

# POLITICO

## The NSC's weekly Ukraine crisis club

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01/26/2022 04:04 PM EST

About once a week starting in December, two key National Security Council aides hop on a Zoom call to discuss their thinking about the current Russia and Ukraine crisis.

Led by Senior Director for Europe **AMANDA SLOAT** and Senior Director for Russia and Central Asia **ERIC GREEN**, the 30- to 60-minute conversations bring together former top U.S. government officials and experts deeply familiar with Russia in the age of President **VLADIMIR PUTIN**.

NatSec Daily spoke to four people who've attended these sessions, all of whom requested we don't publish their names for fear of not receiving an invitation to the next call. (One person did say if you've been watching cable news and reading op-eds about Ukraine lately, you'll have a decent idea of who's involved.) Each offered a slightly different take on the usefulness and thoroughness of the chats.

The meetings usually begin with Sloat and Green recapping what the administration is doing, with a heavy emphasis on America's coordination with allies throughout the standoff. Then they open the lines up for commentary, which is when the mix of think tankers and academics weigh in. After the session ends, the same group meets again roughly a week later, though that depends on people's schedules.

One participant said Sloat and Green are incredibly receptive to the ideas of the 15 to 25 Democrats and Republicans who ideologically range from restrainers to Russia hawks. "Somewhat unusually for NSCs, they actually seem to listen and take onboard the advice, which is not always the case," one person on the calls told us.

This person added that the administration's views on the crisis had shifted since the sessions began, attributing some of the policy changes to the Zoom conversations. "They were slow to understand what was going on, but now they get it," this person said. President **JOE BIDEN** and his team will still go the diplomacy-first route but have no intention of conceding anything to the Kremlin, the person asserted.

Another attendee wasn't as high on the calls, telling us Sloat and Green basically repeat public talking points and treat the meetings more like a press conference. "It's not an outreach to get views and go over options," NatSec Daily was told.

If someone suggests a policy change, this person continued, the NSC officials respond with the Washington equivalent of “thank you, next.” Sloat and Green “dodge” and “tend to get defensive” any time an expert suggests a different plan, the attendee said.

The advice they do take to heart, though, is as a first line of defense against public information gaps. If experts who follow the crisis closely don’t understand an element of the administration’s Russia-Ukraine policy, then the general public likely doesn’t know it, either, requiring the White House to better explain its policies.

This person wasn’t upset that the calls aren’t overly helpful. They take place on an unsecure line, after all, and there are enough people listening in that leaks to the press are a concern. If administration members want to have a serious conversation about their thinking, they’ll call individuals or small groups into a secure room at the White House.

Whether or not these sessions ultimately sway the administration’s views on the crisis, there’s no sign they’ll stop happening any time soon.

“We regularly consult with a range of Russia experts with diverse views, and have particularly welcomed their expertise as we address this crisis,” NSC spokesperson **EMILY HORNE** told NatSec Daily.

**JOIN FRIDAY TO HEAR FROM GOVERNORS ACROSS AMERICA:** As we head into the third year of the pandemic, state governors are taking varying approaches to public health measures including vaccine and mask mandates. "The Fifty: America's Governors" is a series of live conversations featuring various governors on the unique challenges they face as they take the lead and command the national spotlight in historic ways. Learn what is working and what is not from the governors on the front lines, [\*\*REGISTER HERE\*\*](#).

## **THE INBOX**

**U.S. GIVES RUSSIA WRITTEN RESPONSES:** Secretary of State **ANTONY BLINKEN** announced that the U.S. delivered its responses to Russia’s demands today, a move the administration hopes will lower tensions between Washington and Moscow.

Blinken said **JOHN SULLIVAN**, the U.S. ambassador to Russia, sent the response to the Kremlin. “Our responses were fully coordinated with Ukraine and our European allies and partners,” the secretary said. The administration made clear it won’t publicly release the document.

Blinken will brief members of Congress about its contents today, he said, but he also told reporters today that the document reiterates the administration’s public positions. “We will uphold NATO’s open door,” he stated, meaning Ukraine remains welcome to join the alliance at some indefinite point in the future. “NATO’s door is open, it remains open.”

That’s one of Russia’s red lines, so if the written response does say that, it’s unlikely the Kremlin will be mollified. [Read Quint’s story.](#)

**CHINA BILL DUST-UP:** Speaker **NANCY PELOSI** announced the release of a China-competitiveness bill that at once increases the chances a China-focused measure will reach Biden's desk while also angering Republicans who feel they were cut out of legislative negotiations.

