26 NOVEMBER 2024 / Handing off a war

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): This is *Today, Explained.* I’m Sean Rameswaram. There’s been a lotta news outta Ukraine in the past few weeks:  
  
 SCORING IN <Bubbling over, no drums - BMC>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CyZfeifBDU)*> REUTERS: REPORTER: <bombs lifting off> Ukraine used a U.S. missile system to strike deep into Russian territory for the first time on Tuesday.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12-pin-7WSU&list=RDNS12-pin-7WSU&start_radio=1)*> CNN: NICK PATON WALSH, CHIEF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY CORRESPONDENT: People in Dnipro saw the extraordinary scene on their skyline of that multi warhead Russian missile.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/News/video/putin-seemingly-threatens-nuclear-weapons-ukraine-war-115999682)*> ABC NEWS: IAN PANNELL, CHIEF INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENT: Nuclear saber rattling from the Kremlin this morning with Vladimir Putin (DIPS) …*

SEAN: And I don’t wanna make it all about US, but I couldn’t help but wonder how much of it had to do with our recent election here in the United States, so I asked Josh Keating at *Vox*:

JOSHUA KEATING (senior correspondent, *Vox*): I think it has a lot to do with the election. President Trump has come and said he wants to push for negotiations to end the war. And I think what we see from both sides is an attempt to press their advantage, before they're pushed by the new U.S. administration into some kind of talks.

SEAN: How two American presidents are shaping the future of the war in Ukraine at the same time, coming up on the show today.

[THEME]

SEAN: Luke Harding at *The Guardian* has been covering the war in Ukraine since it started. We asked him what’s changed in the past few weeks.

LUKE HARDING (foreign correspondent, *The Guardian)*: Yeah, it's really been hotting up on several fronts: political, military, internationally. On the battlefield…

SCORING IN <Everything Is Not Fine (pulsing, 909 kick rhythm, synth koto, timestretched synth, hypnotizing, meditative, filtered)>

LUKE: I visited recently in the north east Kharkiv region, a place called Kupiansk. And also another front line near Sumy, where Ukraine has, since August, occupied a chunk of territory inside Russia.

*<CLIP> BBC NEWS, Reporter: At least 11 people, including two children were killed by a Russian missile on Sunday night, Ukraine officials said. It hit a nine-story residential building in the northeastern region of Sumy.*

LUKE: There is full scale fighting going on. It's loud.

*<CLIP> CBS News, Reporter: <siren> A morning shattered by the eerie wail of air raid sirens, then drones and missiles that were intercepted <explosions> and those that were not <booms>*

LUKE: In Kupiansk, where I was, the Russians were a couple of miles away. They are sending drones into the streets to chase and hunt civilians. And Russia is winning the war in the east of Ukraine purely because of mass. It's got more of everything. It's got more men. It's got more tanks. It's got more warplanes.

<CLIP> Sky News: <Bombing>

LUKE: And, you know, meanwhile, of course, the other big development is Donald Trump.

*<CLIP> CBS, Donald Trump: I believe I will be able to make a deal between President Putin and President Zelensky quite quickly.*

LUKE: What that means, Kiev, the presidential administration of Volodymyr Zelensky is bracing for impact.

*<CLIP> CNN, Volodymyr Zelenskyy: I believe the war will end. and it will not end in the abstract... the war will end faster with the policy of the team that will now lead the White House.*

SCORING OUT

LUKE: And interestingly, opinion in Kiev about, about what Trump will mean for Ukraine is mixed. There's quite a strong faction, group of people who think that Trump might just be good news for Ukraine, that he might somehow bring about an end to the war …

*<CLIP> The Sunday Times, Trump: I will get it solved in rapid order, and it will take me no longer than one day.*

LUKE: … and manage to cut a deal with Vladimir Putin, because by now there was an enormous frustration with the Biden administration, with its policy of incrementalism: everything too little, too late with this caution, with the fact that it freaks out whatever Putin says, the nuclear word. And some people think that Trump might just be the person to kind of change all this. There are other, more cool headed Ukrainians who think that Trump will be a disaster, that he will sell out Ukraine to Russia and essentially enforce a kind of capitulation lite, some kind of deal where Ukraine gives up territory, makes a commitment not to join NATO and so on. But, you know, the countdown is on until January the 20th, and we don't really quite know what's going to happen.

SEAN: Hmm. And in addition to the Trump development, we also have some Biden related developments, namely Biden giving Zelensky permission to do things they haven't been able to do to this point. Can you tell us a bit about that?

