

***\*\*Note that this is an automated transcription and may contain inaccuracies. Please refer to [the original YouTube recording](#) as well\*\****

## Friday, July 22, 2022

Closing Fireside Chat with **Jake Sullivan**, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs

Moderator: **Jeffrey Goldberg**, Editor-in-Chief, The Atlantic

Anja Manuel ([00:27](#)):

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome. Please take your seats. You are now in for a treat, really one of the highlights of this conference. That's on day four of the Aspen security forum. We are very lucky to have with us Jake Sullivan, who's the current assistant to the president for national security affairs. Jake of course, is just back from a historic trip with president Biden to the middle east. He'll be telling us all about that. He wrestles on behalf of all of us in long meetings with his Chinese counterpart young J sure. And others. Uh, I think the last ones you called candid in depth and possibly productive. So that's good. We'll hear about that. And Jake is also known for his Peter natural ability to function without sleep. So we are enormously grateful for him to taking time out of what must be the busiest schedule in all of Washington DC to be with us. And there's no one better to interview him than Jeff Goldberg. Who of course is the editor in chief of the Atlantic. Thank you very much.

Jeff Goldberg ([01:46](#)):

Thank you, Ana. Thank you. Uh, everyone for being here. Thank you, Jake. For, uh, how much sleep did you get last night? Not enough. Okay. That's good for me. It's bad for you. Um, but we'll go right into it. We, um, uh, we have a relatively short amount of time to cover every known subject. Um, and I'll give you the choice. Do you wanna start with the easy stuff or the hard stuff? Let's start with the easy stuff. Awesome. Okay. Afghanistan, I'm kidding. <laugh> uh, we'll we'll we'll we'll warm it up. We'll warm it up. Let's talk about the, on, you mentioned the trip. Let's talk about the trip. Um, what did you, what did you think you got out of that trip? Well, first, just to take a step back, uh, BEC and put the trip in context for a minute, um, it's always good to answer a direct question by saying, let's take a step back and put it in context, I suppose.

Jake Sullivan ([02:36](#)):

Um, I'm familiar with all of your tricks exactly by the way, but, um, you know, this trip came on the heels of, uh, trips. The president took, uh, to the endo Pacific, where he went to Korean, Japan and met with the quad and then, uh, to Europe for the G seven in a historic NATO summit. Um, and following that, uh, he went to the middle east for meetings in Israel, the west bank, and then with nine Arab leaders, the Gulf cooperation council countries, plus Egypt, Jordan in Iraq. And what I would say at the end of that stretch, basically nine weeks of intensive presidential travel, um, in the middle of which we, he hosted the summit of the Americas in Los Angeles. Uh, you know, we've planted the American flag quite firmly in terms of our leadership and engagement in the three most strategically consequential regions of the world.

Jake Sullivan ([03:26](#)):

One of those being the middle east and as the president said on his way in, uh, he's determined in this time of geopolitical competition with all of the turbulence that we're seeing not to leave a vacuum in the middle east for China or Russia or Ron to fill. And I believe the biggest thing we got out of this trip was a platform upon which to build our engagement, uh, for the rest of his presidency and beyond to achieve that strategic purpose. There were more specific issues related to everything from sustaining and deepening, the Yemen truss to taking the first overt historic step towards normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, with the opening of Saudi aerospace, to Israeli cons, uh, commercial aircraft. Uh, there were commitments that the Gulf countries made to support the president's global infrastructure initiatives in 5g, and, um, very constructive discussions on the energy question, which I know has, uh, preoccupied many people here in the audience. So there were tangible gains out of this trip, but I think, uh, any one of those misses, the larger picture, which really is about the United States, stepping up, uh, to ensure that, uh, a strategically vital region of the world is a region that is going to ultimately be one where interests, uh, are running in our direction rather than against us. But let's

Jeff Goldberg (04:46):

Talk specifically about the, the most controversial aspect of this trip. The, the MBS meeting, um, president Biden called him a pariah earlier, um, and then went to meet him. Was it a mistake to call him a pariah?

Jake Sullivan (05:00):

Well, I think what's interesting about the way that this has been covered is that, um, time seemed to stop between his debate comment in October of 2019, and him traveling to Saudi Arabia in July of 2022, a lot happened in between. In fact, when president Obama came into, uh, president Biden came into office in the first 60 days in office, uh, he made, uh, a fundamental strategic judgment and the administration announced that judgment. It was a judgment that we were going to recalibrate, but not rupture our relationship with Saudi Arabia. And so this wasn't a decision that he made in the weeks leading up to this trip. This is a decision he made taking a sober look at the world as we saw it coming into office. And yes, that means, uh, reversing the prior administration's blank check policy. It did mean cutting off offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia and really pushing hard to help get what is now a fragile, um, but extended TRUS, the longest period of peace that we've seen in Yemen in seven years and a year ago, we were talking about the, uh, Yemen is the worst humanitarian catastrophe on the planet with thousands of civilians dying from violence and starvation.