“House lawmakers released their bill — dubbed the America COMPETES Act — on Tuesday evening as they pushed to finalize a version to compete with Senate legislation passed last year,” our own **GAVIN BADE** wrote. “As expected, the bill's centerpiece is \$52 billion in semiconductor funding sought by the White House and congressional leaders to combat the computer chip shortage, along with a litany of funding provisions for science and technology research aimed at enhancing American competitiveness against China.”

Biden and Senate Majority Leader **CHUCK SCHUMER** backed the effort, boosting its chances of passing the House and sparking a conference session with the Senate. That's the intention, we're told, and Democrats don't need the GOP to start that process.

Still, Republicans railed against the announcement last night, saying that the COMPETES Act derails bipartisan talks to reconcile a previously Senate-passed China bill and differing House versions.

“I would strongly urge Speaker Pelosi and other House Democrats to scrap their weak, partisan bill and work with Republicans on comprehensive legislation that will actually counter CCP aggression — including using meaningful export control policies — and that has the ability to pass both Houses of Congress,” Rep. **MICHAEL McCAUL** (R-Texas), the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement last night.

We'd like to know how many legislators — from either party — even read the damn thing. It's 2,912 pages long.

**GERMANY'S RUSSIA PROBLEM:** New German Chancellor **OLAF SCHOLZ** has had no time to settle in before being confronted with a Russia-driven crisis — and it's unclear he's meeting the moment.

“For Germany's new chancellor — who took over from the crisis-vetted **ANGELA MERKEL** after 16 years — steering the country's Russia policy has meant trying to helm a three-party coalition, negotiating with pro-Russian voices within his own party and navigating questions over the 750-mile, \$11 billion Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Germany and Russia,” The Washington Post's **LOVEDAY MORRIS** reported. “But as NATO attempts to present a united front, Germany has appeared as a weak link that has often left it on the defensive with allies.”

“It has been a baptism of fire for Scholz, who is known for his cautious public style. The fumbling may, in part, be a new government finding its feet. But analysts and foreign officials say it's also the result of a years-overdue need for Berlin to reassess its policy toward Moscow, which has long tried to separate expanding trade and energy ties from politics,” Morris continued.

“You see this German government still negotiating within itself and really, in the past week, putting up a very disunified front, which is frankly dangerous at this time,” **CATHRYN CLÜVER ASHBROOK**, director of the German Council on Foreign Relations, told the Post.

**IT’S WEDNESDAY:** Thanks for tuning in to NatSec Daily. This space is reserved for the top U.S. and foreign officials, the lawmakers, the lobbyists, the experts and the people like you who care about how the natsec sausage gets made. Aim your tips and comments at [award@politico.com](mailto:award@politico.com) and [qforgey@politico.com](mailto:qforgey@politico.com), and follow us on Twitter at [@alexward](https://twitter.com/alexward) and [@QuintForgey](https://twitter.com/QuintForgey).

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## **FLASHPOINTS**

**SDF DEFEATS ISIS AT PRISON:** The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces claimed to have controlled a weeklong prison riot of ISIS militants, though it’s unclear how many terrorists escaped during the episode, [The Washington Post’s LOUISA LOVELUCK](#) reported.

ISIS fighters set off a car bomb at the Ghwaryan prison in Hasakah last Thursday, causing inmates to believe there was an outside campaign to set them free. Violence broke out inside the facility as prisoners tussled with guards.

The scuffle was intense. “In a photograph from the prison yard, provided by an SDF official, traces of battle were etched on the walls. One section was scorched, and other parts had jagged holes where explosives or shrapnel had struck them,” Loveluck wrote.

There’s as of yet no authoritative headcount of the roughly 3,000 prisoners to determine who successfully fled or were killed. There are reportedly around 10,000 total ISIS members held in prisons in northeastern Syria.

**U.S. TRAINED BURKINA FASO COUP LEADER:** Lt. Col. **PAUL-HENRI SANDAOGO DAMIBA**, the leader of the coup that overthrew and imprisoned former President **ROCH KABORÉ**, was trained in warfare by the U.S. and France.

“[H]e studied in France at a military academy and a prestigious institution where he got a Master's in criminal sciences, and served in the presidential guard of the now-exiled **BLAISE COMPAORÉ** who, during his decades-long rule, maintained strong ties with the former colonial power,” the BBC reported. “More recently, Lt-Col Damiba received military training from the US, as it increasingly turned its attention to West Africa to fight militant Islamists who have gained a foothold in the region.”

