

blockade of all of Biden’s foreign policy nominees and delayed passage of the annual defense bill for months, deep into the fall. Politico later depicted Biden’s turnabout on the second Russian pipeline as *“the one decision, arguably more than the chaotic military withdrawal from Afghanistan, that has imperiled Biden’s agenda.”*

The administration was floundering, despite getting a reprieve on the crisis in mid-November, when Germany’s energy regulators suspended approval of the second Nord Stream pipeline. Natural gas prices surged 8% within days, amid growing fears in Germany and Europe that the pipeline suspension and the growing possibility of a war between Russia and Ukraine would lead to a very much unwanted cold winter. It was not clear to Washington just where Olaf Scholz, Germany’s newly appointed chancellor, stood. Months earlier, after the fall of Afghanistan, Scholtz had publicly endorsed French President Emmanuel Macron’s call for a more autonomous European foreign policy in a speech in Prague—clearly suggesting less reliance on Washington and its mercurial actions.

Throughout all of this, Russian troops had been steadily and ominously building up on the borders of Ukraine, and by the end of December more than 100,000 soldiers were in position to strike from Belarus and Crimea. Alarm was growing in Washington, including an assessment from Blinken that those troop numbers could be *“doubled in short order.”*

The administration’s attention once again was focused on Nord Stream. As long as Europe remained dependent on the pipelines for cheap natural gas, Washington was afraid that countries like Germany would be reluctant to supply Ukraine with the money and weapons it needed to defeat Russia.

It was at this unsettled moment that Biden authorized Jake Sullivan to bring together an interagency group to come up with a plan.

All options were to be on the table. But only one would emerge.

PLANNING

In December of 2021, two months before the first Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, Jake Sullivan convened a meeting of a newly formed task force—men and women from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, and the State and Treasury Departments—and asked for recommendations about how to respond to Putin’s impending invasion.

It would be the first of a series of top-secret meetings, in a secure room on a top floor of the Old Executive Office Building, adjacent to the White House, that was also the home of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB). There was the usual back and forth chatter that eventually led to a crucial preliminary question: Would the recommendation forwarded by the group to the President be reversible—such as another layer of sanctions and currency restrictions—or irreversible—that is, kinetic actions, which could not be undone?

What became clear to participants, according to the source with direct knowledge of the process, is that Sullivan intended for the group to come up with a plan for the destruction of the two Nord Stream pipelines—and that he was delivering on the desires of the President.

Over the next several meetings, the participants debated options for an attack. The Navy proposed using a newly commissioned submarine to assault the pipeline directly. The Air Force discussed dropping bombs with delayed fuses that could be set off remotely. The CIA argued that whatever was done, it would have to be covert. Everyone involved understood the stakes. *“This is not kiddie stuff,”* the source said. If the attack were traceable to the United States, *“It’s an act of war.”*

At the time, the CIA was directed by William Burns, a mild-mannered former ambassador to Russia who had served as deputy secretary of state in the Obama Administration. Burns quickly authorized an Agency working group whose ad hoc members included—by chance—someone who was familiar with the capabilities of the Navy’s deep-sea divers in Panama City. Over the next few weeks, members of the CIA’s working group began to craft a plan for a covert operation that would use deep-sea divers to trigger an explosion along the pipeline.

Something like this had been done before. In 1971, the American intelligence community learned from still undisclosed sources that two important units of the Russian Navy were communicating via an undersea cable buried in the Sea of Okhotsk, on Russia’s Far East Coast. The cable linked a regional Navy command to the mainland headquarters at Vladivostok.

A hand-picked team of Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency operatives was assembled somewhere in the Washington area, under deep cover, and worked out a plan, using Navy divers, modified submarines and a deep-submarine rescue vehicle, that succeeded, after much trial and error, in locating the Russian cable. The divers planted a sophisticated listening device on the cable that successfully intercepted the Russian traffic and recorded it on a taping system.

The NSA learned that senior Russian navy officers, convinced of the security of their communication link, chatted away with their peers without encryption. The recording device and its tape had to be replaced monthly and the project rolled on merrily for a decade until it was compromised by a forty-four-year-old civilian NSA technician named Ronald Pelton who was fluent in Russian. Pelton was betrayed by a Russian defector in 1985 and sentenced to prison. He was paid just \$5,000 by the Russians for his revelations about the operation, along with \$35,000 for other Russian operational data he provided that was never made public.

That underwater success, codenamed Ivy Bells, was innovative and risky, and produced invaluable intelligence about the Russian Navy’s intentions and planning.

Still, the interagency group was initially skeptical of the CIA’s enthusiasm for a covert deep-sea attack. There were too many unanswered questions. The waters of the Baltic Sea were heavily patrolled by the Russian navy, and there were no oil rigs that could be used as cover for a diving operation. Would the divers have to go to Estonia, right across the border from Russia’s natural gas loading docks, to train for the mission? *“It would be a goat fuck,”* the Agency was told.

Throughout *“all of this scheming,”* the source said,

“some working guys in the CIA and the State Department were saying, ‘Don’t do this. It’s stupid and will be a political nightmare if it comes out.’”

Nevertheless, in early 2022, the CIA working group reported back to Sullivan’s interagency group: *“We have a way to blow up the pipelines.”*

What came next was stunning. On February 7, less than three weeks before the seemingly inevitable Russian invasion of Ukraine, Biden met in his White House office with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who, after some wobbling, was now firmly on the American team. At the press briefing that followed, Biden defiantly said, *“If Russia invades . . . there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.”*

Twenty days earlier, Undersecretary Nuland had delivered essentially the same message at a State Department briefing, with little press coverage. *“I want to be very clear to you today,”* she said in response to a question. *“If Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another Nord Stream 2 will not move forward.”*



President Biden on Nord Stream 2 Pipeline if Russia Invades Ukraine: *“We will bring an end to it.”*, LINK

Several of those involved in planning the pipeline mission were dismayed by what they viewed as indirect references to the attack.

“It was like putting an atomic bomb on the ground in Tokyo and telling the Japanese that we are going to detonate it,” the source said. *“The plan was for the options to be executed post invasion and not advertised publicly. Biden simply didn’t get it or ignored it.”*

Biden’s and Nuland’s indiscretion, if that is what it was, might have frustrated some of the planners. But it also created an opportunity. According to the source, some of the senior officials of the CIA determined that blowing up the pipeline *“no longer could be considered a covert option because the President just announced that we knew how to do it.”*

The plan to blow up Nord Stream 1 and 2 was suddenly downgraded from a covert operation requiring that Congress be informed to one that was deemed as a highly classified intelligence operation with U.S. military support. Under the law, the source explained, *“There was no longer a legal requirement to report the operation to Congress. All they had to do now is just do it—but it still had to be secret. The Russians have superlative surveillance of the Baltic Sea.”*

The Agency working group members had no direct contact with the White House, and were eager to find out if the President meant what he’d said—that is, if the mission was now a go. The source recalled, *“Bill Burns comes back and says, ‘Do it.’”*



The Norwegian navy was quick to find the right spot, in the shallow water a few miles off Denmark’s Bornholm Island.



THE PLAYERS Left to right: Victoria Nuland, Anthony Blinken, and Jake Sullivan.