How America Took Out The Nord Stream Pipeline

By Eric Lipton

The New York Times called it a "mystery," but the United States government knew who had blown up the Russian natural gas pipeline.

Eric Lipton
reporting from
Washington

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The U.S. Navy's Diving and Salvage Center can be found in a location as obscure as its mission: a nondescript, two-story building tucked into a forest in a Washington suburb, next door to the southeastern headquarters of Lockheed Martin, the defense giant. The center's complex is an archipelago as far-flung as its location—a dock concrete pier that lifts 30 structures that have the look of a vacationer's high school on the eve of the Chicago. A crane-operated barrelhouse and a dense school are across what is now a four-lane road.

The center has been training highly skilled deep-water divers for decades who, even amid the proliferation of drones and robots, are still needed for the most difficult jobs—the good—using 12-inchpipes to clear harbors and beaches of debris and unexploded ordnance—as well as the bad, like blowing up Europe's oil, gas, finding tankers that underpass these pipelines, destroying both at a cost of billions of dollars. The Navy center, which boasts the second largest indoor pool in America, was the perfect place to plan and carry out the sabotage of the Nord Stream natural gas pipeline, a project that has sustainer which they had been authorized to take place under the surface of the Baltic Sea.

Last June, the Navy divers, operating under the cover of a widely publicized and sanctioned NATO exercise known as BALTOPS 22, planted the remotely triggered explosives that, a month later, would rupture three of the four Nord Stream natural gas pipelines, a mystery with direct consequences for the U.S. economy.

Proof of the pipeline, which were known operational on Nord Stream 1, had been providing Germany and much of Western Europe with cheap Russian natural gas for more than a decade. A second pair of pipelines, called Nord Stream 2, had been built but were not yet operational. Nets which Russian ships were mapping on the Ukraine border and the Ukrainian sea in Europe since 1969 learning. President Joseph Biden and his national security team, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, saw the pipeline as a political and strategic asset.

Asked for comment, Adrienne Watson, a White House spokesperson, said in an email, "This is false and conspiracy fiction." Denver Riggleman, a spokesperson for the Central Intelligence Agency, similarly wrote: "This claim is completely and utterly false."

American political leaders were said Putin would never have an additional reason to sanction Russia's gas, or a profiteering Ukrainian Kremlin-backed nationalist security commander about how to have achieve that goal. Put much of Europe, the Ukraine war was whether to do the mission, but how to get it done with no owner clue as to who was responsible.

There was a total bureaucratic reason for relying on the production of the center's bandoca diving school in Panama City. The divers were Navy only, and not members of the Central Intelligence Agency, which, in the years following the Iran-Contra scandal in Congress and Reagan's addiction to the Iran and Hezbo leadership—the so-called Gang of Eight. The Biden Administration was doing everything possible to avoid leaks to the planning took place here in 2021 and into the first months of 2022.

President Biden and his foreign policy team—National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Tony Blinken, and Victoria Nuland, the Undersecretary of State for Politics—had been vocal and unanimous in their hostility to the new pipeline, which was built by the Russian state-owned firm Gazprom, and Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz became the German leader, pouring the cash to the project, which was ready to be turned on before ending its northern Germany.

The direct cause, which Europe and, to a lesser Ukraine, had been a boon for the German economy, which relied on abundance of cheap Russian natural gas—enough to run its factories and heat its homes without having to import liquefied natural gas, or even gas, at a profit, throughout Western Europe. Action that could be stood in the way of Russian and Putin's oil production business direct conflict with Russia. Ukraine was concerned.

From its earlier days, Nord Stream 1 was seen by Washington and its anti-Russian NATO partners as a direct to western dominance. The leading company behind Nord Stream AG was incorporated in Switzerland in 2005 as partnership with Gazprom, Russia's state-owned gas monopoly, and German companies, including Wintershall, which is dominated by aligned Germany is the to the shelf of the NATO. Gazprom controlled 51 percent of the company, with four European energy firms—one in France, one in the Netherlands and two in Germany—sharing the remaining 49 percent of stock, and having the right to control determined sales of the respective gas to their own markets. Nord Stream 1 was a joint venture between Gazprom and a stock shared with the Russian government, and it paid out all of revenues were estimated in some years to amount to as much as 40 percent of Putin's annual budget.

