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Signature Event

The Honorable Jake Sullivan
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Chairman
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DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN: So, why don't we just start with the news from this morning. There was a report that a Russian ship was shot – abandoned, perhaps. What can you tell us about that?

JAKE SULLIVAN: So, we've been in touch with the Ukrainians overnight, who have said that they struck the ship with anti-ship missiles. We don't have the capacity at this point to independently verify that.

But certainly, the way that this unfolded – it's a big blow to Russia. They – this is their flagship, the Moscow, and they have now been forced to admit that it has been badly damaged. And they've had to kind of choose between two stories: One story is that it was just incompetence, and the other was that they came under attack. And neither is a particularly good outcome for them.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Would you expect, based on some of the cruise missiles or other armaments we've provided to the Ukrainians and that other allies have provided as well, that there will be more incidents like this, where more ships will be damaged severely?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, without getting into sensitive operational issues, the president did go to NATO a few weeks ago, and indicated to our allies that we are looking to facilitate the supply of coastal defense and anti-ship capabilities to the Ukrainians, so that they can't be menaced from the sea. And that is being actively worked. And I'll leave it at that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, so we recently – the president and administration provided an additional amount of military assistance to the Ukrainians – I think $800 million or $900 million. When you come up with those kind of numbers, do you sit down with the Ukrainians and say, what do you actually need? And do you know that the military suppliers, that our contractors, actually have this stuff ready to go?

MR. SULLIVAN: Yeah, exactly. So, we don't pick numbers out of a hat. In this particular case, the chairman of the joint chiefs, Mark Milley and myself, spent two hours by secure phone with the Ukrainian CHOD, the chief of defense for Ukraine, and the chief of staff to President Zelensky. And we went item by item through their list, numbers, capabilities.

Some of them are in our stocks, on their priority list; some of them are post-Soviet equipment that we don't have. And essentially, what we do is, we go through everything that we can acquire from our own holdings, everything that we can get our allies and partners to give. We put all that together, and we organize the logistics of delivering it.

And the $800 million that we announced yesterday was everything that we could muster in a reasonable timeframe, to get to the Ukrainians so that they will have those systems ready to use for the coming battle in the East.

And so, if you go down that list, you'll see that it's all things that the Ukrainians have requested. And the president – President Biden had the chance to talk to President Zelensky yesterday to review the list with him, which, you know, is a – is an extremely positive conversation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And when they have those kind of discussions, is it in English, or is there an interpreter?

MR. SULLIVAN: There is an interpreter, and actually, quite a remarkably good interpreter, who works for the U.S. government. But President Zelensky will occasionally switch into English. So most of it is done through interpretation. But when President Zelensky wants to emphasize a particular point, or when they're sort of connecting personally, President Zelensky will speak in English.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when we provide weapons to them, do the – do the contractors who might have the weapons in their supplies, do they just ship it directly? Or do they have to give it to the U.S. military, and then we ship it over?

MR. SULLIVAN: So ultimately, the logistics are managed at the government level, not at the private contractor level. But – I'll leave it at that, because we've tried to protect the method by which we're actually moving the material into Ukraine.

MR RUBENSTEIN: OK, and is there a danger that maybe we won't be able to get these supplies in, because the Russians might try to shoot down planes that are bringing these things in, or ships, or however they're getting there?

MR. SULLIVAN: So we have to be consistently concerned about the Russians trying to interdict weapon shipments, either from the United States, or those that we've facilitated from our allies and partners.

What I will say is this: The United States is not operating inside the territory of Ukraine, and so if the, you know, the Russians obviously were to strike NATO territory, where the material is being assembled, that would invoke Article 5,[1] and would be a complete gamechanger. And their efforts thus far to try to interdict this material inside Ukraine have been limited, but of course, that's something that we're constantly watching. And so part of the effort is to ensure that there is a resilient and diverse method of getting equipment in.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: The president visited Poland recently. And was there any thought to his going into Ukraine?

MR. SULLIVAN: We did talk about it. I think the president would love the opportunity to go to Ukraine to show solidarity with the Ukrainians. The question of what kind of footprint that would require, what kind of assets that would take from the Ukrainians, as well as from us, is a very serious one for him. So, it was not under any serious planning that he would actually go to Ukraine on that trip.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: There are reports today that a U.S. senior official will visit Ukraine. It was reported that maybe the secretary of defense, or somebody like that; I assume you can't tell

[1] Article 5 of the NATO treaty states that an attack on one member of NATO is an attack on all of its members.

in advance. But can you suggest that maybe it would be that idea, if there would be a senior official at some point? Or you can't comment on that?

