

Fear, Escalation and Instability: Keeping the “Ukraine Crisis” Alive

By [William Boardman](#)

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Just when the U.S. Defense Secretary was in Japan giving indications that the Ukraine “crisis” was over as far as the U.S. was concerned, Ukrainians of all sorts, other Washington officials, and even the Japanese government all pitch in to keep the “crisis” alive, at least as a threat meme.

Whether it’s a real crisis doesn’t matter as long as you’re afraid

How much of a Ukraine crisis is it, really, when “pro-Russian” Ukrainians seize Ukrainian government buildings, calling for Russians protection/intervention – and the Russians don’t come? They don’t even threaten to come.

That’s been true for several days as this is written. Maybe it won’t be true as you read it, since writing about Ukraine these days is like leaving a message in the sand without knowing where the tide line is on the beach.

All the same, the opportunity, the pretext, the moment for Russian intervention arrived April 6 in eastern Ukraine (in the three oblasts of Kharkiv, Luhansk, and especially Donetsk). Russia, already presumed to have the means and the motive, did not seize the opportunity to invade any part of Ukraine. Quite the contrary, the Russians, and the Germans, and the European Union were all calling for calm, dialogue, and de-escalation.

While others fulminated fantasy threats, German Chancellor Angela Merkel put the Russian takeover of Crimea in perspective with the succinctness of sanity, saying she considered it a “singular event.” The European Union’s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton called for “de-escalation and the avoidance of further destabilization.”

Along with many American officials, the acting government of Ukraine has been inflating the Russian “threat” for weeks, stoking fear that the Ukraine mainland was poised to go the way of Crimea. That’s the Ukrainian propaganda line that’s still waiting for – or possibly seeking to provoke – confirmation on the ground. This fear-mongering is based on two assumptions: (1) that Russia has annexed Crimea (true) and (2) that Russian troops along the Ukrainian border (hard to nail down, more about that later) are planning to invade eastern Ukraine (counterintuitive from a rational perspective, but impossible to prove until it happens, or doesn’t). In any event, it’s a useful distraction for the Kiev government, which can’t even run its parliament without breaking into fistfights.

The killer quote so far, crystallizing American madness in the midst of a situation we spent twenty years preparing, comes from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, testifying to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 8:

“... quite simply, what we see from Russia is an illegal and illegitimate effort to destabilize a sovereign state and create a contrived crisis with paid operatives across an international boundary.”

Looking in the mirror, Kerry apparently sees someone else as he utters an apt and precise description of the western role in Ukraine, destabilizing a sovereign state during the months of the Maidan that culminated in a pro-western coup d’etat, resulting in the illegal and illegitimate (but possibly better) Kiev government now in power. American paid operatives, both overt and, presumably covert, prominently included [Asst. Secretary of State](#) Victoria (“fuck the EU”) Nuland, who reports to Kerry. Nuland’s stated choice for the next Ukrainian prime minister was [Arseniy Yatsenyuk](#), whom the coup leaders chose as the next and current Ukrainian prime minister.

Remembering that one side’s de-stabilization can become another side’s stabilization, it’s foolish to question whether or not the Russians are engaged in events in Ukraine. The more useful question would be who doesn’t have a hand in stirring the pot? Summing up the official spin on events, the [New York Times](#) of April 8 began its [Ukraine story](#), under the headline “Ukrainian Troops Move to Reassert Control in East,” with this paragraph:

“Ukrainian Interior Ministry troops expelled pro-Russian demonstrators from a regional administration building in the eastern city of Kharkiv early on Tuesday, arresting about 70 protesters as the provisional government in Kiev moved to exert control over unrest that the United States and its Western allies fear might lead to a Russian military invasion.”

Nicely done, implying in one long sentence that: even though Ukraine’s troops are in charge of a challenge that comes from “pro-Russian demonstrators” (who are Ukrainian civilians as far as is known), nevertheless everyone should be afraid of “a Russian military invasion” which seems no more likely than a Russian tourist invasion. The best touch is the reference to Kiev’s “provisional” government, which has no legitimacy, having come to power in a process that began with demonstrations that mirror the one so quickly quelled in Kharkiv.

No doubt someone somewhere is arguing that this comparison proves that Ukrainians had more free speech under [President Yanukovych](#) that they have under the government that overthrew him and, in its first legislative act, banned Russian as an official language (later rescinded).

