

Aspen Security Forum Fireside Chat

CIA Director William Burns and NBC Correspondent Andrea Mitchell

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MITCHELL: Thank you so much. This is such an honor for me to be here with you. The DCI is of course the former Deputy Secretary of State, importantly the ambassador to Moscow and Jordan and so many other positions, so many awards and the author of *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy*, which is an extraordinary book which I recommend to all of you. It really is a primer. An honor to be with you today so thank you.

BURNS: Well it's great to be with you, Andrea, and great to be with all of you.

MITCHELL: I want to start with Russia, with Vladimir Putin's meeting in Iran with the Ayatollah Khomeini, who praised Putin's invasion of Ukraine and said "if you had not taken the helm the other side would have done so and initiated a war." The other side meaning NATO, of course. What are the implications of this new, stronger alliance of adversaries?

BURNS: Well, again, it's great to be with you. I mean, I must admit that watching the images of President Putin and Iran's supreme leader meeting yesterday in Tehran did not exactly fill me with nostalgia because most of the gray hair on top of my head came from negotiating with Russians and Iranians over the years. I mean, I think beneath the images that we all saw, the reality is that Russians and Iranians need each other right now. Both heavily sanctioned countries, both looking to break out of political isolation as well. But if they need each other they don't really trust each other in the sense that they're energy rivals and historical competitors.

So, it's true that, you know, the Russians are reaching out to the Iranians to try to acquire armed drones, UAVs. It's important, I think, for us to remember or to remind ourselves, when you look at that prospect, that the purpose of those drones is to kill Ukrainian civilians in a brutal and unprovoked war of aggression.

It's also important to remind ourselves that it's a reflection, in some ways, of the deficiencies of Russia's defense industry today, the difficulties they're having after significant losses so far in the war against Ukraine and replenishing their stocks as well. Both sides are going to look for ways in which they can help one another evade sanctions. Both sides, I think, are looking to demonstrate that they have options. You know the Russians, Putin, amidst the war in Ukraine, I'm sure it's occurred to the Iranian leadership as they looked at President Biden's trip to the Middle East a week ago, that, you know, they want to demonstrate they have options too. But I think as troubling some of the steps between those two parties are, and we focus on them very sharply at CIA, there are limits, I think, to the ways in which they're going to be able to help one another right now.

MITCHELL: According to Jake Sullivan, we see evidence of Iran supplying these drones, including armed drones. How would that change the battlefield?

BURNS: Well I mean drones have been used very effectively, especially by Ukrainians on the battlefield as well. So you know, as many of you who are military experts in this audience know better than I do, they're a significant dimension of modern warfare right now. So I don't mean to underestimate at all the way in which this aids the Russian war effort as well.

MITCHELL: Lloyd Austin said today that it would be a very bad idea, that he would warn them against supplying these drones. There's nothing we could do to stop them.

BURNS: No, but I mean Secretary Austin is very good at understatement and I think he's right that it's a really bad idea.

MITCHELL: How concerned should we be that Turkey, a NATO member, was part of this wonderful summit in Tehran?

BURNS: Well I mean Turkey and President Erdogan are always very good, very adept, and have a lot of practice at juggling a lot of apparently contradictory relationships. I mean, there obviously was a focus in this meeting on Syria and what may happen next there. And these are three parties that don't always agree on that issue. Especially the Turks versus the Iranians and the Russians. I think another dimension of the conversation between the Turks and the Russians is something that I think all of us have tried to encourage in the U.S. government and that is the efforts that President Erdogan and his colleagues in Ankara have made to, you know, see if they can't broker a way to reopen Odessa port and allow for grain exports out of Ukraine, which, you know, would help, I think, significantly in dealing with growing problems of food insecurity elsewhere in the world and which the Russians have defiantly blocked so far. So, I mean, I think that's a commendable effort and something we should all support on the Turkish side.

MITCHELL: So far not bearing fruit, though.

BURNS: No, but I mean there were at least some encouraging statements made after the last round of conversations. The easiest thing in the world is to be pessimistic about the prospects, so all I can say is well a) the Russians hold the keys here. They could reopen, allow those export very quickly if they wanted to. And I think it's a smart effort on the part of the Turks and also the U.N. Secretary General.

