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Vladimir Putin and Russia's Increasingly Aggressive Nuclear Threat

*Andrei Piontkovsky, William
Schneider, Jr., Roland Freudenstein,
and Kenneth Weinstein*

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Event Transcript*

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KEN WEINSTEIN:

At Hudson, we believe that global security, prosperity and freedom require strong, engaged and strategic American leadership at the heart of a vigorous network of allies. And for now more than half a century we have analyzed Soviet, Soviet-Russian and Russian nuclear rhetoric and weapons programs from the days of the Cold War when our founder, Herman Kahn, encouraged thinking about the unthinkable, the civil defense and analysis of possible ladders of escalation to reduce the possibility of nuclear war, the pioneering work we did in the late 1970s, early 1980s on ballistic missile defense, and to research more recently on what has been termed the second nuclear age.

Our panel today looks at the disturbing new nuclear rhetoric and actions coming out of Moscow these days. As all of us know, in late August Vladimir Putin offered a not-so-veiled nuclear threat against Ukraine, followed by numerous incidents in recent weeks where Russian strategic bombers flew into both American and Canadian air defense space. These actions and rhetoric occurred against the backdrop of an unprecedented announcement by Putin at a recent meeting of the Russian Duma in Ukraine and Crimea, in which the authorization of the basing of nuclear systems in Crimea was permitted, including long-range air launch cruise missiles and Russian short-range ballistic missiles. And this occurred following an announcement in April that Russia might place tactical nuclear weapons in Crimea.

Not only would these obviously violate Ukrainian sovereignty, but as a number of leading figures in Congress--Chairman Buck McKeon of the House Armed Services Committee of Congress and subcommittee chairs Mike Rogers and Michael Turner--wrote in a letter to the president, they make a mockery of nonproliferation goals and give Russia an enhanced strategic advantage. This quote from this important letter is from these members of Congress: "Locating nuclear weapons on the sovereign territory of another state without its permission is a devious and cynical action that further undermines Russian credibility in terms of the Budapest Memorandum that the Russian Federation signed in 1994." This Russian action would be ironic if it was not so threatening to global nonproliferation goals. It further positions Russian nuclear weapons closer to the heart of NATO, and it allows Russia to gain a military advantage from its seizure of Crimea, allowing Russia to profit from its actions. If Russia thinks it can gain advantages from such actions, it will continue them. It is also a clear and perhaps irrevocable tearing of the peaceful and stable security environment that made the Founding Act of Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation of 1997, also known as the NATO-Russia Founding Act. And Chairman McKeon and Subcommittee Chairs Rogers and Turner wrote to the president expressing severe disappointment in the outcome of the NATO summit at Wales for failing to take vigorous action with regard to Putin's action and Putin's rhetoric.

This morning our question is: What do we make of Putin's escalated rhetoric and the action that he's taking, coming at a time when Russia is clearly intent on nuclear modernization? Is this a new Russian foreign policy? What do these actions imply

about the state of the American deterrent and more broadly about the fate of the so-called nuclear zero movement?

The first speaker is Andrei Piontkovsky. Andrei is a visiting fellow here at Hudson, but he is much more than that. Andrei is almost a figure out of Russian literature. He's one of Russia's last and leading pro-Western intellectuals, a brilliant mathematician, and a graduate of Moscow State, who's published over 100 articles on applied mathematics. But his attention moved from math to political science and politics some time ago as he became one of Russia's most outspoken political commentators, a fearless critic of Vladimir Putin, someone who once faced criminal charges in his own home country for more than two years, charges of extremism. And Andrei was eventually acquitted, but he certainly had to fear for his life and still does. We are deeply honored to have him back from Moscow to address us today.

Our second speaker is going to be William Schneider. Bill Schneider is a senior fellow with deep roots here at Hudson, having arrived on staff as a newly minted Ph.D. in economics the week that the Soviet Union marched into Prague in 1968. He worked closely with Herman Kahn on nuclear issues before Bill began an illustrious career in government as a top Senate aide, as an OMB defense official in the Reagan administration, as former undersecretary of state in the Reagan administration and as chair of the Defense Science Board under President George W. Bush. Bill Schneider is one of our nation's leading experts on nuclear issues and he is currently undertaking a major new project here at Hudson on the second nuclear age.

Our last speaker is Roland Freudenstein. Roland is deputy director and head of research at the Wilfried Martens Center for European Studies in Brussels, which is a proud partner of Hudson Institute. Roland has written widely on European defense and security issues as well as alliance questions in a long and distinguished career at the German Council on Foreign Relations, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and as a member of the foreign and security planning staff at the European Union.

We're delighted to have these three noted experts with us this morning.

