

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

What the CIA thinks: William Burns on the new world disorder



Fifty years after Nixon's cold war coup, the US is facing a new global realignment

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It is not often one hears from household names who are nudging three figures. Henry Kissinger, who will turn 99 this month, is older than any living world statesman. At the [FTWeekend Festival](#) in Washington last Saturday, the cold war grand strategist observed that we are “now living in a totally new era”. Given that his lifespan covers 40 per cent of the US republic’s, Kissinger has probably earned the right to make that call — wherever one stands on his controversial record.

Yet it was William Burns, 66, head of the CIA, who generated the news from the same festival. Burns said that Xi Jinping, China’s leader, was “unsettled by the reputational damage that can come to China with the brutishness of Russia’s aggression against Ukrainians”.

In spite of Vladimir Putin’s nuclear sabre-rattling, Burns nevertheless said that the US continues to see China, rather than Russia, as its main adversary. “[Putin] demonstrates in a very disturbing way that declining powers can be at least as disruptive as rising ones,” Burns said. Yet China still posed the bigger threat.

One of the benefits of history is that it enables you to imagine today in a different light. As the Soviet quip goes: “The future is certain. It is only the past that is unpredictable.” Today’s present, however, is up for grabs.

Putin demonstrates in a very disturbing way that declining powers can be at least as disruptive as rising ones

William Burns

Fifty years ago, Kissinger and his president, Richard Nixon, changed the cold war by opening up to Mao Zedong’s China. By cementing the split between the world’s largest communist country and its most powerful, Nixon’s visit to China was arguably America’s biggest move on the cold war chessboard. There was a time when the US and China would happily toast the 1972 Shanghai communiqué that Nixon signed with Mao — and which Kissinger had

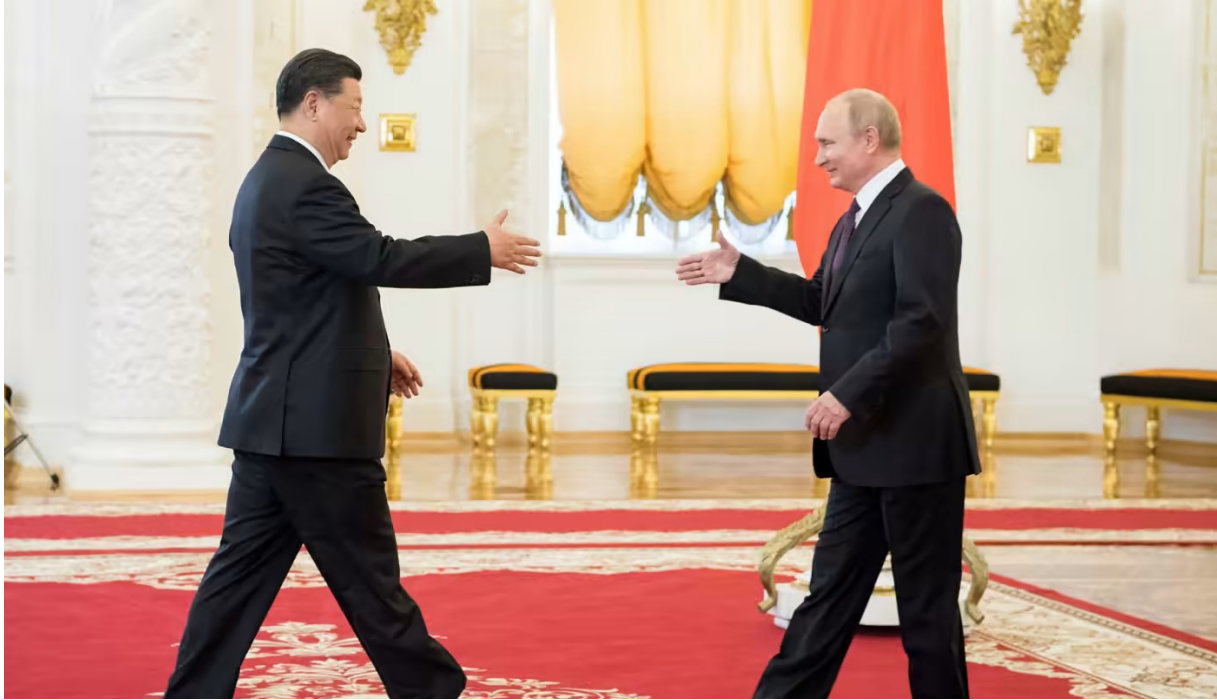
secretively planned on incognito trips to Beijing via Pakistan. But its 50th anniversary

in February passed in silence. Joe Biden's White House ignored China's requests for a joint event to commemorate the date.

