

Billington CyberSecurity Summit Fireside Chat

CIA Director William Burns Interviewed by David Appel, Vice President,
National Security, Amazon Web Services

Thursday, 08 September 2022

David Appel – 0:00

The CIA serves as the nation's early warning system for national security threats, and we've talked about technology as a key priority for the CIA. I'd like to start though, with today's overall threat landscape, and how your primary priorities reflect that. And specifically, Russia's war on the Ukraine has dominated your first 18 months. Can you talk a little bit about the CIA's role and your views right now?

Director Burns – 00:25

Sure. No, I'd be glad to David. It's good to be with you. And it's good to be with all of you as well. Yeah my first 18 months as Director of CIA and the war in Ukraine has certainly occupied a lot of our energy and attention and focus and the truth is, Putin and Russia have occupied a lot of my career in public service, especially over the last 20 years. I served as the US Ambassador in Moscow a little more than a decade ago as well. If you take a step back, I think to last fall, we in the US intelligence community began to develop a pretty clear picture of Russia planning for a major new invasion of Ukraine. And what was striking to us and to me about that was not just the scale of the planning, but also what it said about Putin's increasingly deep fixation with controlling Ukraine. I had watched, especially over the last decade, as Putin tightened his grip on power as he narrowed his circle of advisers and he was increasingly surrounded as he is today with a circle of advisors who either share his views of the world and of Ukraine or have learned over the years it's not career enhancing, to challenge you know, Putin's assumptions or positions of those issues and so, is that clique tightened and the circle narrowed, but you could also see quite clearly it was Putin sense of destiny and his appetite for risk increasing as well. And nowhere was that sense of destiny or that risk appetite greater than on his fixation with control in Ukraine. And so, President Biden asked me to go to Moscow in early November, to talk directly to Putin and some of his closest advisers about our deep concerns about their planning for a major new invasion and the serious consequences, the price, the heavy price that Putin and Russia would pay if they went ahead with those plans. You know, I have to say I was troubled before I got to Moscow, Moscow in early November of last year, and I was even more troubled when I left because Putin was very tough and measured, wasn't angry. But you know what that conveyed was a sense of someone who was pretty close to making up his mind about invasion. And so, you know, I'm very proud of the role that US intelligence is played. I think good accurate intelligence helped the President and senior policymakers to make good policy choices. Good intelligence helped to strengthen the solidarity, the alliance between the United States and all of our key partners in NATO in support of Ukraine. And good intelligence helped the Ukrainians to defend themselves better as well. We're now six months into you know, a very tough slog of a war. Ukrainians have begun to mount a counter offensive, especially in the south, but also in Kharkiv the northeastern part of Ukraine. I would not underestimate the capacity or the courage of the Ukrainians right now as well. Putin's, Putin's bet, I think is that he's going to be tougher than the

Ukrainians and the Europeans and the Americans, that he can wear down the Ukrainians and strangle their economy, the Europeans facing what's going to be a difficult winter with high energy prices are going to lose resolve. He thinks Americans -- Putin's view has always been we have attention deficit disorder, and we'll get distracted. And I believe and my colleagues at CIA believe that Putin is as wrong about that, as he was profoundly wrong in his assumption, going back to last February, about the Ukrainians will to resist and the will of the West, of the United States and all of our partners, to support the Ukrainians in that. So while the final chapter in Putin's war in Ukraine hasn't been written yet, I think intelligence is going to continue to play an enormously important role in supporting Ukraine and ensuring that Putin fails in Ukraine. And I think if you take a step back now, it's hard to see the record of the war, of Putin's record is anything other than a failure so far. Not only has the weakness of the Russian military been exposed, but there's going to be long term damage done to the Russian economy and to generations of Russians as a result of this. He faces two members of NATO and Finland and Sweden as well. And so you know, Russia is going to pay a very heavy price, I think over a long period of time. I'm very proud of the role that the United States and the US intelligence community is playing to support Ukrainians.

David Appel – 05:21

Thank you. Can you also talk a little bit about the about the decision to classify intelligence on Russia, Ukraine and what that means for other major issues including cyber challenges?