Jake Sullivan (06:13):

And now we have had three going on four months of, of fragile, but real, uh, cessation of hostilities. Um, and he also, uh, said all along that he was going to ensure that human rights was a critical part of the agenda. And right at the top of the meeting with the crown prince, he raised the issue, both the direct issue of Jamal Khashoggi and, and his brutal and grizzly murder and the broader issue of human rights as well. And I'll let the crown prince know exactly where America's stood on the yeah, but you,

Jeff Goldberg (06:43):

You barely left Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were already denying what had happened in the meeting and kind of being a little bit disrespectful toward the president. Now, that's why I'm asking what, what actually came out of this and why did they, why did they deny what you heard the president say vis VI Khashoggi, but the larger picture on human rights?

Jake Sullivan (07:04):

Well, I would, you know, I would characterize it a little bit differently. Uh, the Saudi ambassador was quoted in, uh, Peter Baker's newspaper who was, you know, just up here doing the previous panel saying Joe Biden raised the issue. He raised it up top. He was direct about it. Um, the Saudis made no bones about that fact actually, uh, they also put out, um, what the crown Prince's response was, uh, with respect to, um, how, you know, he raised a, a series of issues related to us foreign policy over the past few years. So I, I, I don't really accept the premise of the question. And I think if you look at our major strategic objectives in the middle east relative to, um, stability and peace, whether it's, uh, to do with Yemen or rocks integration into the region, or Israel's integration into the region, whether it's due with energy and the, the free flow of energy and sufficient energy supplies to protect the global economy, whether it's to do with these countries betting on the United States and not another outside power, when it comes to the future of technology and 5g, you go down the list.

Jake Sullivan (08:11):

And, um, the actual outcomes of this meeting were not just a bunch of words. There are real commitments, uh, for us to work together on these issues, but I, I'm not gonna tell an Unal Lloyd positive story about it because we do have real and deep concerns, uh, that the president expressed to the crown prince directly about both actions passed and present. And we do have issues on which, uh, we need to, uh, find ways to close the gap in perspective, and that's gonna be ongoing. But part of the reason you go on a trip like this, Jeff is because there is no substitute for direct diplomacy for the United States to effectively advance its interest. The president believes that passionately and and frequently speaks about, uh, the importance of, of engagement at the leader level. And the middle east is no exception to that. And that was true with the crown prince, but it was also true with several of the other heads of state and government that he was able to meet on the trip. Just

Jeff Goldberg (09:05):

One more question on this. So putting aside the quotidian, but serious and continuing complaints worries that the United States has about the Saudi human rights record. Are you confident now that MBS won't do this again? Won't go after critics dissidents, the way he went after Khashoggi,

Jake Sullivan (09:26):

You know, the night that, uh, president Biden did his, uh, extended meeting with first the king, uh, king Salman, and then the crown prince, he actually came out and did a press conference where he read out the meeting, uh, talked about the conversation about Khashoggi. Also talked about the series of agreements that we had reached and in the question and answer session, uh, during that he was asked this exact question he was asked, can you promise us, uh, that this won't happen again? And the president it's, you know, worth looking at his response. It was very human. It was very direct. It was very Joe Biden. He said, of course, I can't make a promise about what someone else is gonna do. I can only make a promise about what the United States is gonna do. And I made clear in no uncertain terms, what would transpire in the event that anything like this happened again. But so all I can say is what the president said that night. I can't characterize my level of confidence about what another country will choose to do in the future. What I can say is that we went, uh, with the intention, president Biden, went with the intention to make very clear where the United States stood. That is exactly what he did while

he was there. And now, uh, we will have to carry this relationship forward, um, while watching, not just words but actions,

Jeff Goldberg ([10:38](#)):

Because I'm a masochist, I'll try one more time. Um, no, no, no, no, no. It's because no, there's a series because you have direct exposure to very fascinating world leaders. We talk about some others as well. Um, I'm asking what you think about MBS. Do you think that he is, um, the unstable authoritarian thin-skinned dictator that, that the Washington post and well beyond the Washington post believe, or do you think he's capable of growth? We're, we're, we're understanding this. I, in the context of this guy could be running Saudi Arabia 50 years. I'm just asking your own impressions of being directly involved with him on numerous occasions, not just this last visit.

Jake Sullivan ([11:16](#)):

So I will say that, um, I have made it a point from taking this job to reserve my personal opinions about other world leaders that I don't think is like something that should factor into us foreign policy in a, in a significant way. And, um, so I'm afraid that I'll keep my own council in terms of answering that question. Sorry.

