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Ukraine: Close to the Edge

By Conn Hallinan

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“If you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States, I’d have to point to Russia. And if you look at their behavior, it’s nothing short of alarming.”

— Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr. Chair U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

“This is not about Ukraine. Putin wants to restore Russia to its former position as a great power. There is a high probability that he will intervene in the Baltics to test NATO’s Article 5.”

— Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former Head of NATO

It is not just defense secretaries and generals employing language that conjure 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 the 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 is no evidence that Moscow is threatening the Baltics, or even the rest of Ukraine. Indeed, it is the West that has been steadily marching east over the past decade, recruiting one former Russian ally or republic after another into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Nor did the Russians start this crisis.

It began when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich turned down a debt deal from the European Union (EU) that would have required Kiev to institute draconian austerity measures, reduce its ties to Russia, and join NATO through the backdoor. 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 as much real politic' as 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 an insurrection.

There is 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 had just negotiated, the EU recognized the government that took over when Yanukovich was forced to flee the country.

To the Russians this was a coup, and they are 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. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt were recorded talking about how to “midwife” the overthrow of Yanukovich and who 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 Yanukovich. In short, Moscow has been largely reacting to events that it sees as deeply affecting its security, both military and economic.

Its annexation of Crimea—which had been part of Russia until 1954— followed a referendum in which 96 percent of the voters called for a union with Russia. In any case, Moscow was unlikely to hand over its strategic naval base at Sevastopol to a hostile government.

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. Was 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 is not a military analyst on the planet who thinks Russia is a match for U.S. To compare Russia to the power of Nazi Germany or Soviet military forces is to stretch credibility beyond the breaking point.

So why are people talking about Article 5—the section of the NATO treaty that treats an attack on any member as an attack on all—and Munich?

The answer is complex because there are multiple actors with different scripts.

First, there are the neoconservatives from the Bush years that have not given up on the Project for a New American Century, the think tank that brought us the Afghan and Iraq wars, and the war on terror. It is no accident that Nuland is married to Robert Kagen, one of the Project's founders and leading thinkers. The group also includes former Defense Department Undersecretary Paul Wolfowitz, Elliot Abrams, and former UN Ambassador 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 advisors for Republican presidential candidates, including Rick Perry, Ted Cruz, and Jeb Bush. They are well placed and persistent, and if Bush is elected president there is talk that Nuland will become Secretary of State.

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

There is 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 is not even a great deal of support within NATO for enforcing Article 5, and virtually none for getting involved with sending arms to the Ukraine. Most NATO countries don't even pony up the required level of military spending they are supposed to, leaving the U.S. to pick up 70 percent of the bills.

But there is nothing like conjuring up a scary Russian bear to loosen those purse strings. And indeed, a number of former scofflaws have upped their military spending since the Ukraine crisis broke.

The military and its associated industries—from electronics companies to huge defense firms—need enemies, preferably large ones, like Russia and China, where the weapons systems are big and the manpower requirements high.

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 three billion people.

The U.S. has tried to derail a number of these initiatives.

The 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. Both campaigns failed, particularly the latter. 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 its 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.

Why are we 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 has 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 presidential candidates—excluding the quite sensible Bernie Sanders—who want to confront either Russia or China. 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 is really time to change things, and, no, the bear is not coming to get you.