History has now turned 180 degrees. In 1972, Nixon easily brushed off criticism from the right for doing a deal with Mao in the midst of China's Cultural Revolution. America's foreign policy establishment instinctively grasped the upside to a move that left the USSR isolated and weaker. It was amoral but effective. The same, of course, is often remarked of the US-UK alliance with Stalin's USSR to defeat Nazism.



China's Mao Zedong with then US president Richard Nixon in China in 1972 © Everett/Shutterstock





Russia's Vladimir Putin welcomes China's Xi Jinping in the Kremlin in 2019 © Xinhua News Agency / Eyevine

Today's Washington, by contrast, is virtually unanimous on a foreign policy that brackets China and Russia as twins, although this time with Russia as the junior one. President Biden has framed the global stakes as a contest between autocracy and democracy. Kissinger clearly disapproves, though he is careful never to say anything significant in plain language. The venerable figure not only answered in Yoda-like terms; his hunched posture resembled the *Star Wars* sage. Differences in ideology should not be the main issue of confrontation, he said, "unless we are prepared to make regime change the principal goal of our policy".

But what does the CIA think? The question is more than usually relevant because Burns — the first career diplomat to head America's main spy agency in its almost 80 years of existence — is rated as highly as anyone in the US administration. Among his most enduring fans is Biden. Yet Burns was unanimously approved by the evenly divided US Senate, which is as rare as a UFO sighting in today's toxically divided Washington. Some foreign diplomats refer to him as the "shadow secretary of state".

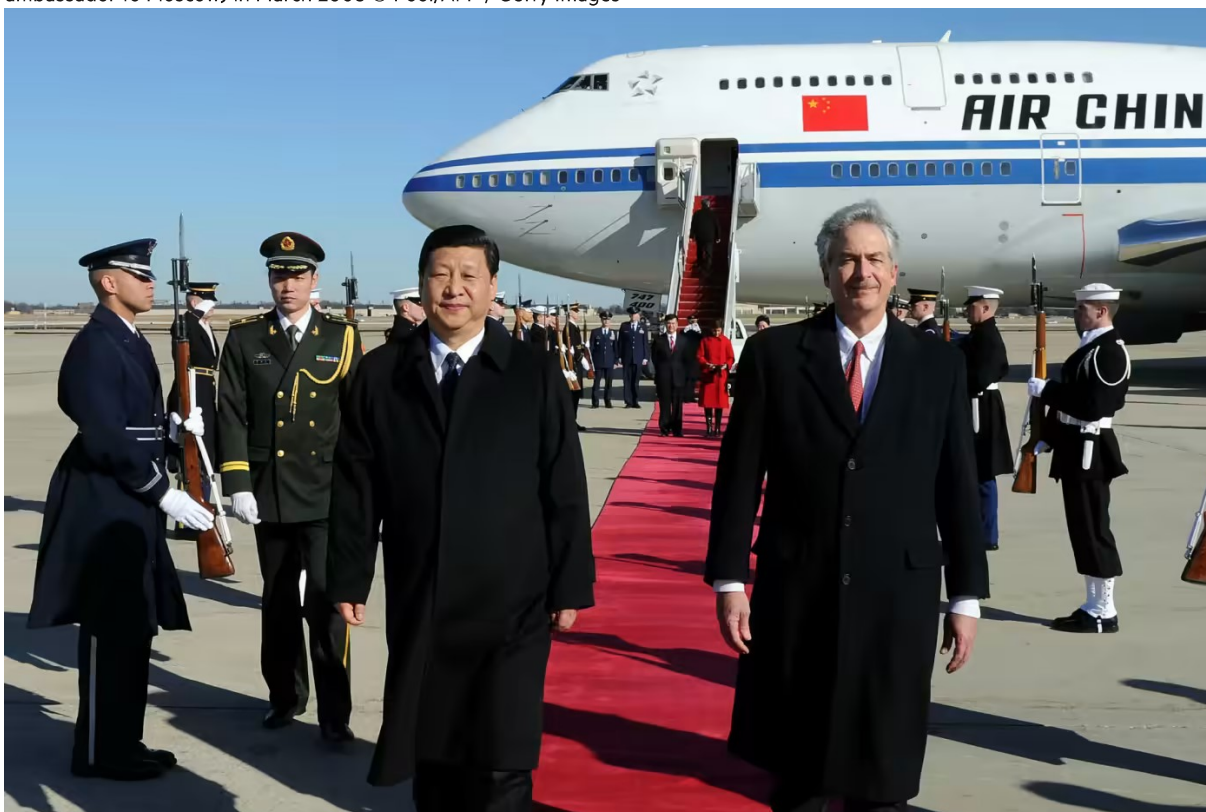
Last November, as Russian forces were massing on Ukraine's border, Biden sent Burns to talk to Putin in Moscow. This was another first. Spy chiefs are not normally recruited to parlay with heads of nuclear-armed states. Though Putin used to head the FSB, formerly known as the KGB, they are not counterparts.