MITCHELL: We know what Russia's original strategy was, which was to take Ukraine and that the U.S does not believe he'll ever be able to do that because of the resistance and the effectiveness of the Ukrainian force but the persistence and John Kirby saying that now he wants to go beyond Donbas and go south and, you know, go west and approach Odessa. What do you think his current strategic goals are?

BURNS: Putin's?

MITCHELL: Putin's.

BURNS: Maybe I'll take a step back just for a minute if you'll indulge me, and talk a little bit about what at least I understand, we understand at CIA, to be the mindset that animates Putin because I've always found this difficult to understand the tactical choices he makes, especially on such an incredibly important issue as Ukraine without understanding that mindset.

So, you know I've watched and dealt with Vladimir Putin for more than two decades now and, you know I've watched him stew in, you know what is a very combustible mix of grievance and ambition and insecurity. He is professionally trained to be a cynic about human nature. He is relentlessly suspicious, always attuned to vulnerabilities that he can take advantage of. He's not a big believer in the better angels in the human spirit. He's a big believer in control and intimidation and getting even. He really is an apostle of payback in a lot of ways.

I say that because all, in my view anyway, all of those qualities have hardened over the course of the last decade. As his grip on power has tightened, as his circle of advisors has narrowed, his own personal sense of destiny and his appetite for risk has grown significantly over that time as well.

And nowhere is that - and I guess what I would say on the issue of his narrowing circle of advisors, the reason I mentioned that is when I was Ambassador in Moscow now more than a decade ago, there were still, you know, fairly wide circles of people who Putin would listen to. Some of them would disagree

with them sometimes. There's virtually none of that now. His very constrained circle of advisors either agrees strongly with them or has even harder views, and many of them are professionally trained like he was to have those views, or they've discovered a long time ago that it's not career enhancing to question his judgment. So I say all that because nowhere uh are those views harder than on Ukraine and that's how I think we need to understand Putin's decision making in the run-up to the war.

He is convinced that his destiny as Russia's leader is to restore Russia as a great power. He believes the key to doing that is to recreate a sphere of influence in Russia's neighborhood and he does not believe you can do that without controlling Ukraine and its choices. And so that's what that's what produced, I think, this horrible war.

MITCHELL: You were the last American official that we know of, who sat across the table from Putin in November of last year, warning him against an invasion. Tell me about that - the dynamic there.

BURNS: Well I mean what I would say first is that, you know, we had been building from at least October of 2021, last October, a very troubling picture of what were quite detailed plans on Putin's part, for a major new invasion of Ukraine and what was most troubling in many ways across the U.S intelligence community and working with, you know, wonderful partners like MI6. And I know Richard Moore is here and is going to be speaking to you tomorrow; he's an exceptional friend and partner. But working together we developed a very troubling intelligence picture and so the president asked me to go to Moscow and lay out our serious concerns about that, in an unusual amount of detail, to President Putin and some of his closest advisors and then to lay out the serious consequences that would unfold if he chose to execute that plan.

I must admit I came away from those conversations even more troubled than when I arrived. Putin himself made no effort to deny the planning and while my impression, the impression I conveyed back to the president when I got home, was that Putin hadn't yet made an irreversible decision to launch that invasion, he was clearly leaning hard in that direction at that point too.

My further impression was he had convinced himself strategically that the window was closing for his ability to control Ukraine and its choices. That it wasn't so much a function of Ukraine and NATO, because he was smart enough to understand that formal Ukrainian membership in NATO, at that time, was at best a distant aspiration. It was more in a way about NATO in Ukraine - the movement that he could see and that Ukrainians were undertaking toward the West in economic, political, and security terms as well.

MITCHELL: EU membership.

