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American Foreign Policy Challenges: Russia and Beyond

Victoria Nuland, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, U.S. Department of State

Moderator: Jim Sciutto, Chief National Security Correspondent, CNN

Sciutto ([00:00](#)):

Does the US share that scathing assessment of where Russia's invasion stands?

Nuland ([00:06](#)):

Well, first of all, thanks Jim for doing this and thanks to Aspen for, uh, having us back here. Um, listen, the us and the UK are, uh, in lockstep on the intelligence, on the policy, on the vital imperative of supporting Ukraine. Now I think Senator Warner said it best Ukraine is on the front lines of defending democracy for all of us right now. Um, and you had a good overview from bill burns yesterday. Uh, you know, who made clear that one of the problems with running an autocracy is it's pretty scary for your people to tell you the truth. So when president Putin was convinced that, you know, Russian forces would take Keve in five days, that they would be greeted as liberators, that the Ukrainians would welcome them. That, uh, in fact, Ukraine, as a historic part of Russia, not so much, and they vastly miscalculated, obviously at the beginning of the war coming in from five different places and being, you know, roundly rebuffed.

Nuland ([01:07](#)):

I think what we've seen in the last month and a half is that the Russians have recalibrated the fight to their traditional advantage, which is coming in from the east of Ukraine. So they have all of that support along the Russian border. But now the parts of Ukraine that the Ukrainians are seeking to win back from Kirson outside of Crimea to Southern areas above Mary Opal. And I know, you know, this well and the sea of oof, where the grain comes out of, um, and great news today on the Odessa ports has to be implemented. Uh, it's a lot, it's, it's harder for the Russians because their, uh, command lines are longer. Uh, now that the us is giving these long range artillery pieces, the high Mars, uh, they're getting behind the Russian lines and, uh, upsetting the command in control and also, um, you know, making it harder for them to, to organize them themselves. So would

Sciutto ([01:59](#)):

You, would you go, and I wanna ask you about the grain deal, just a moment. Would you go so far as to say that Russia is losing in Ukraine today?

Nuland ([02:05](#)):

You know, I think when general Millie said it's a war of attrition, he's right. I think the question is, you know, who's got the better strategy, who's got the better tactics. And just as the last panel said, never vote against America. Um, president Biden's favorite line, uh, never vote against Ukraine and Ukrainians, and they're voting for their fighting for their Homeland. Uh, and the Russians have made a lot of mistakes.

Sciutto (02:28):

So some positive news today you referenced that the grain deal, there's certainly not a FTA comp plea going into it. Uh, how did this deal come together? And does the us believe that it will happen as agreed to?

Nuland (02:40):

Well, your last point is most important. Uh, this was six, seven weeks in negotiation, uh, led by UN secretary general, Guttier with, uh, strong support from, from Turkey. And it should have been easy. You know, we could have done this on the back of an envelope in a middle of an afternoon with, with will. Um, so the fact that Russia for all these months of the war has been blocking Ukrainian grain, getting out to the world, uh, in addition to what it does to ensure fields can't get planted and terrorizing farmers, uh, has made this not only a European crisis, but obviously a, a global crisis in terms of food security. So this came together because, uh, I think, uh, Russia ultimately felt the hot breath of global opprobrium, and it was losing the global south who had become convinced that this was really NATO's fault, et cetera. But now when it understands that, uh, it, you know, it is Russia that is blocking the food that feeds the people of Mozambique. For example, where I was two weeks ago, 30% of their grain comes from Ukraine. It was losing support. And you see that in the fact that, you know, Putin has to go ask, uh, for favors from the Iranians and he's asking the north Koreans, uh, to come to Ukraine. So with friends like that, they, uh, had to make some moves. I think mm-hmm

Sciutto (04:08):

<affirmative> well, it sounds like, I mean, certainly not out of altruism, but out of necessity, it sounds like the us has some confidence that this deal will go through that, that Russia will allow it to happen because of the pressures you describe.