Jeff Goldberg ([11:36](#)):

You'll write it for the Atlantic eventually. Exactly. Thank you. Um, the let's, let's go, let's talk about, um, let's talk about Ukraine a bit, uh, give us your analysis of Russia's campaign to date, where you've been surprised, where you're not surprised, and, and maybe if you could talk about what you and the president can, would consider to be success, what does success look like in Ukraine? And I don't mean just success for the, from the Ukrainian perspective, but what would, what conditions would have to obtain for you to feel like the west has gotten the better of this situation?

Jake Sullivan ([12:19](#)):

Well, so first on the question of, um, you know, how we've watched this unfold, uh, since it began and, and what was surprising and not surprising, I have to acknowledge upfront that it was the assessment of the American intelligence community who did just a masterful job of, of ferreting out describing, and then disseminating what the Russian plans were, but it was their judgment that Russia, uh, would be significantly more capable and significantly more successful on the battlefield taking territory. Uh, as a military that had kind of built itself up in the world's estimation, uh, as a first rate global power military. And in fact, Russia was not able to achieve the basic strategic objectives that president Putin set out, which were to seize the capital city of Kyiv and to end Ukraine as a going concern. And instead the Ukrainians won the battle of Kyiv.

Jake Sullivan ([13:17](#)):

They beat, uh, Russia back from car Kyiv. They stopped Russia from being able to make a bums rush to Odessa. And, uh, they essentially stymied the Russian effort to get beyond, uh, a swath of territory in the south and east of the country. And now we're in a circumstance in which, uh, Russia is facing significant difficulties, constituting, the kind of force necessary for them to achieve the objectives, which have not fundamentally changed, but the gap between their capabilities and, and Putin's objectives has grown with each passing month. And that has been an enormous credit to the bravery and skill of the Ukrainian military, the resilience of the Ukrainian people, the leadership of, uh, Ukrainian's president

and those around him who galvanized the international support in the early weeks and months. And it's also a credit to the fact that we have provided an enormous amount of sophisticated weaponry and training on that weaponry to give Ukraine the capability to, uh, achieve those military successes against the Russian army.

Jake Sullivan ([14:32](#)):

Now, um, from the point of view of what we see as success first, our view from the point of view of Ukraine itself is that we want to see a sovereign independent, viable Ukraine that emerges proudly from this and can repel any future Russian aggression. What exactly the terms of any diploma CR and president Zelensky himself has said that diplomacy is ultimately going to have to be part of the resolution of this. That is for the Ukrainians to determine for us, our job is to put the Ukrainians on the strongest possible footing on the battlefield so that they are in the strongest possible position at the negotiating table. Beyond that we have two further objectives. One to ensure that Putin is tying in his goal to weaken and divide the west. And I believe that he has so far gotten the exact opposite of what he sought, which is a more purposeful, more United, more determined, uh, and more capable NATO Alliance than at any point in modern memory.

Jake Sullivan ([15:30](#)):

And I also believe that the, that, that we have staying power, despite, you know, what a lot of people raise questions about. They raised those questions six months ago, we proved them wrong. They raised them today. I believe we will prove them wrong. And second, we believe that it is our, uh, uh, strategic objective to ensure that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not a strategic success for Putin, that it is a strategic failure for Putin. And that means both that he be denied his objectives in Ukraine, and that Russia pay a longer term price in terms of the elements of its national power. So that the lesson that goes forth to would be aggressors elsewhere is that if you try things like this, it comes at a cost that is not worth bearing. And that is part of what we are trying to accomplish in this as well.

Jeff Goldberg ([16:16](#)):

Let's talk about your efforts to help Ukraine win on the battlefield. Obviously supplying huge, huge number of weapons. Um, but I know from talking to him that your mock among others, you seem to have a daily phone call with your Mac, where he gives you a shopping list of things that they need. Um, do you accept the Ukrainian criticism that the us is not supplying enough and fast enough? And let me add onto that since you're already going down this road, why not long range drones?

Jake Sullivan ([16:49](#)):

So, um, I accept that if I were sitting where my counterpart or president Zelensky were, I'd be doing exactly what they're doing. I'd be asking for more faster, who wouldn't, who is a Patriot for their country. That's their job. Our job is to provide everything that we can on a basis that is, um, specifically targeted to the military objectives. They're trying to pursue that is sustainable from the point of view of their capacity, to absorb it into their military, that is sustainable from the point of view of us being able to train them up on systems that are highly sophisticated and need to be used and maintained effectively, uh, and that bring along the entire Alliance as well. So we have a number of factors that have to go into it. Do I believe that we have undersupply the Ukrainian military? I do not. I believe that the United States is speed scope and scale of military assistance to Ukraine is, uh, an, an absolute Testament to the logistical capacity of the us military.