MR. SULLIVAN: I can't. I'm not going to speak to any question about a senior official visiting Kyiv, or visiting Ukraine at this point, because we want to make sure if and when that happens – and obviously, you know, Kyiv stands. We want to get Americans back there. But if and when that happens, we'll want to make sure it's done in a very secure way.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, so the president recently said that what the Russians were doing was genocide. And was that a carefully constructed use of the word, or would – did it just happen, and now you're saying, well, we agree with the use of the word genocide? Or is there any doubt that genocide's going on? And what are you going to do about genocide being?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, the president said, after he said initially, you know, this – we've got a brutal dictator committing genocide in eastern Ukraine. He was asked to elaborate on that by the press on the trip to Iowa a couple of days ago. And what he said is what he has assessed over the course of the past weeks, seeing everything that has come in, which is that the Russians and Putin seem to be hellbent on erasing the very idea of Ukrainian identity as an independent identity. And when you combine that with the mass acts of killing, from the president's perspective, that's genocide.

Now, he also said, that's from his perspective. There is a legal process our State Department goes through. The lawyers look at the terms of the Genocide Convention,[2] and make a determination as to whether, in fact, it meets the legal standard. That's something that will take quite a bit of time. But the president was quite deliberate in his own personal use of that term.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: How much longer do you think the fighting will continue in Ukraine? Is it a couple of weeks, is it a couple of months, a year, or more? Do you have any idea?

MR. SULLIVAN: It's very hard to assess. I have said before from the White House podium that we believe there is a good chance that the fighting will be protracted, that this will go on for months, or even longer. Because what you're looking at is a substantial amount of territory in the east that the Russians are now going to – and in the south, that the Russians are going to seek to contest. And they're going to throw a lot at it, and the Ukrainians are going to resist.

But you know, obviously, we should all offer some degree of humility in making projections about the course of this war, because it's uncertain as to how exactly it will unfold.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: The economic sanctions that the administration has imposed, along with our allies in Europe and other places, are they having any bite on Putin's ability to fight that you can see?

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[2] The Genocide Convention (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG)), is an international treaty that criminalizes genocide and obligates state parties to enforce its prohibition.

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, one of the ways in which they are hampering his ability to fight is a lesser focused-on part of the economic pressure, which are the export controls. The United States and all of our western allies, as well as our key allies in Asia, Korea and Japan, have all signed up to export controls on high-end inputs to defense technology. So Russia's ability to retool and replenish – because many of the systems rely on western microchips and other western components – has been severely limited, and they are exhausting the stocks of some of those high-end weapons. So that's a very direct way in which you will see that. And then more broadly, reducing the amount of money coming into Russia, reducing the Russian state coffers and freezing or immobilizing hundreds of billions of dollars in their central bank, has an impact on their ability to fund and fuel the war machine.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: As long as the Europeans still need to buy Russian gas and oil, the Russians will still have some money that they can fight this war with, is that right?

MR. SULLIVAN: It's fair to say that they're continuing to collect resources. And so I'm not sitting here suggesting we have so starved them of those resources that they literally can't field an army and continue to try to make progress on the battlefield.

On the issue of European purchases of oil and gas: First, they just banned the purchases of coal. Second, there's more active discussion in Europe now, and more active discussion between us and Europe, about what the future of that energy relationship is. And one thing the United States is doing, very aggressively, is taking practical steps to help Europe be able to wean itself off of Russian gas, by increasing and intensifying the delivery of the supplies of U.S. liquified natural gas.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Is there any evidence the Chinese are providing military equipment or financial aid in any way to the Russians that you know of?

MR. SULLIVAN: Military equipment, we have not seen that yet, but it's something that we constantly monitor. And of course, you know, we don't have complete visibility at all times, so we have to keep intensively looking to see whether that's something that will happen. But at the moment, we have not seen that.

On financial aid, that's a complicated question to answer, because of course, Russia and China have an economic relationship, and there is continuing economic intercourse between Russia and China. But have we seen a kind of systematic effort to undermine, weaken, or defang the sanctions? At this point, we have not. But again, day by day, week by week, that's something we watch very closely

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Are there any more economic sanctions left that you can actually impose? It seems as if you've imposed almost every economic sanction imaginable. Are there any more you have in your toolkit?

MR. SULLIVAN: I mean, what we have done is unprecedented in terms of a major economy, to take this set of steps across financial sanctions, investment bans, the export controls I spoke about before.