“On Tuesday, the U.S. Africa Command confirmed that Lieutenant Colonel Damiba participated in numerous American military courses and exercises between 2010 and 2020,” The New York Times' DECLAN WALSH reported. Damiba “received instruction on the law of armed conflict, civilian control and respect for human rights, **KELLY CAHALAN**, a spokeswoman for the Africa command, said in an email.”

## **KEYSTROKES**

**NORTH KOREA'S INTERNET DOWNED:** North Korea's internet went out for a second time in the last few weeks, possibly caused by a denial-of-service cyberattack, Reuters' JOSH SMITH reported.

“The latest incident took place for about six hours on Wednesday morning local time, and came a day after North Korea conducted its fifth missile test this month,” he wrote.

**JUNADE ALI**, a U.K.-based researcher, told Smith that “[w]hen someone would try to connect to an IP address in North Korea, the internet would literally be unable to route their data into the country.”

It's unclear who, if anyone, is behind the suspected cyberattacks.

## **THE COMPLEX**

**WHAT NEXT FOR LMCO-AEROJET MERGER?:** Our friends at Morning Defense (for Pros!) dig into what the Federal Trade Commission's antitrust suit on the Lockheed Martin-Aerojet Rocketdyne merger means going forward.

One possibility is that another company could make a play for Aerojet. “A company not named Lockheed, Northrop, Raytheon or Boeing might be able to acquire or merge with Aerojet down the road,” said **ROMAN SCHWEIZER**, managing director at Cowen Washington Research Group.

Another is that Lockheed walks away from the deal altogether. “If I was in their shoes, I am not sure I'd do it,” an industry official told Morning D.

More broadly, the administration's decision to finally get involved in a large defense industry deal could signal they're just getting started. But Capital Alpha Partners' **BYRAN CALLAN** isn't so sure: “We don't, however, see the current FTC move as one that throws defense [mergers and acquisitions] into the deep freeze,” he told investors.

Pros can read more from our own LEE HUDSON and LEAH NYLEN.

## ON THE HILL

**55 DEMS URGE BIDEN TO CHOOSE MORE DOVISH NUKE POLICY:** In a letter to Biden, the four co-chairs of the bicameral Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group plus 51 other Democrats want Biden to reduce America’s reliance on nuclear weapons and scrap new weapons that were planned and authorized by former President **DONALD TRUMP**.

The message — led by Sens. **EDWARD MARKEY** (D-Mass.) and **JEFF MERKLEY** (D-Ore.) as well as Reps. **JOHN GARAMENDI** (D-Calif.) and **DON BEYER** (D-Va.) — comes as the administration soon plans to release its Nuclear Posture Review.

“We urge you to question the necessity of new nuclear weapons systems and the sustainability of the current expansive program of work. Doing so will also create space for your Administration’s bilateral strategic stability dialogue with Russia to progress, and allow time to gauge the willingness of China to engage in nuclear risk reduction negotiations,” they and other lawmakers wrote, calling for the end to deployments of the low-yield W-76(2) and inquiry into the effectiveness of a new ground-based strategic deterrent.

Other notable signees to the letter — notably from the party’s progressive wing — include Sens. **ELIZABETH WARREN** (D-Mass.) and **BERNIE SANDERS** (I-Vt.) alongside Reps. **BARBARA LEE** (D-Calif.) and **PRAMILA JAYAPAL** (D-Wash.).

## BROADSIDES

**TRUMP SECDEF WEIGHS IN ON UKRAINE:** Former Secretary of Defense **MARK ESPER**, who served during the Trump administration and clashed with the former president, is now calling out Biden for his policy toward Russia.

“The United States must do more to deter a Russian invasion, reassure our NATO Allies and stand firm with Ukraine,” Esper said in a statement released by the McCain Institute at Arizona State University, where he is now a distinguished fellow.

Esper calls on the administration to send U.S. troops to defend Baltic and Black Sea allies, send more military and intelligence support to Ukraine and “lead a clear, detailed, and unified statement of support from all NATO capitals, especially Berlin, that a Russian incursion of any size, or an action of any type, against Ukraine will be met with a broad and severe range of sanctions and economic penalties.”

When Biden administration officials read that statement, I’m sure they’ll say “We’re already doing that!” (Save for the joint statement part.) But Esper’s comment underscores how Republicans — even those out of government — feel the U.S. could be doing more to deter an invasion.

## TRANSITIONS

— **BOB KOLASKY**, an assistant director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, will leave his post in late February. He has led CISA’s National Risk Management Center since 2018.