Director Burns – 05:39

Yeah, decisions to declassify intelligence are always very complicated ones. But I think when President Biden has decided very carefully, very selectively to you know, make public some of our secrets, it's played a very effective role over the course of the last six months and I think he can continue to again, if we make it the exception, not the rule, because the surest way, I've certainly found in a year and a half now as Director of CIA, to lose that access to good intelligence is to be reckless about how you handle it. But in this instance, I think it's been a very important means of denying Vladimir Putin something that I've watched him employ too often in the past, which is creating false narratives, trying to blame the Ukrainians to create false provocations and the run up to the war. And I think what we were able to do working, you know, with our allies and partners is to expose the fact that Putin's war is a naked, unprovoked aggression as well. And I think that's played - that very selective, very careful declassification has played an effective role. Again, I think we're going to have to be careful looking at other instances, whether it's in terms of cyber threats or other kinds of challenges that the United States and our allies will face in the future. But I think again, if used carefully and selectively, I think this technique, this tool of declassifying some of our secrets in a way that serves a broader strategy can pay big dividends.

David Appel – 07:12

How does that change? Or what does it mean in how we work with our allies and partners?

Director Burns – 07:16

Well, I mean, I think you have two different things. You're sharing intelligence with allies and partners, as I was saying before, in the case of Putin's war Ukraine, I think it's been extremely valuable as well now, makes a huge difference if you're right. I mean, if the intelligence is accurate, as I believe it has been in the run up to the war in Ukraine, then it plays a big role in helping to bring allies and partners closer together and deepening their interest and working closely with one another as well. And I think you can see that same benefit of very systematic intelligence sharing in supporting Ukrainians ability to defend themselves, as we see right through this day. But I think on many other issues around the world, that sharing of intelligence and doing it methodically and quickly with our partners, is a really important tool or instrument of American national security policy. Declassifying intelligence, parts of it and making it public is a different kind of tool, but as I've said before, I think that can also be effective in some circumstances.

David Appel – 08:23

And global competition with adversaries is a huge challenge. Can you speak a little bit more about how it's changed the way things were in the past?

Director Burns – 08:30

Sure. Yeah. I mean, I became a career diplomat, you know, almost 40 years ago now. So the beginning of the, in the midst of the Cold War as well and so you know, obviously, the international landscape has been transformed over the course of the last four decades or so in the world my colleagues and I face at CIA today, as you know, a very complicated one as well, with you know, major power competition with China and with Russia emerging as huge priorities for the United States and for our allies, you know, a rising power in China, a really formidable rival, I think, for the United States as far as the 21st century as I can see, and then Putin's Russia, you know, showing us every day that declining powers which is what Russia is today I think, can be at least as disruptive as rising ones. And then as all of you know, as well as I do, the revolution of technology, which is transforming the way in which we live, work, compete and fight and it's that revolution in technology as much as anything else I think that's going to shape intelligence services and the intelligence profession as well. It's a balancing act, because it's not as if at CIA we can neglect the continuing threat posed by terrorism as well. And you know, we focus very sharply on that. You know, one example of that was the success that the US intelligence and counterterrorism community demonstrated and the successful strike against Ayman al-Zawahiri, the co-founder and leader since Bin Laden's death of Al-Qaeda and responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people on 9/11 and other major terrorist attacks. And it's, you know, it's a demonstration I think that the continuing focus and capability of the US intelligence and counterterrorism community that the al-Zawahiri strike in a safe house in the middle of downtown in Kabul resulted in his elimination, but didn't cause any other casualties at all. So it's a reminder that we have to keep our eye on that ball as well.

David Appel – 10:40

Thank you. You touched a little on this, but technology is a central feature of global competition with adversaries and it affects our CIA does its job, but you just touched on both advantages and disadvantages. I'm thinking especially ubiquitous technical surveillance, which can make operating more difficult. Can you, can you talk a little bit more about how the CIA is adapting with technology?

