

Nuclear War Is Not Likely Over Ukraine, US Tries to Reassure the World

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"We don't think the Ukrainian conflict is a nuclear crisis."

That comment is a recent example of a US State Department diplomat deploying standard diplo-speak in order to engage in nuclear saber rattling by denying there's any need to rattle any of the roughly [10,000 nuclear sabers](#) that already worry the entire sentient world. The world can plainly see that the two most [heavily nuclear-armed countries](#) (between them, the US and Russia have about 95% of the global nuclear stockpile) are in a confrontation over Ukraine that shows no significant signs of compromise or de-escalation.

Expressing official US policy, Rose Gottemoeller, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, told [the Russian daily Kommersant](#) on May 13 that the White House does not believe that the Ukraine conflict will lead to nuclear war, because there is no need for the use of nuclear weapons. The day before she spoke, Russia and China began a joint operation, Sea Cooperation 2015, [ten days of naval exercises](#) with live fire in the Mediterranean and Black seas. This is the first such Russian-Chinese military exercise, [albeit of limited scale](#), with seven Russian and two Chinese warships.

That would be two nuclear-armed countries playing naval war games on the home waters of four other nuclear-armed countries: Israel, France, GB and the US. The headquarters ship for these naval activities is the Russian missile cruiser Moskva, part of the Black Sea Fleet based at Sevastopol, Crimea. In good non-saber rattling fashion, Russian vice-admiral Alexander Fedotenkov said the military exercises were "not aimed against a third country."

Others are less delicate. In France on May 13, Ukraine prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk (called "[prime minister of war](#)" by the Czech president) warned that Ukraine and Russia are on the [verge of a nuclear confrontation](#), even though Ukraine has no known nuclear weapons. Yatsenyuk has, for months, been promoting the perception that Ukraine and Russia are "[in a state of war](#)." (With the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Ukraine was left in possession of hundreds of nuclear weapons that its government surrendered, as did Belarus and Kazakhstan.)

Is the Risk of Nuclear War Worth Taking for Any Reason?

However close any nuclear-armed state actually is to using those weapons, the actions of those states do little to ease global anxiety. Both the US and Russia have lately [increased their nuclear weapons](#) stockpiles. The [nuclear Doomsday Clock](#) maintained by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists since 1947 represents the assessment of a panel that includes 18 Nobel laureates as to how close, metaphorically, the world is to midnight, nuclear apocalypse. The

Doomsday Clock has been re-set 22 times, most recently in January 2015, when it was moved to three minutes to midnight. This is the [closest to midnight](#) the clock has been since 1953, when it was at two minutes (it was last at three minutes during the US build-up in 1984). Announcing the Doomsday Clock re-set, the Bulletin's executive director [Kennette Benedict said](#) in part:

Today, unchecked climate change and a nuclear arms race resulting from modernization of huge arsenals pose extraordinary and undeniable threats to the continued existence of humanity. And world leaders have failed to act with the speed or on the scale required to protect citizens from potential catastrophe. These failures of leadership endanger every person on Earth.

The grand failure of human leadership on climate change and nuclear disarmament is mirrored in smaller scale by the failure of human leadership in Ukraine and a host of other places – but among these, only Ukraine is an obvious and certain flashpoint that could unleash nuclear war.

For more than 20 years now, US policy toward Ukraine has been relentlessly aggressive in pushing nuclear-armed NATO ever closer to Russia's borders. This is a policy that makes imperial economic sense only so long as its base remains rock solid denial of the most obvious global risk: the assumption that pushing Russia to the limit on its vital interests would not ever lead to a nuclear attack or counterattack.

That combination of aggressive policy and denial was alive and well at the high level [NATO/Russia meeting](#) May 19 in Brussels. This was the first such meeting since February and, by its own account, only NATO made demands. NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg later told reporters he had reiterated the "[very strong NATO position](#)" that Russia should leave Crimea and disengage from the rebels in eastern Ukraine:

I restated the very strong NATO position on the illegal annexation of Crimea, but also on the very serious situation we see in eastern Ukraine. I also called upon Russia to withdraw all its forces and support for the separatists.

Translated, Stoltenberg was demanding that Russia accede to the US-backed coup that seized control of Ukraine from its duly-elected government in February 2014. Unfortunately, it's perfectly natural for a military alliance like NATO to seek victory by any means necessary, but that's a far cry from acting honestly and in good faith in negotiating hard questions with merit on more than one side. Stoltenberg reinforced his apparently non-negotiable demands with a bit of oblique nuclear saber rattling on behalf of NATO, which has nuclear weapons well within range of every part of Ukraine (not to mention Russia). Stoltenberg's argument was that Russia has been having [too many military exercises](#) on short notice and should treat NATO with "more transparency and predictability" to avoid creating an incident that could "spiral out of control."

Stoltenberg's Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, made no public comments about the meeting.

Will Gottemoeller Tell Stoltenberg Not to Rattle those Nuclear Sabers?