Nuland (04:22):

Well, let's see. And, and as, uh, as we are saying today, you know, it's now incumbent on Russia to actually implement this deal. Um, but it is very well structured in terms of monitoring and in terms of, uh, you know, channels that the grain ought to be able to get out of Russia also was out there complaining to the world that its own fertilizer ingrained. Couldn't, couldn't get out, uh, in terms of the us posture. We never put sanctions on Russian food or on its fertilizer, but we have now given them comfort letters. So it may also have had to do with the fact that it was hard for them to get shippers and insurers and others to move their grains. So they also need the money given what else we're doing to them

Sciutto (05:05):

Since I've been covering this war. I, I, I sometimes feel like I'm living in a world war II news reel, the, you know, the air raid sirens, uh, uh, you know, deliberate attacks on civilians, but, but the, the, the Dawn or re Dawn of concentration camps, right? Filtration camps, you've been at the forefront of drawing attention to this. What is the us sense of the scale of these camps, uh, to the extent that we know and are these people in effect hostages?

Nuland (05:33):

Well, first Jim, a shout out to you personally, to all of the us news organizations who have worked so hard to cover this war and bring it not just to the American people, but globally, because it makes it

much harder for Putin to hide his crimes. You talk about this being a world War I scenario, and I agree there are absolutely Hitlerian aspects of this, but there are also medieval aspects to this in terms of the brutality, you know, everything from the mass graves in Bucha. But now we are hearing stories of up to 10, 10,000 Ukrainians, forced into camps, both in Ukraine, uh, those who were residents of Mary Opal, and some of those cities that got caught, got, uh, taken first and Kisan and some other camps, uh, over the border in Russia, unable to leave and unable to contact their families, et cetera, and even worse when, uh, the Ukrainian first lady was here earlier this week, uh, she made a plea for the Ukrainian children who are being exfiltrated. So first Russia makes orphans, and then it steals those orphans up to a thousand Ukrainian kids being, uh, stolen and taken and given to Russian families potentially never to be found by their families again. So these are the kinds of horrors that Russia is willing to, to perpetrate, uh, all because one man thinks he has a right to Ukraine. Yeah.

Sciutto ([07:13](#)):

Uh, from the beginning of this, uh, folks have, have drawn potential parallels between Russia's designs on Ukraine and China's designs on Taiwan. And I, and I wonder, do you think that the international response, both in terms of, well, the NATO, the Western response in terms of weapon supplies, economic sanctions have been sufficient to make she and Beijing think twice or, or think again about the prospect of, uh, military takeover of Taiwan?

Nuland ([07:42](#)):

There's no question Jim, that the Chinese are watching this, uh, Russia war against Ukraine, uh, and studying it with a fine tooth comb in all manners, uh, both in terms of the military tactics that the Ukrainians have used to defend themselves the Russian mistakes, uh, and in terms of the economic unity of all of the countries who have imposed sanctions, the fact that, uh, against Putin's predictions and potentially against she's predictions. So many countries have held together in, uh, blocking Russia from the global financial system, the export controls the kinds of things, uh, our playbook that potentially China would have to worry about in, uh, a Ukraine scenario. Um, they're also having an interesting dance as Bill Burns made reference to here, uh, with Moscow, because Moscow's asking for money and for weapons, uh, it's asking China to, um, acknowledge and accept, uh, annexation that the Russians have already formally done of Donetsk. And Luhansk, uh, so far the Chinese have, uh, declined. We believe to do most of those things. And, uh, they are trying to maintain this image of honest broker, at least publicly, but at the same time, and the last panel made some of this clear, they are also hiding their hand as they augment and, uh, help the Russians with their global propaganda effort, um, spreading, spreading lies about the war, et cetera, in the disinformation, in the information space. So a little of this, a little of that, but certainly they're watching

Sciutto ([09:28](#)):

The, the sanctions have worked in cutting off Russia from a lot of trade except where they make their most money, which is energy. And, and it, you know, this better than me, but, but their monthly haul from, from oil sales is higher than it was. But before the invasion and Putin, it seems calculates that he can outlast the west on this. Is there enough unity to bring the energy sector more definitively into the realm of sanctions? So, I mean, there's talk by the end of the year, you know, Europe weaning itself off, but hasn't happened yet and he's still banking the money. Will that be fixed?