LUKE: Yeah, there's been a long and difficult and contentious conversation that has been happening since really last year, were if not before, where Zelensky and his team have been asking the White House, the Biden White House for permission to carry out deep strikes inside Russia using ATACMS, using long range American systems, which are highly effective and highly accurate. And Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, you know, Biden have basically said, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. And to the point where really, I think to some degree, you can say it's spoiled the relationship between Biden and Zelensky because it's become mistrustful. Various official Pentagon officials, other officials complaining loudly about the Ukrainians, about about their rudeness, about their military failings and so on. And the Ukrainians for whom this war is existential – you know, bear in mind that people are dying every night; Russian missiles are striking all the time, killing civilians, killing kids, killing families – they're saying, you know, just just give us these tools. And *finally*, in the very twilight of his presidency, after, after Kamala Harris lost the election with Trump on the horizon, the White House has allowed these strikes and Ukraine has wasted no time in whacking strategic targets. So so there's a real sense that the tempo of war is stepping up. Not that there's ever been slack. It's always been pretty busy.

SEAN: Presumably the chief reason Biden didn't want to give Ukraine the go ahead here is because he wanted to avoid escalating with Russia, provoking Russia. How is Russia responding? Was Russia provoked?

LUKE: Yeah, I mean, the question is a fair one, but the paradigm is completely wrong. I mean, we just have to sort of go back to basics here. Russia invaded Ukraine more than ten years ago when it annexed Crimea and started a kind of covert military operation in the east of the country and seized the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk.

*CLIP ABC NEWS, Reporter: large groups of pro-Russia troops surrounding Ukrainian bases, ordering their forces off of them so they can occupy them. The international warning to Russia to end its invasion is being ignored.*

LUKE: So Russia's been escalating all the way through. And then, of course in February 2022, it launched the biggest war, land war in Europe since 1945 – with shock and awe, with tank divisions trying to capture Kiev with a multi-pronged invasion …

*<CLIP> NBC News, Reporter: They're being pushed to the limit by Russia's full-scale invasion with attacks across Ukraine, from areas near those pro-Russian enclaves in the east to the capital Kiev in the west.*

LUKE: … which the Ukrainians really, to the surprise of America and other allies, kind of batted back.

*<CLIP> CBS Morning News, Reporter: village by village Ukrainian soldiers are pushing Russian troops away from Kharkiv and back towards the Russian border.*

LUKE: And they've been, you know, trying to take back territory. And really, you know, in the last year or so, just hold the front line with varying degrees of success. And during this period, there have been no nuclear strikes. You know, Putin has not nuked Texas or London or Paris or indeed Kiev or southern Ukraine. It's it's it's the most enormous bluff. And it's a sort of psychological operation designed to cow the democratic world and to make them afraid of supporting Ukraine. And also to promote the myth that Russia can't lose this war.

SEAN: Hm. And if I'm not mistaken, Russia is now increasing the threat of nuclear warfare. Is that right?

LUKE: No. <laughs> No, not really.

SEAN: No! Is it a myth?

LUKE: I mean, it's it's rhetorical. It's performative. It's ultimately fake. I mean, the threats of Russia launching a nuclear attack is no greater now than it was two years ago. The reality is that in any direct confrontation between, between Russia and the US and its allies, Russia would lose. I mean, America is a more formidable power. NATO is bigger and mightier, and it's just a sort of tremendous bluff. I mean, I think it should be interpreted as an operational informational game. I think I think what's a more realistic scenario is not the Russians launching nukes is some kind of fuck up.   
  
SEAN: <chortles>   
  
LUKE: Bear in mind that that Russia has occupied since in spring 2022. The nuclear power station in Zaporizhzhia. It blew up the reservoir which provided the cooling pond. It's been shelling from this nuclear facility across the river into Ukraine in settlements. I've seen, I've seen them, I've been there. And I think some kind of Chernobyl-style, you know, mess up where Russia just just gets it wrong because it's not regular these protocols is more probable than a kind of calculated Russian military strike. I think that is just a kind of negotiating tactic ahead of some kind of possible deal in spring. And the ultimate audience for this is is one Donald J. Trump ...   
  
SEAN: Mmmmmm.   
  
LUKE: … back in the White House who could potentially portray himself as a peacemaker, the man who avoided nuclear war and all of his flatterers and supporters can say, you know, Trump should win the Nobel Peace Prize because, look, he's he's avoided World War Three and he's brought peace to Ukraine, which, by the way, I don't think is going to be peace.