Later the same day, the original lede disappeared from the Times website, when the [Times re-packaged](#) the official message this way: “As the government in Kiev moved to reassert control over pro-Russian protesters across eastern Ukraine, the United States and NATO issued stern warnings to Moscow about further intervention in the country’s affairs, amid continuing fears of an eventual Russian incursion.” Now the Kiev government, no longer “provisional,” remains in control of its pro-Russian citizens, but the U.S. and NATO are bombast-throwing against the diminished threat of an “eventual” mere “incursion.” This might seem like an indication of some easing of tensions except that, in the print edition of the April 8 Times, the same reporters had earlier written that “there was no imminent threat to peace.”

Who wants trouble, and where do they want it?

The American Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, [arrived in Japan](#) on April 5 at the same time that American officials were [sending signals](#) that the Ukraine “crisis” caused by the Russian takeover of Crimea was over. Even though the 1994 Budapest Memorandum signed by President Clinton purported to guarantee Ukraine’s territorial integrity, the U.S. response has been that there is no military solution (in other words: Crimea is not worth going to war over). The Budapest Memorandum did not mean what it said, American officials explained, because its commitments were “nonbinding.” The memorandum is not a formal treaty.

Japan and the U.S. have a formal security treaty, which Defense Secretary Hagel emphasized publicly and privately. But Japanese officials were using the American response on Crimea to try to leverage a stronger American commitment to an even less important bit of contested real estate in the East China Sea – the uninhabited islands called Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. Both countries claim the islands, whose status is legally ambiguous. The Chinese discovered a large natural gas field near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2006, which China and Japan have developed jointly since 2008.

Increasing Japanese militarism was expressed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in January, when he told the World Economic Forum that the world should stand up to China or risk a regional war with global economic consequences. Feeding that fear in February, U.S. intelligence officer Capt. James Farrell claimed that Chinese training exercises included practice for “a short sharp war to destroy Japanese forces in the East China Sea.” The U.S. ambassador to China, Gary Locke, responding indirectly at the time, asking that “both sides lower the temperature and focus on diplomacy,” while adding that the U.S. had no position on the dispute over the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Adding to the context leading up to Hagel’s visit, the North Koreans launched some 30 short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan. Japan [promised to shoot](#) down any more North Korean missiles seen as a threat to Japan. And South Korea, which also has a military security treaty with the U.S., tested a new, long-range ballistic missile that could reach almost any point in North Korea, firing it into the Yellow Sea.

Manipulating the perception of increasing tensions, the Japanese sought to maneuver the U.S. in committing itself to a military response to any attack on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands that Japan administers. Hagel reaffirmed the American commitment to protect Japan’s security, without specifically including the disputed islands, reiterating the official U.S. position that it has no position.

For all their diplomatic ambiguity, Hagel’s assurances annoyed the Chinese without satisfying the Japanese. Hagel travelled on to China, where he became the first foreigner to get a tour of China’s newest [aircraft carrier](#), a former Soviet vessel that the Chinese spent a decade refurbishing after buying it from Ukraine.

What none of the public officials (and little if any of the media coverage) said about the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is that the islands are arguably located in both countries’ [exclusive economic zones](#) and also within their 200-mile territorial limits (the East China Sea is about 360 miles wide) as controlled by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which both countries have signed. The dispute has been pending before the UN’s State Oceanic Administration since [December 2012](#), when China submitted its claim. The ocean area in dispute is about one-and-a-half times the size of Crimea.

Speaking at the NATO Transformation Seminar in Paris on April 8, NATO Secretary General

Anders Fogh Rasmussen defined the Ukraine situation through the now familiar meme of Russian troops massed on the border of Ukraine, a description of reality that is as unchallenged as it is unproven, even though it has settled into acceptance as conventional wisdom:

“We are meeting at a defining moment for the security architecture we have built together over the last decades. Events in Eastern Ukraine are of great concern. I urge Russia to step back. Any further move into Eastern Ukraine would represent a serious escalation, rather than the de-escalation that we all seek.

“We call on Russia to pull back the tens of thousands of troops it has massed on Ukraine’s borders, engage in a genuine dialogue with the Ukrainian authorities, and respect its international commitments.”

The first problem with the troop meme is that Ukraine’s border with Russia is more than 1,200 miles long. No one is asserting that there are massed Russian troops stretching 1,200 miles from Belarus to the Black Sea, and clearly that’s not what’s real [if there were 40,000 troops along the entire 1,200 mile border, that would mean there were 33 troops per mile, which is pretty thin massing]. It’s not clear what’s real, and hasn’t been since the earliest assertions of Russian troops massing.