BURNS: Right. And this was something of course that it was Putin's aggression in Crimea in 2014 that had accelerated but Putin really does believe his rhetoric, and I've heard him say this privately over the years that Ukraine's not a real country. He believes that it's his entitlement, Russia's entitlement to dominate Ukraine. And so, that was the sort of strategic impression I took away. And then tactically Putin and the people closest to him clearly believe they had a favorable landscape over this past winter: a Ukraine that they judge to be weak and divided that would fold quickly, a Russian military modernized to the point where they could win - in his view - a quick and decisive victory at minimal cost, European leaders whom he saw to be distracted by their own political transitions in the French elections that were coming up in the spring and risk-averse, and he believed he had built a sanctions-proofed economy with a big war chest of hard currency reserves. He had failed, however, to tell his Central Bank Governor he was going to war and so, many of those reserves were outside his control outside of Russia as well. So that, you know, produced, since each of those four assumptions were profoundly flawed, that helped to

produce the catastrophic performance of the Russian military in the first phase of the war - the first seven or eight weeks.

MITCHELL: Would you describe him as unstable? Unhealthy?

BURNS: No. I mean there are lots of rumors about President Putin's health and as far as we can tell he's entirely too healthy. It's not a formal intelligence judgment. No, he's got his own, as I said, his views have hardened - in my experience - over the years, but he's got his own way of looking at reality, and as we, you know, could see in the first stages of this war it was based on some profoundly flawed assumptions and some real illusions...especially about Ukraine and the will to resist in Ukraine. Which he's helped to create, in many ways, by aggression now over a period of at least the eight years since 2014.

MITCHELL: President Zelenskyy has fired his intelligence chief and his top prosecutor because their staffs were riddled with collaborators...Russian collaborators. Do you have concerns about Russia's ability to penetrate these staffs of Ukraine and steal secrets? And how concerning is it that our intelligence could be at risk and our methods at risk?

BURNS: I mean I just speak for CIA but we work very closely with our Ukrainian partners and I talk to them regularly and, you know, we're obviously very alert, as we are with lots of partners around the world, but particularly given the history of Russian penetrations over the years in Ukraine. But we're confident that, you know, the Partnerships we built are effective ones and we're sharing quite significant amounts of intelligence with the Ukrainian services and with the Ukrainian leadership that they're putting to very effective use.

MITCHELL: What is our estimate of the amount of casualties that Russia is sustaining?

BURNS: Well it's always a range and you know there's no there's no perfect number. I think the latest estimates from the U.S. Intelligence Community would be, you know, something in the vicinity of 15,000 killed and maybe three times that wounded. So a quite significant set of losses. And, you know, the Ukrainians have suffered as well. Probably a little less than that but, you know, significant casualties.

MITCHELL: Is the big picture that you think Russia is planning to dig in, keep hammering Ukraine, and believe that when winter comes and the fuel costs are so high on Europe that NATO solidarity will weaken?

BURNS: Well, I mean I'd say several things. I mean first, you know, after those catastrophic failures in the first phase of the war, the Russians and the Russian military have adapted. One of my recent conversations with one of my Ukrainian counterparts, he pointed out that the dumb Russians are all dead. And I think what he meant by that, at least what I took away, is that, you know, in terms of their small unit tactics in the Donbas and elsewhere the, you know, the Russians have adapted. Certainly their leadership, Putin, has shrunk his objectives, you know, at least for the time being.

I would stress at least for the time being, he's concentrated their forces in the Donbas and, you know, they're grinding away right now, making, as I think General Milley pointed out today, over the 90 days of this refocused effort in the Donbas they've advanced, you know, something like between six and 10 miles on a fairly narrow front. So it's come at great cost and it's been very painful to both sides. But in a way what the Russian military has done is retreat to a more comfortable way of war, in a sense, by using their advantages in long-range firepower to stand off and effectively destroy Ukrainian targets and to compensate for the weaknesses in manpower that they still experience.

And so, in many ways it reminded me of what I saw as a young diplomat the first time I served in Russia in Chechnya in the 90s - the first Chechen war in the winter of '94/'95, when the Russians and the Russian military encountered significant problems on the ground they pulled back and leveled 40 square blocks in the center of Grozny the capital of Chechnya. And as you look at the terrible scenes across Ukrainian towns and villages in the Donbas right now you see a lot of that - looks like a moonscape in some ways. But the Russians are able to make very slow progress in those areas now.