Nuland ([10:09](#)):

Uh, this is a main line of effort and has been for some time, Jim, there are many aspects to it, including, uh, the president's trip to Saudi and trying to get the global price of oil down because of course the Russians were major beneficiaries when global prices were much higher than they are, uh, today, the Europeans, as you know, have now made firm decision to cut themselves off from Russian oil by the end of the year, and to deny insurance and shipping and all of those kinds of things. The problem though, is that that could have the effect of increasing the global price. And then Russia makes its money elsewhere from, from China and India, et cetera, which is why you've seen, if you've been watching the fine, fine print of the press and of the president's recent trip to, to Europe, you've seen us talking about a price cap, a buyer's cap, uh, whereby the European sanctions on insurance and shipping our sanctions on insurance and shipping would kick in for Russian oil that is above a certain price so that the Russians would make a tiny bit of profit enough to make it worth it, to keep their oil on the market, because we need Russian oil on the market.

Nuland ([11:27](#)):

Otherwise the shortage makes the price go up, but not so much that it can fuel the war. So that's one piece of it. There's obviously money that they make from gas. Um, and there is the diversification effort all over the world. So this is a major line of effort that we're working on. Now,

Sciutto ([11:45](#)):

A, another pillar of that plan was getting Iranian oil back on the market. Uh, I asked Richard Moore yesterday, his assessment of the chances of Iranian nuclear deal, resurrection of it. And, and he said, he's not just skeptical. He, he said he doesn't believe the Supreme leader wants to make that deal. Uh, what does the us think are, are those negotiations going anywhere?

Nuland ([12:08](#)):

The deal is sitting there on the table for the taking, if the Iranians want it. And as you said, there's only one decision maker in Iran. It would get their oil back on the market. It would get them some relief from some of the sanctions that have come on. Um, but for so far, they haven't chosen to go in that route. He's, you know, farm and the frankly, the Iranian people pay the price as their prices go up and inflation goes up and if he doesn't take the deal, we're gonna have to increase the pressure. Of course.

Sciutto ([12:39](#)):

Do, do you share, does the us share the UK's pessimism read that he doesn't want to, that it's done?

Nuland ([12:48](#)):

You know, it's, it's interesting that they haven't thrown over the table yet. They haven't walked away when they could have done that over these many months where the deal's been ready and sitting there. So, you know, let's see what happens

Sciutto ([13:01](#)):

Next month will be one year anniversary with withdrawal from Afghanistan, has that withdrawal left the us less safe from international terrorism.

Nuland ([13:16](#)):

Let's start with the difference between the two Terra groups that we faced in Afghanistan, uh, Al Qaeda, which was closely aligned with the Taliban, which, uh, they have more capacity to keep under control now that they run the joint, um, and ISIS, which, you know, is an enemy of ours, but an enemy of the

Taliban as well. So among the things that we are continuing to talk to the Afghans about, and we do have a quiet channel with them is that they've got to do a better job of dealing with, uh, the potential for ISIS to rise again in parts of Afghanistan. Um, they complain about some of the things that the United States does in intelligence terms to keep ourselves safe. And, and we've made clear that we will continue to do those things, and we'll continue to work with all their neighbors to squeeze the space, as long as they don't have control over their territory.

Sciutto ([14:18](#)):

I haven't met anyone who believes or, or trust the Taliban to have control over their territory. And you have folks like Bill Burns, who acknowledge that over the horizon counter terror doesn't work nearly as well as being on the ground. Richard Moore, that British view as well, they call it outside in. They acknowledge it's not as good at doing the job. So where does that leave us?

Nuland ([14:42](#)):

No, I think among the things that one has to keep watching, whether it's in Afghanistan, whether it's in Africa, where ISIS is also present and has largely a regional footprint right now is whether their capability grows or regenerates in these places such that it can reach beyond the, the neighborhood that it is in. And we keep an extremely close watch on that and we'll do what is necessary to protect the American people in our LS.

Sciutto ([15:10](#)):

Was it a mistake for the US to pull out as abruptly as it did?