But Burns is an unorthodox spy chief. Having spent many years in DC, I have yet to come across a public figure about whom no one has a bad word to say. The previous time I saw him was at the British embassy-hosted DC premiere of Daniel Craig's final James Bond movie in October — a film that seemed to drag on longer than the cold war and with far worse dialogue. Burns cheerily posed for an iPhone picture next to a large promotional cut-out of the outgoing Bond.





Vladimir Putin sits at a negotiating table next to his foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, and across from William Burns (then US ambassador to Moscow) in March 2008 © Pool/AFP / Getty Images



China's Xi Jinping (then vice-president) being welcomed on arrival in Washington by Burns (then US deputy secretary of state) in February 2012 © Xinhua News Agency / Eyevine

There is a surreal quality to a CIA chief talking in real time about an almost-proxy war with the other big nuclear armed power (Russia has as many strategic nuclear warheads as the US; on this measure alone, China comes a distant third). As a Russian-speaking former US ambassador to Moscow, Burns knows Putin well. “I had dealt with and watched President Putin for many years and what I’ve seen, especially over the past decade, is him in a way stewing in a very combustible combination of grievance and ambition and insecurity [that] are all kind of wrapped together,” said Burns. “His risk appetite has grown over the years as his grip on power has tightened and also as his circle of advisers has narrowed.”

Partly because of America’s aggressive use of “pre-emptive intelligence” — the selective declassification of Putin’s military plans — Russia has been forced back to the drawing board. Today’s military outlook for Ukraine, and its Nato backers, is

more optimistic than at any time since Russia's February 24 invasion. Putin's planned lightning strike on Kyiv was called off in April, having met fierce Ukrainian resistance and because of heavy casualties. Supply and morale problems created the longest traffic jam in the world — a 65km caravan of Russian tanks and armoured vehicles that was eventually forced into reverse.

Some of Putin's humiliation was because Ukraine had a good pipeline of western intelligence about Russia's battle plans. Pre-emptive intelligence also robbed Putin of pretexts for the invasion, according to Burns. "I think it's helped to deny Putin something that I watched over many years him do quite adeptly, which was to create false narratives to stage what are called false-flag operations," he said.

On Monday, Putin belied fears of a new offensive and widening of the war when he spoke almost resignedly from the ramparts of Red Square. Russia's annual May 9 Victory Day parade, which celebrates the country's role in the defeat of Nazi Germany in the "great patriotic war", was seen as Putin's moment to reveal more of what Kissinger calls Putin's "almost mystic" view of history. Putin has already substantially rewritten the past to serve his narrative of "denazifying" Ukraine and linking Nato to Kyiv's allegedly fascist world view. Putin's revisions have written the US and Britain out of the 1945 defeat of Nazism. They also conveniently omit the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact in which the two regimes had agreed to carve up Poland and other parts of eastern Europe. The Soviets had already seized Ukraine 20 years earlier.

Burns was speaking two days before the parade in Moscow. But he was in no doubt that Putin would eventually go back on the offensive. The war, he said, was probably entering a period of attrition in which Russia would seek to consolidate and expand its land grab in the east before regrouping for another assault on Kyiv. "I think he's convinced right now that doubling down will still enable him to make progress," said Burns.





Russian soldiers during the May 9 Victory Day parade in Moscow this week © Zuma Press/Eyevine

So far US intelligence’s record has been very good. With the exception of Russia’s shocking military incompetence, which has taken everyone by surprise, Biden’s administration has predicted almost every Putin move before he has made it. But finding where Putin’s ultimate red line might lie is a matter of guesswork. It is conceivable that even Putin, who shows few signs of having upgraded the quality of his own intelligence — which has been as bad as Ukraine’s has been good — does not know his own trigger points.

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William Burns

intelligence had pinpointed the 12 Russian generals who have so far been killed in the war. Another leak to the Washington Post claimed that US spy agencies had provided the co-ordinates to help sink the Moskva, Russia’s Black Sea flagship, one of the most devastating naval blows in decades.

Biden was irritated by the leaks, which were neither declassified nor authorised. But it is hard to escape the impression that Washington’s mood has shifted from a tone of caution to one of bragging. This is the last thing Burns wants. “It is irresponsible,” he said. “It’s dangerous when people talk too much, whether it’s leaking in private or talking in public about intelligence issues.”

