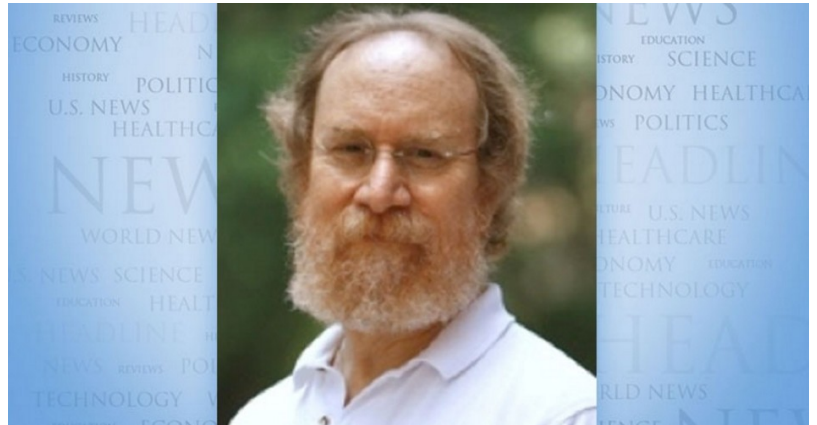




Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on March 6, 2014

American Hawks Risk Escalating the Ukrainian Crisis

With Russia and the United States confronting each other over Ukraine, the world is at a dangerous juncture. While the chances of war between the two behemoths seem small — these are, after all, nuclear powers that have avoided war for over 60 years — nothing can be taken for granted. No one wanted the Great War that began in central Europe a century ago this year either, but things can get out of control. Governments are run by human beings who, perhaps more than others, are tainted by arrogance, vainglory, and the fear of humiliation.



What's most worrisome is not what Russian President Vladimir Putin is doing in Crimea and threatening to do in eastern Ukraine. Not that Putin's actions are good or justified — they are neither. What's most worrisome are the actions of the U.S. government, which could aggravate the conflict.

U.S. regimes from George H.W. Bush onward have [done their utmost](#) to demean Russia and its rulers. In violation of Bush's promise to Mikhail Gorbachev, NATO expanded its membership to include states formerly part of the defunct Soviet Union's empire and publicly talked about admitting both Ukraine and another former Soviet republic, Georgia. The United States has also cut deals with former Soviet republics in central Asia, further putting Russian rulers on edge.

But despite these aggressive U.S. actions, Putin should not have escalated the Ukrainian conflict by sending troops to Crimea or obtaining his parliament's authorization to invade the rest of Ukraine.

No government is to be trusted, and among the most fearful components of government is the military. Thus Putin's moves toward mobilization are to be condemned by all who love peace and oppose war. Any war would kill innocents and run a high risk of careening out of control. For that reason, Putin's responses to events in Ukraine merit the contempt of all decent people.

But Putin alone cannot heighten the risk of a big war. That would also require certain moves by the Obama administration. President Obama talks about imposing sanctions, which is bad enough. The question is whether he has the backbone to withstand the pressure to "get tougher" with Russia.

This pressure comes from the usual hawks, like the dependably opportunistic Republican senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham and Rep. Mike Rogers, as well as the *Wall Street Journal* and Washington Post. Obama, we're told, is naïve, playing marbles while Putin plays chess. Do they not see the [hypocrisy](#) of supporting America's preventive wars while condemning Russia for violating another country's sovereignty?

The theme of the Obama-goaded is that Putin wouldn't have dreamed of intervening in Ukraine had America not "retreated from the world."

The problem with this claim is that it is utterly without foundation. There has been no U.S. retreat from the world. After pointing out that Secretary of State John Kerry has both asserted and rejected the



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retreat claim, foreign policy writer [John Glaser](#) commented, “I can’t think of one single place in the world where the United States is withdrawing.”

Not only is the U.S. government exerting influence, however ineptly, in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, it’s been heavily involved in the very location under examination, Russia’s backyard. (I agree that Russia should not attempt to control its backyard, but how many Americans believe the U.S. government should stop trying to manage its backyard?) As Glaser writes,

Our State Department has helped usher in a change of government in Ukraine, as Washington continues to compete with Moscow for influence in a post-Soviet state that is of no vital interest to the U.S. Across Europe, in countries like Germany, Italy, Greece, Belgium, et al., Washington maintains military bases and continues to push for the expansion of NATO.

Yes, indeed. Talk about bringing Ukraine and Georgia into NATO is heard once again. (Through the “[Partnership for Peace](#)” program, they along with former Soviet allies Moldova, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are virtually members now.) NATO, which should have disbanded along with the Soviet Union, operates on the principle that an attack on one member is an attack on all. Imagine if Georgia had been a member when it fought with Russia over South Ossetia in 2008. Imagine if Ukraine were a member now.

It’s unlikely any good would come from more U.S. intervention. Obama should pull back and resist the confrontationists.

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