And what's also quite remarkable is more than 600 major companies leaving Russia of their own accord – American companies, European companies. And we're grateful to the ways in which the private sector has stepped up on behalf of principle and value. And there are now more companies that are making that decision as to whether they're going to leave. And of course, the United States, kind of – there's always – as long as there is a functioning economy somewhere, more tools you could potentially bring to bear. We feel we've taken the major measures.

But where our focus will be over the course of the coming days is on evasion. It's on – as Russia tries to adjust to the fact that it is under this massive economic pressure, what steps do they take to try to evade our sanctions, and how do we crack down on that. And I think we'll have some announcements in the next week or two, that identify targets that are trying to facilitate that evasion, both inside Russia and beyond.

And then, of course, there's this issue of energy and Europe. And that's an ongoing conversation with the Europeans.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Every war comes to an end, or at least has an armistice at some point, it seems. So at some point, this presumably will end. I don't know how long that will be; nobody knows. But when that happens, do you think these sanctions will automatically be lifted as a result of the negotiations? Or it's not a foregone conclusion that sanctions will be lifted?

MR. SULLIVAN: It's not a foregone conclusion. A lot of that depends on what the shape and scope of that diplomatic agreement is. And a lot of it depends on what the Ukrainians, in consultation with us and the Europeans, come to agree to. You know, we're not going to do a deal over the head of the Ukrainians where we give a bunch of sanctions relief to Russia. But if some measure of sanctions relief were built into some credible diplomatic solution led by the Ukrainians, that's something that we would happily discuss with them.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And what about the oligarchs and their yachts and other possessions? Are you likely to give them back as part of a deal as well, or is that off the table?

MR. SULLIVAN: [Laughs.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And won't those be available for reparations of some type, in other words, are you going to sell those yachts?

MR. SULLIVAN: I will say one thing that I was not deep on before taking this job was laws on asset seizure and forfeiture. I have come to learn quite a bit about it. There are authorities we have, and there are further authorities that maybe we could develop, and that's something we're actively looking at. And I don't want to get ahead of any announcements, but the president is actively looking at how he can deal with the fact that, as we seize these assets, our goal is not to give them back. Our goal is to put them to a better use than that.

But I'll be careful on what I say today, because there's an ongoing kind of policy process around how we end up dealing with that question. But rest assured that the goal is not just to sit on them for a while, and then pass them all back.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, so when we are sending weapons over to the Ukrainians, are they trained in the use of these weapons? And – or do we have to spend a lot of time training them?

MR. SULLIVAN: So, this is one of the factors that we consider, in terms of what we supply. They can much more easily integrate Soviet systems into their current operational formations. Just bringing a new weapons system from the United States and handing it over to a bunch of guys who have been working largely with post-Soviet systems could be, hence, more disruptive than additive.

So, some of our things are easily handed over and used, and Javelins[3] are a good example of this. We trained the Ukrainians over years on the use of Javelins, and so they now have the capacity to pass that training on to others, and that's a pretty seamless process.

For other types of systems, they do require some degree of training. In fact, Lloyd Austin[4] was just sort of publicly showing how we are doing a limited amount of training on some of these other systems. But we're trying to do it on systems where you can do it rapidly, not over the course of months or years. For some of the higher-end stuff that the United States has, it is a months or years process.

And then there's a separate question – it's not just about, can someone point and shoot with a given weapon; it's how is it maintained, and sustained, and repaired? What is the logistical tail for it? How do you build an entire ecosystem to be able to deploy it in the fight? So, there are some systems for which it just doesn't make sense because it would end up being a drag. But that's a constant conversation that we have with the Ukrainians about that piece of the puzzle, the question of, is this actually really usable in any kind of reasonable timeframe?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, so is there any red line that the Russians could cross, that would force us to go into Ukraine? In other words, let's suppose weapons of mass destruction were imposed – in Ukraine by the Russians – is that a red line that would force us to send troops or other things into Ukraine? Or is there – there is no red line?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, we have consistently said, with respect to the use of chemical or biological weapons, is that there would be severe consequences on Russia, and we've said nothing more than that, in terms of detailing them in public. We have communicated directly to the Russians our views on this subject, and we've consulted closely with our allies, and I'm going to leave it there.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, you don't want to give a tip about what you're telling them? [Laughter.] No? OK.