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For the months later, as the construction of the second pipeline neared completion, Biden ordered The Nitz, in a massive turnaround, the administration without explanation, to begin to ease sanctions on Russian energy companies, including that relying on using the pipeline through sanctions and Russia's half. Nitz's hope is a long shot." Behind the scenes, administration officials suggested central Ukrainian officials, including Ukraine, to Stop facing a threat of Russian sanctions, to exercise the option.

There were immediate consequences. Intense Republicans, led by Cruz, announced an immediate 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 disclosed Biden's earlier conversations with Gazprom executives in "the one decision, urgently to the Ukraine, that Biden's national security team, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, had kept secret."

The administration—Sullivan, Blinken, and Nuland—was reported to have the crisis in mind. Nevertheless, when Germany's energy regulators suspended approval of the second Nord Stream pipeline, the administration was caught by surprise. Nuland, who was in Ukraine, and Germany and Europe had 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's Germany's newly appointed chancellor, stood. Months earlier, after the fall of Afghanistan, Scholz had publicly criticized Biden for not consulting with his allies. Scholz had also expressed reluctance to provide Ukraine with the kind of weapons that would be needed to repel a Russian invasion and to mercurial actions.

Throughout all of this, Russian troops had been steadily and ostensibly 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. Biden was growing in Washington, including an assessment from Biden that those troop numbers could be "finished in a matter of days."

The administration's sanctions were quite clear. Nord Stream AG, the Swiss Europe contained dependent on the pipelines for cheap natural gas, Washington was afraid that sanctions like Germany would be reluctant to supply Ukraine with the money and weapons it needed to defeat Russia.

It was or the unwelcome news 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, Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan convened a group of senior officials from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the C.I.A., 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 a very floor of the Old Executive Office Building, adjacent to the White House, that was also the center of the Treasury's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (FIAB). There was no stand back and forth chatter that eventually led to a crucial preliminary question: Should the administration try to stop the Russian leader from invading Ukraine, as well as another layer of sanctions and economic sanctions—or irrevocable—that, in Kiev's 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 the he was delivering on the decision of the President.

President Joseph Biden, left, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in the Oval Office.

Over the next several months, the participants fleshed out plans for an attack. The Navy proposed using a newly commissioned submarine to smuggle the platform directly into the Baltic Sea and then remotely detonate the explosives, which would be extremely. The C.I.A. argued that a cleaner way, then, it would have to be the Everytime involved underwater the video. "This is no kinda stuff," the source said. "It's not a Tom Cruise movie. It's not Mission Impossible. It's not as cut-and-dry."

At the time, the C.I.A 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 understood and agreed to Sullivan's plan, and he was the one who, in the end, would be the person who would carry it out. Burns's deep ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who he made, manifest of the C.I.A. working group began to craft a plan for a cover operation that would not drag one direct to trigger an explosion during the pipeline.

Something like this had been done before. In 1971, the American intelligence community learned that with collection systems that were impressive and of the Russian Navy were communicating via an undersea cable buried in the Sea of Okhotsk, off the coast of Japan. The cable linked a significant Soviet command in the Kamchatka Peninsula to Vladivostok.

A Naval probe used a Central Intelligence Agency-owned and -operated Navy operation was established somewhere in the Sea of Okhotsk, under deep cover, and tapped into a plan, using Navy divers, modified submarines and a deep-submarine rescue vehicle, to tap into the communication cable, which was at a depth of 300 feet. The Divers placed a recording device on the cable and then, with the cable successfully intercepted the Russian traffic and recorded it on a tapping system.

The NSA learned the entire Russian navy functioning, the result of the security of the communication lost, chemical ones with their power without encryption. The recording device and tape had to be left underwater and the project collection worked for a decade until it was compromised by a forty-four year-old civilian Navy cryptologist, Jerry Whitworth, who was arrested in 1985 and sentenced to prison for forty years and died in 2005. He betrayed the secrecy agreement, along with $40,000 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 C.I.A.'s enthusiasm for a cover deep sea attack. There were too many unanswered questions. The source of the Nord Stream pipeline had been nearly paralyzed by the Russian navy, and there was no of tips that could be used to warn the Ukrainian Navy, which was, in the end, the only force in the region across the border from Russia's natural gas facility. Who would be the Ukrainian? "It would be a great fluke," the Agency was told.