The Ukrainians, their will remains quite strong. I hear this directly from them. We see this on the ground. They're, you know, they're being courageous and tenacious and quite skillful in using the weaponry that we and other allies supply - especially the HIMARS, the long-range missile artillery systems which have been very effective against the Russian targets. Putin's bet, just as you said, Andrea, is that he can succeed in a grinding war of attrition - that they can wear down the Ukrainian military, that winter's coming and so, he can strangle the Ukrainian economy, he can wear down European publics and leaderships, and he can wear down the United States, because Putin's view of Americans is that we always suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder and you know, we'll get distracted by something else.

I think my own strong view is that Putin was wrong in his assumptions about breaking the alliance and breaking Ukrainian will before the war began, and I think he's just as wrong now and looking out ahead. You know, he insists that Ukraine is not a real country. Well, real countries fight back and that's what the Ukrainians have done so long as we continue to support them with the weaponry and the munitions that they have used so effectively. And I think, you know, Putin was wrong in thinking he could fracture the NATO alliance and now he faces an alliance that's just about to add Finland and Sweden, and that has strengthened its deployments closer to his borders. So it's hard against the backdrop of his original war aims in this conflict where he really thought he could take Kiev in less than a week, and he thought he could establish his dominance over Ukraine very quickly. It's hard not to see this as a strategic failure at this point for Putin and Russia.

MITCHELL: I want to ask you about Brittney Griner and the other wrongful detainees and the families complaining today that the administration is not doing enough to try to do prisoner swaps. You've been involved in these negotiations in the past. What are the obstacles to prisoner swaps, not just in Russia, you know obviously in Iran, wrongful detainees in a number of these countries?

BURNS: You know, I mean I say this as much as an American citizen a fellow American citizen for Brittney Griner, and for Trevor Reed who was released recently, and Paul Whelan who's still being wrongfully detained by the Russians. These are awful and shameful steps to hold American citizens for political leverage as well. I mean, in Brittney Griner's case my heart goes out to her wife and her family as well. I've been through these kind of cases in the past in my old life as a diplomat and it's very painful as well. And the Russians are, you know, quite cold-blooded about this right now as well. In the case of Brittney Griner, you know, when I was Ambassador in Moscow I remember going with my family to watch Russian womens' professional basketball games and there were a number of WNBA stars - best American players in the world - who in the WNBA offseason would compete there. And these incredible women were very popular figures in Russia which makes it all the more awful and shameful to see this today. So I know that the White House is working very hard to secure her release and working very hard on the Paul Whelan case as well.

MITCHELL: Why does Putin want Viktor Bout back so badly?

BURNS: that's a good question because Viktor Bout's a creep. So, you know, the Russians over the years have certainly expressed an interest in, you know, Viktor Bout's return but those are, as I learned in my old life, very complicated issues in terms of trying to sort through.

MITCHELL: Do you see a good outcome despite the fact that we are involved, you know, deeply involved in this war and relations with Russia are at the worst certainly since the Cold War?

BURNS: Yeah, I certainly hope so and the Trevor Reed case, you know, gives you a little bit of faith that that's possible and it certainly won't be for a lack of serious effort on the part of the White House or the State Department or anyone else.

MITCHELL: President Biden has just said today that he's going to be speaking to President Xi Jinping in the next 10 days or so there. There has been a lot of Confrontation on the Taiwan Strait over Taiwan and over other issues the South China Sea recently in the last couple of days. In fact, is China providing material support—either weapons or other economic support—to Russia for the Ukraine war?

BURNS: Well, I mean, I'd say two things – first on the economic side, I think the Chinese have certainly stepped up their purchases of Russian energy they've been generally very careful at least as we see it and not running across the potential for sanctions against them on the military side they've been very cautious from what we can tell which is certainly something we've encouraged. I think more broadly it seems to me that President Xi and the Chinese leadership has been unsettled to some extent especially in the first phase of Putin's war in Ukraine by what they saw unsettled by the military performance of the Russians early on and the performance of Russian Weaponry unsettled by the economic uncertainties that the war unleashed around the world in the year 2022, when I think Xi Jinping's main concern is getting through a very important party Congress and the autumn and having a relatively predictable global economic landscape.