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[3] The Javelin is an American-made portable anti-tank missile system.
[4] U.S. Secretary of Defense

MR. SULLIVAN: Not today.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Not today, OK. So, is there any ongoing negotiation that's kind of – by Abramovich[5] or anybody that's trying to negotiate a peace here? Is there anything going on now behind the scenes that you can hint at, or there's nothing really going on?

MR. SULLIVAN: There is a negotiation that's going on. You know, Putin just spoke to it a day or two ago, where he described it as being as at a dead end, but they should keep working. And the Ukrainians have expressed a view that it has been a difficult slog, but they think remaining invested in trying to see if there's a negotiated solution is a good thing.

We have not been direct participants in any negotiation, because we believe this is something where the Ukrainians should be in the lead, and we should be in support. But we have regular consultations, and I will have a further consultation today with my counterparts in Kyiv by secure phone on what they're thinking. But we're not – we're not actively involved in any negotiations.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But we have intelligence that picks up what they're saying? Or we don't know what they're saying?

MR. SULLIVAN: I mean, we get reports from the Ukrainians, so I don't think this is one where they're trying to hide the ball on it. They're sharing with us the progress, or lack of progress, at the negotiating table.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So in this administration, what you've done in the war is to release previously classified information, that was declassified relatively quickly, so on the – where the Russian troops were, and on, theoretically, what Putin has been saying. Is that a novel technique? Are you happy with it? Is it having good benefit that you know of yet, essentially declassifying things quickly, and saying to the Russians, we know what you're thinking and saying, and what you're doing?

MR. SULLIVAN: So, we do think it's had a positive benefit. We do think it – novel might not be the exact right word, because this – the declassification and public presentation of intelligence has been done before. But the tempo and the manner in which we did it, particularly in the leadup to the war, I'm not familiar with another example of that.

And the reason we did it is really twofold. The first was to rob the Russians of the element of surprise, which they had in Crimea, and we did not want them to have here. The second was more important, which was, the Russians are masters of making things murky. How did this start? You know, were the Russians forced into it because of some provocation or pretext by the Ukrainians? We wanted to rob them of that as well, and show that this was premeditated, long-planned, that we knew what the plan was, that we knew roughly what the timeframe was. And so when it happened, the world would know that this was a brutal war of

[5] Roman Arkadyevich Abramovich is a Russian oligarch, businessman, philanthropist and politician. He is best known outside Russia as the owner of Chelsea, a Premier League football club in London, England, and is the primary owner of the private investment company Millhouse LLC.

choice, imposed by Putin and Russia on the Ukrainians, and not some conflict that began because things spun out of control.

We believe that we were very successful in that, and actually were able to rally the world to respond, not just aggressively over time, as they scrambled to figure it out, but very, very rapidly, within days. Within days of the invasion, we had imposed the most sweeping sanctions, in a coordinated fashion with the Europeans, the Japanese and others, that have ever been applied against a major economy, as I said before. And that could not have happened if we had not been painstakingly systematically doing these declassifications, and building this coalition for the moment when the Russians acted.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And when you declassify something, does it have to be declassified by the president of the United States? Does he have to sign off on it? Is that the only way you declassify things?

MR. SULLIVAN: He has the ultimate power and authority to declassify, and he gave broad strategic direction that we do this. But in terms of the individual pieces, there is a process that involves the intelligence community to ensure that sources and methods are protected. So they – ultimately, we deferred to the intelligence community to say, we're OK with that; we're not OK with that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you declassify something that says, Putin said this to somebody, doesn't it kind of make Putin wonder whether you have human intelligence right around him, or you're picking up his communications by technical means? Does that kind of make you nervous that, when you say, he's – this is what he's saying, in almost real time, isn't that dangerous, a bit?

MR. SULLIVAN: This is what protection of sources and methods is all about. It's a kind of, you know, seemingly technocratic phrase, but what it really means is, if you put a piece of intelligence into the world, can your adversary readily determine what the source of that information was, and shut off that source? And so, we will only put pieces of information in the world where we have confidence that they cannot do that. That's what the analysis with the intelligence community is, and that's why they will greenlight certain things we can say, and redlight other things.

