

## **WADING INTO THE NORD STREAM PIPELINE CONTROVERSY**

*“The Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, consisting of two pipes each, run largely parallel to each other below the Baltic Sea between the eastern shores of Russia and the northern coast of Germany. Three of the lines, which were at the time full of gas, were severed by underwater blasts that prosecutors said were caused by planted explosives on September 26 last year.”*

The Wall Street Journal, Mar. 10, 2023<sup>1</sup>

*“On February 7, [2022] less than three weeks before the seemingly inevitable Russian invasion of Ukraine, Biden met in his White House with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who, after some wobbling, was now firmly on the American team. At the press briefing that followed, Biden defiantly said, ‘If Russia invades ... there will no longer be a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.’”*

Seymour Hersh<sup>2</sup>

*“When it comes to Great Power rivalries, nothing is as it seems to be.”*

Akers’ Third Law of the Universe

The sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines, which run some 260 feet under the Baltic Sea, may be the most successful covert operation of the post-Cold War world, or at least since the *Stuxnet worm*.<sup>3</sup> It will be regarded by future historians as one of the crowning clandestine achievements of today’s “shadow war” between the United States and its allies, and, on the other side, the authoritarian troika of China, Russia and Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> Bojan Pancevski and Sune Engel Rasmussen, “Investigators Puzzle Over Yacht’s Possible Role in the Nord Stream Blast,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 10, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Hersh, “How America Took Out The Nord Stream Pipeline,” *substack.com*, Feb. 8, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> *Stuxnet*, incorrectly claimed by some to be the world’s first cyberweapon, was a powerful computer worm designed as early as 2005 and first uncovered in 2010. Many experts claim the weapon was designed by U.S. and Israeli intelligence agents—a claim that continues to be denied by both governments—targeting supervisory control and data acquisition systems (SCADA) and reportedly caused significant damage to centrifuges essential to Iran’s secret nuclear weapons programs. See, among others, Kim Zetter, *Countdown to Zero Day: Stuxnet and the Launch of the World’s First Digital Weapon*, (Crown, 2015).

The explosion happened almost six months ago. So far at least, no individual or group of individuals, or any organization, or any country, has stepped forward to take credit.

That's the way the "shadow war" works.

And, just as predictably, those blamed have vehemently denied any involvement.

I find it incredible that in an age of ubiquitous monitoring, underwater sensors, overhead surveillance—not to mention intelligence organization and government leaks—it appears a group of individuals or an organization have pulled off the impossible: deliberately sabotaging one of the globe's most vital conduits of transnational energy.

And getting away with it.

The event has all the earmarks of a high-tech espionage thriller!

So far, even the "plausible deniability" that provides CYA coverage of secretive projects by covert organizations has not been used.

It hasn't had to be.

Why? The mainstream press in our country has largely refused to cover the story, or when forced to acknowledge parts of it, simply mutes its significance. Apparently, there is no appetite to conduct an in-depth journalistic investigation into the planning, execution, and cover-up of the blast itself (remember when our printed press and television news organizations used to pride itself in conducting such inquiries?)

Nevertheless, today, faintly glowing embers of the story are being kept alive, making it a story refusing to be buried at the margins. For example, in recent weeks stories appearing in the German weekly *Die Zeit* (and later picked up by *The Wall Street Journal*) describe an official German Federal Criminal Office (BKA, Berlin's equivalent of our FBI) investigation into the blast driven by concerns that unnamed German individuals or property may have been used by the culprits.<sup>4</sup> To this end, in the past few days, attention by international investigators have focused on the *Andromeda*, a 50-foot sailing yacht where traces of explosives have been found (an estimated 500 kilograms of explosives were used in the blast), a charter company based on the German island of Ruegen, a small Baltic Sea port near Rostock, and the small Danish island of Christianso (with its 58 inhabitants).<sup>5</sup>

It's like the howling, slobbering bloodhounds chasing the smell-trail of Cool Hand Luke.

But lots of pepper lies ahead.

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<sup>4</sup> Pancevski and Rasmussen, "Nord Stream Blast Probe in Germany Centers on Sailboat, Crew," *The Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 9, 2023. The article has a good map of the pipelines and explosion sites.

<sup>5</sup> Pancevski, "Investigators Puzzle."

Not to mention smelly red-herrings.