Jake Sullivan ([17:54](#)):

And honestly, to the surprising political capacity of the us Congress to come together on a bipartisan basis and put forward the resources to get this done. But we have moved billions of dollars of equipment in at, at what, by any, uh, kind of reasonable historical analysis would say is lightning speed. And we will continue to do so. There are certain capabilities. The president has said he is not prepared to provide. One of them is long range missiles, a Tums that have a, a range of 300 kilometers, because he does believe that while a key goal of the United States is to do the needful to support and defend Ukraine. Another key goal is to ensure that we do not end up in a circumstance where, um, we are heading down the road towards a third world war. And so for a system like that, the president has said, I'm prepared to give you sophisticated precision guided munitions for these high Mars that have been used to great effect, but I'm not going to give the long range, uh, missiles we have in fact, um, contracted for, uh, multiple different kinds of UAVs for Ukraine, uh, and we will continue to do so.

Jake Sullivan ([19:08](#)):

UAVs for us, from our perspective are an essential part of this fight are very much consistent with Ukrainian doctrine of what they're trying to accomplish in the United States has directly supplied them and has helped facilitate other countries, uh, to supply them as well. And they've been used to very good effect. H

Jeff Goldberg ([19:25](#)):

How worried are you about the American people staying power on this issue? Granted, there are no American troops involved, but we do have a short attention span. The war has become grinding in a kind of way. Do you worry about criticism that we're spending billions and millions of dollars to support Ukraine, not spending it here?

Jake Sullivan ([19:43](#)):

It's my job to worry. So I worry about literally everything. I worry about my answer to this question. Um, so yes, I guess I worry, but in a way that's sort of not saying anything at all. Um, uh,

Jeff Goldberg ([19:58](#)):

I mean, this is the, this is the being John Malkovich portion of the, of our, of our session,

Jake Sullivan ([20:03](#)):

But fundamentally no, and I think it's very important for, uh, Putin to understand what exactly he's up against from the point of view of the United States is staying power. Number one, Congress passed a 40 billion package for Ukraine of which a substantial amount remains. And we are, uh, working on a month by month basis to move weapons at, you know, at a pace, as I said before, that the Ukrainians can actually absorb and get out onto the battlefield with trained personnel to deploy them. That can go on just on the basis of what we have already had allocated to us in resources for a considerable period of time. And then I strongly believe that there will be bipartisan support in the Congress to re-up those resources, should it become necessary? Does that mean that there is the same level of intensity in the American public as there was in the early weeks of the war?

Jake Sullivan ([21:03](#)):

Is it on TV 24 7? No, but is the reservoir of support in this country as translated into the Congress and the executive branch deep and sustainable from the point of view of doing whatever it takes for as the

president has said, as long as it takes? Yes. And I actually believe that that is basically true, despite the difficulties, the Europe is facing on energy for the major European countries as well. Uh, and you see actually in a way, the issue today is not wavering a public support for Ukraine, but still upward pressure on governments there to do more, uh, and to supply more weapons and to go further with respect to sanctions, and you just saw the European union take yet another step with its seven package of sanctions this week alone at the very time that all the headlines are saying somehow there's flagging interest in this issue.

Jeff Goldberg ([21:54](#)):

How worried are you about the physical safety of president Zelensky now

Jake Sullivan ([22:00](#)):

I thought, I thought I'd coached you with the previous question, not to start with how worried are you cuz

Jeff Goldberg ([22:05](#)):

I'm my

Jake Sullivan ([22:05](#)):

Answer. Is

Jeff Goldberg ([22:06](#)):

Jacob worried, worried as you know, I'm worried as you know, I'm unable

Jake Sullivan ([22:10](#)):

I'm but go on. No, uh, I mean, is

Jeff Goldberg ([22:13](#)):

Compared to where you compared to where you guys were in February?

Jake Sullivan ([22:16](#)):

I want obviously, and it's not something to make light up because president Lasky's personal safety is something that, that concerns us. This is a leader in war time, dealing with an opponent, an adversary and enemy in Russia that is ruthless brutal and capable of just about anything. So, uh, it is a concern, um, uh, president Zelensky takes, uh, the precautions you would expect to protect himself to protect continuity of government in Ukraine. And we are trying to help and facilitate that in any way that we can,

Jeff Goldberg ([22:49](#)):

Uh, China, Taiwan, um, is there a possible, and this came up in an earlier panel, I heard, uh, possible that, uh, one of the problems you might be facing in the near future in terms of supplying Ukraine with weapons necessary for its defense, that you're also trying to buttress Taiwan with many of the same kinds of weapons. Um, the second part of that is the larger question. The porcupine strategy is Taiwan ready right now to repel a Chinese attack.

