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As the U.S. pours billions in military aid into Ukraine, we host a debate on the Biden administration's response to the war and U.S. policy toward Russia amid increasing calls among progressives for a diplomatic end to the conflict. We speak to former Bernie Sanders foreign policy adviser Matt Duss, now a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst who specialized in the Soviet Union. "Everyone understands that at some point there will need to be a negotiation to bring this war to a close, but I think the tension within the progressive community comes to when and how that diplomacy actually takes place," says Duss. McGovern stresses that U.S. policymakers must understand Russia's motivations, saying Russia sees the eastward expansion of NATO as threatening its core interests akin to how the United States viewed the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960s. "We need to go back and figure out how this all started in order to figure out how to end it," says McGovern.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!*, [Democracynow.org](#), the War and Peace Report. I'm Amy Goodman in New York, joined by *Democracy Now!* co-host Juan González in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Hi, Juan.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Hi, Amy, and welcome to all of our listeners and viewers across the country and around the world.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We begin today's show looking at the war in Ukraine. Russia has announced it is rejoining a deal allowing for grain shipments from Ukraine's ports. This comes just four days after Russia withdrew from the deal, sparking fears it could worsen the global hunger crisis. The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the renewed deal would prioritize grain shipments to Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan and other African nations. Russia said it rejoined the deal after Ukraine agreed not to use the sea corridor to attack Russian forces.

Meanwhile, *The New York Times* is reporting senior Russian military leaders have had high-level discussions about how tactical weapons could be used in the war in Ukraine. That's tactical *nuclear* weapons. The article was based on unnamed U.S. officials who said they have seen no evidence that the Russians were moving nuclear weapons into place or making preparations for a nuclear strike. Last month, President Biden described the war in Ukraine as the first time the world has seen a direct threat of the use of a nuclear weapon since the Cuban Missile Crisis 60 years ago. In a speech to Democratic donors, Biden said, "We're trying to figure out, what is Putin's off-ramp?"

Well, today we host a debate on the U.S. response to Russia's invasion and U.S. policy toward Russia. We are joined by two guests. In Washington, D.C., we are joined by Matt Duss. He is former foreign policy adviser to Senator Bernie Sanders, a Ukrainian-American who is a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. And in Raleigh, North Carolina, we are joined by Ray McGovern, former senior CIA analyst. His 27-year career as a CIA

analyst includes serving as Chief of the Soviet foreign policy branch and daily briefer of the President's Daily Brief. At the time it was George H.W. Bush. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!*

Ray McGovern, let's begin with you. Why don't you lay out what you think the U.S. policy should be toward Russia now and in dealing with the Ukraine war.

**RAY MCGOVERN:** Amy, I think we need to go back and figure out how this all started in order to figure out how to end it. In a word, you quoted a new *New York Times* story this morning about Russian tactical nuclear missiles and senior Russian military officials discussing this. The source described by

*The New York Times*

was "multiple U.S. officials." Now, I dare say that the same "multiple U.S. officials" and some of the same authors of this piece warned us seven times at the end of July in one article that there were sure to be weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I guess we have to say that

*The New York Times*

has lost its credibility on these issues, but more so since they back off the story themselves, saying Putin himself last week said, "There's no need for us to use tactical nuclear missiles and we never threatened to do so." And Putin happens to be right on that.

The last thing I will say here is that the notion that the Russians are desperate is erroneous. It is contrived. The Russians aren't losing. The Russians are not going to lose because they can't afford to. When I say this, I mean that Putin sees an existential threat from not only Ukraine becoming part of NATO, but NATO using the emplacements for so-called anti-ballistic missiles in Romania and Poland already there to put in cruise missiles or to put in hypersonic missiles

which Putin himself warned last December would give him between seven and ten minutes, or if hypersonic missiles, five minutes, to decide in a word whether to blow up the rest of the world.

