

White House press briefing [via CBSN]

02/11/22

2:11:42 p.m.

1 minute and 36 seconds

KAITLAN COLLINS: And in the warning that you just delivered to Americans in Ukrainian, saying they should get out now while they still can, do you have a picture of how many Americans right now are in Ukraine?

JAKE SULLIVAN: I would you refer you to the state department for the specifics on this because —

COLLINS: They said that they don't know.

SULLIVAN: — I don't want to do it off the top of my head. This is basically two categories. There are those who have registered with the embassy and those who have not registered with the embassy. In the first category, obviously, they have a number, although some of those folks have left and didn't deregister. In the second category, we don't know because, of course, no American is obligated or required. So, you can't fix a perfect number, but they're the ones best positioned to be able to explain what our current picture is of American citizens in Ukraine. What I could do is stand before the world media and send a very clear message to — to all Americans and to any American who's in Ukraine right now who needs help, needs financial help or needs logistical help to take advantage of a commercial option to get out. Please call the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv because we stand ready to provide that help. [TO JENNIFER EPSTEIN] Yes.

JENNIFER EPSTEIN: Thanks, Jake. Two quick questions. One, are you looking at this being some kind of attack on Kyiv? On the Donbass? On another region? Do you have any sense of that? And then what is the level of confidence that the intelligence community has in what they're hearing about this plan, especially about the potential for it to come before the end of the Olympics?

SULLIVAN: When you say — I'm sorry. You could repeat the second question?

EPSTEIN: Just around the confidence that the intelligence world has around whether this will happen before the Olympics.

(....)

2:14:59 p.m.

2 minutes and 27 seconds

FRANCO ORDOÑEZ: You — you mentioned that you do not want to say that Putin has made a decision. But can — does the United States believe the president, pardon me, that President Putin has made a decision? Because *PBS NewsHour* has just reported a little bit ago that the United States believe Putin has made a decision and has communicated that decision to the Russian

military. Is that accurate?

SULLIVAN: The report that you just referenced, which I have not seen yet, it does not accurately capture what the U.S. government's view is today. Our view is that we do not believe he has made any kind of final decision or we don't know that he has made any final decision and we have not communicated that to anybody.

AMNA NAWAZ: Follow up on that because my colleague Nick Schiffrin who's doing that reporting. He's citing three western and defense officials who says the U.S. does believe that Putin has made up his mind, has communicated that to the military, and that they've been shown intelligence on that. You're saying that's not true?

SULLIVAN: What we have communicated to our allies and partners — all 30 allies in nato plus a range of partners, our latest intelligence information and it does not include a statement that Vladimir Putin has definitively given an order to proceed with the invasion. [TO REPORTER] Yes.

NAWAZ: You haven't been shown anything from your NATO allies either?

SULLIVAN: I'm sorry?

NAWAZ: You haven't been shown any evidence or briefed on intelligence that speaks to that from NATO allies?

SULLIVAN: We have not seen anything comes to us that says a final decision has been taken, the go order has been given. What I will say and the reason I'm up here talking in the way that I am to American citizens, the reason we're taking the various actions we're taking, the reason the president convened our closest allies and partners from across the NATO alliance and the European Union is because we believe he very well may give the final go order. That is a very distinct possibility but we are not standing before you today and saying the order is given, the invasion is on, it may well happen, it may well happen soon, but we are not saying, I think, the way that you've just characterized it, I have not seen this PBS report but as you've characterized it, that does not capture the communication we are making to our NATO allies nor what we understand internally. [TO MARY BRUCE] Yes.

MARY BRUCE: Given the risk, the fact that you're not 100 percent certain that Putin has made his decision. We have seen other world leaders meeting with Putin. Has there been any more thought to President Biden engaging with him directly?

SULLIVAN: I would expect that President Biden will engage by telephone with President Putin, but I don't have anything to announce for you on that right now.

(....)

2:21:37 p.m.

1 minutes and 5 seconds

RACQUEL KRÄHENBÜHL: Next week, Vice President is going to Germany for the Munich Security Conference. Why isn't President Biden going? Wouldn't it be a good time to engage with his allies in person? Is he doing enough to avoid a war, and the second question, next week the Brazilian president is going to Russia to meet with Vladimir Putin. How does the White House see this and timing of this visit, and do you guys expect anything from the Brazilian president during his meeting?

SULLIVAN: If you simply looked at a catalogue of the engagements the President has had with his allies and partners, including engagement he had today, that catalogue alone would be rebuttal to the proposition that he's not doing enough to rally the west and to offer Russia a credible diplomatic path out of this. That's included phone calls, it's included meetings, it's included video conferences, it's included countless, sustained effort over the course of months, and we will continue with that and we're also very proud to have the vice president representing the American delegation at the Munich Security Conference.