Jake Sullivan ([23:25](#)):

So on the first question, um, one of the things I've learned a lot about in the last 18 months is every form of artillery, munition, coastal defense system, Naval mine, um, you know, that is produced on mother earth, not just American systems, but European systems, Soviet systems, and so forth. And, um,

there are longer term questions about ensuring that our defense industrial base, the American defense industrial base and our allies defense industrial base can be, uh, put in a position to be able to sustain the kind of, uh, security assistance that we are going to need to keep supplying Ukraine as well as Taiwan, as well as ourselves to ensure that we are, uh, maintaining a proper level of deterrent that is going to require, uh, increased investment increased workforce development, increased emphasis on supply chains to ensure that, uh, components are not being cannibalized and, and that all of the necessary types of systems, especially munitions are getting created in sufficient numbers.

Jake Sullivan ([24:32](#)):

I believe that, um, particularly under the leadership of deputy secretary Hicks, we have a good strategy for that we're working in. Um, there are some overlaps between the systems for Ukraine and the systems for Taiwan. There are also some big differences because the nature of the, uh, the contingency or the conflict would be quite different from land war in Europe and a, uh, and a potential contingency across the Taiwan straight. So, um, it's not, it's not a one for one trade off between those two, except for, with certain types of capabilities. Um, with respect to the porcupine strategy. One of the things that the United States has tried to do over multiple administrations, but that we have accelerated dramatically over the course of the past 18 months, is to try to ensure that in our defense and security relationship with Taiwan, we are focused on those capabilities that are going to be most useful in, um, the kinds of contingencies we can expect and not just rely on systems that, you know, they've had around for a very long time.

Jake Sullivan ([25:31](#)):

A lot of people talk about whether China is learning lessons from Ukraine. And it's a very interesting question. And of course they are. And some of those lessons I think, um, are concerning actually, but not as many people ask as Taiwan learning lessons from Ukraine and you can bet they are. They're learning lessons about citizen mobilization and territorial defense. They're learning lessons about, uh, information warfare and how to set the information space. And they're learning lessons about how to prepare for a potential, uh, contingency involving, uh, China and they're working, uh, rapidly at that. And, and as part of our approach, um, which is as you know, rooted in the one China policy and the three joint communicates and the six assurances and the Taiwan relations act is to have this defense and security relationship, um, where this question is a part of our engagement with the Taiwans. Could you

Jeff Goldberg ([26:25](#)):

Just pause on something you said, uh, a moment ago, what are the lessons that China is learning that most concern you from the Ukraine? You just mentioned the concerning lessons that they're learn that they're picking up?

Jake Sullivan ([26:37](#)):

Well, I think that, um, you, you can look at what RO, uh, Russia has done in Ukraine and say, say a much bigger country, much bigger military has gone after a much smaller neighbor, uh, with a much smaller military and not achieved its objectives and say, Hey, maybe we should completely rethink this. I think our view is, um, it's more about how do we do it better than, uh, if we had to do it, I'm not predicting anything, but then, oh man, we should completely rethink this entire thing.

Jeff Goldberg ([27:07](#)):

If the west wins in Ukraine, you think China no longer contemplates invading Taiwan.

Jake Sullivan ([27:12](#)):

I, the way I look at this is it's never as simple as that ever because countries, I think these kinds of analogies in this question of credibility in one part of the world, translating absolutely to decisions in another part of the world. No, I, I don't think it's as simple as that, but do I think it would have an impact? Yes. And I do think that part of our objective in Ukraine has to be able to show strength, resilience, staying power, military capability, because that will have some impact on our ability to effectively deter others elsewhere.

Jeff Goldberg ([27:49](#)):

You, you spend a lot of time thinking about China, strategic perspective. Give us your, give us your view now of the competition between the us and China. I, I have a feeling you're feeling a little bit better about it, then you, then you were maybe a year or two ago, but go into this.

Jake Sullivan ([28:06](#)):

Yeah. So look, I think we came in office, I think there were sort of three basic strategic facts that we were looking at the first is, um, that, that China, Beijing, the PRC was, was presenting a bit of an inevitability narrative. China will inevitably surpass the United States as the world's leading power. And equally importantly, the United States is inevitably in decline. That was an important part of the Chinese strategic logic being pedaled in the Indo Pacific. But frankly globally, the second is that the next decade is a decisive decade in terms of capabilities across the board, military economic technological, soft power. And the third is that no matter what happens with the trajectory of our two countries over that decade, we are going to have to live with one another in the international system and have some terms upon which, uh, we deal with one another.