Director Burns – 11:03

Well, you know, certainly the revolution in technology in the era of ubiquitous technical surveillance in smart cities, it's transformed the way in which our case officers, you know, conduct our tradecraft and do our business overseas. You know, it's an era in which we are under constant surveillance observation, on monitoring as well, where our adversaries and our rivals are able to use artificial intelligence and machine learning to mine data and go back through years into the past and discern patterns in our activities that make it a lot more complicated to conduct our tradecraft in our profession of human intelligence in particular, in the way that we were accustomed to doing it for years and years before. We're an adaptable agency. And so we're working very hard to transform our tools and our tradecraft. And we work a lot with the private sector as well to understand the patterns and innovation as well, not only to keep pace with our rivals, but to get ahead of them as well, which is going to be absolutely crucial. At the same time, you know, we've focused at CIA on the significance of the revolution in technology and the way in which we organized ourselves. Nearly one-third of all of CIA's officers today, work every day on issues related to you know, cybersecurity, issues related to technology and science, issues, issues related to digital innovation as well. But what we're trying to do is make sure that we're more than the sum of our parts. So that's why we've founded a new Mission Center, a new group at CIA, which aims at coordinating across the Agency, and in particular, trying to build stronger relationships with the private sector to so that we understand better. Not just, you know, patterns in innovation, but we understand civilian technologies as well as we've tried to understand military technologies for decades, because we have a contribution to make a competition with China and competition with other rivals in trying to help policymakers understand what's the best way to shore up vulnerabilities in our supply chains, how do we compete successfully in critical spheres as all of you know very well from semiconductors to quantum computing to synthetic biology as well. So we're putting a lot of energy and resources into those efforts. And we've named for the first time in CIA's history a Chief Technology Officer as well, aimed again at producing agency-wide technology strategy, as we look out over the next five or 10 years, and also better connected to the tech sector to the private sector as well into academia, again, so that we can perform that mission in supporting American interests, American policymakers, you know, as far right into the 21st century, as I can see.

David Appel – 14:04

Where do you see the private sector fitting in? What do you, what do you need from the private sector and the broader community to maintain this technological advantage in an era of strategic competition?

Director Burns – 14:14

Well, I mean, I think 60 or 70 years ago, the truth was, you know, the US government investing very heavily at the height of the Cold War in research and development. And so, you know, the federal government could, to some extent drive innovation, again, as all of you know, better than I do, it's the private sector today, which drives patterns of technological innovation, more than the federal government notwithstanding all the skills that I was describing before and the human talent. And so we need, and this is true of my colleagues across the US government and the intelligence community, to build better partnerships as well with the private sector. I think the CHIPS Act, I saw Senator King was out here before, and I think that Congress deserves a great deal of credit for passage of the CHIPS Act as well, which I think aims at deepening that public private partnership, particularly in the area of ensuring that in semiconductors, we are able to compete successfully with China, with Russia with others and that we're able to reduce what can sometimes be an unhealthy reliance on foreign suppliers as well. So that's, you know, one pretty big example of the importance of that partnership with the private sector but for CIA, you know, we feel acutely the need to deepen, you know, our own understanding and that understanding really is going to rely on healthy partnerships with the private sector too.

David Appel – 15:39

Finding and retaining cyber and technology talent is a challenge for everyone, everyone in this room, both in the public and private sector. How is the CIA addressing this issue?

Director Burns – 15:50

Well, it's a pretty fierce competition for talent that all of us face in the US government in the private sector, as well. So we try to approach this from a number of different angles. As I said, we're well aware of the strengths that we already have. But we recruit very energetically across all 50 states in the United States, for STEM talent as well. We offer scholarships for students, internships, to give people an exposure to the work that we do. We offer both hiring and retention bonuses, a little bit unusual in the US government, but a way to both attract and retain talent. We just set up a new CIA Technology Fellows Program, which aims to create a two way street to make it possible for talented professionals in the private sector to spend shorter periods in public service for six months or a year. And then also to make it possible for some of our officers to get experience, again for shorter periods of time in the private sector as well. So you know, we face a real challenge in building greater flexibility into how we connect better with the private sector. We're never going to be able to match in the US government the kind of salaries or, you know, economic benefits that you can find in lots of parts of the tech sector as well. What we can offer, though, are fascinating problems to solve along the lines of what we were discussing before, a fascinating group of people to try to solve those problems with smart dedicated people, and an opportunity whether it's for short periods of service or a whole career, to serve our country as well at a critical moment of transformation, at a moment when the revolution in technology,

I think, as much as any other single factor is going to shape not just the future of intelligence services like CIA, but the future of American society as well.