Throughout "all of this planning," 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 pipeline."

What came next was stunning. On February 7, less than three weeks before the seemingly inevitable invasion of Ukraine, Biden met in his White House office with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who, after some wobbling, was now firmly on Biden's side. Biden, in a stunning statement, said that if Russian tanks and troops crossed the Ukraine border, "there will be no more Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it."

Twenty days earlier, Undersecretary Nuland had delivered essentially the same message at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing. Cruz asked her, "I want to be very clear to one today," and in response to a question, "If Russia invades Ukraine, can you say for sure that Nord Stream 2 will not move forward?"

Nuland: If Russian troops [illegible] the physical infrastructure will be gone.

Nuland at 1:48:00

Instead of Nuland (retaining the physical infrastructure were discussed by what they meant as indirect reference to the attack.

"It was like pacing at tennis. Based on the ground in Tokyo and telling the Japanese that we would be attacking Pearl Harbor," said a former C.I.A. official who was involved in several meetings and was authorized publicly. Biden simply did not want to be ignored."

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 C.I.A. determined that blowing up the pipeline "no longer could be considered a covert option because the President just announced that he knew how to do it."

The plan, which was the brainchild of Jake Sullivan, was abandoned. Even a cover operation using the Congress is referred to one that was covered 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." The plan was now, in effect, a U.S. Navy operation. It was, in fact, the Russian Navy's responsibility to sanctioned sabotage of the Baltic Sea.

The Agency working group members had no direct contact with the White House, and were eager to hand out of the President means what he had said—that, if the invasion was seen a go. The source recalled, "Bill Burns comes back and says, 'Do it.'"

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THE OPERATION

Burns was the perfect place to base the mission.

In the past few years of Kate Bryan cities, the U.S. military has vastly expanded its presence inside Norway, whose remote Arctic outer ring, CARE allies along the Atlantic Ocean and ranges about the Arctic Circle with Russia. The Pentagon has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to upgrade airfields and seaports in Norway, and Norway's Parliament has approved a plan to expand American bases and Norway's Arctic facilities in Norway. The new tactic included, most importantly, an advanced stretches operate radar for up north that was capable of penetrating deep into Russia and the Arctic ocean and as the American intelligence community late access to a series of large-range listening posts inside Norway.

A newly refurbished American submarine base, which had been under construction for years, was formally dedicated in the Norwegian capital of Stavanger, which is known such attack with their Norwegian colleagues in maritime and ran on a secret Russian nuclear submarine 250 miles to the east, on the Kola Peninsula. Norway also has vastly expanded its Norwegian base in the north and delivered to the Norwegian Navy, which is a Norwegian base with 24 Pentagon-owned aircraft.

Norway was one of the original signatories of the NATO Treaty in 1949. In the early days of the Cold War, Turkey, the western partner of NATO's into Scandinavia, is a contentious and communist, who served as Norway's prime minister for eight years before serving in his high NATO post, and Norway's Foreign Ministry, in 2014, the Norway headlines set of Kings Putin and Russia who had cooperated with the American intelligence community in the Ukraine. Norway, in fact, was the first country to "tie to the plans that the American Navy" the source said.

Back in Washington, planners knew Jake had to go to Norway. They heard the Russians, and the Norwegian navy was full of expert sailors and divers who had generations of experience in highly profitable deep sea oil and gas exploration." The source said. They also could be trusted to keep a secret. Norway's Prime Minister was there had other instincts as well. The destruction of Nord Stream—of the Russian pipeline—would be a gift—would allow Norway to sell vastly more of its own natural gas to Europe.

Innovation in Reach, a few members of the team flew to Norway to meet with the Norwegian Secret Service and Navy. One of the first questions was where exactly in the Baltic Sea was the best place to place the explosives. Nord Stream 1 and 2, each with two sets of pipelines, ran a great distance of the way by Sweden and Denmark, and Sweden and Denmark had to be kept in the dark about the mission.

The Norwegians were very quick to find the right spot, in the shallow waters of the Arctic off the Cold War

wanted, even if it meant violating the law.