And then, I think, unsettled also by the fact that Putin has driven Europeans and Americans closer together, which is also something that, you know, unsettles the Chinese a little bit since they had banked on their ability to play off some Europeans against Americans as well. So for all those reasons I think you know, the Chinese are a little bit unsettled by that as I said. But it's a very good thing that I think our two presidents are going to engage with one another. I've learned over many years that even in the most complicated and often dangerous rivalries it's important to talk to one another to try to reduce the dangers of inadvertent collisions and to try to create the kinds of processes and habits of talking to one another that can at least reduce some of the worst dangers of escalation.

MITCHELL: What is your analysis of an increasingly militaristic China taking action against Taiwan after the Party Conference?

BURNS: I wouldn't underestimate you know President Xi's determination to assert China's control the People's Republic of China's control over Taiwan. I think he's determined to ensure that his military has the capability to undertake such an action should he decide to move in that Direction. I think the risks of that become higher it seems to us the further into this decade that you get. I think the Chinese leadership is trying to study the lessons of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and what it tells them I think our sense is that it probably affects less the question of whether the Chinese leadership might choose some years down the road to use force to control Taiwan but how and when they would do it.

If there's one lesson I think they may be drawing from Putin's experience in Ukraine is you don't achieve you know quick decisive victories with underwhelming force. Because Ukraine's a huge country and the notion, and I had this conversation with Russians and that visited in November, that you know, 190,000 Russian troops are going to effectively occupy and control 47 million Ukrainians who are bound to fiercely resist that doesn't make any sense. It's not a sustainable political end game, so I suspect the lesson that the Chinese leadership and military are drawing is that you've got to mass overwhelming force if you're going to contemplate that in the future, you've got to control the information space, you've got to do everything you can to shore up your economy against the potential for sanctions even though the

Chinese economy is you know is a far stronger and more entangled with economies around the world than Russia's ever was.

And you've got to do everything you can to try to drive wedges across the Indo-Pacific between the United States and its allies so we shouldn't underestimate I think President Xi's determination on that score but that's short of a prediction that right after the party Congress there's going to be action, I don't believe that's the case.

MITCHELL: I want to ask you about Iran. Is it your sense that Iran might stay just below the breakout threshold to avoid what President Biden said last week would be his last resort military action?

BURNS: I mean I think there are at least two dimensions of Iran's nuclear program that are particularly concerning right now. The first is the amount of time it takes them to produce the fissile material the highly enriched uranium you need for a single nuclear weapon under the terms of the JCPOA, the comprehensive nuclear agreement, which the last Administration pulled out of several years ago. That breakout time to produce that amount of material was a little more than a year today after the U.S withdrawal from the JCPOA and Iran's moving away from you know, its compliance with the agreement, enriching to 60 percent, resuming enrichment activities at Fordo—the nuclear site dug into pretty deep into a mountain in Iran. And hugely expanding the amount of the stockpile of enriched uranium that they have well beyond the constraints of the comprehensive nuclear agreement beginning to work again on advanced centrifuges, which speed up their ability to enrich especially to higher levels as well for all those things.

I mean that's a concern because now that same breakout time can be measured not in a year plus but in weeks. The second dimension though is how long it would take if the Iranians resumed an effort to build a weapon a nuclear device and our best intelligence judgment is that the Iranians have not resumed the weaponization effort that they had underway up until 2004 and then suspended so that's something obviously we at CIA and across the U.S Intelligence Community keep a very very sharp focus on, but the trend lines are quite troubling.

MITCHELL: Is it your judgment now that their missile and drone development is actually a greater threat to the U.S and to our partners in the region?

BURNS: I don't know if it's a greater threat but it's certainly an increasingly significant threat as well they have the biggest arsenal of missiles of anyone in the Middle East right now and you know it's a mark of the development of their armed drone system that you have the Russians now trying to acquire some as well. So those are both significant concerns.

MITCHELL: Do you think the president's trip to Saudi Arabia for all of the controversy has made it more likely or possible that the Saudis and Israel and the U.S could work together to deter Iran?

BURNS: Well, I mean, I hope and more importantly, I know the president hopes that you know his trip to the Middle East both Israel and the West Bank and then to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf will help to reinforce what is clearly a positive trend line, which the last Administration pushed along toward more normal relationships with between a number of Gulf Arab states and Israel. I think that's something obviously we'll do everything we can as a government to encourage as well part of the movement in that direction is clearly born of a shared concern about Iran and the threat that it poses as well. This is one of those rare moments as I think the president was looking at taking this trip for all the controversy that it was bound, in some ways understandably, to arouse, you know was looking at one of those rare moments when there are at least some modestly positive trend lines in a part of the world where I spent a lot of time and learned the hard way that modestly positive trend lines are exceedingly rare.