Now, Katrina vanden Heuvel said in an op-ed just last week that we have to empathize with anyone, even the hated Putin, even the hated Russians. And just thinking this through, and I will close with this, thinking about how many Americans *hate* Russia. I mean, hate is the word. And I think back to

*South Pacific*

—you have got to be carefully taught. [singing] You've got to be taught to hate and fear, you've got to be taught from year to year, it's got to be drummed in your dear little ear, you've got to be carefully taught. You've got to be taught, the Russians to hate, in order to remain part of the Fourth Estate. You've got to—[end singing]

I made up the last two lines, okay? But that's what it is! In a word, we've had six years of unfounded hating Russians. I mentioned Russiagate. I think the press, the Fourth Estate, could do a real service by saying, "Hey, we were wrong about that! The Russians didn't hack into the DNC and they didn't do all those other dastardly things that they were accused of. And let those 35 Russian diplomats come on back and let's talk to each other. Let's work this out. There is no reason why we can't make a deal."

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** I would like to bring in Matt Duss on this issue. Matt, as a foreign policy adviser to Bernie Sanders famously, an advocate for peace not war, what is your perspective on how this war can end, and also the issue of how it began?

**MATT DUSS:** Thank you for having me, first of all. I would say the easiest way for this war to end would be for Vladimir Putin to end his invasion and withdraw Russian troops from Ukrainian territory. As far as how this war began, there certainly are a lot of things we could bring in to describe the deteriorating U.S.-Russia relationship over the past decades and longer, but just to focus on this issue of NATO which was brought up just earlier, certainly Vladimir Putin has brought up the concern about NATO

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*he*

has brought up. Other Russian officials have brought it up in the past.

I think it is fair to say that some of the steps that were taken with regard to NATO could have

been done differently, but this idea that Vladimir Putin had to wage this war because he sees an existential threat from

NATO

I think has just been completely discredited by events. Let's remember, Finland and Sweden announced their decision to join

NATO

some months ago. Finland shares an 800-mile border with Russia. The response from the Russian government was basically, "No big deal." I would suggest that if

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was really contributing to the sense of existential threat here, we might have seen a bit of a different response to Finland joining

NATO

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**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** I would like to ask you, Matt, in terms of that, though, clearly, there is a far different relationship between Ukraine and Russia than there is between Finland and Russia. Clearly, Russia historically sees Ukraine as the entry point to previous invasions and attack on its country whether it is Napoleon in the 19th century or Hitler and the Nazis in the 20th century. Your sense of Putin's view of the special relationship that has existed between Ukraine and Russia?

**MATT DUSS:** I think that is very fair to bring up. Clearly, there is a very different historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine, and Putin himself has described his view of that relationship which is that Ukrainians don't really exist; they are simply Russians. Certainly, Ukrainians disagree with that, and I think most of the people in the world would disagree with that. Ukraine is a different country. Ukraine has a different culture, a different history. Certainly there is a historical relationship with Russia, but I think this also gets to what one of Putin's real goals here is, and that is not just to defend himself against the alleged threat from

NATO

encroachment but it is to erase the Ukrainians as an independent political entity.

I think we see various steps that he is taking to make that vision real, including the kidnapping, essentially, of thousands of Ukrainian children, transporting them into Russia, putting them with new families, a violation, a gross violation of international humanitarian law with regard to occupied territories. So I think Putin himself has given us I think a much better understanding of his real goals and grievances in launching this war.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I wanted to go to General Mike Mullen. In October, the former chair of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff appeared on

ABC *This Week* calling for talks to end the war.

**MIKE MULLEN:** It also speaks to the need, I think, to get to the table. I am a little concerned about the language, which we are about at the top, if you will.

**NEWS ANCHOR:** President Biden's language.

**MIKE MULLEN:** President Biden's language. We're about at the top of the language scale, if you will, and I think we need to back off that a little bit and do everything we possibly can to try to get to the table to resolve this thing.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I wanted to get both of your responses on this, beginning with Matt Duss. You are the former foreign policy advisor to Bernie Sanders. Clearly, there is a major debate going on right now within the progressive community of elected officials in Congress. You had this letter that was released and withdrawn within a day that called for continued military support for Ukraine but at the same time pushing for negotiations as we have seen Germany call for and France call for. That was released but withdrawn by Pramila Jayapal, the head of the Congressional progressive Caucus. We interviewed Congressman Ro Khanna; he said it shouldn't have been withdrawn, it should be the position.