SCORING IN <Ready Or Not (percussive bass, moving forward, montage, call to action, ghostly synth, celesta, drums, crotales)>

LUKE: Look at Russia's past record for deals. It breaks them and then it sort of continues doing what what it wants to do. And I think, I think, Sean, this is a fascist project. Putin believes that Ukraine does not exist. He thinks this is historical Russia. He wants de-Ukrainize Ukraine and turn the whole country, its people into back into a Russian province. That's his goal. He thinks he can get there. And I think I think he thinks that, that Trump ultimately is someone that he can – if not exactly dupe – I would say outmaneuver.  
  
 SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Luke Harding! He’s got a new book about Ukraine. It’s called *Invasion: Russia’s Bloody War and Ukraine’s Fight for Survival.* Find this light holiday reading wherever you find your books.

Biden’s in charge for the moment. But all eyes are on Trump. The trouble with two presidents, when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: Josh Keating is a senior correspondent at Vox who writes about foreign policy. We asked him if the incoming Trump administration is at all miffed by how much action the outgoing Biden administration is taking on Ukraine.

JOSHUA KEATING (senior correspondent, Vox): So the last tranche of Ukraine aid was allocated by Congress last April.

SCORING IN <A song to bring the sun back>

*<CLIP> BBC: NOMIA IQBAL, CORRESPONDENT: After more than six months. A bill pledging further military aid for Ukraine finally passed.*

*<Reporters shout questions>*

*NOMIA IQBAL: President Zelensky had personally met with U.S. lawmakers to lobby for support.*

JOSHUA: That was $61 billion and basically, they're trying to rush whatever they can out the door before Inauguration Day. So they're trying to, like, get all these contracts in place, get as much aid moving to Ukraine now as they can. The incoming Trump administration does seem to be sort of irritated by this. I saw Richard Grenell, who was the former Trump administration ambassador to Germany, a real kind of like sharp elbowed, you know, you know, troll basically. A guy, a guy who talks a lot of smack on social media and did so even when he was a diplomat. You know, he's accused the Biden administration on Twitter of escalating the war before he leaves office. There's been some coverage that's mentioned him as potentially a candidate for the Trump administration's envoy to Ukraine. So he could be somebody who's like very closely involved in this.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Right. It is plausible that Biden is trying to ramp up his support for Ukraine in advance of an administration coming in that has been less than totally sympathetic to Ukraine.

JOSHUA: Absolutely. And whenever you're in a negotiation, you want to be in the best position possible. When you start from that negotiation, you don't have to have written *The Art of the Deal* to know that you want to move into talks from a position of strength. There's clearly a desire that if Ukraine and Russia are pressured into a position where they're talking about territorial concessions, you want Ukraine to be controlling as much territory as they can before those talks start.

SEAN: Have we seen something like this before? I mean, certainly this isn't the first time a presidential transition is happening in the middle of a conflict abroad.

JOSHUA: Yeah, I mean, we're in this awkward period right now where there are basically two U.S. presidents. Foreign actors, international actors have to deal with both of those realities—they have to get, you know, press their advantage as much as they can with the team that's there now, and also position themselves for the one that's coming in. And we have seen this before, especially when one administration is handing off a war to the next one. One example you could look at is the transition from Harry Truman to Dwight Eisenhower when the Korean War was going on.

*<CLIP> 1950s NEWSREEL: U.S. forces recapture this South Korean capital. These are Marines and U.S. seventh Division troops bouncing into Seoul under enemy fire.*

JOSHUA: Eisenhower had promised to end the war, which by that point had become very unpopular. But he hadn't quite spelled out on the campaign trail how he was going to do it. And this really annoyed Truman, who had basically made the argument, hey, buddy if you know how to end the war, could you please share that with us? We'd like to end the war before we leave office. And Eisenhower made this famous pledge. He said, I shall go to Korea and to basically, you know, assess the situation on the ground and figure out how to end it.

*<CLIP> 1950s NEWSREEL: During his three day stay in Korea, Ike is determined to meet as many veterans from the battlefront as he can and from their experiences plan a way of ending this bitter conflict.*

JOSHUA: And he went and, you know, had a fact finding mission and came to the conclusion the war wouldn't be winnable with, you know, another big offensive, which is what, you know, the South Koreans and what hawks in the U.S. wanted. And he basically continued the armistice talks that Truman had started, and that helped, a few months after he took office, that war did finally end.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT DWIGHT EISENHOWER: Tonight, we greet with prayers of Thanksgiving with the official news that an armistice was signed almost an hour ago in Korea.*

SCORING IN <Because we care>

JOSHUA: Sometimes we've seen the incoming administration actually kind of stymie or sabotage the efforts of the outgoing one.

