

William Burns

Transcript: Vladimir Putin 'doesn't believe he can afford to lose' — William Burns, CIA director

Intelligence chief discusses Russian president and war in Ukraine at FT Weekend Festival in Washington



William Burns: 'It's a big mistake to underestimate the significant intelligence capabilities that the Ukrainians themselves have' © Brynn Anderson/AP

Interview conducted by **Edward Luce** in Washington YESTERDAY

Stay across the latest Ukraine coverage

 **Get instant email alerts**



This is the edited transcript of a discussion between William Burns, CIA director, and Edward Luce, Financial Times US national editor, which took place on May 7 in Washington.

Financial Times: You travelled to Moscow last November at the [US] president's request to talk to Putin. What was it in that conversation that you had with Putin almost six months ago now . . . that convinced you this invasion really was going to happen?

William Burns: I had dealt with and watched President Putin for many years and what I've seen, especially over the last 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.

His risk appetite has grown over the years as his grip on power has tightened and also as his circle of advisers has narrowed.

I came away from those conversations in early November quite troubled. It didn't seem to me that President Putin had yet made an irreversible decision to launch that

seem to me that President Putin had yet made an irreversible decision to launch that invasion or go to war. But he was clearly defiantly leaning in that direction. Strategically, his view seemed to be that his window was closing to shape Ukraine's orientation, because from his point of view, Russia can't be a major power without a deferential Ukraine.

He was convinced that having invested a lot to modernise his military, that the Russian military could achieve a quick, decisive victory at minimal cost. He seemed convinced that our closest European allies were distracted by political transitions in Germany and by elections coming up in France, and were risk averse. And he also seemed convinced that he had created a sanctions-proofed economy. He had put away a war chest of hard currency reserves.

As we've seen, as we saw in the first few weeks of this war, he was wrong on each of those counts. Those assumptions were profoundly flawed. But that creates in the second phase now of his offensive, as he's concentrated forces in the Donbas in the east of Ukraine and in the south, at least as risky a phase as that first phase we saw over the first seven or eight weeks of the conflict, and maybe even riskier in some ways too.

FT: Do you have any reason to believe that Putin is now hearing what he needs to hear?

WB: I think he's in a frame of mind in which he doesn't believe he can afford to lose. . . I don't think this means Putin is deterred at this point because he staked so much on the choice that he made to launch this invasion that I think he's convinced right now that doubling down still will enable him to make progress.

FT: I have to ask you about this relatively new coinage, "pre-emptive intelligence" . . . You took quite a risk in saying this [invasion] is going to happen. What made you so confident, over and above your meeting with [Putin] in November?

WB: It was the detail and precision of what we were seeing in terms of Russian planning, combined with what I was trying to say before, which was Vladimir Putin's absolute conviction that the window was closing for him to use force . . . That's not to suggest that we didn't have a lot of sleepless nights wondering whether we were right or not, and a lot of sleepless nights actually hoping that we were wrong.

When the [US] president made some very careful and selective decisions to declassify intelligence, 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 was determined in the run-up to the war to try to create a pretext for that invasion, to try to create instances where he could try to pin the blame on the Ukrainians for provoking hostilities — and by exposing a lot of those false narratives, I think we helped in many ways to disarm what has been a useful weapon for him before.

FT: News reports have claimed the US provided data to the Ukrainians enabling them to target Russian generals, 12 of whom are now dead, and the Moskva [warship]. Could I ask you to comment on these stories?

WB: It is irresponsible. It's very risky, it's dangerous when people talk too much, whether it's leaking in private or talking in public about specific intelligence issues. Both the White House and the Department of Defense have spoken to this publicly, so I don't have anything to add to that.

The only thing I would say is it's a big mistake to underestimate the significant intelligence capabilities that the Ukrainians themselves have. This is their country. They have a lot more information than we do and a lot more intelligence than we in the United States and amongst our allies do.

FT: One of the things on everybody's mind is the escalatory risk of this situation. We've not seen a nuclear leader talk this often, arguably at any time, at least not since the Cuban missile crisis, of nuclear escalation. What might be the potential trigger situations for this extreme scenario for tactical battlefield nuclear weapons or a test above the Black Sea?

WB: We don't see, as an intelligence community, practical evidence at this point of Russian planning, deployment or even potential use of tactical nuclear weapons. But, you know, given the kind of sabre-rattling we've heard from the Russian leadership, we can't take lightly . . . those possibilities.

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. 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. And so it's absolutely crucial that the Russian leadership, despite all that nuclear sabre-rattling, remembers that responsibility not just to Russians and Americans, but to the entire global community as well.

FT: We heard a lot before the war, not so much now for obvious reasons, about the

“Finlandisation” of Ukraine. Now, I mean, arguably as soon as next week, we’re going to get the “Nato-isation” of Finland and probably Sweden, which Putin has mentioned as one of his red lines . . . Is that a concern to you?

WB: These are choices that the Finns and Swedes are going to make. In many ways, these are choices that Putin himself has driven by the ugliness of his aggression against Ukraine and the threats that he’s made against the west in general.

FT: What lessons do you think China is drawing from the Ukraine situation for Taiwan and what reappraisals if any do you think they’re undergoing about Putin?

WB: I would not underestimate [President] Xi Jinping’s commitment to his partnership with Putin’s Russia. On the 4th of February at the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics, three weeks before [Putin] launched his invasion of Ukraine, China and Russia issued a very lengthy joint statement in which they proclaimed a friendship without limits.

I think what the bitter experience in many ways of Putin’s Russia in Ukraine over the last 10 or 11 weeks has done is demonstrate that that friendship actually does have some limits.

It strikes us, anyway, that Xi Jinping is a little bit unsettled by the reputational damage that can come to China by association with the brutishness of, you know, Russia’s aggression against Ukrainians: unsettled, certainly, by the economic uncertainty that’s been produced by the war, particularly in a year, 2022, when I think Xi’s main focus is on predictability and getting through a major party Congress this coming November, and I think also unsettled by the fact that what Putin has done is drive Europeans and Americans closer together.

Clearly, the Chinese leadership is trying to look carefully at what lessons they should draw from Ukraine about their own ambitions in Taiwan. I don’t for a minute think that it’s eroded Xi’s determination over time to gain control over Taiwan. But I think it’s something that’s affecting their calculation about how and when they go about doing that.

I suspect that they’ve been surprised by [the] Russian military performance. I suspect they’ve been struck by the ways in which Ukrainians through a “whole of society” effort have resisted. I think they’ve been struck by the way in which particularly the Transatlantic Alliance has come together to impose economic costs on Russia as a result of that aggression. So I think these are things that they’re weighing very carefully right now.

Transcribed by James Politi in Washington

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