Jake Sullivan ([28:55](#)):

So those were the facts that we came in with, upon which we had to build a strategy. And so the strategy that we put forward was really somewhat boring, straightforward, but I think ultimately has put us in a better position today than we were when we inherited it. And it came down to invest, align, compete, invest in the sources of American strength and with any luck in, in the coming days, we will make a big step forward on that with this, uh, bipartisan innovation agreement that will help with the industries of the future align with allies and like-minded partners and from the Quad to August to the G7 to the trade and technology council with the EU to this most, most recent trip to the middle east. I think our alignment and convergence around the challenge posed by China is at a high watermark and then compete effectively across all of these domains, but don't let competition unintentionally drift or trip into conflict or a new cold war.

Jake Sullivan ([29:57](#)):

That is how we have tried to approach things. I believe that we have hit our marks in terms of what we set out. And, uh, two days ago was the 18, 18 month point of this administration. And I think in the Indo Pacific in Europe, in the middle east, as we look at the global competition with China, I think we are well positioned to be able to effectively deal with it. And the last thing I would say on the inevitability narrative is, is never a good bet to bet against the United States of America. And if you look at the headwinds China's facing from the point of view of, uh, economic, uh, challenges, uh, it's continued

effort to deal with the zero COVID policy. I think there are real questions about what exactly its trajectory is going forward. Uh, and that is something countries both near and far from China are having to factor in.

Jeff Goldberg (30:48):

Uh, one more thing on this. The, the president, um, is known on occasion for making off the cuff statements that then are debated, are they policy? Was it an off the cuff statement and so on? But the president has said, I believe three times that the us will come to Taiwan's defense in the case of an attack, is that formal us policy. In other words, one of the huge differences between Ukraine and Taiwan might be this fact.

Jake Sullivan (31:13):

So the president said in Japan, uh, that our policy has not changed, that we maintain a policy of strategic ambiguity and we do. And, you know, when it comes to Taiwan generally, and there are people here who've been dealing with this issue for decades, um, every administration's Taiwan policy, both its declaratory policy and its actual policy has contained multitudes, many different sentences that you look at collectively and say, how do those all fit together? But somehow that ambiguity, that creative tension within the policy has allowed us to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait for multiple decades across multiple administrations. So, uh, the direct answer to your question is no, as the president himself has said, our policy has not changed, uh, and we, uh, maintain a policy of strategic

Jeff Goldberg (32:01):

I'm periodically reminded that you were a debater when you just elevate strategic incoherence into a policy. <laugh>

Jake Sullivan (32:08):

Well, I will, I will make this point that people, people often put the word strategic before something, you know, as, as a way of making it sound good, like strategic patients kind of means we don't quite know what we're doing, but we're gonna be strategic about waiting a while to figure it out. And strategic ambiguity means we don't want to be super clear, so strategically we're gonna be ambiguous and so on and so on. So I, I acknowledge, I acknowledge that to us, let's move to it strategic conversation, but there is, but I, I will say it, you know, this is not just true in international affairs, it's true in many different realms of human life that, that, um, I wouldn't call it incoherence, but I would say, um, ambiguity has to be a feature of strategy in certain contexts, particularly very complex concepts. And, uh, and yes, I will, I will, I will stand to defend that, that idea, conceptually,

Jeff Goldberg (33:05):

Uh, noted. Um, let's go to, um, I wanna talk about Afghanistan for a minute. We're coming up on a year anniversary of the withdrawal. Um, and I was rereading and I, I suggest everyone read this, not for self-interested reasons, but Jake wrote a very, very interesting long piece in the Atlantic in the beginning of 2019, I think, um, on, among other things, American exceptionalism and making the case for an enlightened kind of an exceptionalism, um, in the course of that you wrote, um, that the purpose of foreign policy American foreign policy is to defend and protect the American way of life. Um, I was thinking about that in light of Afghanistan and the withdrawal and subsequent events in Afghanistan, mainly the, the closing of girls schools, the suppression of women and, and so on. And I'm wondering if

you could talk about any regrets that you may have about what happened and the, the, the, the consequences months later, for some of the most vulnerable people in Afghanistan and, and how you are, how you're thinking about that today and, and, uh, what mistakes might have been made, or if you think that everything that happened is just inevitable.

Jake Sullivan ([34:20](#)):

Look, I just gave an answer about strategic ambiguity, this and that very kind of abstract highminded stuff. But I think your question about Afghanistan is a good reminder, and it's something I try to remind myself every day. And I know that that Tom and Condi and Steve who are up here before probably did the same in their job. This is a, this is a human job. And the decisions we make have impacts on human beings. And, and that is something that is never lost on me. And, and I'm one of those human beings. It has an impact on me. And when I see the closing of girl schools, I think that is a horrible thing. And, uh, watching the images of the withdrawal was, was, was obviously painful, difficult, but I believe that the president's fundamental judgment, which was that after 20 years of war in Afghanistan, choosing a course, which was the alternative course to intensify our engagement, go back to war with the Taliban, lose more American life over more years, um, could not be justified on the basis of trying to sustain, um, you know, what we had done in Afghanistan.