I found myself in a kind of awkward situation of late, where it's a common thing for a national security adviser to say, I don't comment on intelligence matters. But we've been commenting very broadly on intelligence matters – [laughter] – over the last few months. So, maybe the better way to say it is, I don't comment on intelligence matters where commenting on them could harm our national security, and I do comment on them when it can help our national security.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MR. SULLIVAN: And that's been a kind of – a careful, very thoughtful, very systematic, very prudent process that has been managed at senior levels across the director of national intelligence, the CIA, the NSA, the – you know, all of the different agencies of our government.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, would the president prefer, and the administration prefer, when this fighting is over – at some point, it presumably will be over – that Putin stay in power, or not stay in power?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, the president has spoken to his views on this subject, quite emphatically. And you know, what he said – when he was asked about that, he said, look, I, you know, am not going to hold back in expressing just the absolute and utter moral outrage of what this person is doing. I mean, out of nowhere, for no reason, initiating and then leading the industrial-scale destruction, devastation, and human toll of this conflict – it's barbaric. It's outrageous.

But he also made the point that the future of Russia is going to be decided in Russia, by Russians. The United States is not enunciating some regime-change policy. But that doesn't change the view that the president has, of the absolute brutality that Putin has wrought, and what harm he has brought from sitting where he sits.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, when we are in the kind of opposition to what Russia is doing, how do we deal with Russia on other issues – so, on space issues, or other issues where Russia and we might have some common interests? Or do we just have no relationship at this point, as long as this war is going on?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, you know, one example of where, you know, we've had, obviously, to continue to deal with the Russians is in the context of the Iran nuclear negotiations, where they're a member of the permanent 5+1, plus Germany and the – and the European Union. So it's not like American diplomats never come into contact with Russian diplomats. But in no area, in no arena is it business as usual.

We do still cooperate with the Russians on the International Space Station, and, you know, we did that at the height of the Cold War, when we had, you know, nuclear weapons on hair trigger. So we have a kind of muscle memory of being able to deal with Moscow, even in a context of extraordinarily heightened tensions.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do you see any likelihood the president will talk to Putin in the near future, by videoconference or anything like that? Is that –

MR. SULLIVAN: We don't have anything on the horizon.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, OK. Let's talk about China for a moment. It's an easier subject. [Laughter.] So, do you see any concern by the Chinese about what the western allies have done, in terms of putting sanctions on Russia, and they're maybe worried about something that they might do in Taiwan? Or there's no similarity worth talking about?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, certainly, we have expressed our concerns about China taking efforts to unilaterally change the status quo. And we think they are carefully looking at what's happening in Ukraine, to learn lessons writ large, including with respect to Taiwan.

Now, for the U.S. ourselves, the situation with Ukraine and the situation with Taiwan are not the same. Our relationship with Taiwan is governed by the Taiwan Relations Act. Our security partnership with Taiwan is governed by the Taiwan Relations Act. And you know, we have – one of the things that we have focused on in the past several weeks is actually deep consultations with allies and partners, including in Europe, to say: This kind of thing can happen in Europe, this kind of thing can also happen in the Indo-Pacific, and it's incumbent upon responsible countries in the world to send a clear message that any type of aggression is unacceptable wherever it happens.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So if China were to invade Taiwan in some way, our official government policy is that we would defend Taiwan?

MR. SULLIVAN: Our official government policy is that we're going to take every step we possibly can to ensure that never happens.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Let's talk about the Iranian negotiations. Where do they stand? Are they anywhere close to getting resolved?

MR. SULLIVAN: Over the course of the past few months we've made a fair deal of progress in getting to the point where both Iran and the U.S. could come back into the nuclear deal on a compliance-for-compliance basis. There are a few issues that have not been – yet been resolved. We are continuing to go back and forth on those issues and we'll see where things land.

If we get to the point where the president believes that there's a deal on the table that will put Iran's nuclear program back in the box it got out of when the previous president pulled out of the deal in 2018, and that it protects America's national security interests, he'll do the deal. If not, he won't. And we'll – you know, the coming days and weeks will be telling.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So I said earlier, in introducing you, I think you were the youngest – you are the youngest person to have this position.

MR. SULLIVAN: I am not.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You're not? Who was younger?

MR. SULLIVAN: McGeorge Bundy was younger.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. You're the second-youngest, then.

MR. SULLIVAN: Yeah. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. OK, but he wasn't a Rhodes scholar.

MR. SULLIVAN: I don't know. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So you're the second-youngest. But I'm just curious how you have changed the process, if at all, the national security process. Do you meet with the president every morning? Do you meet with him in the afternoon? How do you communicate with him about what you think he should know? And is it by written communication you mostly deal with him, or is it oral communications?

MR. SULLIVAN: I do meet with the president every morning that he's in Washington. We have something called the president's daily briefing, where myself and the intelligence community and a couple of other senior national security staffers will sit with him, not just to go through the daily intelligence briefing, but then to talk about issues that are on his mind. Some of them may be immediate. It might be the news of the day out of Ukraine. And some of them may be longer-term, strategic systemic issues. But we do that on a daily basis.

