

Summer of the Hawks. Seymour Hersh

Wishful thinking is still the rule among Biden's foreign policy team, as the slaughter in Ukraine continues

By [Seymour M. Hersh](#)

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It's been weeks since we looked into the adventures of the Biden administration's foreign policy cluster, led by Tony Blinken, Jake Sullivan, and Victoria Nuland. How has the trio of war hawks spent the summer?

Sullivan, the national security adviser, recently brought an American delegation to the second international peace summit earlier this month at Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. The summit was led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, who in June announced a merger between his state-backed golf tour and the PGA. Four years earlier MBS was accused of ordering the assassination and dismemberment of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, for perceived disloyalty to the state.

As unlikely as it sounds, there was such a peace summit and its stars did include MBS, Sullivan, and President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine. What was missing was a representative of Russia, which was not invited to the summit. It included just a handful of heads of state from the fewer than fifty nations that sent delegates. The conference lasted two days, and attracted what could only be described as little international attention.

Reuters reported that Zelensky's goal was to get international support for "the principles" that that he will consider as a basis for the settlement of the war, including "the withdrawal of all Russian troops and the return of all Ukrainian territory." Russia's formal response to the non-event came not from President Vladimir Putin but from Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Ryabkov. He called the summit "a reflection of the West's attempt to continue futile, doomed efforts" to mobilize the Global South behind Zelensky.

India and China both sent delegations to the session, perhaps drawn to Saudi Arabia for its immense oil reserves. One Indian academic observer dismissed the event as achieving little

more than “good advertising for MBS’s convening power within the Global South; the kingdom’s positioning in the same; and perhaps more narrowly, aiding American efforts to build consensus by making sure China attends the meeting with . . . Jake Sullivan in the same room.”

Meanwhile, far away on the battlefield in Ukraine, Russia continued to thwart Zelensky’s ongoing counteroffensive. I asked an American intelligence official why it was Sullivan who emerged from the Biden administration’s foreign policy circle to preside over the inconsequential conference in Saudi Arabia.

“Jeddah was Sullivan’s baby,” the official said. “He planned it to be Biden’s equivalent of [President Woodrow] Wilson’s Versailles. The grand alliance of the free world meeting in a victory celebration after the humiliating defeat of the hated foe to determine the shape of nations for the next generation. Fame and Glory. Promotion and re-election. The jewel in the crown was to be Zelensky’s achievement of Putin’s unconditional surrender after the lightning spring offensive. They were even planning a Nuremberg type trial at the world court, with Jake as our representative. Just one more fuck-up, but who is counting? Forty nations showed up, all but six looking for free food after the Odessa shutdown”—a reference to Putin’s curtailing of Ukrainian wheat shipments in response to Zelensky’s renewed attacks on the bridge linking Crimea to the Russian mainland.

Enough about Sullivan. Let us now turn to Victoria Nuland, an architect of the 2014 overthrow of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine, one of the American moves that led us to where we are, though it was Putin who initiated the horrid current war. The ultra-hawkish Nuland was promoted early this summer by Biden, over the heated objections of many in the State Department, to be the acting deputy secretary of state. She has not been formally nominated as the deputy for fear that her nomination would lead to a hellish fight in the Senate.

It was Nuland who was sent last week to see what could be salvaged after a coup led to the overthrow of a pro-Western government in Niger, one of a group of former French colonies in West Africa that have remained in the French sphere of influence. President Mohamed Bazoum, who was democratically elected, was tossed out of office by a junta led by the head of his presidential guard, General Abdourahmane Tchiani. The general suspended the constitution and jailed potential political opponents. Five other military officers were named to his cabinet. All of this generated enormous public support on the streets in Niamey, Niger’s capital—enough support to discourage outside Western intervention.

There were grim reports in the Western press that initially viewed the upheaval in East-West terms: some of the supporters of the coup were carrying Russian flags as they marched in the streets. The *New York Times* saw the coup as a blow to the main US ally in the region, Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who controls vast oil and gas reserves. Tinubu threatened the new government in Niger with military action unless they returned power to Bazoum. He set a deadline that passed without any outside intervention. The revolution in Niger was not seen by those living in the region in east-west terms but as a long needed rejection of long-standing French economic and political control. It is a scenario that may be repeated again and again throughout the French-dominated Sahel nations in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Featured image: Blinken at the U.S. embassy in Ukraine, Sept. 8. Credit: @SecBlinken

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