

CIA Director William Burns Goes to Moscow

It's easier to talk about repairing relationships than to actually do so

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The recent unprecedented surprise two-day visit by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) William Burns to Moscow for talks with his counterparts has triggered considerable discussion within retired spook circles in and around Washington. Even among active CIA employees the preparations for the trip were tightly held with few advisers briefed on the agenda that had been prepared for the meetings, which were clearly initiated at Langley’s request. Burns met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev as well as Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin last Tuesday. President Vladimir Putin was briefed on the meetings on the following day. Concerning the discussions, a Kremlin spokesman said only that “Of course, dialogue at this level and dialogue on such sensitive issues is extremely important for bilateral relations and for the exchange of views on the problems that we have” elaborating only that various international issues were discussed. A US Embassy press release echoed the Russian comments.

There is a consensus that Burns, a former Ambassador to Russia and a Russian speaker, was on a mission ordered by the president to create a [more stable and predictable relationship](#).

The move comes in spite of US issuance of a new wave of [sanctions](#) for past presumed Russian offenses in April. Leaks regarding the visit, if verifiable, indicate that Burns was in Moscow to discuss specifically alleged Russian ransomware hacking and even the widely discredited view that Moscow has been continuing its interference in US elections. If all of that is so, the visit would be pointless as the Kremlin has denied any such involvement and dismissed claims that the alleged Russian hackers are in any way associated with the

government.

The most popular narrative currently making the rounds among some conspiracy theorists is that the Biden Administration has compiled what might be described as a dossier on the expansion of Chinese influence operations worldwide and is keen to make the case that they threaten everyone, including the Europeans and Russians. Presumably Burns would have been in Moscow to share that information in hopes that the burgeoning de facto alliance between Russia and China can be reversed. Whether Burns was successful in such a task remains to be seen, but it of course would not take into account that views in Beijing and Moscow have been shaped and hardened by confrontational activity that the United States has been engaged in both in the Baltic and South China Sea.

Joe Biden for his part has not helped any rapprochement by his assurances to defend Taiwan and his critical comments about Vladimir Putin at the recent climate change conference in Glasgow. So one must ask why is it that an Administration that is increasingly seen as disconnected and incapable at home been persisting in provocative policies that could plausibly lead to war against major powers like China and Russia? Particularly given the fact that recent war games and exercises have suggested that the in-disarray US armed forces might well be defeated? Is the trip of William Burns to Moscow something of a wake-up call to the fact that US foreign policy basically makes no sense?

Unfortunately, the Republicans are equally locked into an adversarial mode when it comes to Russia and China. Ex-UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, [is now calling for](#) economic war against Beijing. Some might conclude that everything in contemporary Washington comes down to a latter-day *opera buffa* in which an assortment of comic characters parade for a moment only to be replaced by the next bumbler sporting an equally ridiculous message.

Russia aside, witness the recent wave of China bashing, begun by Barack Obama with his pivot to Asia, continued under Donald Trump with his China virus rants, and endorsed by Joe Biden's team [which persists in labeling](#) Beijing as enemy number one. No one steps back and considers even for a moment that the US is China's largest market and that the US in turn relies on Chinese manufactured products to fill its Walmarts. If ever two nations had good reasons not to go to war, it would be China and the United States, yet the US desire to confront the "Red Menace" [to include defending Taiwan](#) continues to drive policy.

So, it remains to be seen what might come out of the William Burns delegation going to Moscow. But there have been other recent visits by senior American officials. If you really want to consider policy making that is brain dead, the prize would have to go to the [recently concluded trip](#) made by State Department Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland to Moscow. The mainstream media that reported the trip saw it, just like the Burns trip, as a gesture being made by the Biden White House to mend fences with the Vladimir Putin government. But if that were so, the selection of Nuland as the interlocutor was particularly inappropriate. She is a hard-core neoconservative who is married to Robert Kagan. She was in fact on a Russian sanctions list before her trip and had to be removed from it so she could carry out the official travel. Nuland is best known in the media for having said in an intercepted phone call "Fuck the EU" when a colleague suggested that the European Union might have a role to play in the future direction of Ukraine.

Nuland at State Department under Barack Obama was in fact the driving force behind demanding regime change in Ukraine to oust its pro-Russian government. She would drop in

on Kiev's Maidan Square with her buddy Senator John McCain to pass out cookies to demonstrators. After the government was changed to satisfy Washington, it was admitted that the US had spent something like \$5 billion to bring about the "revolution." Moscow and Putin, however, were not amused and promptly moved to take back Crimea and to stir up resistance in the largely ethnic Russian Donbass region.

Nuland met in Moscow with the Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov. What she chose to discuss belies suggestions that she was there to talk nice and mend fences. A major issue was a demand from Washington to greatly reduce the Russian diplomatic presence in the United States. The number that Nuland reportedly presented to Ryabkov was that 300 dips would have to go. The demand reportedly came from Congressional pressure [to greatly reduce the number of accredited Russians](#) based on the claim that Moscow had interfered in American elections. Nuland had with her two lists of names for removal, and suggested that the first fifty should be returned home by January.

The Russians responded that they were willing to lift all sanctions of US diplomats if Washington would reciprocate by lifting sanctions on Russian diplomatic missions in the US. Nuland said that was not acceptable. Ryabkov countered with his observation that many of the diplomats were accredited to the United Nations and were not accountable to the US approved diplomatic list. Ryabkov elaborated that "If you will insist, we are ready to close down all US missions in Russia, and to lock down our remaining offices at Washington. We can terminate all diplomatic interaction; if you want our relations be based on the number of our nuclear missiles, we are ready. But it's your choice, not ours." So the discussion obviously went nowhere.

In fact, the discussion went downhill from that point, including as it did US disapproval of Russian involvement in Mali and in Libya and a sounding out of possible Kremlin response if the Biden Administration pushes forward with plans to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. The Russians also confirmed that they [would not permit](#) hosting US intelligence personnel on military bases in former Central Asian Soviet countries "the 'Stans" to monitor developments in Afghanistan. Crimea was apparently not mentioned.

Ryabkov concluded that "...he and Nuland made no progress on normalizing the work of their diplomatic missions, which has been hampered by multiple rounds of sanctions, adding that the situation could exacerbate even further. The Russian Foreign Ministry reiterated Moscow's readiness to respond in kind to any unfriendly US action." The only positive development was thin gruel, coming when Ryabkov floated a suggestion that Putin might be willing to meet with Joe Biden at some undesignated point in the future to discuss mutual concerns.

One has to wonder who exactly selected someone as toxic as Victoria Nuland to go to Russia, but worse was to come after her return to America. Any Putin-Biden summit meeting is now less likely than it was several weeks ago as right after Nuland's departure for the United States, the bilateral relationship worsened.

The NATO headquarters in Brussels declared several Russian diplomats 'personae non gratae', and the Russian Foreign Ministry responded to the provocation by sending home all NATO representatives present at diplomatic missions in Russia. In response back in the United States, the media and some Congressmen and Biden Administration officials immediately [began to press forward](#) with their plans to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, a vital or even existential issue for Russia that guarantees to scuttle any attempts to

actually improve relations. And the White House continues to make a bad situation worse by suggesting that it has an obligation to “defend Ukraine.”

So why was CIA Director William Burns in Moscow and what did he accomplish? God only knows!

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