If you can explain why they would have withdrawn this? And you have Bernie Sanders himself—he's not a congressman so he wouldn't have signed on to the letter; he's a senator—but he did say that he supported the withdrawal of the letter. He said the Russian invasion of Ukraine has to be resisted, that the letter should have been withdrawn. He said, "I don't agree with that." They don't agree with it, apparently, around the issue of urging President Biden to negotiate an end to the war with Vladimir Putin. Explain what this battle is about. Then I would like to get Ray McGovern's response as well.

**MATT DUSS:** Sure. A couple things about the letter. One is I think in general terms, it is right to support diplomacy. As I said in a recent interview with *The New Yorker*, the

United States is bringing its superior military and intelligence capabilities to bear on Ukraine's behalf, I think appropriately. It is also appropriate for the United States to bring its superior diplomatic capabilities to bear on Ukraine's behalf.

But I think the question here is when the time is right for that high-level diplomacy. No one wants to see the United States—or I would say I don't want to see and certainly many Americans and Ukrainians don't want to see the United States simply negotiating the end to this war with Russia over the heads of the Ukrainians. It is their country that has been invaded. They are the ones who are fighting and dying to defend their country. So I think we want to avoid the impression this is simply two great powers divvying up the spoils.

I think that is part of the concern that you saw from even some of the signers of the letter which I would just remind folks was actually written in I believe June and July and signed in June and July and then released with little warning to some of the signers. I don't want to get too into the details of that but I would agree that diplomacy is good. I think everyone understands that at some point there will need to be a negotiation to bring this war to a close, but I think the tension within the progressive community comes to when and how that diplomacy actually takes place.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ray McGovern?

**RAY MCGOVERN:** Amy, I was distraught. It was scandalous that within 36 hours those "progressive" Democrats tucked tail and gave up. I mean, the suggestion was eminently sensible. Who could be against talks? There is an opportunity coming up where presidents are to meet in Bali, Indonesia. There would be an opportunity. Rose Gottemoeller, who used to be Obama's czar in the State Department for arms control has suggested we start with these intermediate-range nuclear missiles and start to deal on a tactical level.

But the notion that we shouldn't talk is—you know, I have just been focusing on the Cuban Missile Crisis of exactly 60 years ago. How did that get resolved? By talks. And by a modicum of trust. Let me explain. Kennedy took a very, very serious position, didn't he? He said, "Look, here is a quarantine." He called it a quarantine; it was really a blockade, illegal. "Here's my invasion force in Key West and here I am going to threaten nuclear weapons." That is what he did. Khrushchev talked to him and said, "Well, look, okay [laugh] we're going to back off but we need something." And Kennedy said, "Okay, I promise not to invade Cuba." Khrushchev said, "Okay." And on the side, they did this little deal on Turkey. Now, that was because—these were oral promises. These were negotiations. By teletype in those days! But why we can't have that

kind of thing now with people saying “You’re giving in to the Russians” is beyond me.

With respect to the Finnish, let me say a word about that. Matt only quoted the first part of Russia’s response to the Finnish application to join NATO. What Putin said is, “Look, we’ve lived with the Finns for a lot of years. As long as no

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infrastructure goes into Finland, we’ve got no problem.” What does that mean?

NATO

infrastructure are these little holes in the ground that can accommodate missiles like the Tomahawk and hypersonic missiles which can reach Moscow in five, six, seven minutes. That is what they are afraid of, and that is what they consider to be their existential threat.

Just a final word here comparing the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Ukraine crisis. Now, does anyone say to John Kennedy, “Look, Mr. President, you’re overreacting. This is unprovoked, all of these measures you are taking, some of them illegal! Blockade or—that’s unprovoked!” Did anybody say that? No. Why? Because it was provoked. Now putting missiles within five minutes, six minutes of Moscow or the ICBM force in the western part of Russia, that’s provocation, folks. And Putin has been warning about that for seven, eight, nine years.

John Mearsheimer, the dean of the realistic school of political science, said eight years ago that the crisis in Ukraine is the West’s fault. He used good evidence for that. There’s lots more evidence now. He was right then and he is right now. So what does that mean? That means we have to deal. We have to deal with the fact that Putin is in the same position that John Kennedy was 60 years ago. He sees an existential threat. He’s not going to back off. He’s going to do illegal things. Unless we understand that and unless our administration gets used to the fact that—I was a military intelligence officer, okay? If you look at the map, for god’s sake, where is the enemy? What’s the terrain? What’s the weather? What’s the weather going to be in the next couple of months? And most of all, what we all LOCS; not bagels and lox, but lines of communication and supply.