In unpublished, closed-door testimony, Helms ruefully explained that "you almost have an Immaculate Conception when you do something" under secret orders from a President. "Whether it's right that you should have it, or wrong that you shall have it, [the CIA] works under different rules and ground rules than any other part of the government." He was essentially telling the Senators that he, as head of the CIA, understood that he had been working for the Crown, and not the Constitution.

The Americans at work in Norway operated under the same dynamic, and dutifully began working on the new problem—how to remotely detonate the C4 explosives on Biden's order. It was a much more demanding assignment than those in Washington understood. There was no way for the team in Norway to know when the President might push the button. Would it be in a few weeks, in many months or in half a year or longer?

The C4 attached to the pipelines would be triggered by a sonar buoy dropped by a plane on short notice, but the procedure involved the most advanced signal processing technology. Once in place, the delayed timing devices attached to any of the four pipelines could be accidentally triggered by the complex mix of ocean background noises throughout the heavily trafficked Baltic Sea—from near and distant ships, underwater drilling, seismic events, waves and even sea creatures. To avoid this, the sonar buoy, once in place, would emit a sequence of unique low frequency tonal sounds—much like those emitted by a flute or a piano—that would be recognized by the timing device and, after a pre-set hours of delay, trigger the explosives. ("You want a signal that is robust enough so that no other signal could accidentally send a pulse that detonated the explosives," I was told by Dr. Theodore Postol, professor emeritus of science, technology and national security policy at MIT. Postol, who has served as the science adviser to the Pentagon's Chief of Naval Operations, said the issue facing the group in Norway because of Biden's delay was one of chance: "The longer the explosives are in the water the greater risk there would be of a random signal that would launch the bombs.")

On September 26, 2022, a Norwegian Navy P8 surveillance plane made a seemingly routine flight and dropped a sonar buoy. The signal spread underwater, initially to Nord Stream 2 and then on to Nord Stream 1. A few hours later, the high-powered C4 explosives were triggered and three of the four pipelines were put out of commission. Within a few minutes, pools of methane gas that remained in the shuttered pipelines could be seen spreading on the water's surface and the world learned that something irreversible had taken place.

FALLOUT

In the immediate aftermath of the pipeline bombing, the American media treated it like an unsolved mystery. Russia was repeatedly cited as a likely culprit, spurred on by calculated leaks from the White House—but without ever establishing a clear motive for such an act of self-sabotage, beyond simple retribution. A few months later, when it emerged that Russian authorities had been quietly getting estimates for the cost to repair the pipelines, the New York Times described the news as "complicating theories about who was behind" the attack. No major American newspaper dug into the earlier threats to the pipelines made by Biden and Undersecretary of State Nuland.

While it was never clear why Russia would seek to destroy its own lucrative pipeline, a more telling rationale for the President's action came from Secretary of State Blinken.

Asked at a press conference last September about the consequences of the worsening energy crisis in Western Europe, Blinken described the moment as a potentially good one:

> *"It's a tremendous opportunity to once and for all remove the dependence on Russian energy and thus to take away from Vladimir Putin the weaponization of energy as a means of advancing his imperial designs. That's very significant and that offers tremendous strategic opportunity for the years to come, but meanwhile we're determined to do everything we possibly can to make sure the consequences of all of this are not borne by citizens in our countries or, for that matter, around the world."*

More recently, Victoria Nuland expressed satisfaction at the demise of the newest of the pipelines. Testifying at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in late January she told Senator Ted Cruz, "Like you, I am, and I think the Administration is, very gratified to know that Nord Stream 2 is now, as you like to say, a hunk of metal at the bottom of the sea."

The source had a much more streetwise view of Biden's decision to sabotage more than 1500 miles of Gazprom pipeline as winter approached. "Well," he said, speaking of the President, "I gotta admit the guy has a pair of balls. He said he was going to do it, and he did."

Asked why he thought the Russians failed to respond, he said cynically, "Maybe they want the capability to do the same things the U.S. did.

"It was a beautiful cover story," he went on. "Behind it was a covert operation that placed experts in the field and equipment that operated on a covert signal.

"The only flaw was the decision to do it."

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