And then ordinarily in the course of the day there'll be at least one if not two or three other engagements, whether it's a phone call to a foreign leader, a meeting in the Situation Room, me having to just go down to talk him through something that has developed. So there's a lot of both formal meetings on national security issues where we assemble the key national security principals, and just informal exchange on what is a rapidly developing and quite turbulent international development.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So when you got this position I assume you heard from a lot of former national security advisors. What was the best advice you got?

MR. SULLIVAN: I think the best advice I got was to try to actually put time on the calendar to think, which sounds crazy but, like, in this job you essentially – you're subject to the tyranny of the inbox. There's so much happening you could spend from early in the morning until early in the morning the next morning just responding. And so a number of them said, look, the thing I wish I had done more was literally put time to say: Let's focus on the affirmative. How do we play offense? And I try to do that every day. I will say, that is – as many of you know, from other contexts, it's an extraordinarily difficult thing. But when I feel like I am actually being successful in my job are the weeks in which I am following through on that advice. And when I feel like I'm being less successful in my job are the weeks when I am subject to the tyranny of the inbox.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But it's a seven-day-a-week job. You don't just – on Saturday you don't say, well, I'm just going to relax at home, or something like that, right?

MR. SULLIVAN: No.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So –

MR. SULLIVAN: Straightforwardly, no. It's –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Have you ever had a job – I mean, you've worked in the government before, as I mentioned in your introduction. Is there any job you've ever had or seen that is as intense as this job, in terms of daily – being on call all the time?

MR. SULLIVAN: I mean, I can think of other professions that are more intense in other ways. You know –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Private equity. [Laughter.]

MR. SULLIVAN: Yeah. Don't know about that. But in terms of the job in the government, you know, I guess maybe the deputy national security advisor has a more intense job, actually, to be fair. [Laughter.] But it's – it is – it is really intense. And one of the things that I think makes the job of the American national security advisor particularly intense is everything that happens everywhere on every dimension and every geography, some piece of the U.S. government has something to say or do about that.

And that's true from the energy markets to a humanitarian disaster, to nuclear proliferation, to a terrorist incident, to a diplomatic agreement between two countries in a different part of the world and what its – what its knock-on implications are. And the amount of information that you have to process rapidly every day, and then the knowledge of the system, to be able to say who actually really knows what's going on here and who needs to be empowered to do something about it – the diversity of that – the sheer diversity of that is the most – is probably the most challenging part of the job.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So how do you relate to the secretary of state? Historically the secretary of state and the national security advisor often didn't get along. Sometimes they did. But how do you relate? How many times a day do you talk to the secretary of state?

MR. SULLIVAN: You know, Tony Blinken's such a not-nice person that it's just very difficult to deal with him. [Laughter.] But, no, it's – we actually have a tremendous relationship. We've known each other for years. We've worked in government together before. I think we have a similar operating style. We don't always agree on every issue. In fact, we debate a lot of issues. But we do so, I think, in a constructive way that is not just the two of us working through an issue personally, it's our – you know, it's the National Security Council and the State Department effectively working through things.

And I think it works very well. I talk to Tony every day, sometimes repeatedly. He's in my office a lot. He's over at the White House a considerable amount. His relationship with the president is extremely close and longstanding. And actually, that has been, in my view, a big asset in carrying forward what the president really has focused on, which is to elevate diplomacy in our national security and to give the State Department the kind of position in the U.S. government that it has long deserved, and it has not always had in previous administrations.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So if you and Tony agree on something, and let's suppose the secretary of defense agrees as well. You go to the president, and does he ever overturn a united recommendation?

MR. SULLIVAN: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Really?

MR. SULLIVAN: Yes, he does.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Does he give you a reason, or he just said, I don't like it.

MR. SULLIVAN: No, yes, of course he gives a reason, yeah. [Laughs.] No, it's every third time, he just does it, you know, for – [laughter] – no. He actually – you know, I have found this to be one of the kind of humbling things about this job is we can run a whole process that involves multiple layers of review and decision and a lot of people who are pretty smart and very knowledgeable on the subject all coming together collectively around a consensus recommendation. We can take it to the president, who will have spent that day focused on domestic policy or something totally different. And he will look at it, and then he will ask a question that makes you think, oh, wow, we didn't even really get to that. He'll get to the heart of the matter and say, you know, I question this underlying premise of the decision you just came out with.