ANDREI PIONTKOVSKY:

Any military strategy, including nuclear strategy, is generated by the political strategy of the state, by the set of ambitions, objectives, complexes, values of its leadership. So before addressing directly the subject of our panel, I oblige to devote some time to this political motivation of Russian leadership's behavior.

We all remember the famous Churchill saying that "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." But fortunately, in our current situation, we have key to this riddle/mystery/enigma. Russian foreign policy is conducted 100 hundred percent by one person, Vladimir Putin. The key to Russian foreign policy-- its strategy, its set of motivation and interests-- lies on this one particular person. Putin's highest priority is to

stay in power forever. He watched what happened to Mubarak and especially what happened to Gadhafi when they lost power, and he became determined never to leave the Kremlin.

Until this recent Ukrainian crisis, the Putin regime was an authoritarian kleptocracy without much ideological pretention. Its foreign agenda was reactive; it just reacted to what was perceived as a threat to itself. And certainly the European aspirations of Ukraine, the European vector of policy, were perceived as an existential threat by Putin's Russia because success of Ukraine would present an undesirable example for Russian society. That's why he first tried to bully and bribe Yanukovych into refusing an association agreement with the European Union, and then after Yanukovych's kleptocracy, which was very similar to Putin's, was overthrown, Putin was determined to either submit Ukraine completely to his will or to dismantle it. And the first act on this agenda was the annexation of Crimea, the act by which Putin's Russia broke a dozen international agreements signed by our state.

I think that Putin's Crimean speech, which he delivered from the Kremlin on occasion of Crimea and Sevastopol formally joining the Russian Federation, was a political event even more important than annexation of Crimea itself. The task for Putin during this speech was to legitimize, to justify, or even to glorify, the act of annexation. But he did much more. He fulfilled an even more important mission. He created a new ideology of so-called "Russkiy Mir," the Russian World.

No dictatorship can be based only on violence and intimidation. Prolonged dictatorship needs some kind of ideology or mythology that will appeal to a considerable part of the population for considerable span of time--like Hitler's ideology of the superiority of the German people or Stalin's ideology of communism.

Many commentators, including myself, note that Putin's Crimean speech was a remake of German Chancellor Hitler's Sudetenland speech, which he had delivered on the occasion of annexation of Sudetenland. The main concept and even the terminology of Nazi political foreign policy and propaganda (in Putin's Crimean speech) were borrowed from this speech.

First of all, this was the concept of "disunited nation." Putin informed us that we, the Russian people, are "disunited nation." This was the first time this term was used in such a high level speech. Next he justified the Crimean annexation as a gathering of historical Russian lands. Then he coined a new term for his opponents, "National-predateli," or "national traitors." That set a new tone as there previously had been no such term in the Soviet or Russian political vocabulary. The Soviets' opponents were castigated as "enemies of people." And national traitors, National-predateli, is pure Nazi terminology.

However the most important concept was the concept of Russkiy Mir, or the Russian World. Putin claims it is his right, and even sacred duty to protect not citizens – not Russian citizens--but ethnic Russians or Russian language speakers, all over the world. And to demonstrate that Crimea is only a first step for promoting this Russkiy Mir agenda, Putin immediately initiated another stage. He also coined one more new term,

“Novorossiia” (“new Russia”). By Novorossiia he is referring to the parts of the Ukrainian region, which were, in his opinion, unjustly handed over to Ukraine after the Bolshevik revolution.

So now Putin has created a long-term ideological system by which he can justify his role forever, because it’s a very long-term program. Any dictator, as I already note, needs such an apology. It’s much more comfortable for him to say I’m here in the Kremlin to promote a great Russian idea, than to say I am here in Crimea just to make tens of billions of dollars for myself and my cronies. These were not just simple words. This hybrid war against Ukraine began with his pressure on the Yanukovich government to eject Europeans.

This war is going on and it’s going on now. There are ups and downs. And as I already mentioned, their main objective is to control Kiev, to control the Ukrainian government and Ukraine as a whole. He doesn’t need the annexation of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. By the way, now he is a most ardent supporter of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, besides Crimea, of course. He needs to have this cancerous tumor inside of the Ukrainian territory to spread instability and chaos.

But Kremlin propaganda offices present this war – present these events-- not as a war of Russia with Ukraine. The Kremlin talking heads tell us every day on TV that it’s much more. It’s a war between Russia and the United States of America. Ukraine is just terrain on which this war is developing. And even more philosophically, it is a war between Russkiy Mir, the Russian world, and the Anglo-Saxon world. Putin explains that we Russians have a unique genetic code, superior to the genetic code of Anglo-Saxon world because Anglo-Saxons are merchants, they are concerned about their own enrichment, and due to our specific Russian genetic code, we possess more spirituality. For example, one of the Kremlin guys -- it’s Vyacheslav Alekseyevich Nikonov, grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov—has made the historical claim that Russians are an Aryan tribe which descended from the Carpathian mountains and spread all over the world until they reached Fort Ross, California.

