean, the U.S. government, many of our partners have been bringing up from, you know, the seabed just off the coast of South Carolina as well, you know, a lot of materials from the platform that that balloon was carrying. It was clearly an intelligence platform as well. And I think we'll be able to develop a pretty clear picture of exactly what its capabilities were.

MARGARET BRENNAN: But it will be awhile, won't it?

DIRECTOR BURNS: It takes some time. But I think my understanding is that we're managing to pull up quite a bit of evidence and material from that platform.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Do you think Xi Jinping knew that balloon was sent here?

DIRECTOR BURNS: I don't know.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You have an idea?

DIRECTOR BURNS: I mean, this is something obviously we watch very carefully as well. I think the Chinese leadership obviously understood that they had launched this capability, that it was an intelligence platform, whether, when, and what the Chinese leadership knew about the trajectory of this balloon, I honestly can't say.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You- I want to come back to something you just said about Iran. You've said in the past, there's the beginnings of a full-fledged defense partnership between Russia and Iran. Exactly how far does the alliance go?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Well, it's moving at a pretty fast clip in a very dangerous direction right now, in the sense that we know that the Iranians have already provided hundreds of armed drones to the Russians, which they're using to inflict pain on Ukrainian civilians and Ukrainian

civilian infrastructure. We know that they've provided, you know, ammunition for artillery and for tanks as well. And what we also see are signs that, you know, Russia is proposing to help the Iranians on their missile program and also at least considering the possibility of providing fighter aircraft to Iran as well. That creates obvious risks not only for the people of Ukraine, and we've seen the evidence of that already, but also risks to our friends and partners across the Middle East as well. So it's, you know, quite disturbing set of developments.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Have Iran's leaders made the decision to pursue a nuclear weapon?

DIRECTOR BURNS: To the best of our knowledge, we don't believe that the Supreme Leader in Iran has yet made a decision to resume the weaponization program that we judge that they suspended or stopped at the end of 2003. But the other two legs of the stool, meaning enrichment programs, they've obviously advanced very far, you know, over the past couple of years--

MARGARET BRENNAN: 84 percent purity reportedly.

DIRECTOR BURNS: They've advanced very far to the point where it would only be a matter of weeks before they can enrich to 90 percent, if they chose to cross that line. And also in terms of their missile systems, their ability to deliver a nuclear weapon, once they developed it, has also been advancing as well. So the answer to your question is no, we don't see evidence that they made a decision to resume that weaponization program. But the other dimensions of this challenge, I think, are growing at a worrisome pace too.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Israel has said they believe Iran has enough fuel for four bombs, and the enriched uranium that was found recently was at 84 percent purity- that's very close to 90 percent, what you need for a nuclear weapon. So how far are they from testing? Or are you saying because they haven't chosen to pursue a weapon that--

DIRECTOR BURNS: Right.

MARGARET BRENNAN: We're not near that point?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Yeah. And they're still a ways off, at least in our judgment in terms of their ability to actually develop a weapon. But their progress on enrichment is quite troubling, as I said before.

MARGARET BRENNAN: I have a lot of questions to still ask you, but I'm told we're running out of time. I want to ask you, what keeps you up at night?

DIRECTOR BURNS: Oh, lots of things. It's in the nature of this job. The job I've been proud to hold for the last couple of years as well. I mean, I think in the short term, there's obviously a lot of concern about Putin's war in Ukraine and doing everything that we can to support the Ukrainians. I'm very proud of the role that intelligence has played. I think we, not just at CIA but across the U.S. intelligence community, provided strong early warning of the invasion that was coming. I think we shared intelligence which helped the Ukrainians to defend themselves. I think the credibility of our intelligence has helped the President to build such a strong coalition. And I

also think that the President's decision to selectively and carefully declassify some of our secrets, some of our intelligence has had an important impact in the sense that it's denied Putin the ability to shape false narratives, which I had seen him do too many times over the course of my experience with him in the last two decades. And it's put him on the back foot, which is for Vladimir Putin that kind of uncomfortable and unaccustomed place to be. So I think for all those reasons, you know, I focus very intently on the role that intelligence plays in this conflict, and doing everything we can to support the Ukrainians and help the President shore up this, you know, remarkable coalition of countries supporting Ukraine.

MARGARET BRENNAN: You were the last American to speak with Vladimir Putin before this war.

DIRECTOR BURNS: I think the President talked to him on the telephone after that trip I made in you know, in early November of 2021, but you know with Putin and the conversation that I had in- in November, so several months before the war, you know, just left me with a very troubling impression that he was someone who had just about made up his mind to go to war at that point. And I had heard from him, before, a lot of what he had to say about Ukraine, his conviction that Ukraine is not a real country, you know real countries fight back. And that's just what the Ukrainians have done, you know, so courageously over the course of the last year.

MARGARET BRENNAN: Yeah, he'd been telling you, it's not a real country back in 2008.

DIRECTOR BURNS: Yes, yeah. No, it's a consistent theme with him. But, you know, over the course, especially of the 15 years, since, you know, I was ambassador in Moscow, you have seen, you know, his views harden with regard to Ukraine. I think, as you know, he can't conceive of Russia as a great power without controlling Ukraine's choices. And I think as he's looked at Ukraine's evolution over the last decade, what he's seen is Ukraine's stubborn independence, it's democratic progress, it's movement toward the West in political and economic and security terms, largely accelerated by Putin himself through his aggression in Crimea in 2014. He's seen that as a direct threat to the ambition that cuts to the core of his view as a Russian leader, and I think that's the backdrop to the horrific aggression that he's launched.