That happens more often than you might think. And lest you believe that that is some display of a messed up process or we didn't quite get it right, there is something about having a chief executive who has perspective, experience, the ability to kind of see things from multiple different angles, who just brings a different level of capacity to decision making. And it does mean that we will prepare consensus recommendations. He'll say, I don't buy that. You need to improve that. Or I'm on the other side of that. And then, you know, obviously he's the boss. But I think it makes for a more effective decision-making process that he engages in that way.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So how has he changed since you were his national security advisor when he was vice president? Is he smarter than he was before, he's different? How has he changed?

MR. SULLIVAN: I think just being president is so different from being anything else in the world, let alone vice president. It's really the gravity of feeling about the decisions, the kind of weight of that. I think it gives you an intensity of focus on the stakes and the scope of every outcome, that it has – that manifests itself. Like, you almost can feel it in the room, how a president is engaging a decision from basically how anyone else – a secretary, a senator, or even a vice president.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So you've worked for Hillary Clinton. You've worked for Barack Obama. You worked for Joe Biden. Who's the smarter of those? [Laughter.] You're not going to answer that?

MR. SULLIVAN: No comment.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. [Laughter.] So you've worked in the White House under President Obama. How was the national security process different now than it was then? Or is it not much different?

MR. SULLIVAN: Some of it's similar. And in fact, I've learned a tremendous amount from Susan[6] and Tom Donilon and Jim Jones, who were the national security advisors in the Obama era. So the fundamental kind of skeleton of the process is the same. I would say a couple things are different. One is, the issue set has expanded over the past decade – technology and national security, energy and climate and national security are only becoming more relevant. The intersection of foreign policy and domestic policy. COVID I think has introduced – or elevated the kind of question of biosecurity, pandemic preparedness in a different way from how it existed before.

So I've added directorates to the National Security Council. We have a different constellation of actors around the table, a broader constellation of actors around the table than has happened previously. And so I would say that's probably the biggest way in which – in which things have evolved from the time President Obama was in office until today.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So what time do you have for relaxation or just getting in shape? Do you exercise anymore? Do you have any time for that? Or do you have any time for staying just healthy?

MR. SULLIVAN: Not really. [Laughter.] And in fact, I'm – yes, I'm not – I'm not in fighting shape physically. Hopefully, I'm still in mentally good and emotionally good fighting shape. I do try to exercise, but I would say that the thing I have probably fallen down on the job most since beginning has been keeping up a really good exercise regime and a good sleep regime and a good diet. I mean, honestly, I've reverted to a certain extent to eating like I did in college. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Really?

MR. SULLIVAN: I have late nights at work, yeah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So let me ask you about mistakes. Everybody's made mistakes in life, I think. So when you look back at your time now as the national security advisor, would you say that you've made any mistakes that you can talk about publicly? Would you do anything differently with the way you handled Russia or Afghanistan in hindsight?

MR. SULLIVAN: I think anyone who tells you after a year and some months in any job, let alone a job of the kind of complexity of a national security advisor, who'd say, no, I don't think I really made any mistakes, they should be fired because they're not, you know, properly assessing either their own performance or how they could improve. So, yes, of course I've made mistakes. I mean, I do think that I will be guarded in kind of baring my soul here about what I think they were, because I think that has implications.

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[6] Susan Rice

And then, you know, for the question of Afghanistan, I get this question a fair amount. And, you know, obviously the way things turned out I wish they had turned out differently. And if I could go back and make them turn out differently, I would. But, you know, there will be time when I leave this job to actually kind of reflect on was there a moment or a decision or a particular move we made or didn't make that would have dramatically or materially altered the outcome. I try to learn in real time for myself, but in terms of kind of meditating on that publicly I'll wait for the future.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So let's talk about, for a moment, other troublesome spots in the world. Anything new on North Korea?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, it has been a period of intense activity by North Korea in terms of the tests that they have conducted. They have conducted a series of shorter- and intermediate-range tests, followed by a couple of efforts to test longer-range systems, that they didn't really advertise publicly. In fact, we went out to say, hey, we think they're up to something here. And then finally a few weeks ago, a test of an intercontinental ballistic missile, which they had not done previously – they had not done since 2017.

So, yes, they are in a pattern of provocation, a pattern of testing. We expect that will continue. I think you will hear more out of North Korea in terms of its efforts to advance its nuclear program and its missile program in the weeks and months ahead. And we are coordinating closely with both our – the outgoing and incoming ROK[7] government, with Japan. And I was just in Rome a few weeks ago with my Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi. And so we're talking to Beijing about this as well.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But does North Korea today have an intercontinental ballistic missile that's nuclear tipped that can get to the United States?