The corresponding element of this propaganda campaign is a permanent reference to nuclear weapons. Every statement of Putin’s includes the phrase “Don’t forget that we’re a nuclear power.” There was a scandalous performance during a meeting with a top Russian official in August in Sochi, when Vice Speaker of Duma Mr. Zhirinovskiy threatened to completely annihilate the Baltic States and Poland. Mr. Putin was present and in summing up the panel discussion, he noted approvingly that Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s speech was very vivid and flamboyant, but added maybe not all of his words reflect the policy of current government. Then the host of a popular TV program, Mr. Kiselyov boasted that we can reduce the United States to radioactive ashes.

What does all this rhetoric mean? I think that Putin is rational enough and informed enough to understand that, yes, we can reduce the United States to radioactive ashes, but the cost of this pleasure will be to reduce ourselves to the same state. The doctrine of mutually assured destruction is still valid, and it prevents us – prevents the world-- from full-scale war. But Ken already mentioned the name of a pre-eminent nuclear

strategist, one of the founders of our institute, Dr. Herman Kahn. In his classic books *On Thermonuclear War* and *Thinking about the Unthinkable*, he taught us the scenario of limited nuclear war and that eventually a nuclear power would try to reach some political objective by initiating limited nuclear war.

Let's try to think a bit about unthinkable like Herman Kahn. Let's imagine that someday in the Estonian city of Narva, which has a predominately Russian population, Putin's polite green men appear, conduct a referendum and the Kremlin says, well, this part of Estonian territory historically belongs to the Russian world. Well, a year ago, the annexation of Ukraine was unthinkable, so they should think about this scenario. The Estonian government, referring to Article 5 of the NATO agreement, asks NATO countries to help. And if NATO countries can help, their joint military might would be much stronger than the Russian Army. At this point, Putin publicly states or says in private talks with his partners in Europe; "OK, we realize that a more powerful conventional military force is ready to confront us in our pursuit of the Russian world agenda, so we won't use that – we are ready to use a nuclear weapon if this NATO conventional forces try to eject us from Estonia."

How will Western politicians react? It's very difficult to predict. I think that a vast majority of people both in Europe and in the United States would say that we are not ready to die for Narva, like certain Europeans repeated we are not ready to die for Danzig. So this situation will create an unthinkable choice for West: either humiliating capitulation (refusing to help Estonia, which in turn would mean the end of NATO, the end of Western allies, the end of the role of the United States as guarantor of Western security) or providing this help, which would lead to war with thermonuclear power.

The only way to tackle this problem is to avoid it. That is, it's the only way and it's my last point. The only way to avoid this problem is to defeat this crazy idea of "Russkiy Mir" (the Russian World) here and now in Ukraine purely by economic and political instruments. The West has an opportunity to do it and to prevent itself from facing the choice between capitulation and nuclear war.

BILL SCHNEIDER:

I'm going to just address three subjects that are derived from the points that Andrei has just made about the implications of the increased aggressiveness of Russian foreign policy with respect to nuclear deterrence, arms control and, finally, to the policy aspiration of nuclear abolition or nuclear zero. The increasing congruence of Russian foreign policy and the manipulation of nuclear threats is a serious challenge to the post-war order that tried to stabilize the use of, and threat of use of nuclear weapons through the nuclear nonproliferation treaty of 1968.

The aim was to create a new set of norms that would discourage or prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also to assure that the five countries that were grandfathered in as nuclear weapon states because they have tested nuclear weapons before the treaty came into force would also not use their nuclear advantage to threaten

non-nuclear states. But a dimension of Russian foreign policy in the past, certainly, in the past year, has much more aggressively coupled its nuclear power to its threatening of states in the region.

And this, in turn, couples directly to the core of U.S. and, indeed, global nonproliferation policy, which is the credibility of the extended deterrent, because the Russians have continued to integrate the threat of nuclear weapons into their foreign policy, it becomes increasingly important to countries that have abstained from the development of nuclear weapons to be confident that the U.S. nuclear umbrella will extend to deter the future threat or use of nuclear weapons by nuclear states, and in particular, Russia.

The rapid sequence with which the Russians have not only undertaken these threats, but have coupled it with action, is already having a destructive impact on the global norms created by the nonproliferation treaty. Three countries in Europe have already discussed the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons – Poland, Turkey and Ukraine, and this process is only beginning as the NPT– becomes at risk as a consequence of these developments.