Before the Maidan began in Kiev in the fall of 2013, the Russians were allowed by treaty to have 25,000 troops in Ukraine, all in bases in Crimea. Once Russia controlled Crimea, early reports of Russian troops in Ukraine often confused this reality with other things that may or may not have been real, such as the March 7 report that the [Pentagon estimated](#) the presence of “20,000 Russian troops in Ukraine.” If true, the Russians would seem to have been under-massed by about 5,000 troops. Whatever else was true during the [Crimea takeover](#), there were no pictures of massive Russian troop movements. Video of Russian tanks moving to Crimea on trains were, if real, showing those tanks moving unmolested through southern Ukraine, the only rail route from Russia to Crimea.

As of March 4, [according to a map](#) in the British Daily Telegraph, the standing military of Ukraine comprised little more than 150 planes and 65,000 troops. Across the border in Russia, the standing military in the western district (Moscow) included 278 planes and over 150,000 troops. The southern military district (Rostov-on-Don) had some 200 planes and 150,000 troops. In other words, before there was any “massing,” the Russians already had more than 300,000 troops stationed in regions bordering Ukraine, presumably at a variety of distances from the border.

On March 12, the British [Daily Mail](#) reported a Ukraine government claim that “80,000 Russian troops were massing on its borders.” The story included two maps, one of which showed [four areas](#) on the border where the Russians were reportedly massing 80,000 troops, 270 tanks, 180 armored vehicles, 90 helicopters, 140 planes, and so on, without any indication how they were divided up. The [second map](#) purported to show that Russia planned to occupy all of southern Ukraine from Kharkiv to Odessa, which wasn’t fully consistent with the map showing where the troops were “massed.”

That was the government in Kiev, or the Daily Mail, crying wolf. The next day, March 13, the [UK Guardian](#) reported that “Moscow has deployed 10,000 troops along its border with Ukraine,” no massing, and clearly discounting the 25,000 or so in Crimea. Russia confirmed

the 10,00 in “several border regions... in a training exercise that would last two weeks.” The [New York Times](#) the same day reported the same story based on the same source somewhat more hysterically, under the fundamentally false headline:

Russian Troops Mass at Border With Ukraine

The Russians continued to deny the Times’s definition of reality, which President Obama said “we have seen... massing along that border under the guise of military exercises.” Whatever the president may have seen, there was no conclusive visual evidence offered to the public. What pictures there have been to date have shown little that could be called “massing,” and were often pictures that could have been taken anywhere, any time. That includes the purported classified satellite [images tweeted](#) by U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt on April 9 that he claims show a “buildup” near Rostov-on-Don, which is some [fifty miles](#) from the Ukraine border.

By the end of March, Ukraine was claiming Russia had 100,000 troops on the border ([later reduced](#) to “still over 10,000”), while the Russians were [claiming that](#) they had allowed [foreign observers](#) to probe border regions four times and that “even Ukrainian inspectors [agreed] there were no major military activities being carried out.” [Fox News](#) said the Russians were just hiding their troops. The [official U.S. estimate](#) of massed Russian troops stabilized at [around 40,000](#) (where it remains), while the [European estimate](#) is 30,000. As of April 7, at the joint meeting in Vienna of the Forum for Security Cooperation and the Permanent Council, the U.S. remained [officially dissatisfied](#) with Russian responses to formal inquiries as to the precise nature and purpose of forces deployed near the Ukraine border.

The United States currently has 67,000 troops in Europe, far from Ukraine, with 40,000 in Germany, 11,000 in Italy, and 9,500 in Britain. The total in 1991, before the Soviet Union collapsed, was 285,000.

Whatever the reality of the positions of Russian troops in Russia, there’s no credible evidence they exist in threatening strength. It could be true, but even those who have looked for them reportedly [can’t find them](#). Ukraine [is inherently unstable](#) and has long existed in a nearly continuous state of chronic crisis. But the engaged participants all have reasons to perpetuate the spectre of massed Russian troops, whether they’re there or not: the Russians for leverage and mystique; the Ukrainians for unity and support; the west for posturing.

And there’s another constituency with a clear vested interest in pushing the Russian threat toward a new Cold War: arms makers (excuse me: “defense contractors”). As the NATO secretary general said quite plainly at the [NATO Transformation](#) Seminar, April 8:

“The reality is that Europeans have disarmed too much and for too long. In NATO, we have agreed a defence spending guideline of 2% of Gross Domestic Product. Too few Allies meet this guideline. And too many have moved too far in the other direction. This is the time to stop the cuts and start reversing the trend.”

From that perspective, there are likely some who are afraid that Russia won’t invade Ukraine, or that China won’t invade the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

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Articles by: [William Boardman](#)

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