This is you know, Gulf Arab states, you know for the time being anyway, working reasonably well together, working well with Jordan and Egypt and Iraq moving steadily in a process that hopefully can produce further normalization with Israel, sharing a concern about Iran, obviously a moment when the gulf still matters to the global energy market and then also a moment when you know that the temptation to hedge in the direction of Russia you know has been eroded a little bit given Putin's performance in Ukraine and the fact that at least the early performance of the Russian military and its weapon system hasn't been exactly a great advertisement for Russian arms sales too.

So for all those reasons I think you know there were opportunities to reinforce and reassurance to provide about the fact that you know well the terms of American engagement in the Middle East you know may shift we're not disengaging as the president made clear, we're going to continue to be committed to doing what we can to produce the most stable regional order possible. And we're not going to leave vacuums that the Chinese or the Russians or anybody else will seek to fill.

MITCHELL: What about the Chinese and their increasing involvement, engagement in that region?

BURNS: Well, and certainly economically the northern Chinese have a lot of weight to throw around and you know they can make a very appealing case for their investments in security terms they're generally a little more cautious partly because they look at the U.S. experience over you know the last couple days in the Middle East in South Asia. And you know that causes them to want to draw back a little bit too but you know I think in parts of the Middle East they also suffer from the object lessons of a place like Sri Lanka today you know heavily indebted to China which has made some you know really dumb bets about their economic future and are suffering pretty catastrophic—both economic and political—consequences as a result. In that I think ought to be an object lesson to a lot of other players not just in the Middle East or South Asia but around the world about you know having your eyes wide open about those kind of dealings.

MITCHELL: You were in Afghanistan in the days after Kabul fell last August, right after August 14th if I'm correct, so do you better understand how badly we misread the ability of the Afghan Army to stand up?

BURNS: Well, I mean, first I'd say as the president has said publicly none of us anticipated that the Afghan government was going to flee as quickly as they did or that the Afghan military was going to collapse as fast as it did. Having said that, I think CIA at least was always on the more pessimistic end of the spectrum in terms of highlighting you know over the course of the spring and summer the obvious ways in which the Taliban were advancing rapidly and how this was hollowing out in many ways not just the political leadership but also the military. Having said that all of us have lessons to learn from experiences like that and you know I saw firsthand some of the consequences of that when the president sent me to Kabul in the last week before the completion of our withdrawal as well in fact I was there for the two or three days right before the awful attack that cost 13 U.S military lives as well.

And it was as intense a threat stream as I've ever seen not just in the last year and a half as director of CIA but over many years before that. I was very proud not only of the analysis with all of its imperfections that we tried to provide to policy makers over the six months leading up to the withdrawal but also of you know the performance of lots of American government personnel on the ground and that last week that I saw firsthand risking their own lives going out beyond the wire of the airport to try to rescue U.S citizens who are trying to get into the airport to try to take care of our Afghan partners and in particular in the case of CIA we had a profound obligation to partners who had worked with us for many years in Afghanistan and whose lives were very much at risk then too.

MITCHELL: I mean I realize how hollowed out the ability of our personnel was frankly during the previous administration, there were no visa applications being done, there was no personnel, the appropriations were not forthcoming. That said, do you think we've lived up to our obligation to the SIVs and to the others who worked so closely with us in the years since?

BURNS: I mean I think early on there were a lot of challenges to show that I'm a recovering Diplomat and can speak diplomatically um I think there were certainly things across the U.S government here I'm including CIA as well that we could have done better and should have done better and we're all I think trying to learn lessons from that as well. All I can speak to is extraordinary effort that we put into taking care of partners across the board not just those who had worked with the US intelligence Community but partners of the U.S government, locally engaged staff for the embassy, as well as U.S citizens who were, you know, in very desperate circumstances trying to leave too.