This, in turn, raises a larger question about whether Biden is pushing US involvement too far. At the start of the war, the president was at pains to play down America’s role in supplying Ukraine with arms and data. The more Russia’s military weakness has been exposed, and the more atrocities have come to light, the bolder Biden has become. In April, he called Putin a war criminal. He also described Russia’s war on Ukraine as “genocide”. Last week, unnamed officials leaked to the New York Times that US



Ukrainian soldiers display an American flag in Kyiv, March 7 © Polaris/eyevine

This is especially true when your nuclear-armed opponent is dropping escalatory hints thick and fast, as Putin and his officials have increasingly been doing. Though Burns says US intelligence has not detected concrete signs that Putin is deploying tactical nuclear weapons, this could change at any moment. Moscow’s doomsday rhetoric is in terrifying contrast to most of the cold war — at least since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis — when Washington and Moscow learnt to speak of nuclear weapons in only the most elliptical language.

“I think what’s incredibly important for both Russians and Americans to remember is that we are still, at least today, the world’s only nuclear superpowers,” said Burns. “Together we control 90 per cent of the world’s nuclear weapons and even in the worst stages of the cold war, both Russian and American leaderships demonstrated a realisation that we had unique capabilities but also unique responsibilities.”

So where does it go from here? America’s official aim is for Russia to be defeated in Ukraine. Its unofficial one, which Biden is not trying too hard to disguise, is to bring Putin to account for his war crimes. The US, in other words, would like nothing more than a regime change. The same is implicitly true of China. As Burns put it, talking to the FT: “I don’t for a minute think that it [the Ukraine war] has eroded Xi’s determination over time to gain control over Taiwan.” Xi’s China remained the

determination over time to gain control over Taiwan, Xi's China remains the “biggest geopolitical challenge we face over the long term as a country”.

It is telling that in the midst of the Ukraine war, Biden will travel to South Korea and Japan next week — his first overseas trip since he went to Warsaw in April. This week, he is hosting the leaders of Asean, the south-east Asian grouping, in Washington. America's goal is to isolate China and eventually carry out some form of economic “decoupling”, though there is a glaring lack of detail on how that could be put into practice.

The anti-China hawkishness in Washington is about as strong as bipartisanship gets nowadays. Republican senators refer to China as the “new evil empire”. Last month, a Republican put forward a new bill, the AXIS act — Assessing Xi's Interference and Subversion — that would mandate the US state department to report on the extent of China's support for Russia in the war. The act's name, of course, refers to the fascist alliance between Germany, Italy and Japan during the second world war.



People take photos of a speech shown on TV of Henry Kissinger speaking in Shanghai for the 50th anniversary of the Shanghai communique © CNS/AFP / Getty Images

The “realist” school of foreign policy, which Kissinger personifies, has had a terrible press recently, most of it richly deserved. The idea that Russia should have its own sphere of interest, including Ukraine, and a veto over Nato expansion, seems repugnant in the face of Russia's nakedly imperial land grab. It feels not just amoral but self-defeating. If Putin wins in Ukraine, the whole of Europe would be destabilised. But things will probably look different once Russia has been forced to

acknowledge its military defeat, which seems likely to come to pass eventually. At that point, the US will find itself in an unprecedented situation, where it confronts the world's two other global military powers that are in an alliance of convenience against it.

Putin's invasion has produced two strikingly different reactions around the world. The west has rarely been more united. Germany has ripped up its decades-long stance of appeasing Russia through trade and investment. Instead of talk of the "Finlandisation" of Ukraine, ensuring its neutrality, it looks like Finland will join Nato. Sweden is also considering following suit.



Russia's Vladimir Putin with fellow leaders in Brasilia for the Brics summit in November 2019. From left: South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa, India's Narendra Modi, China's Xi Jinping and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro © Kyodo News/Getty Images

Beyond the west, however, the world has given a collective shrug. Countries that ought to fall on the democracy side of Biden's global dividing line, such as India and Mexico, have abstained on UN votes to condemn Putin's aggression. All told, those abstaining or voting with Russia represent more than half the world's population. If the Biden administration eventually forces third countries to choose between the US and China in an economic and technological decoupling, it is unclear which way most would go. The Asean countries, for example, have almost double the trade with China as they do with the US. They would rather not be forced to make a choice. If they are compelled to pick sides it may not go Washington's way.

The US is a “dangerous nation”, in the words of the writer Robert Kagan — which is another way of saying that America is prepared to use force to export its ideals. Yet history tells us the US is most effective when it is pragmatic, such as during the cold war and the second world war. The ultimate postwar question for the US will be whether it seeks to drive Russia and China closer together, or whether it looks for innovative diplomatic ways to loosen their bear hug.

With either approach, the stakes are enormous. “We are now faced with technologies where the rapidity of exchange . . . can produce levels of catastrophe that were not even imaginable,” said Kissinger. The world is learning how unpredictable Russia’s history can be. But Putin’s misuse of the past may come to look trivial compared with the radical uncertainty that hovers over everyone’s future.

Edward Luce is the FT’s US national editor

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