Jake Sullivan ([35:34](#)):

It had to come to an end and there are human consequences to that, that we have an obligation to try to deal with through means other than the deployment of large numbers of us forces, the same way we try to alleviate similar kinds of grievous, um, atrocities and repressive policies, the world over without going to war. But did that includes a range of tools that we have, and that doesn't mean we succeed in every case. And obviously the situation in Afghanistan, particularly when it comes to issues like girls being able to go to school is not where we want it to be. But at the end of the day, the president's view was that we cannot stay at war indefinitely with the United States fighting and dying to try to hold cobble and, you know, other significant cities in that country. Um, and it would mean bearing some human costs to not do that, but those are the tough, uh, judgements that president has to make. And one year later, I think the president feels that the decision that he made was the right decision for the American people and the right decision for, uh, how we can position ourselves to be the best and most effective contributor to the global public, good, across a range of issues, uh, involving a range of geographies.

Jeff Goldberg ([36:55](#)):

One quick follow on that. Wasn't, didn't the late stage American involvement engagement in Afghanistan show that small numbers of troops could actually create a kind of backbone for the rest of the country. I mean, you didn't have that many troops, uh, in cobble, outside of cobble, uh, in the months, even years leading up to the withdrawal.

Jake Sullivan ([37:16](#)):

That's absolutely correct. And why, why was that? Why were we able to draw down to such a small number of forces and why were they able to operate with relative safety? It's because the previous administration struck an agreement with the Taliban and that agreement said, we'll stop attacking you. You can draw down your forces and you need to leave by May 1st, 2021. You need to leave. That was the policy and the agreement, whether we would've negotiated that same agreement or not is another

question. That was the agreement that president Biden inherited when he came into office. So his choice on May 2nd was not keep 2,500 troops in place in Afghanistan, and everything will be just fine. That is a fanciful concept. His choice was go back to war with it, Taliban, where we would've had to flow in more forces and increase our level of involvement in the country and increase the exposure of those troops to death and injury, uh, or draw down, follow through on the agreement. The previous administration made this idea that we could just sustainably stay there indefinitely at basically no cost is the kind of counterfactual that, you know, people can sit around and talk about. But at the end of the day, it was not the reality that the president confronted when he had to make this very hard decision. Jeff Goldberg ([38:36](#)):

There are many other subjects regions. We could talk about Iran among them, but I'd, I'd rather ask in our, in our few remaining minutes to, to, to have you talk a little bit about what you've learned in this role, um, for an audience of many, many security professionals. Um, I think back to the piece that you wrote in 2019, very, very excellent piece, uh, edited very well, by the way I have to say. Um, but, uh, you had a vision for what, of what a restoration of America America's role in the world could be. Um, and it's too complicated to go in in a few minutes, but I'm wondering when the rubber met the road, when you actually took this role, what, what have you learned about the, the, the realities, the difficulties of, of an enacting to borrow a word, a coherent, idealistic, expansive American foreign policy?

Jake Sullivan ([39:32](#)):

Well, one thing I've learned what a supply chain is <laugh>, um, and I say that kind of lightly, but it is remarkable how, um, the very notion of supply chain resilience was simply not a central topic of conversation in the national security space before COVID. Now it implicates everything from our capacity to lead on the industries of the future, like EV batteries to our ability to continue supplying Ukraine with 155 ammunition or Gimler to our ability, uh, to ensure that, um, China doesn't actually dominate a massive tracks of the global economy through basically buying up, um, uh, not just rare earth minerals, but many other types of important minerals from the America's Africa and elsewhere, actually that factor the factor of how, um, we need to up our game in terms of the United States, uh, being able to take advantage of our immense capacities to get, you know, to, to compete with China on supply chains, on infrastructure, on belt road, that whole set of things.

Jake Sullivan ([40:47](#)):

We were on the sidelines to that, and it has set us back strategically, and this administration has made a major push to try to catch up. That was not something I really contemplated back in 2019. It has become a big focus of ours now. And we think we put some points on the board. We've launched this new partnership for global, uh, in infrastructure and investment. Um, we are working hard to, um, to, to map the global supply chain and fix it. And that all sounds kind of Aine, but it is so elemental to our ability to succeed strategically and economically in the world. And it's something that I walked into this job basically waking up to because of what happened with COVID 19.

Jeff Goldberg ([41:30](#)):

This is, I guess this is what happens after two years of reality. I asked you to talk about American exceptionalism. You talked about supply chains, um, which may be maybe our exceptional.

