

The Russians Aren't Coming

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The New York Times [reported](#) on the end of the Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border in a very strange way:

The Russian president went up to the brink — and then, with the eyes of the world upon him, stepped back from it.

Last week, the Russian government [announced](#) that it was ending its military exercise and most of the troops involved would be returning to their permanent bases. Conducting military drills in the territory that they claim is theirs isn't really brinksmanship, so it is hard to see how the Russian government went to the brink. The troop movements were not linked with any demands, so they weren't really being used as leverage. There was no attempt to conceal the buildup, which is what a government would usually do if it is about to launch a surprise attack.

Despite a fair amount of [alarmism](#) in the Western press, there was [never any good reason](#) to think that a Russian offensive was in the offing, but that didn't stop quite a [few pundits](#) from seizing on the buildup as [proof](#) that Russia was “testing” American resolve and that this was somehow linked to the announcement of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. It was commonplace for [news articles](#) to frame the buildup as a “test” for Biden, and Biden was inundated with [advice](#) on the hawkish measures he needed to take. When Biden chose not to send U.S. ships into the Black Sea, we were assured by Russia hawks that this would [“embolden”](#) Putin. Just a few days later, the supposed threat has evaporated and the fearmongering about Russian invasion proved to be completely wrong. The Russia hawks were primed to blame a crisis on Biden's supposed “weakness” and then the crisis never materialized.

This latest episode illustrates some of the recurring problems in our foreign policy debates. Everything begins with threat inflation. Instead of taking a measured and balanced view of a foreign threat (and instead of checking to make sure that the threat actually exists), hawks immediately jump to the worst-case scenario by default. Taking this worst-case scenario to be very likely or certain, they skew the entire debate towards confrontation. There is no attempt to understand why the other government is acting the way it is, because they automatically assume the worst motives and twist the evidence to fit their assumption.

There is little or no consideration of U.S. interests, and it is simply taken for granted that if something undesirable is happening then it is a “test” for the U.S. and the president must pass the “test” or jeopardize U.S. standing everywhere.

All of these errors badly distort analysis and lead people to jump to the wrong conclusions about what U.S. policy ought to be. No matter how many times hawks misjudge things, they don’t check their assumptions or learn from these mistakes, but just keep repeating them. Our political culture gives hawks every reason to be aggressively wrong about the world rather than being reasonable and right. There is no penalty for error as long as you hold the “right” hostile attitude towards the other country. That is a recipe for foreign policy dysfunction and failure, and that is why so many of our government’s policies are unsuccessful and destructive.

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