David Appel – 17:46

Thank you. Going back to something we were talking about a little early. You mentioned you appointed the first Chief Technology Officer for the CIA earlier this year and of course, directly you that got a lot of attention. Can you go into a little bit more on your thinking and your rationale for that decision?

Director Burns – 18:00

Well, I mean, the the rationale is essentially what I was trying to describe before the importance again of us, having an agency-wide technology strategy which draws on all the talent and all the resources we have that builds a better partnership with the private sector, that builds on partnerships as well with, you know, allies and partners, many of whom, I know you're going to talk to one of our British colleagues just after this, and those partnerships are critically important as we look at supply chain issues in semiconductors and other areas as well. So that's an opportunity, I think, across the CIA, but for our Chief Technology Officer, a gentleman named Nand Mulchandani with a quarter century of experience in the tech, sector in startups, a very good feel for you know what we have to begin by building better partnerships. And his first charge is to work again with all of our colleagues across CIA to produce for the first time, a serious agency-wide technology strategy looking out over the long term. So I think there are a lot of opportunities here. And Nand as the CTO is already working very closely with you know, a lot of the exceptional leaders and exceptional digital cyber and technology specialists that we already have at the Agency. So I'm optimistic about what we can achieve along those lines.

David Appel – 19:32

A few more minutes. Final question. How do you, going forward, how do you balance the Great Power Competition with continuing with the counterterrorism challenges as well?

Director Burns – 19:40

Well, as I mentioned before, and there's a lot of you know, very well, it's like terrorism is going to go away, as a threat to our homeland or the United States. And I think we've had, you know, made considerable progress over the course of the two decades since 9/11. And not only developing our own techniques our own capabilities, some of which was so on display. And the successful strike that I mentioned before against al-Zawahiri in downtown Kabul. We've built by contrast to the world I remember more than two decades ago before 9/11, a series of very strong partnerships around the world to fight terrorism effectively. And we have to be mindful that the terrorism landscape is shifting around the world. It's not exactly the world that we face to the immediate aftermath of 9/11. But we can't afford to neglect that challenge. And so that's why it remains an important priority for CIA as well, as I know, is the case across the US intelligence and counterterrorism community. There are lots of

other challenges. So we talked a good bit already about major power competition, technology and counterterrorism. But at CIA, what we also have to do is provide policymakers, starting with the President, the best possible analysis that we can provide, to collect the best intelligence we can about the wider trend lines out there, whether it's climate change or food insecurity, that are affecting the lives of lots of people around the world beyond the sort of headline issues that, you know, we've been discussing already. So that's also a part of our role, is to help policymakers look ahead at a world that's changing very fast, and to understand those kinds of trend lines as well so that we can make smart policy choices and position the United States for success in dealing with a whole range of issues. So it's a constant balancing act that I find at my job over the last year and a half, but I'm very fortunate to be in this role. I'm very proud of the work we do at CIA. I'm very proud of all of the colleagues that I work with, you know, they oftentimes operate in the shadows that's the nature of intelligence we're kind of out of sight out of mind, but they're incredibly dedicated group of Americans, a group of professionals as well working very hard and doing very hard jobs in very hard places around the world to help keep all of us safe, to help keep American society safe as well.

David Appel – 22:20

Director Burns, I want to thank you for your time and spend time with us. We have about a minute left if there's any final comments you want to make or any final statements you want to make?

Director Burns – 22:30

No, thanks. As I said before, I just really look forward to you know, over the course of the next few years to try to deepen the kinds of partnerships that CIA has already begun to build and lots of my colleagues across the federal government have already begun to build with the private sector. I think you know, we not only have a lot to learn about patterns and technology and innovation, but I think we have a lot to impart sometimes too, about the very complicated international landscape that all of us have to deal with as well and the kinds of challenges and oftentimes real threats that major powers, major power rivals, like China can pose for us as well, too. So, you know, that's one of the things that I've tried to make, you know, among my highest priorities as Director of CIA we'll keep working very hard at that. So thanks very much for the opportunity to see all of you today, and I wish you a really good rest of this important conference.