Jake Sullivan ([41:38](#)):

Sorry. I thought you asked why. Yeah. Fair enough. Fair enough. Like, no,  
Jeff Goldberg ([41:41](#)):

No, no, it's fine. But go to part two of the, go to part two of the question you, you know, um, talk about America's role in the world post, uh, especially post Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Jake Sullivan ([41:52](#)):

Look, I mean, we were just at a NATO summit, uh, in which, uh, Finland and Sweden were invited to join too historically neutral, uh, countries that the president began reaching out to last fall that, um, within 24 hours of them going out and making their historic announcements in their capitals, their request was can we come to the United States and stand with Joe Biden, stand with the American president. Um, and when you go to these summits, even the most recent one, we just held with the GCC plus three, we get down on ourselves a lot. And we have a lot of challenges here at home and plenty of challenges that keep me up at night abroad, but the basic attributes and capacity of the United States, our value proposition in the world is profound today. And it will be profound 10 years from now. I truly believe that.

Jake Sullivan ([42:48](#)):

And I think a little bit of what we all collectively need to think about is how confidence is a commodity. It's something that we have to nurture and carry and, and display. And one of the things that Russia, Ukraine I believe has done for the us and us foreign policy is not just positioned us to lead the Western Alliance in the Euro Atlantic region, but it's had global reverberations countries around the world are looking at what the United States NATO, the G seven has done in response to that and said, wow, that that is a group of countries led by the United States with genuine capacity. And that should be taken note of, and that gives us an opportunity, not just in geopolitical competition, but to deal with the great challenges of our time, food security, climate pandemics, um, to make a difference to harness that for an agenda much broader than, um, the immediate crisis that we're facing on the European continent. Um, that's how I sit here feeling today at 18 months, plenty of problems. I think those problems also get plenty of attention, but a lot of huge opportunities for Americans.

Jeff Goldberg ([43:56](#)):

Let me just do one last follow up on this. And again, referring back to some of your, your writing and your thoughts from previous years. Um, one of your worries has been that there's no common story in America that young people, especially I'm, I'm interpreting this, but especially at the base of the democratic party, um, no longer feel that America has a positive role to play or never thought of it, that it did. Obviously the invasion of Ukraine has taught many people the difference between a microaggression and an aggression, um, and that there are people in the world more evil than the president of Oberlin college. But, uh, talk about where the next generation of national security and foreign policy thinkers are coming from. And if you're worried about this lack of a coherent, confident story is gonna affect America's ability to advance the ideals that you you talk about.

Jake Sullivan ([44:53](#)):

Yeah. So, you know, the, the starting off point for the piece that I wrote in the Atlantic, that Jeff is shamelessly plugging, um,

Jeff Goldberg ([45:01](#)):

That, that, that wasn't shameless, that was subtle <laugh>. And you wanna, I can do shameless  
Jake Sullivan ([45:05](#)):

Was, um, you know, I grew up as a child of the 1980s of top gun and red Dawn and miracle on ice. And, you know, I teach before I came into government, I was teaching students whose touch tone for American foreign policy was the Iraq war and Abu grave and Edward Snowden. And they were sort of, they would look at me like, what are you talking about, man? You know, as I would wax lyrical as I was just attempting to do a few minutes ago, I think a couple things about that generation. Um, one is that on the major strategic imperative of tackling the great global public goods, there actually is a way to out energizing, galvanize young people around the United States, being a leader on, on solving the food crisis or the climate crisis and so forth. We need to keep it that, but I do agree with you that the invasion of Ukraine has also crystallized this idea that there is, uh, an example of a direct attack on freedom and what it means for people to stand up and fight for freedom.

Jake Sullivan ([46:12](#)):

And I think that is reverberated through the United States in ways that have now left the front pages, but is still there in the mix in a real way. And I think it allows us to have a different kind of conversation going forward about what the United States can do to stand up, to try to be a force for good, because the military conflict people are talking about today is not the us' wars of the last 20 years. It's Russia's war of aggression that the United States is working with the free world to fight against. And I do think as a, as a platform, upon which to build a national conversation, especially with young people on the question of America's purpose and power in the world, it gives us, um, a meaningful opportunity to change. The, the course of that conversation doesn't mean it's gonna be straightforward because the, the, the kind of feeling of the last 20 years is real and it's it's deep, but there is an opportunity there. And I think we collectively should work to season

Jeff Goldberg ([47:08](#)):

Jake. Um, we all know that there are even more enjoyable things to do in Aspen, then answer questions about MBS and Ukraine. So we're very grateful for your time and your answers. And thank you very much for doing this really

Jake Sullivan ([47:19](#)):

Great. Thanks.