

# Just Listen to What Western Officials Are Saying About Russia

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*If you want a sleepless night – or month – just listen to what Western security officials are saying these days about a possible confrontation with Russia.*

“If you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States,” [warned](#) General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, “I’d have to point to Russia.”

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former head of NATO, similarly inveighed about impending regional conflict. “Putin wants to restore Russia to its former position as a great power,” Rasmussen [insisted](#). “There is a high probability that he will intervene in the Baltics” as he has in Ukraine.

It’s not just defense secretaries and generals employing language that conjures up the ghosts of the past. Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton used a [“Munich”](#) analogy in reference to Russian President Vladimir Putin, and a common *New York Times* description of Russia is [“revanchist.”](#) These two terms take the Ukraine crisis back to 1938, when fascist Germany menaced the world.

Yet comparing the civil war in Ukraine to the Cold War – let alone Europe on the eve of World War II – has little basis in fact. Yes, Russia is certainly aiding insurgents in eastern Ukraine, but there’s no evidence that Moscow is threatening the Baltics, or even the rest of Ukraine. Indeed, it’s the West that’s been steadily [marching east](#) over the past decade, recruiting one former Russian ally or Soviet republic after another into NATO.

## Russia Reacts

Nor did the Russians start the Ukraine crisis.

It began when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich turned down a debt deal from the European Union that would have required Kiev to institute draconian austerity measures, reduce its ties to Russia, and join NATO through [the back door](#). In return, Ukraine would have received a very modest aid package.

Moscow, worried about the possibility of yet another NATO-allied country on its border, tendered a far more generous package. While the offer was more *realpolitik* than altruism, it was a better deal. When Yanukovich took it, demonstrators occupied Kiev’s central square.

In an attempt to defuse the tense standoff between the government and demonstrators,

France, Germany, and Poland drew up a compromise that would have accelerated elections and established a national unity government. It was then that the demonstrations turned into a full-scale insurrection.

There's a [dispute](#) over what set off the bloodshed – demonstrators claim government snipers fired on them, but some independent [investigations](#) have implicated extremist neo-Nazis in initiating the violence. However, instead of supporting the agreement they'd just negotiated, the EU recognized the government that took over when Yanukovych was forced to flee the country.

To the Russians this was a coup, and they're not alone in thinking so. [George Friedman](#), head of the international security organization Stratfor, called it "the most blatant coup in history," and it had Western fingerprints all over it. In a phone call [better remembered for an impolitic F-word](#), U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt were recorded talking about how to "midwife" the overthrow of Yanukovych and whom to put in his place.

Besides making Kiev a counterproposal on resolving its debt crisis, no one has implicated the Russians in any of the events that led up to the fall of Yanukovych. In short, Moscow's subsequent annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine, while certainly aggressive, were largely [reactive](#) to events that Russia sees as deeply affecting its security, both military and economic.

#### Threat Inflation

Somehow these events have morphed into Nazi armies poised on the Polish border in 1939, or Soviet armored divisions threatening to overrun Western Europe during the Cold War. Were it not for the fact that nuclear powers are involved, these images would be almost silly: NATO spends [10 times](#) what Moscow does on armaments, and there's not a military analyst on the planet who thinks Russia is a match for the United States.

To compare Russia to the power of Nazi Germany or even the Soviet Union of old is to stretch credibility beyond the breaking point. So why are people doing it? The answer is complex because there are multiple actors with different scripts.

First, there are [the neoconservatives](#) from the Bush years. Many of them haven't given up on the "Reaganite" dreams of the [Project for the New American Century](#), the now defunct think tank that brought us the Iraq war and the broader "war on terror." It's no accident that [Nuland](#) is married to [Robert Kagan](#), one of the project's founders and leading thinkers. The group also includes [Paul Wolfowitz](#), [Elliott Abrams](#), and [John Bolton](#).

The neocons believe in aggressively projecting American military power and using regime change to get rid of leaders they don't like. Disgraced by the Iraq debacle, they still have a presence in the State Department, and many are leading foreign policy advisers for Republican presidential candidates, including [Rick Perry](#), [Ted Cruz](#), and [Jeb Bush](#). They're well placed and persistent, and if another Bush is elected president, there's talk that Nuland will become secretary of state.

Then there are the generals, who have a number of irons in the fire.

There's a current in NATO's leadership that would like to see the alliance become a

worldwide military confederacy, although the [Afghan disaster](#) has dampened the enthusiasm of many. In fact, there's not even a great deal of support within NATO for enforcing the treaty's provisions for "collective self-defense," and virtually none for [sending arms](#) to Ukraine. Most NATO countries don't even pony up the required level of military spending they're supposed to, leaving the U.S. to pick up [70 percent of the bills](#).

But there's nothing like conjuring up a scary Russian bear to loosen those purse strings for NATO's militaries and their associated industries. And indeed, a number of former scofflaws have upped their military spending since the Ukraine crisis broke.

### Shifting Poles

Right now there appears to be [a split](#) among U.S. decision makers over whether Russia or China is our major competitor. For the neocons and most of the Republican candidates, the Kremlin is the clear and present danger. For the Obama administration and most Democrats – including Hillary Clinton – China is the competition, hence the so-called "[Asia pivot](#)" to beef up military forces in the Pacific and establish a ring of bases and allies to obstruct Beijing's ability to expand.

One can make too much of this "division," because most of these currents merge at some point. Thus the sanctions targeting Russia's energy industry also squeeze China, which desperately needs oil and gas.

In response to sanctions, [Russia](#) is shifting its supplies and pipelines east. Russia and China have also begun [establishing alternatives](#) to Western-dominated financial institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank. Organizations like [the BRICS](#) countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – have established [a development bank](#) and currency reserves, and the new Chinese-initiated Asian Infrastructure Development Bank has already attracted not only Asian nations, but [the leading European ones as well](#). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization now embraces over 3 billion people.

The U.S. has tried to derail a number of these initiatives. Its sanctions against Russia have made it difficult for Moscow to develop oil and gas in the arctic, and Washington pointedly told its allies that they should not join the China development bank. Yet only Japan and the Philippines heeded the American plea to boycott the bank, and Asia's need for energy is overcoming many of the roadblocks created by the sanctions.

However, the campaign against Russia has damaged the Kremlin's energy sales to Western Europe. The EU successfully [blocked](#) a Russian pipeline through Bulgaria, and the Americans have promised that the U.S. fracking industry will wean Europe off Russian energy. Fracking, however, is in trouble, because [Saudi Arabia](#) stepped up production and crashed oil prices worldwide. A number of U.S. fracking industries have gone belly up, and the industry is experiencing mass layoffs.

Stay tuned for EU-Russian energy developments.

### Blowing Things Up

Why are we now in a dangerous standoff with a country that is not a serious threat to our European allies or ourselves, but does have the capacity to incinerate a sizable portion of the planet?

At least part of the problem is that U.S. foreign policy requires enemies so that it can deploy the one thing we know best how to do: blow things up. The fact that our wars over the past decade have led to one disaster after another is irrelevant, explained away by “inadequate” use of violence, lack of resolve, or weak-kneed allies.

Americans are currently looking at a host of major-party presidential candidates – excluding the quite sensible Bernie Sanders – who want to confront either Russia or China or both. Both are hideously dangerous policies and ones that are certainly not in the interests of the vast majority of Americans – let alone the rest of the planet.

It's really time to change things. And no, the bear is not coming to get you.

*Foreign Policy In Focus* columnist Conn Hallinan can be read at [www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com](http://www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com) and [www.middleempireseries.wordpress.com](http://www.middleempireseries.wordpress.com).

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