## WHAT TO READ

— **ARTHUR HERMAN**, *National Review*: “[Who Can Stop Putin?](#)”

— **EVELYN FARKAS, TIMOTHY FRYE, MARK GALEOTTI, ALYONA GETMANCHUK, THOMAS GRAHAM, FIONA HILL, ANDREI KOLESNIKOV, MOLLY MCKEW, RAJAN MENON, OLGA OLIKER, STEVEN PIFER, LILIA SHEVTSOVA** and **STROBE TALBOTT**, *POLITICO Magazine*: “[Will There Be a War Over Ukraine? 13 Putin Watchers Weigh In](#)”

— **VIVIAN SALAMA**, *The Wall Street Journal*: “[Ukrainian City Tries to Ward off Russia by Promising a Better Future](#)”

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## TOMORROW TODAY

— **The Stimson Center, 8:30 a.m.:** “[Prospects for Japanese Defense Policy and the Indo-Pacific Region](#) — with **KEN JIMBO** and **YUKI TATSUMI**”

— **The Atlantic Council, 9 a.m.:** “[Lessons From the Afghanistan Experience: Protecting Future U.S. Assistance for the Afghan People](#) — with **SHUJA NAWAZ** and **JOHN SOPKO**”

— **Chatham House, 9 a.m.:** “[The Political Economy of Populism in Europe](#) — with **SHERI BERMAN, HANS KUNDNANI, PHILIP MANOW** and **DANI RODRIK**”

— **The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 9 a.m.:** “[Asia Forecast 2022](#) — with **JUDE BLANCHETTE, VICTOR D. CHA, CHARLES EDEL, MATTHEW P. GOODMAN, MICHAEL J. GREEN, SCOTT KENNEDY, BONNY LIN, YUKO NAKANO, GREGORY POLING, WILLIAM A. REINSCH, RICHARD M. ROSSOW, STEPHANIE SEGAL** and **NICHOLAS SZECHENYI**”

— **The Business Council for International Understanding, 10 a.m.:** “Virtual Roundtable With the Honorable MICHAEL RAYNOR, Ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Senegal and the Republic of Guinea-Bissau”

— **The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 a.m.:** “Carnegie Connects: A Conversation With BRETT MCGURK — with AARON DAVID MILLER”

— **The Wilson Center, 10 a.m.:** “The Middle East and North Africa in 2022: Regional Security and America’s Role — with GENEIVE ABDO, ABDULLAH BAABOOD, JAMES F. JEFFREY, MERISSA KHURMA, MICHAEL SINGH and ROBIN WRIGHT”

— **The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 a.m.:** “How to Make China Adapt to Local Needs — with KATHARINE ADENEY, ALVIN CAMBA, EVAN A. FEIGENBAUM, MAIARA FOLLY and NIVA YAU”

— **The Atlantic Council, 12 p.m.:** “Iranians on #SocialMedia: The Only Way to Be Heard — with MAHSA ALIMARDANI, HOLLY DAGRES, SIMIN KARGAR and MEGHA RAJAGOPALAN”

— **The Cato Institute, 12 p.m.:** “Catastrophic Success: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Goes Wrong — with BEN DENISON, ALEXANDER B. DOWNES, ERIC GOMEZ and MELISSA WILLARD-FOSTER”

— **The Hudson Institute, 12 p.m.:** “The Rise of China and the Concentration of Power — with ANDERS CORR and NURY TURKEL”

— **The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 12:15 p.m.:** “Britain and the Creation of the United Nations, 1939-1945 — with ANDREW EHRHARDT”

— **The Mercatus Center, 1 p.m.:** “Brexit Is Fueling the Nativist Movement in Britain: A Debate — with SHIKHA DALMIA, STEPHEN DAVIES, FRANCIS FUKUYAMA and DAVID GOODHART”

— **Chatham House, 1:30 p.m.:** “Thinking Out Loud: Can Democracy Be Saved? — with HANS KUNDNANI”

— **The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2:30 p.m.:** “Data for Development and Diplomacy: The New Age — with ROMINA BANDURA, JOSEPH S. BERMUDEZ JR., RICHARD CRESPIAN, CLAIRE MELAMED and CHRIS WATSON”

— **The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4:30 p.m.:** “U.S. And Korea’s Role and Cooperation Towards a Trustworthy, Resilient, and Sustainable Indo-Pacific Trade — with VICTOR CHA, YEO HAN-KOO, WILLIAM ALAN REINSCH and KATHLEEN STEPHENS”

— **The Stimson Center, 7 p.m.:** “Understanding Kim Jong Un’s Economic Policymaking: Implications and Opportunities — with ROBERT CARLIN and RACHEL MINYOUNG LEE”



