

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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A Crisis in World Leadership

Because this summer is the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, I have read several books this summer on the beginnings of this horrific war, a war that dismantled four great empires, remade the Middle East and laid the groundwork for World War II, an even more catastrophic war. One of the best books on the origins of the Great War is Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. It is masterful, erudite and completely compelling. At the very end of the book, Clark writes: ". . . the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world" (p. 562). Especially in Great Britain and to some extent in the US, the perspective was that because war was so irrational no sane nation or leader would choose war. This attitude was even more pervasive in the years between the two World Wars. The worldview that still somewhat informed how Americans and Britons viewed the world was a world where order, stability and trust defined relationships between nations. But Germany, Japan and Italy did not share these values or perspective. After World War II, the US faced a new threat to that order—international communism. Therefore, the US adopted the policy of containment, which had at its core the conviction that a strong, robust military would always be a deterrent to those who do not share our view of order, stability and trust. Today, once again that world of order, stability and trust is breaking down. Robert Kagan, one of today's shrewdest foreign policy specialists, writes, "The wise men and women of our own time insist that this history is irrelevant. They tell us, when they are not announcing America's irrevocable decline, that our adversaries are too weak to pose a real threat, even as they pile victory upon victory . . . Let us hope that those who urge calm are right, but it is hard to avoid the impression that we have already had our 1931. As we head deeper into our version of the 1930s, we may be quite shocked, just as our forbearers were, at how quickly things fall apart."

Let's consider the situation with Russia in Ukraine as an example of a 21st century generation of leaders who are "sleepwalkers." Timothy Garton Ash, European Studies Professor at Oxford University, reports that he was present in 1994 at a St. Petersburg, Russia round table discussion when an obscure aid to that city's mayor spoke up and declared that Russia had voluntarily given up "huge territories" to the former republics of the USSR, including areas "which historically have always belonged to Russia." Russia, he argued, could simply not abandon to their fate those "25 million Russians" who now lived abroad. The world had to respect the interests of the Russian state "and of the Russian people as a great nation." That man was Vladimir Putin. At that time, Putin articulated a policy he is now implementing: The "responsibility to protect" Russians—all Russians no matter where they live; and he gets to decide who is Russian. Ash calls this a "resentment-fueled protector state doctrine." Putin's

worldview arguably then is to disrupt the post-Cold War status quo by restoring Greater Russia and becoming the dominant Eurasian power. To that end, what has Putin done in Ukraine? Bernard-Henri Levy, French philosopher and commentator, has written “[Putin] has mobilized the worst elements to be found in the region. He has taken thugs, thieves, rapists, ex-cons and vandals and turned them into a paramilitary force. He has permitted ad hoc commanders of separatist groups to kill or chase off intellectuals, journalists and other moral authorities in the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk. He has watched a veritable gang war to take hold—without caring that he is losing control of the forces that he has unleashed, with rival bands pitted against one another and carving out fiefs amid the growing anarchy.” In addition, he has armed these thugs with terrifying weapons that wreak havoc—witness the downing of the Malaysian passenger jet in July, the murder of 298 innocent people over the rebel held area of eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, Putin launched an invasion of Ukraine this August. On 14 August, the Ukrainian government said it had destroyed a convoy of Russia military trucks carrying ammunition. On 21 August NATO satellite photos showed Russian military units advancing with self-propelled artillery at Krasnodan on the road between Donetsk and Luhansk. By 25 and 26 August Russian armored columns were streaming across the border near Amvrosiyivka, on the road to Donetsk. From that point on, with Russian troops on the ground, the Ukrainian army was pushed back from its amazing summer gains against the Russian-thugs and separatists. Incomprehensibly, both the European members of NATO and the President of the United States refuse to use the term “invasion” when discussing what Putin is doing, calling it instead an “incursion.”

What is the state of preparedness in Europe? Can NATO realistically challenge what Russia is doing? What if Russia begins to do the same thing in the Baltic States (i.e., Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) or in Poland? Member nations of NATO are obligated to spend 2% of their GDP on defense. Historically, the US has accounted for roughly 50% of NATO’s military spending; today that amount is 75%. Only four NATO members (the US, Britain, Estonia, Greece) fulfill their obligation to spend 2% of their GDP on defense. This is out of an alliance that consists of 28 member states!! These are indeed nations of “sleepwalkers.” Is it any wonder Vladimir Putin is so bold and arrogant? It is hardly realistic to expect the NATO alliance to do much of anything for Ukraine. Neither the US nor other NATO members are even willing to give Ukraine small arms, equipment, missiles or even basic military support. Perhaps Levy is correct: “In European parlance, this is called the spirit of Munich—appeasement. And it is a disgrace.” In NATO’s meeting in Wales recently, it made these decisions:

- A “continuous” rotational presence of an unspecified number of troops in Eastern Europe.
- It approved a new “spearhead” rapid-reaction force headquartered in Poland, though the 4,000 troops pledged to it will be based somewhere else.
- While these meetings were occurring, Russian troops abducted one of Estonia’s security officers at gunpoint in southeastern Estonia. NATO did nothing.
- President Obama again pledged “support of Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and its right to defend itself.” But he did nothing more than he has

been doing—talking; no pledge of weapons so that Ukraine can do the very thing he says we pledge to help them do!

Fundamentally, NATO and President Obama have given Ukraine no diplomatic leverage, no military equipment, no significant ability to do the very things Obama pledges to do. Russian President Putin continues to lie about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while NATO and America's president give speeches.

When future historians evaluate this era of history, they will no doubt compare this second decade of the 21st century to the summer of 1914 or the decade of the 1930s, when much of Western Europe and the United States could not believe that their world of order, stability and trust was disintegrating. As with the summer of 1914 and the 1930s, so with this decade: We are being led by a generation of "sleepwalkers."

See *The Economist* (6 September 2014), pp. 27-28; editorials in the *Wall Street Journal* (6 September 2014 and 19-20 July 2014); Bernard-Henri Levy in the *New York Times* (23 July 2014); Timothy Garton Ash in the *New York Times* (20 July 2014); George Will in www.washingtonpost.com (8 September 2014); and Robert Kagan in *Wall Street Journal* (6-7 September 2014).