I mean, Russia can’t lose this either militarily or politically. It is going to keep going as far as it has to. If HIMARS and the like comes in, he’s going have to go farther north and west. As Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister has said, it’s a matter of geography. “We would settle for the Donbas in southern Ukraine. If you’re going to put in HIMARS or worse, geography will dictate that we go farther.” So talks, of course talks are necessary! And, talks are really—“labil” is the German word—they are very delicate because there’s very little trust. There has to be a modicum of trust as there was in 1962 on the Cuban Missile Crisis.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** I would like to ask Matt and possibly Ray also to respond to—Europe is suffering much more as a result of their continuation of this war, both in terms of its having to redirect its energy sources, much higher inflation than exists here in the United States right now, and there are some who view that Europe was dragged into this more by the United States in terms of the way it approached Russia and Putin in terms of Ukraine. Your response to that and to whether there are differences between how Europe sees this war and the United States?

**MATT DUSS:** I think there initially were. We saw the reports that European leaders were actually quite skeptical, as publicly were Ukrainian leaders, of the prospect of a Russian invasion. The United States continued to say that the intelligence showed that Russia was preparing for an invasion, that the pieces were being moved into place for this invasion. And they turned out to be right.

Mr. McGovern earlier brought up the Iraq War WMDs debacle. I think certainly the Biden administration is quite aware of that record and I think they have been very, very careful in the importance of rebuilding U.S. credibility when it comes to making these kinds of claims. I think to their credit, the claims, the intelligence that they have made public all along the way has been affirmed repeatedly.

Now, with regard to the European position, I think there were a lot of European countries, particularly Germany, that had a vision of much cooperation with Vladimir Putin certainly on the issue of energy. But I think European leaders, based on observing Putin's own behavior, have come around to the U.S. view of the threat that Putin poses and what the problem, what this invasion of Ukraine could really mean not just for Europe but for the world. Certainly, they are the ones who are facing much more immediate difficulty with regard to energy and food insecurity. The Global South, as Amy mentioned early on, with regard to the agreement over grain exports, this is a really good deal that is happening because certainly countries in the Global South are bearing the brunt of this global food crisis as well.

But just one last point here. Mr. McGovern brought up John Mearsheimer's comment about this war being the U.S.'s fault. I know John Mearsheimer. He is not, however, the Pope. He has a view. I think there are many eminent scholars who know Russia much better than John Mearsheimer does who have a very different view of how we got here. Again, I think those views should be taken into account and I would point people once again to what Vladimir Putin himself has said is the reason for this invasion repeatedly, both in the written word and in



speeches, and that in part is to reestablish what he believes to be Russia's historical rights, Russia's historical control of what he believes to be a kind of Russian imperium.

That is not to say that diplomacy isn't necessary. Diplomacy *is* necessary. I believe there *is* diplomacy ongoing right now, perhaps not at the high level that some would like to see, but we know that U.S. Defense Secretary Austin, has a line open with Russian Defense Minister Shoigu. They have talked multiple times. There are also contacts and talks going on at lower levels. I think these are the kinds of things that could lead to greater talks at higher levels at some time down in the future. But I think the disagreement is when does that time come, when is it most appropriate.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Ray McGovern, if you could respond? Also, this issue of Europe and energy and Russia, the blowing up of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, which the Western press is remarkably uninterested in trying to investigate what actually happened there and these ludicrous claims, in my view, that Russia would blow up its own \$10 billion project of supplying energy to Europe.

**RAY MCGOVERN:** There you go, Juan. Most Americans would be prepared to believe that, and I would submit that that is a direct result of six years worth of brainwashing. Now, with respect to what Putin has said, Matt is free to quote Putin but not erroneously. Putin spelled out very precisely what the aims of that invasion was. He said it was a demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. There was no indication that he sent enough troops in there to take over Kiev. As a matter of fact, they have been very reluctant to shell the cities until now, until many provocations have happened.