In today's world, any successful covert operation must have red-herrings. In recent days, for example, Western media floated the story—based on unidentified new intelligence reports—that a shadowy group of rogue of Ukrainian actors were responsible for the act of sabotage.<sup>6</sup> Ukrainian officials immediately denied the reports. Moscow, which continues to label the blast as an act of “international terrorism” and Putin himself, early this week, dismissed the idea as “complete nonsense.” At the same time, Putin said a ship rented by Gazprom had found an antenna-like object about 19 miles from the blast site, close to only remaining intact Nord Stream pipeline. So what? Russian experts claim the antenna could receive a signal to detonate an explosive device.<sup>7</sup>

Ah, the games in the shadows.

Despite the red-herrings and distractions, German interest in the story may have staying power. The twin pipelines, which run for 750 miles under the Baltic Sea, (and do not have to transit Ukrainian territory) were designed to pump 110 billion cubic metres (bcm) of natural gas a year to Germany.<sup>8</sup> The pipelines originate from two different ports in northeastern Russia before ending in northern Germany. As Hersh observes:

“From its earliest days, Nord Stream 1 was seen by Washington and its anti-Russian NATO partners as a threat to western dominance. The holding company behind it, Nord Stream AG, was incorporated in Switzerland in 2005 in partnership with Gazprom, a publicly traded Russian company producing enormous profits for shareholders which is dominated by oligarchs known to be in the thrall of Putin. Gazprom controlled 51 percent of the company, with four European energy firms—one in France, one in the Netherlands, and two in Germany—sharing the remaining 49 percent of stock ... Gazprom's profits were shared with the Russian government, and state gas and oil revenues were estimated in some years to amount as much as 45 percent of Russia's annual budget.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Adam Entous, *et.al.*, “Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Pipelines, U.S. Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 7, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Caleb Davis, “Putin says Nord Stream blasts carried out on ‘state level,’” *Reuters*, Mar. 14, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Soldatkin, *et.al.*, “Exclusive: Russia set to mothball damaged Nord Stream gas pipelines—sources,” *Reuters*, Mar. 3, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Hersh, “How America Took Out”; Hiroko Tabuchi, “Russia's Oil Revenue Soars Despite Sanctions, Study Finds,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2022. (Estimate based on 2021 figures).

So much methane gas escaped out of the pipelines after the explosion that all ships were prohibited from approaching within a five nautical mile radius of the blast site for weeks afterward.<sup>10</sup>

Today, Germans are swallowing much higher energy prices in the name of NATO solidarity.

Many of them aren't happy.

The cost of repairing the pipelines is an estimated \$500 million.<sup>11</sup> Russia, for its part, seems increasingly inclined to seal up and mothball the damaged pipelines, rather than repair them.<sup>12</sup> Today, they are focusing instead on developing a major new gas field in Siberia (Kovykta) to feed the new "Power of Siberia" pipeline to carry Russian gas to China (with a full capacity of 38 bcm by 1935). In addition, Russia is planning to build a new pipeline via Mongolia (the Power of Siberia 2) to provide an additional 50 bcm of gas per year.<sup>13</sup> In short, while the September sabotage abruptly ended Germany's reliance on Russian gas, it had the practical effect of driving Russia further into Chinese arms.

Such episodes in the "shadow war" often have unintended consequences.

As is the case in so many circumstances these days, when a topic is too hot to handle (or politically inconvenient) for mainstream media sources, investigative journalists are forced to turn to outlets like *Substack* to get stories out. In this vein, on February 8, 2023, journalist Seymour Hirsch released just such a bombshell story claiming that the United States executed a covert sea operation to take out the pipelines. Hersh—relying on "a source with direct knowledge of the operational planning," asserted that Navy divers, under the cover of a widely-publicized mid-summer NATO exercise (BALTOPS 22) planted the remotely triggered explosives that, three months later, destroyed three of the four Nord Stream pipelines.<sup>14</sup>

Hersh's allegations—if true—(and that is a big IF) could be more explosive for the Biden administration than the ill-fated pipelines themselves.

Who is Hersh? According to his biographical profile in *Wikipedia*, the 85-year-old Seymour Myron "Sy" Hersh is an American investigative journalist and political writer. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for exposing the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. In the 1970s, he covered the Watergate scandal, reported on the secret U.S. bombing of Cambodia, and the CIA's alleged program of domestic spying. In

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Mathiesen and Zia Weise, "8 things to know about the environmental impact of 'unprecedented' Nord Stream leaks," *POLITICO*, Sep. 28, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Entous, "Intelligence Suggests."