MITCHELL: I want to ask you about you know something that has been going on for six years since the first known case and that is what the government calls Anomalous Health Incidents and which is commonly known as the Havana Syndrome. So six years later do we know anything more about what caused these illnesses?

BURNS: I think we know more but let me start at least the beginning of my tenure as director of CIA. I mean, I you know I've learned over many years in public service that any leader has no more profound obligation than taking care of your people so I was determined from the start to build on efforts that were ongoing to make clear to our officers and their families that they were going to get the care that they needed and that they deserved and my very first day on the job I started meeting with officers who had been affected by these Anomalous Health Incidents as well. You can't meet with individuals who have suffered through this and not take very seriously what they've experienced whatever the causes turn out to be.

So I think we've made significant progress in ensuring people get the care that they need and deserve. We tripled the number of full-time personnel in our medical office that deals with this issue we worked out very important relationships not just with Walter Reed but you know private medical systems to make sure people got that care and the investigation side over the course of the last year and a half we've thrown some of our very very best officers at this working closely with partners across the U.S. Intelligence Community and the U.S government. It's fair to say that we've learned a lot over that time there's still more to learn it's a frustrating process but I have great confidence in the professionalism of the people who are carrying this out and in their commitment to objectivity.

A few months ago the Intelligence Community across the board made public some preliminary findings the broadest was that we don't assess that a foreign player whether Russians or anyone else is behind or is responsible for a sustained global campaign scale of what has been reported to harm U.S personnel with a weapon or some kind of external device we further stated publicly several months ago that in the majority of incidents and we've you know investigated each one as thoroughly as we possibly can and we're still working on a number of them that you know you could find reasonable alternative explanations whether it was other environmental factors or pre-existing medical conditions or other kind of medical explanations. None of that detracts from the real nature of what people have gone through. We still have work to do despite the progress I think we made in the investigation this is not something that CIA only is doing as I said we work very closely with other partners and you know I owe it to my officers and their families to be straight about first making sure they get the care they deserve but also being straight about what we find and what we don't find and that's what we'll continue to do.

MITCHELL: Congress has authorized compensation. How do you compensate if you don't know what it is?

BURNS: Well in some cases you know we're very careful to implement the spirit of that law which talks you know in very specific terms about the kind of injuries that people have suffered and so it's not a question of causation it's a question of what people have gone through and so you know we've already begun the process of implementation and we're going to work very hard at doing that because that's what people deserve and what Congress expects.

MITCHELL: Let me ask you about climate which is now becoming so incredibly overwhelmingly apparent around the world I think you're just back from London and saw the 100 degree temperatures unheard of historic temperatures. What can you do? I know you have a unit working on this. What can you do to try to figure out where the flash points are for conflict zones for conflicts over food security water and other resources migration? I mean there are going to be conflicts around the world from this.

BURNS: Yeah, it's an important priority for CIA and the U.S intelligence Community as well it's not in the past been seen as a kind of traditional area in which intelligence and intelligence service focuses. But you know if you assume as I do that you know the People's Republic of China is the biggest geopolitical challenge that you know our country faces as far out in the 21st century as I can see the biggest existential threat in many ways is climate change. So it is our responsibility to help policy makers in the US government understand the consequences of climate change in already fragile societies the way in which that's going to aggravate problems of food insecurity health concerns, problems of poverty, the kinds of things that are going to have a huge impact on stability and some very significant parts of the world that don't often get all the attention they should from the U.S government.

So, we created as part of a new Mission Center kind of one of the building blocks of CIA a unit that's focused on these issues we've expanded its staff and we work very closely with you know Partners across the U.S Government on these issues so we're not tripping over other parts of the government that have a lot of scientific expertise they can bring to bear on this. Our job is to focus on the consequences short medium long-term consequences of this how concerned are you about these risks they're quite concerned because as I said there's no shortage of fragility and you know lots of societies around the world and when you put the challenges of climate change on top of covert insecurities that many societies are still experiencing some quite severely on top of food insecurity on top of drought and water insecurity, you know, it's going to create steadily and predictably huge challenges for the United States and for all of those societies.

MITCHELL: Well Bill Burns thank you so much we're grateful for your time for coming out here and delivering a very busy time and I know everyone here in Aspen is very very thankful.