(....)

2:22:58 p.m.
14 seconds

JEFF MASON: You mentioned the possibility of an assault on Kyiv specifically. What is your sense if Putin does decide to invade Ukraine, is he looking to take over the country, or part like Crimea in 2014?

(....)

2:25:15 p.m.
3 minutes and 8 seconds

JACQUI HEINRICH: Did the U.S. wait too long to arm Ukraine, especially with respect to weapons that could defend against an airstrike like you laid out? Did they wait too long to move U.S. forces to NATO countries and does the President still view the idea of pre-invasion sanctions as a stupid question?

SULLIVAN: So, as to the question of waiting too long on arming the Ukrainians, over the course of the past year the United States has provided more than half a billion dollars, \$650 million in defensive assistance to Ukraine. That's more than has ever been given by any president in any year at any time, and that began more than a year under the presidency of Joe Biden. Second, we have made good on the commitment to get those deliveries to the hands of the Ukrainian armed forces. Those are defensive weapons intended to defend Ukraine against aggression. They are not meant for offensive purposes against any country, so we feel very proud of the contribution and commitment that we have had to helping the Ukrainians be able to defend themselves. With respect to the question of the deployment of forces to defend NATO territory, our view is that in

addition to the 80,000 strong U.S. force presence in Europe today, that showing in Poland and Romania in particular, but also through the deployment of air squadrons to the Baltics as we had a few days ago, and other significant moves we have made, a carrier in the Mediterranean that, for the first time in 30 years, actually flew the NATO flag as well as the American flag, that we have been forward-leaning and robust in defending and reassuring our NATO allies, and you don't have to take it from me. You can talk to the president of Poland or the president of Romania about the satisfaction they have with the fact that the United States has stepped up alongside other NATO allies to deter and reassure and reinforce our presence along the eastern flank. [TO REPORTER] Yes.

HEINRICH: What about the sanctions part, though, Jake? What about the pre-invasion sanctions? You didn't answer that part of my question. Is the president looking at sanctions ahead of an invasion any differently than he has been up until this point, given the escalation we are seeing from Russia?

SULLIVAN: The President believes that sanctions are intended to deter and in order for them to work to deter, they have to be set up in a way where if Putin moves, then the costs are imposed. We believe that that is the right logic both on its own merits, but equally importantly, we believe that the most important fundamental for anything that unfolds in this crisis, whether through diplomacy or as a result of military action, is that the west be strong, be united, and, be determined to operate with common purpose and he believes the sanctions approach he's taken in lock step with our European partners, the Canadians and others, puts us in position for the west to respond to this contingency in the most united and purposeful way possible. That will pay dividends for us in this circumstance, but it will pay enormous strategic dividends for the United States in the years and decades ahead.

(...)

2:36:11 p.m.

30 seconds

NANCY CORDES: The diplomats that are being moved out of the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, where are they going? Are they going to other countries, being taken to safer locations within Ukraine? What can you tell us?

PSAKI: It's a great question. I would really refer you to the State Department. Typically when we reduce a presence at the embassy, that means they depart the country, but I can certainly check with them and get you more details on that. Typically, it means they would return to a home base.

(...)

2:37:21 p.m.

4 minutes and 42 seconds

HEINRICH: Has the U.S. shared the latest intelligence with Ukraine and do — does the U.S. feel

the Ukrainian government is properly preparing its citizens for a possibility of war because it seems like they keep downplaying it?

PSAKI: Well, I'm not going to speak with how the Ukrainian officials — leaders speak or engage with their citizens, but we do engage very closely with them, sharing of information, as we do with our European counterparts and that has been the case at every point in this process.

HEINRICH: Is the State Department doing anything right now to help Americans to get out of Ukraine or just warning them to get out on their own?

PSAKI: Well, we have been warning for several weeks now, if not longer, that American citizens should depart and I think you heard our national security adviser give a pretty stark warning of what would happen — on purpose — what would happen if Russia were to invade in the difficulty of not just being in the middle of a military zone, but also the difficulty of departing or getting out, and the fact that departure — means of departure could be cut off, and we feel important for American citizens in Ukraine to understand. We have been conveying as American citizens don't have the means to depart, that we would provide assistance for those purposes. That has been the case for several weeks now.

HEINRICH: If we don't know if Putin has made up his mind, why are we hearing this warning from Jake Sullivan that Americans should get out ideally in the next 24 to 48 hours, specifically? I don't believe we've heard that window before.