Our general view is that nuclear saber rattling is unwarranted. There's simply no threat out there that would warrant nuclear saber rattling, and nuclear

countries have come a long way since the Cuban Missile Crisis and what went on at that point, and it's all been to the good in terms of enhancing stability, predictability, and mutual understanding.

That's what Under Secretary Rose Gottemoeller told the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in an [interview published May 14](#). She was on the same message in April to [Kyodo News of Japan](#) in which she engaged in nuclear saber rattling by denying she was engaging in nuclear saber rattling and, at the same time, pretending that nuclear saber rattling wasn't inherent in every move made by her country, the only country that has ever used nuclear weapons.

To say that there's "no threat out there that would warrant nuclear saber rattling" is to express a purely America-centric view that is, like Stoltenberg's, a view without honesty or good faith. The question evaded is also a question the US has forced upon the Russians: what would you do if you had a nuclear armed alliance like NATO pressing your borders for decades?

If you were the president of Russia and felt you'd been put on the defensive, you might well nuclear saber rattle, as Vladimir Putin has done with regard to NATO and Ukraine since early 2014, to little or no avail. In Kiev, Putin's comments serve as a reason for Euromaidan Press to call for NATO to [arm Ukraine to the teeth](#), at least with conventional weapons, a call made by too many American senators and congressmen.

Despite [Gottemoeller's official optimism](#), years of "enhancing stability, predictability, and mutual understanding" are getting frayed and may be over for now. The 185 or so nuclear-weapons-free states who want to see progress on the promise of the nuclear weapons states to move toward disarmament have been watching that hope fade at the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) conference that ends May 22 at the United Nations:

The NPT is a landmark international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament. The NPT represents the only binding commitment in a multilateral treaty to the goal of disarmament by the nuclear-weapon States.

New Nuclear Arms Race, New Cold War, and Honoring the Holocaust?

As the UN makes clear, there is no other hope for nuclear disarmament, short of a spontaneous outbreak of profound international good will. In reality, every nuclear weapons state is presumably continuing to improve and expand the effective destructiveness of its arsenal. The next non-proliferation treaty conference will be held five years from now.

Rose Gottemoeller's carefully calibrated but meaningless objections to nuclear saber rattling have at least one very clear propaganda purpose: to set up Russia as the scapegoat for further failures in cooperation on nuclear weapons. A corollary purpose of Gottemoeller's happy talk is that the US is working hard for world peace and disarmament. That is fundamentally a lie, as [Greg Mello](#) of the Los Alamos Study Group notes in response to [Gottemoeller in the Bulletin](#):

The truth is that this administration isn't retiring warheads on a net basis any more, but rather keeping them. Obsolete warheads retired under GW Bush and before are being dismantled, but there are no plans to dismantle post-2009 warheads until new factories are up and running in the late 2020s.

The Obama administration continues to pretend that US-Russian relations remain reasonable despite tensions over Ukraine. But the administration so far shows no willingness to abandon the aggressive NATO expansion policy that is the source of those tensions. In another sign of deteriorating relations, the Russians have now [closed a military supply route](#) that NATO has been using since 2010 to support NATO forces in Afghanistan. The [official Russian reason](#) for closing the NATO supply route was that the UN mandate for troops in Afghanistan expired months earlier, in December 2014. There is also Russian resentment of sanctions over Ukraine and Russian concern that US troops may be in Afghanistan permanently as the Obama administration keeps extending the mission.

In Ukraine, the Kiev government continues [to press for war](#) against the separatist eastern provinces where the ceasefire continues to hold most of the time. Yatsenyuk has virtually called for an invasion to take back Crimea. US assistant secretary of state [Victoria Nuland](#), one of Yatsenyuk's strongest backers, visited Kiev May 16 to reaffirm, as [the official statement](#) put it:

... the United States' full and unbreakable support for Ukraine's government, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. We continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine and reiterate our deep commitment to a single Ukrainian nation, including Crimea, and all the other regions of Ukraine.

There is no flexibility in this position. The US allied itself with an illegitimate government, ignoring the fascist elements that brought it into being and support its existence. The US is expressing "unbreakable support" for a government that passed a bill in April recognizing the World War II era [Ukrainian Insurgent Army](#), a militia that collaborated with the Nazis. The Simon Wiesenthal Center has condemned the Ukraine's government actions that "honor local Nazi collaborators and grant them special benefits turns." The US [Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) has also condemned the Ukraine legislation.

According to the [Jerusalem Post](#): "The Simon Wiesenthal Center condemned Ukraine's recognition of the group as well as a second bill that equated communist and Nazi crimes."

The following image was published by the JPOST



Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko pays visit to Babi Yar, Kiev. (photo credit:UKRAINE EMBASSY TEL AVIV)

But the US still stands “shoulder to shoulder” with those who still honor perpetrators of the Holocaust. How can any policy with such grotesque results end well?

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