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By Vijay Prashad
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The Western Allied Nations Bully the World While Warning of Threats From China and Russia

On January 21, 2022, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach [attended](#) a talk in New Delhi, India, organized by the [Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses](#). Schönbach was speaking as the [chief](#) of Germany's navy during his visit to the institute. "What he really wants is respect," Schönbach [said](#), referring to Russia's President Vladimir Putin. "And my god, giving someone respect is low cost, even no cost." Furthermore, Schönbach said that in his opinion, "It is easy to even give him the respect he really demands and probably also deserves."

The next day, on January 22, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba [summoned](#) Germany's ambassador to Ukraine, Anka Feldhusen, to Kyiv and "expressed deep disappointment" regarding the lack of German weapons provided to Ukraine and also about Schönbach's comments in New Delhi. Vice Admiral Schönbach released a statement soon after, [saying](#), "I have just asked the Federal Minister of Defense [Christine Lambrecht] to release me from my duties and responsibilities as inspector of the navy with immediate effect." Lambrecht did not wait long to accept the resignation.

Why was Vice Admiral Schönbach sacked? Because he said two things that are [unacceptable](#) in the West: first, [that](#) "the Crimean Peninsula is gone and never [coming] back" to Ukraine and, second, that Putin should be treated with respect. The

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Schönbach affair is a vivid illustration of the problem that confronts the West currently, where Russian behavior is routinely described as “aggression” and where the idea of giving “respect” to Russia is disparaged.

Aggression

U.S. President Joe Biden’s administration began to [use](#) the word “imminent” to describe a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine toward the end of January. On January 18, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki did not use the word “imminent,” but implied it with her [comment](#): “Our view is this is an extremely dangerous situation. We’re now at a stage where Russia could at any point launch an attack in Ukraine.” On January 25, Psaki, while referring to the possible timeline for a Russian invasion, [said](#), “I think when we said it was imminent, it remains imminent.” Two days later, on January 27, when she was asked about her use of the word “imminent” with regard to the invasion, Psaki [said](#), “Our assessment has not changed since that point.”

On January 17, as the idea of an “imminent” Russian “invasion” escalated in Washington, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [rebuked](#) the suggestion of “the so-called Russian invasion of Ukraine.” Three days later, on January 20, spokeswoman for Russia’s Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova denied that Russia would invade Ukraine, but [said](#) that the talk of such an invasion allowed the West to intervene militarily in Ukraine and threaten Russia.

Even a modicum of historical memory could have improved the debate about Russian military intervention in Ukraine. In the [aftermath](#) of the Georgian-Russian conflict in 2008, the European Union’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, found that the information war in the lead-up to the conflict was inaccurate and inflammatory. Contrary to Georgian-Western statements, Tagliavini [said](#), “[T]here was no massive Russian military invasion underway, which had to be stopped by Georgian military forces shelling Tskhinvali.” The idea of Russian “aggression” that has been mentioned in recent months, while referring to the possibility of Russia invading Ukraine, replicates the tone that preceded the conflict between Georgia and Russia, which was another dispute about old Soviet borders that should have been handled diplomatically.

Western politicians and media outlets have [used](#) the fact that 100,000 Russian troops have been stationed on Ukraine's border as a sign of "aggression." The number—100,000—sounds threatening, but it has been taken out of context. To invade Iraq in 1991, the United States and its allies [amassed](#) more than 700,000 troops as well as the entire ensemble of U.S. war technology located in its nearby bases and on its ships. Iraq had no allies and a military force depleted by the decade-long war of attrition against Iran. Ukraine's army—regular and reserve—[number](#) about 500,000 troops (backed by the 1.5 million troops in NATO countries). With more than a million soldiers in uniform, Russia could have deployed many more troops at the Ukrainian border and would need to have done so for a full-scale invasion of a NATO partner country.

Respect

The word "respect" used by Vice Admiral Schönbach is key to the discussion regarding the emergence of both Russia and China as world powers. The conflict is not merely about Ukraine, just as the conflict in the South China Sea is not merely about Taiwan. The real conflict is about whether the West will allow both Russia and China to define policies that extend beyond their borders.

Russia, for instance, was not seen as a threat or as aggressive when it was in a less powerful position in comparison to the West after the collapse of the USSR. During the tenure of Russian President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), the Russian government encouraged the looting of the country by oligarchs—many of whom now reside in the West—and defined its own foreign policy based on the [objectives](#) of the United States. In 1994, "Russia became the first country to join NATO's [Partnership for Peace](#)," and that same year, Russia began a three-year process of joining the Group of Seven, which in 1997 [expanded](#) into the Group of Eight. Putin became president of Russia in 2000, inheriting a vastly depleted country, and promised to build it up so that Russia could realize its full potential.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Western credit markets in 2007-2008, Putin began to [speak](#) about the new buoyancy in Russia. In 2015, I met a Russian diplomat in Beirut, who explained to me that Russia worried that various Western-backed maneuvers

threatened Russia's access to its two warm-water ports—in Sevastopol, Crimea, and in Tartus, Syria; it was in reaction to these provocations, he said, that Russia acted in both Crimea (2014) and Syria (2015).

The United States made it clear during the administration of President Barack Obama that both Russia and China must [stay](#) within their borders and know their place in the world order. An aggressive [policy](#) of NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and of the [creation](#) of the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the United States) drew Russia and China into a security alliance that has only [strengthened](#) over time. Both Putin and China's President Xi Jinping recently [agreed](#) that NATO's expansion eastward and Taiwan's independence were not acceptable to them. China and Russia see the West's actions in both Eastern Europe and Taiwan as provocations by the West against the ambitions of these Eurasian powers.

That same Russian diplomat to whom I spoke in Beirut in 2015 said something to me that remains pertinent: “When the U.S. illegally invaded Iraq, none of the Western press called it ‘aggression.’”

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

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