

# Is CIA Director Bill Burns a Biden Yes-Man, a Putin Apologist or a Peacemaker?

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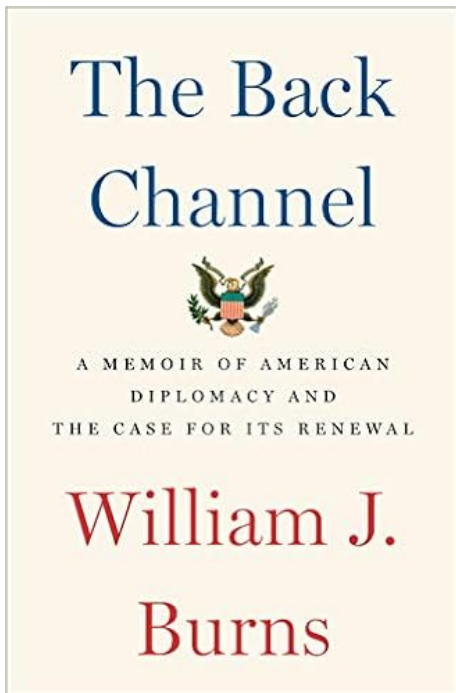
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*Lost in a chaotic hall of mirrors of its own creation, the CIA has generally failed in its one and only legitimate task, to provide U.S. policymakers with accurate intelligence about the world beyond the Washington echo-chamber to inform U.S. decision-making.*

If, unlike many of his predecessors, President Biden actually wanted to be guided by accurate intelligence, which is by no means certain, his nomination of former Deputy Secretary of State **Bill Burns** as CIA Director was an encouraging, although puzzling, appointment. It removed Burns from the State Department's policymaking chain of command, **but puts him in a position where his decades of diplomatic experience and insight might help to guide Biden's decisions**, especially over the crisis in U.S. relations with Russia. Burns, fluent in Russian, lived and worked at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow for many years, first as a political officer and later as U.S. Ambassador.

It is hard to find Burns's finger-prints on Biden's Russia policy or on the conduct of NATO's war in Ukraine, where U.S. policy has run headlong into precisely the dangers Burns warned his government about, in cables from Moscow spanning more than a decade. We cannot know what Burns tells the president behind closed doors. But he has not publicly called for peace talks, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **General Mark Milley** has done, although to do so would be highly unusual for a CIA director.

In the current environment of rigid pro-war, anti-Russian orthodoxy, if Bill Burns publicly voiced some of the concerns he expressed earlier in his career, he might be ostracized, or even fired, as a Putin apologist. But his dire warnings about the consequences of inviting Ukraine to join NATO have been quietly tucked in his back pocket, as he condemns Russia as the sole author of the catastrophic war in Ukraine, without mentioning the vital context that he has so vividly explained over the past 30 years.



In his memoir [The Back Channel](#), published in 2019, Burns confirmed that, in 1990, **Secretary of State James Baker** had indeed assured **Mikhail Gorbachev** that there would be no expansion of the NATO alliance or forces “one inch to the east” of the borders of a reunified Germany. Burns wrote that, even though the pledge was never formalized and was made before the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russians took Baker at his word and felt betrayed by NATO enlargement in the years that followed.

When he was political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in 1995, Burns [reported](#) that

“hostility to early NATO expansion is almost universally felt across the domestic political spectrum here.”

When in the late 1990s **President Bill Clinton’s** administration moved to bring Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into NATO, Burns called the decision premature at best, and needlessly provocative at worst.

“As Russians stewed in their grievance and sense of disadvantage, a gathering storm of ‘stab in the back’ theories slowly swirled, leaving a mark on Russia’s relations with the West that would linger for decades,” he [wrote](#).

After serving various posts in the Middle East, including ambassador to Jordan, in 2005 Burns finally got the job he had been eyeing for years: U.S. ambassador to Russia. From thorny trade issues to the conflict in Kosovo and missile defense disputes, he had his hands full. But the issue of NATO expansion was a source of constant friction.