*<CLIP> 1968 NIXON CAMPAIGN AD: I pledge to you we shall have an honorable end to the war in Vietnam.*

JOSHUA: In 1968, the Nixon campaign basically reached out to the South Vietnamese negotiators and told them not to agree to a deal that would end the war in Vietnam and would presumably give the outgoing Johnson administration a big win and make the Democrats look good in that election.

*<CLIP> MSNBC:*

*PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON: We have found that our… our friend, the Republican nominee, our California friend has been playing on the outskirts with our enemies and our friends both.*

JOSHUA: And so the war actually ended up continuing for another few years with, you know, a lot more casualties, Americans and Vietnamese.

*<CLIP> KTLA NEWS:*

*SPOKESMAN, VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR: I came back from Vietnam in 1967, and here it is 1971. I still haven't seen the end of the war in sight yet.*

SCORING OUT

JOSHUA: And then, you know, a final example you could talk to is a more recent one is the war in Afghanistan.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS:*

*ANTHONY MASON, NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT: President Trump has just nine weeks left in his term. During that time, he's expected to sharply cut U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan and Iraq...*

JOSHUA: Donald Trump agreed to the deal with the Taliban that led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops. And the withdrawal actually began before the Biden administration came in.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT TRUMP: Two days ago, the United States signed a deal with the Taliban so that after 19 years of conflict—and very close to 20—we can finally begin to bring our amazing troops back home.*

JOSHUA: Biden probably would have wanted to get those troops out anyway, but I think would have preferred to negotiate it on his own terms.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN: So we're left with a simple decision: either follow through on the commitment made by the last administration and leave Afghanistan, or say we weren't leaving and commit another tens of thousands more troops going back to war.*

JOSHUA: And it's actually interesting, if you look at how Trump talks about that now, he's criticized Biden quite a bit for how the withdrawal was handled, including, you know, the terrorist attack that, you know, killed people, including a number of U.S. troops.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT TRUMP: Afghanistan. The most embarrassing day in the history of our country. And none of the generals got fired for the incompetence that they showed.*

JOSHUA: But, you know, I think all these examples just go to show you can talk about, you know, conditions on the battlefield, the weapons each side has. But, you know, these U.S. elections are themselves kind of developments in the war. And they affect the strategy that all sides in the conflict are pursuing.

SEAN: And do these examples, especially the last one you gave about Afghanistan, where it was the same two characters involved, tell us anything about what might shake out with this war in Ukraine in the coming months?

JOSHUA: Yeah, well, I'm going to steal an argument from Sam Greene, a really smart Russia analyst, whose basic point was that Putin, up until this point, has managed to use uncertainty to his advantage and use the fact that he's the most unpredictable character in this drama to his advantage. He's no longer the most unpredictable character.  
  
SEAN: <laughs>

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT TRUMP: I'll keep you in suspense.*

JOSHUA: You know, Trump's coming in and Putin may not be able to sort of leverage uncertainty about, you know, just how crazy he is, just how much he's willing to escalate this to his advantage to quite the same extent, because now there's somebody who prides himself on being, you know, the potentially craziest guy in the room that that's not me saying that that's Trump has actually like talked about his approach and framed it that way. I think it's pretty clear that the Trump team is going to push for negotiations. Will that work, though? It's possible Russia may just say no. They may say we're winning on the battlefield, we're walking away from this. In which case, you know, Trump has said that he would tell Putin like he's just going to give Zelensky everything right now. He's going to send him all the weapons.  
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
JOSHUA: Let him do whatever he wants. So I don't think it's out of the question: this could actually end with the U.S. escalating its involvement in the war in Ukraine.

SCORING IN <Scanning the horizon NO DRONE, BUT NO TAPPY DRUM>

JOSHUA: And then there's the question, you know, what does a deal actually look like? You can say we want to freeze the lines in place. I think there is a consensus developing that this is going to end with some current internationally recognized Ukrainian territory held by Russia. But the Ukrainians are going to want security guarantees. They don't want a repeat of the deals they've made in the past where they've sort of agreed to ceasefires with Russia and then Russia has violated them. And so, you know, they say they want full membership in NATO. That, to be honest, seems unlikely. But, so then, what does security guarantees look like? You know, is it basing Western troops in Ukraine? Is it, you know, providing them with a lot more military aid? If they don't get that I could see the Ukrainians just walking away from the deal saying, ‘We're going to keep fighting with whatever we have.’ We shouldn't assume that, you know, this war is going to end just because Donald Trump wants it to.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Josh Keating. Vox dot com. This episode of *Today, Explained* was produced by Hady Mawajdeh and Haleema Shah. They were edited by Jolie Myers, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.   
  
Tomorrow on the show, we’re gonna talk about how you can make the world a better place.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]