Nuland ([15:17](#)):

You know, I think, uh, we're gonna have, uh, a number of, uh, after action reports coming out from all of the government agencies that were involved. I think this is a, a very long story that starts with, uh, whether or not the Taliban ever intended to have a power sharing deal of the kind that the previous administration thought was possible, uh, and encouraged, and was willing to take troops down to a, a, a dangerous level during the negotiation of if you believe that they were never sincere in that, then you have to ask what they were doing four years ago. If you, uh, believe that there was a chance that they might have, uh, been willing to do that had the Afghan forces mounted a stronger counter attack, particularly around Cobble. Then there's a question as to why that happened. But obviously at the moment, when we understood that the Afghan forces were not gonna be able to hold, we had an obligation to, uh, our citizens, to those who had worked with us in Afghanistan to move as quickly as, as we could. And as many people as we could, um, our own, our allies and partners in Afghans to, to safety. And that is what we were involved in last summer and what we've been doing since, because we continue to get Afghans at risk out of Afghanistan.

Sciutto ([16:48](#)):

I, I want to ask you about that because as you know, the vast majority of SIVs are still there. The vast majority of Afghans who served along with the US military and other high risk capacities are still there. But as you know, there's only one president at a time. Yep. And President Biden was president for what, seven months by the time the, the Afghan withdrawal was complete. He could have taken General Millie's suggestion and kept 2,500 troops there. You know, the finger in the dam description as, as he will often say to, to keep the dam from break breaking as it did. I just wonder with, with the, with

hindsight 11 months and all the costs, uh, to bear, uh, do you or others in the administration look back and say, we made a mistake

Nuland ([17:29](#)):

Again. I think there're gonna be a lot of after action reports that look at some of these things. I would simply say that the deal that was cut with the Taliban before president Biden came into office was that us troops would go down. They would not go up. And that, and it was on that basis that the Taliban were not fighting, fighting. Um, and had we increased troops without a negotiated understanding with the Taliban about that, which you know, was, uh, hard to imagine that would've been possible. They would've gone back into, onto a major war footing, not simply vis-a-vis the Afghan government, but vis a vis us forces as well. So, you know, 20, 20 hindsight, but also there were many risks in that course. And the president had to weigh his options and make a decision.

Sciutto ([18:20](#)):

I'm sure I'm not alone, uh, among people in this room who, who, who knows Afghan F SIV applicants from their time traveling there. I, I, I've been making an effort to, to get some families out, uh, so far stifled, uh, some have had success. You know, it's not easy to have success, but, but the, the numbers speak for themselves. The vast majority have not been able to, the process is slow. It's difficult. I mean, it'd be hard for me, uh, based on what I've seen of it to make it happen. It's, it's hard for people I talk to there who currently in hiding, trying to go through this process, why, why 11 months later have those delays? And, and I, I know that some of the standards were just relaxed as, as a policy decision. Why, what, what, what explains that for people who laid their lives down on the line for us forces there,

Nuland ([19:07](#)):

Again, in terms of what has happened since August 30th, 31st, 2021, I'm gonna lay this at the feet of the Taliban, because we have processes in place to get the 10,000 or others who are ready to come out. And the Taliban have been extremely parsimonious in terms of who they've let on airplanes, who they've let, Sciutto ([19:31](#)):

It's not just the town ban. The, the approval process has

Nuland ([19:34](#)):

Been slow is brutal. It's we are working very hard every day to try to speed it up. We had a bunch of folks who were ready to go out into Pakistan just a month ago, and, and they were not able to do that. We've had, you know, folks lined up probably friends of yours, uh, who are approved to travel. And we haven't been able to get flights out, but with regard to those who are already in the pipeline, uh, we're doing our best to, to speed that up as well.

Sciutto ([20:01](#)):

Understood. And I don't mean to underestimate the difficulty of getting flights out or even getting passports, right? Yeah. Passport issuance is there. So, so I'm not saying they don't have overall to play. I'm just saying, uh, you know, trying to zero in on the us side

Nuland ([20:12](#)):

Of it. And I would also say Jim, that, you know, a lot of these people who worked with us are extreme Patriots of Afghanistan, right. And they wanted to stay to the very end, hoping for a better outcome for their country, uh, which is how, why it's off also difficult. Now, no question,

Sciutto ([20:29](#)):

I, I, I want to, if I can given events in this country today as highlighted by the January 6th hearings, I often hear when I travel, for instance, when I was in Madrid for the NATO conference, that, that, that folks, I know diplomats, I know overseas will say, say, you know, sincerely, right. I'm concerned about what I see happening in your country. It, I'm not the first person to mention this to you. I just wonder in your interactions, do you hear those concerns? And what is your answer to them?