It came to a head in 2008, when officials in the Bush administration were pushing to extend a NATO invitation to Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest NATO Summit. Burns tried to head it off. Two months before the summit, he penned a no-holds-barred email to [Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice](#), parts of which he quoted in his book.

“Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players,

from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests," Burns wrote. "At this stage, a MAP [Membership Action Plan] offer would be seen not as a technical step along a long road toward membership, but as throwing down the strategic gauntlet. Russia will respond. Russian-Ukrainian relations will go into a deep freeze.... It will create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and eastern Ukraine."

In addition to this personal email, he wrote a meticulous 12-point official cable to Secretary Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, which only came to light thanks to a WikiLeaks diplomatic cable dump in 2010.

Dated February 1, 2008, the memo's subject line, all caps, could not have been more clear: NYET MEANS NYET: RUSSIA'S NATO ENLARGEMENT REDLINES.

In no uncertain terms, Burns conveyed the intense opposition from **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov** and other senior officials, stressing that Russia would view further NATO eastward expansion as a potential military threat. He said that NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, was "an emotional and neuralgic" issue but also a strategic policy issue.

"Not only does Russia perceive encirclement and efforts to undermine Russia's influence in the region, but it also fears unpredictable and uncontrolled consequences which would seriously affect Russian security interests. Experts tell us that Russia is particularly worried that the strong divisions in Ukraine over NATO membership, with much of the ethnic-Russian community against membership, could lead to a major split, involving violence or at worst, civil war. In that eventuality, Russia would have to decide whether to intervene—a decision Russia does not want to have to face."

Six years later, the U.S.-supported Maidan uprising provided the final trigger for the civil war that Russian experts had predicted.

Burns quoted Lavrov as saying that, while countries were free to make their own decisions about their security and which political-military structures to join, they needed to keep in mind the impact on their neighbors, and that Russia and Ukraine were bound by bilateral obligations set forth in the 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership, in which both parties undertook to "refrain from participation in or support of any actions capable of prejudicing the security of the other side."

Burns said a Ukrainian move toward the Western sphere would hurt defense industry cooperation between Russia and Ukraine, including a number of factories where Russian weapons were made, and would have a negative impact on the thousands of Ukrainians living and working in Russia and vice versa. Burns quoted Aleksandr Konovalov, Director of the Institute for Strategic Assessment, predicting that this would become "a boiling cauldron of anger and resentment among the local population."

Russian officials told Burns that NATO expansion would have repercussions throughout the region and into Central and Western Europe, and could even cause Russia to revisit its arms control agreements with the West.

In a rare personal meeting Burns had with Putin just before leaving his post as ambassador

in 2008, Putin warned him that “no Russian leader could stand idly by in the face of steps toward NATO membership for Ukraine. That would be a hostile act toward Russia. We would do all in our power to prevent it.”

Despite all these warnings, the Bush administration plowed ahead at the 2008 Summit in Bucharest. Given objections from several key European countries, no date for membership was set, but NATO issued a provocative statement, saying “we agreed today that Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO.”

Burns was not happy.

“In many ways, Bucharest left us with the worst of both worlds—indulging the Ukrainians and Georgians in hopes of NATO membership on which we were unlikely to deliver, while reinforcing Putin’s sense that we were determined to pursue a course he saw as an existential threat,” he wrote.

While Ukraine still has hopes to formally enter NATO, Ukraine’s former defense minister Oleksii Reznikov [says](#) that Ukraine has already become a de facto member of the NATO alliance that receives NATO weapons, NATO training and all-round military and intelligence cooperation. The intelligence sharing is directed by the CIA chief himself, who has been shuttling back and forth to meet with his counterpart in Ukraine.

A much better use of Burns’s expertise would be to shuttle back and forth to Moscow to help negotiate an end to this brutal and unwinnable war. Would that make him a Putin apologist, or a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize? What do you think?

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Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies are the authors of [War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict](#), published by OR Books in November 2022.

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