So you have to kind of really not do what I call a Giuliani theorem. You recall what he said to that Arizona legislator about corruption in the election. He's on the phone and he says, "There's lots of corruption. You've got to look at it, because it is corrupt!" And the legislator said, "Well oh my god, sure, we'll look at it. What is the evidence?" And Giuliani famously said, "Well, we have lots of theories; no evidence." I would suggest to Matt that he has got a nice theory there that Putin wants to take over Ukraine and that Putin wants to take over maybe the rest of Europe like other people say. There is no evidence for that. Now with respect to the West Germans, the West Europeans and particularly the Germans, I know the Germans real well. I spent five years there. Some of them are my best friends, all right? [laugh] But they are so subservient to the United States, 77 years after the war, that it is hard for me to believe they won't stand up on their own two feet. When? And it's very clear to me when the U.S. or its allies, U.K., blow up [laugh] Nord Stream 1 and 2—I mean, hello!

So, German industry is going to go ptoom! The German people are going to go ploof! Okay? This winter. And German people, will they ever act any different than they did in 1933 and stand up on their own two legs and say, “No, we’re not going to abide by that”? The Germans had the majority in 1933. There are a majority of German citizens who feel straightaway that this is [laugh] unnecessary. And I daresay they may follow the Czechs and many of the others who by the tens of thousands are already in the streets. I just hope that they see their way to standing on their own two feet and saying, “Look, we put up with a lot of stuff, and when you blew up those pipelines, we’re going to freeze. And also our industry is going kaput, so would you lay off? We’re going to stand on our own two feet. We’re going to make a deal with the Russians.”

Now there are reports that the Germans were already talking with the Russians about a deal on energy, on gas supplies, when those pipelines were sabotaged. So it is a real sad story in Europe and it is going to be sadder as the months go by. Not only that, but as the ice covers those fields in Ukraine, Russian forces are going to go forward. And there is a hint in Putin’s latest speech that Odesa could be negotiated about. People ought to look at that. People ought to read his speeches. People ought to read through the Q&A. Now if Odesa can easily fall—after all, it is a Russian city—if it can fall to the Russians, well, maybe they will be able to negotiate on that and say, “Look, we will make a deal here. Let’s talk and let’s work out something where we stop and Ukraine persists in a smaller way but the war is over and Ukrainians stop dying by the thousands.”

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let’s get Matt Duss’s response to that and also Juan’s question about Nord Stream. *Newsweek* reported that speaking to reporters on February 7th, Biden said, “If Russia invades, that means tanks or troops crossing the border of Ukraine again. There will no longer be a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it,” the president said. A journalist asked Biden how he could do that since Germany was in control of the project. The president replied, “I promise you, we will be able to do it.” If you could talk about both Nord Stream and the rest of what Ray McGovern just said?

**MATT DUSS:** Sure. Just to address Nord Stream. first I think what the president clearly meant there was that Nord Stream 2 would not be brought online. The project would be halted. I don’t think that was a threat, despite the tendency of some to try and interpret it as a threat, that the United States would blow up Nord Stream 2. There is no evidence that the United States was responsible for that.

As for some of these other claims about what Putin really wants, I feel like we are getting into just bizarre territory here. To claim that Putin wasn't trying to take over Kyiv—listen, the Russians landed strike teams outside Kyiv with the goal of toppling the Ukrainian government. These troops were not just there to go camping, OK? The plan clearly was to land forces inside Kyiv, to take control of the government. Clearly, Russia miscalculated. They did not send enough troops. They did not have solid enough supply lines to support these troops. But then to turn around and point to Russia's poor planning as somehow evidence that Putin's goals were much more modest, I think is just untenable.

I did not claim that Putin wants to take over all of Europe. I pointed out that Putin himself claimed that he wanted to reestablish what he describes as Russia's historic right. I don't want to overstate that but I do again want to point people to things that Putin has written and said about this which give a good idea of his own goals.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We want to thank you both very much for joining us. There is a lot there. We want to thank Matt Duss, Ukrainian American, visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, former foreign policy advisor to Senator Bernie Sanders, and Ray McGovern, former senior CIA analyst, speaking to us from Raleigh, North Carolina. Matt is from Washington, D.C.