Nuland ([21:04](#)):

We practice an extreme form of democracy. And that's what we are seeing in

Sciutto ([21:11](#)):

X games. Democracy. Is

Nuland ([21:12](#)):

That what exactly? That is what we are seeing in action right now. And I frankly think it sets a profound example for both mature and more fragile and younger democracies, uh, that we are having these hearings now that we are having justice department investigations, that all of this is coming out, that nobody's, um, you know, no, no insurrectionists, uh, phone records and emails are safe from scrutiny, and that we're doing it in a bipartisan way, and we're doing it on television. Imagine trying to get that done in Vladimir Putins Russia, or she, Jim pings China. Uh, and so, you know, we are, we, every day we work for a more perfect democracy and we try to set that example for others. But as my boss, Tony blink likes to say, we have to go out there in the world with humility, because obviously we got our own words and problems. And when we do this sort of summit of democracy work that the president has us doing, it's not, you know, we're the best and everybody follow us. It is every single democracy has to work every day at its system. And that's what we're doing.

Sciutto ([22:21](#)):

Your role, this us soft power, arguably as essential as us hard power has us soft power been diminished, but by just the, the, the, the, the bareness and violence, sometimes sadly, as, as, as shown on January 6th of the political divisions in this country,

Nuland ([22:40](#)):

You know, I think Senator Warner said it best on the last panel. There are crazy Americans too. And when you add to that, the cocktail of DUNS and, uh, you know, and we need as a country to get a handle on this. And there are also mental health problems out there that we need to get a handle on. Um, that said, uh, when you think about things like the number one global impact from Russia's brutal war on Ukraine, which is food insecurity, you know, nobody, but the United States could rally the world. As we are doing now could be as generous as we are being nationally 5.6 billion already to address that global need, uh, that's come about as a result of one of the world's worst global authoritarians, you know, Imperial ambitions, but we are telling the rest of the world, we're not gonna leave you alone with this problem.

Nuland ([23:39](#)):

We're gonna rally the world. We're gonna rally UN systems, and we're gonna get this, you know, free the wheat wheat and free the sunflower seeds out of, out of Odessa port. Um, and you know, when I go around the world and as I did this six country tour of Africa, a five country tour, four, four countries, five

cities, uh, three weeks ago, uh, people are saying, thank you for hearing. Thank you for listening. Thank you for getting everybody else involved. And, uh, that's what gets me up in the morning as an American diplomat, we still have enormous ability the own, you know, to, to galvanize the world as needed
Sciutto ([24:15](#)):

Four countries, five cities. That that was your route to Aspen. Was it in
Nuland ([24:19](#)):

24 hours? No, that was, yeah. That was the American version of that tour. Yeah.
Sciutto ([24:22](#)):

Uh, we have 49 seconds. I, I will try to often end interviews with, with a question. What is the most hopeful development you've seen in the last six, six to 12 months?

Nuland ([24:33](#)):

I would say that, you know, the UN unsung, small conflict, not small conflicts, but dangerous conflicts that have, uh, begun to ease whether it's in Ethiopia, whether it's in Sudan, whether it's the ceasefire now in the Yemen war, but more importantly, the democratic world, advanced democracies, medium sized democracies coming together to say no. When an authoritarian wants to break, the UN system wants to break international rule of rules of the road and eat another country just because he thinks he gets to, and we've all stood up together and said no. And great, thanks to the American people too, in American news organizations for being part of that campaign, to ensure that democracy thrives and survives in Ukraine and for all of us.

Sciutto ([25:26](#)):

So we'll hand we'll end on a hopeful note to Newland. Thanks so much.

Nuland ([25:29](#)):

Thank you, Jim.