PSAKI: Because we recognize that, if President Putin were to decide to invade, that this would make it a — a very difficult circumstance on the ground for American citizens. We don't have an assessment as he — as you heard him say of him making that decision, but he could make that decision at any point and we want to be very clear and direct with American citizens about the risk that that would pose to them, that the risk — the risk that would be posed to any civilian if they remain in the country.

HEINRICH: And this is now the second evacuation of Americans in the course of six —

PSAKI: It's not actually an evacuation, to be clear. American citizens can depart Ukraine. There are means of departing Ukraine. This is not a country where we are at war where we have tens of thousands of troops who have been fighting a war for 20 years, so it's incredibly different.

HEINRICH: Correct. You are correct in that. But it's the second time we have urged American citizens to get out of a country.

PSAKI: Actually, we've urged American citizens to depart a number of times —

HEINRICH: But when I mean — Afghanistan —

PSAKI: — well, I think this —

HEINRICH: — because the question then is —

PSAKI: — let me finish here because I think it's important for people to understand: We urged American citizens to depart Kazakhstan. We urged American citizens to depart Ethiopia. This is a responsibility that the state department and our diplomats who are serving there and serving around the world take on to keep American citizens safe and it may not be front and center on the news in the United States, but those are conflict areas and zones where we are constantly monitoring.

HEINRICH: But these are the two major events that have happened under this administration, and what does the — what do you guys say —

PSAKI: I would say the people in Ethiopia would differ with that, as would the people in Kazakhstan or other parts of the world where there has been — they have been under dangerous circumstances, and they look to the United States to provide up to date information of their safety and security in the country.

HEINRICH: — the President has frequently talked about getting out of Afghanistan as a major event. It has impacted his polling. This is a current event that is underway. The question is, what does the administration say to critics who are looking at these two events and questioning the administration's foreign policy approach?

PSAKI: Who is questioning us? Give me names.

HEINRICH: Plenty of Republicans.

PSAKI: Like who?

HEINRICH: I could name off any number of Republicans.

PSAKI: I would love to know a name.

HEINRICH: Goodness? Ah, Mitch McConnell.

PSAKI: Ok, well, here's what I would say to Mr. McConnell. The President ended a 20-year war in Afghanistan, a war that had cost us thousands of American lives, billions, trillions of dollars, and was a failed enterprise after 20 years. He was the first President to do that after many predecessors failed to take exactly that step. We knew it would be complicated. We knew it would be challenging. He had the courage to get our troops out of there and end a 20-year war. This is entirely different because we are not ending a 20-year war. We are trying to prevent war here. We are trying to keep American citizens safe in Ukraine by encouraging them to depart, by providing them information about what the security circumstances are on the ground and I think it's important for the American public to understand the significant differences between these different scenarios.

(....)

2:43:18 p.m.

2 minutes and 25 seconds

STEVEN PORTNOY: Jen, in the NBC interview, the President said he rejected the findings of the After Action report to the State Department and the military response to Afghanistan. Does that mean [he] has ruled out any action that might be viewed or read as accountability?

PSAKI: Well, Steve, I think it's important for people to understand there was no after-action report. *The Washington Post* report was not an after-action report. It was based on a range of FOIA documents, which is their right to do, based on individual interviews of members of the military, including many who were not a part of policy-making decision in The Situation Room. Some were. Many were not. But that is not an after-action report. There was also a report from CENTCOM about the attack at Abbey Gate on Friday, which the president certainly stands by and that was important work, vital work, a formal report and review that was done internally. So, I just want to separate the two for people's understanding. What the President was rejecting is the notion that there weren't a range of preparations done in advance of the course of last spring and last summer. And so, it's important to remember that we made the decision, he made the decision to end a 20-year war. He came into office without any plan — well, there was a — there was a deadline, but without any plan for departure or helping the — the Afghans who had served by our side for 20 years. We put in place — and this is in — this is in the same documents, beginning last spring, a plan, a range of contingency plans should we need to bring American citizens out, or bring Afghans out. We put into place — we positioned military troops on the ground working with the Department of Defense back in early summer to ensure that we could execute on that plan. And in every single meeting last August, the President asked the team and often ended the meeting with this: Is there anything you need to implement what your plans are? Is there anything you need on the ground? He always ended with that. I would also note that he always raised the question of whether we needed to evacuate our embassy and people — Americans who were serving at the embassy there. That decision was always posed to the group at the table. That decision was not made until August 12th, so reporting that suggests otherwise is incorrect. That is — that is the state of play that happened last summer.