<sup>12</sup> Soldatkin., "Exclusive: Russia."

<sup>13</sup> See, among others, "Putin oversees launch of Siberian gas field feeding pipeline to China," *Reuters*, Dec. 21, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Hersh, "How America Took Out."

2004, he detailed the U.S. torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. In those days, his reporting was widely applauded by leftists of all stripes (and others): he won a record five George Polk Awards, two National Magazine Awards, and is an acclaimed author of eleven books, including a prize-winning biography of Henry Kissinger.

With a track record like that, you would think the mainstream media would at least be mildly interested in his account of the Nord Stream bombings, right?

*Wrong.*

They are doing everything they can to ignore or dismiss his allegations.

Why?

I can think of at least five reasons:

First, Hersh's reliance on a single unnamed source for the operational details—the Navy training schools, the secretive administration decision-making process, the cooperation of regional allies—gives mainstream U.S. news outlets an excuse not to touch such a “hot topic.” This is not true of media outside the United States. Britain's *Reuters News Agency*, for example, reported at least ten stories based on the Hersh revelations: the *Associated Press* not one. Indeed, the on-line magazine *Newsweek* was a notable exception to this American media silence.<sup>15</sup> As one journalist noted, “anonymous sources *are* newsworthy—when they talk to The New York Times, but not Seymour Hersh.”<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, authorities at the highest levels have vehemently denied the story. As Hersh notes in his piece, a White House e-mail responded by saying “This is false and complete nonsense,” and a CIA spokesperson said, “This claim is completely and utterly false.”<sup>17</sup> These official denials further cloud the “attribution problem” that accompanies such operations.

Thirdly, on controversial issues like this the elites who control mainstream sources of information seemingly march in lock-step fashion. The fig-leaf-thin ideological differences separating MSNBC and FOX suddenly disappear. Do not expect Tucker Carlson or others on the right to cover the story; certainly, none of the left-leaning commentators, or the legion of Biden apologists, will touch the story.

No matter how important the issues are that are raised.

Moreover, I've heard nothing about a congressional investigation of the allegations and, unless there is a tsunami of foreign pressure, do I expect there to be any. As one report notes:

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<sup>15</sup> David Knox, “Major US Outlets Found Hersh's Nord Stream Scoop Too Hot to Handle,” *FAIR*, Mar. 3, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> David Knox, “Anonymous Sources *Are* Newsworthy—When They Talk to NYT, Not Seymour Hersh,” *FAIR*, Mar. 10, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

“While big news internationally, Hersh’s story was not reported by any of the major US corporate broadcast networks—**NBC**, **ABC**, and **CBS**—or the public broadcasters, **PBS** and **NPR**. Nor did the nation’s major cable outlets, **CNN**, **MSNBC**, and **Fox News**, cover the story.”<sup>18</sup>

Ironically enough, it is the bold and risky decision to sabotage the Russian pipelines that should be treated as a healing balm for Biden supporters, especially as they suffer through an endless trail of Biden gaffes, falls on the steps of Air Force One, hidden classified documents, bizarre off-the-cuff statements, and multiple public misstatements.

H-m-m-m ...

Fourth, the story runs contrary to the official narrative intensely critical of Putin and his unprovoked invasion of Ukraine (now over 380 days old): any other line-of-march *must* be discredited. If Hersh’s assertions are true it is tantamount to an act of war. Leftist elements in Chancellor Scholz’s own ruling Social Democrat Party (never to be seen as pro-American on a wide range of issues) would revolt.

Fifth, there is the all-important “law of obfuscation” (my terminology)—to render obscure or unclear—when it comes to covert operations in the “war of shadows.” Immediately following Hersh’s revelations, the headlines in American newspapers and social media were besieged by a bewildering string of stories designed—in my view—to distract the American public. Suddenly, out of the blue, we were flooded with stories about Chinese balloons, UFO sightings, bank failures, etc.

All this makes peeling back the layers of any covert operation in today’s world more-and-more difficult. Each layer brings a new set of obfuscations. In this case, the complicated and sophisticated multi-layered “onion” bears all the characteristics of a successful modern-day covert operation.

It is by design.

Somewhere, in an unnamed location and at an unattributable future time, the planners and executors of the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage will meet to toast each other with glasses of champagne.

Or will it be vodka, horilka, baijiu, jaegermeister, gin or arak?

We may never know for sure.

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<sup>18</sup> Knox, “Anonymous Sources.”