MR. SULLIVAN: North Korea has tested an ICBM. They did so back in 2017. They did so again just a few weeks ago. They obviously have nuclear weapons. And the last test they had of a nuke was back in 2017. And we know they have an arsenal of them. The question of whether they can mate a nuclear warhead to an intercontinental ballistic missile, fire it, and actually have it hit a target as they would want to in the continental United States, that is something that is not yet proven.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, so far Israel and India have not been supportive of our positions on Russian sanctions. Is that disappointing to you? Or do you think that there's a justification for it and you're OK with it?

MR. SULLIVAN: I guess our view on this is that we cannot think about, quote/unquote "support" for our Ukraine policy, for sanctions or other things, as a strict on/off switch. For us, this is an ongoing process, a work in progress. President Biden spoke with Prime Minister Modi earlier this week. We're not trying to beat other countries over the head that have been more reluctant to get onboard.

[7] South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea (ROK)

What we're trying to do is move steadily towards a greater consensus both around what Russia has done here and around what the right ways to respond to it are. India has a longstanding relationship with Russia. They're not situated with them the same way we are, or Europe is, or Japan is. But it's something that we're working on. And the same thing is true with Israel. And I think you've seen, particularly out of Israel, an increasingly robust stand on particularly the atrocities that we've seen out of Bucha and Khamatorsk and elsewhere. And we hope to see more of that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So every morning you wake up. You have to deal with all the problems in the world. If you eliminate Russia and China, what are the biggest things you're worried about right now? Climate change, is that one of the things you're worried about, or that's not in your purview?

MR. SULLIVAN: Climate change is in all of our purviews. And it is something we worry profoundly about. And, you know, the question of how to mobilize collective action and collective resources to effectively stable at 1.5 degrees, while at the same time dealing with an energy transition that is putting real pressure on the pocketbooks of working people in the United States and elsewhere, that has all kinds of policy dimensions to it, including geopolitical dimensions. And so that is something that, you know, we are taking a hard look at.

There's also the question of the global refugee crisis, and the ways in which displaced people the world over – that that is being exacerbated by climate change and exacerbated by COVID. Last thing is food security. You know, one of the factors that we need to weigh, because of the war in Ukraine, is Ukraine is a major supplier of food. Some of that food has been disrupted from getting to market because the Russians are sinking civilian ships in the Black Sea – or at least disabling ships in the Black Sea. And so figuring out how we make sure that people don't go hungry, that that hunger doesn't lead to instability, and so on down the line, that's a major focus of ours as well. These knock-on effects of what's unfolded here because of Putin's aggression in Ukraine.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So your career has seemed to be built toward getting this position because you've had many jobs that prepare you for it. Now that you've got the position that you're prepared for, are you happy with the job? Do you wish you hadn't prepared for this job? [Laughter.]

MR. SULLIVAN: It depends on the day you ask me; I suppose. Look, I think it's just an exceptional privilege to be able to have this job. But it is – it's not easy. And it's – the weight of this job is nothing compared to what I was describing before with the weight of being the president, but it's a weight to carry. And what I try to just do every day is try to justify the president's confidence in me having it. And what I do every night is not sleep, thinking about all the things I should have done the day before and what's coming the next day. So it's doing a number on my ability to be restful, I would say. But I'm happy to be of use.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But for the foreseeable future, despite all the challenges, you intend to stay in this job as long as you can, right?

MR. SULLIVAN: I have no announcements today about returning to spend time with my family. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Thank you. I want to thank you for a very interesting conversation. I want to give you a gift, which is authorized by the lawyers at the White House to give you, OK? [Laughter, applause.] OK. This is a map of Washington, D.C. All right? [Applause.]

MR. SULLIVAN: Thank you.

The Honorable Jake Sullivan
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs

Jake Sullivan serves as National Security Advisor to President Joe Biden. He is a visiting lecturer in law at Yale Law School and a nonresident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Mr. Sullivan previously served in the Obama administration as National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. Department of State, and Deputy Chief of Staff to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Mr. Sullivan has also been a Senior Policy Advisor and Chief Counsel to Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), worked as an associate for Faegre & Benson LLP, and taught at the University of St. Thomas Law School. He clerked for Judge Stephen Breyer of the U.S. Supreme Court and Judge Guido Calabresi of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. He holds both undergraduate and law degrees from Yale University and was a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford.