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By James W. Carden / Globetrotter
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What Kind of a Threat Is Russia?

On no subject is the bipartisan consensus more unshakable than on the Russian threat.

In his latest book, [*The Stupidity of War: American Foreign Policy and the Case for Complacency*](#), American political scientist John Mueller demonstrates that since the end of World War II, American policymakers have developed a kind of addiction to threat inflation by “routinely elevating the problematic to the dire... focused on problems, or monsters, that essentially didn’t exist.” And with regard to the American foreign policy establishment’s current twin obsessions, Russia and China, Mueller, ever the iconoclast, counsels complacency.

No matter how much the U.S. may disagree with one or another of Russia and China’s domestic policies, Mueller believes that both countries are more interested in getting rich and receiving the recognition they believe is their due as world powers than in military conquest. Mueller writes that “neither state seems to harbor Hitler-like dreams of extensive expansion by military means, and to a considerable degree it seems sensible for other countries, including the United States, to accept, and even service, such vaporous, cosmetic, and substantially meaningless goals.”

Yet among the legacies of the first Cold War was the creation of a self-anointed caste of foreign policy alarmists in Washington who, according to Mueller, specialize in inferring “desperate intent from apparent capacity.” Well, *plus ça change...* U.S. policy toward Putin’s Russia remains driven by threat inflation, emotion and the [duplicitous lobbying](#) of

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various foreign interest groups on Capitol Hill, rather than a level-headed assessment of American national security interests.

As Mueller shows, at every turn a bipartisan cast of serial alarmists proclaims that the United States faces a global threat environment that is unprecedented. As an example, Mueller points to the [2018 Commission on the National Defense Strategy for the United States](#), which [proclaimed](#) that the “security and wellbeing of the United States are at greater risk than at any time in decades.” The congressionally appointed 12-member commission included a mix of neoconservative and liberal interventionists including former CIA Director Michael Morell, former U.S. Ambassador Eric Edelman and think tank fixture Kathleen Hicks, who now serves as the U.S. deputy secretary of defense.

And on no subject is the bipartisan consensus more unshakable than on Russia. In the years since the start of the Ukrainian civil war in 2014, the U.S. foreign policy establishment adopted the position that Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its support for the rebellion in eastern Ukraine was only the beginning: they believed that Putin had his [sights](#) set on bigger things like seeking control of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

But was that really the case?

Mueller, citing the work of Robert Person, an associate professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, notes that for Russia, Ukraine carries “deep symbolic meaning” as well as strategic importance due to the Russian naval base in Sevastopol, Crimea. But by contrast, Russia has “long recognized that the Baltics are culturally and historically different from Russia.”

To Mueller, the idea, so vigorously promoted by U.S. foreign policy elites in 2014 (and beyond), that Putin was on an expansionary mission “seems to have little substance.” Indeed, according to Mueller, Putin’s Ukrainian adventure seems more like “a one-off—a unique, opportunistic, and probably under-considered escapade that proved to be unexpectedly costly to the perpetrators.”

Mueller observes that Russia, like China, “does not seek to impose its own model on the world.” In that sense, both countries follow a mainly Westphalian foreign policy of

noninterference in the affairs of other countries—and in the instances in which Putin has veered from that vision, including the at-times farcical effort to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russia has paid an unenviable price.

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#) in partnership with the [American Committee for U.S.-Russia Accord](#).

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