The second set of implications that derive from the increasing aggressiveness of Russian foreign policy, particularly as it deals with weapons of mass destruction, is on the network of arms control agreements that have been put in place since the 1960s. I've already mentioned the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, but perhaps the most troublesome dimension of this, certainly, that affects the United States is the impact of Russian aggressiveness on its nuclear modernization. It has undertaken a program of nuclear modernization that the Russian leadership intends to put in place by the year 2020.

This nuclear modernization involves not only building new missiles but a whole new generation of advanced nuclear weapons that are much smaller and lighter. And as a consequence, they are taking this great increase in the payload capacity, or throw weight of its ballistic missile force and fractioning that payload among a much larger number of re-entry vehicles or the warheads that are contained on the missiles.

This eye-watering increase in the scale of the threat posed to the U.S. completely undermines the aims of the New Start agreement, which was intended to be a first step on the road to nuclear abolition. So when this agreement's term ends in 2021, the U.S. will be much worse off in terms of the strategic balance, and indeed, the coupling of U.S. strategic nuclear power to the extended deterrent, which poses the kind of problems I mentioned at the outset.

But while the New Start treaty is the one that has the most immediate impact on the U.S. – the Russian behavior has also produced problems for the credibility of two of the other major arms control agreements. The Intermediate Nuclear Forces Agreement of 1987 – the Russians have both tested a cruise missile of intermediate range that's supposed to be banned by the treaty. They've just brushed off U.S. concerns.

The Department of State sent its senior negotiator to Moscow on September 11th, and her complaints were dismissed. No less troublesome is the recent test of a Russian ICBM that had a single warhead in it. The Russians then put three warheads on it, and that additional weight reduced the range of the system so that it become an intermediate-ranged nuclear missile, which is supposed to be banned by the 1987 agreement, but again the Russians have shown no interest in becoming compliant with a regime.

The Chemical Weapons Convention and entered into force in the 1990s was supposed to bring an end to chemical weapons. And of course we have seen in Syria that, with Russian diplomatic cooperation, had agreed to get rid of all of its chemical weapons, but we got a bait-and-switch deal out of it, where they provided some precursor chemicals but have refused inspections on either their facilities for manufacturing the chemical agents or its residual stocks. The Russians have not chosen to cooperate further on this matter, and as a consequence Syria has now initiated the use of toxic industrial chemicals that were favored during World War I, such as the use of chlorine as a chemical agent and have used it with tactical success and in its effort to suppress the revolt in Syria. How do we deter use when we're unable to deal with this situation in Syria? Other countries will almost certainly find this a useful way of dealing with rebellious individuals, and the use of toxic industrial chemicals that are widely accessible--like chlorine, as it's one of the most widely used industrial chemicals and is essential for water purification. So it's not as if the chemical can be constructive banned, even though its use is banned as as a weapon under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

All of these developments that are chipping away at the arms control regimes that have been put in place, are descending on what has been one of the core foreign policy pursuits of the current administration, which is its preference for nuclear abolition and to seek a sequence of arms control agreements that would progressively lead to the abolition of nuclear weapons. This, along with the efforts to impose this policy, has produced a paradoxical outcome.

The efforts that have been undertaken through the New START treaty in particular to reduce or eliminate nuclear weapons and excise their role from international affairs has in fact created circumstances that will accelerate the nuclear proliferation problem, rather than mitigate it. Perhaps the most compelling dimension of this is not that proliferation will increase among U.S. adversaries – there are already incentives for that to take place, and we've seen this in North Korea and in Iran, for example – but among nations that are friendly to the U.S., but are increasingly skeptical of the credibility of the extended deterrent. And the New START treaty, with its aspiration of nuclear abolition, is producing this paradoxical result that we are unable to sustain the credibility of the extended deterrent without any effort to effectively modernize our forces.

As you may be aware, every element of our strategic nuclear forces requires modernization, more or less simultaneously. Our nuclear submarine force for delivering ballistic missiles, our ICBM force, heavy bombers, the air-launched cruise missile, and the nuclear command and control system all require modernization. The ballistic

missile defense system has been built at a small scale and is not suitable if the threat is going to increase substantially, as may be happening as Russia becomes increasingly aggressive. So all of these things have to be taken more or less simultaneously, a feat that seems very difficult in the current fiscal environment, but nevertheless reflects this underlying paradox that the aspiration for nuclear abolition is in fact producing a much larger, much more dynamic and much more threatening environment for nuclear weapons.

And the cumulative effect of all of these developments suggests that we need some substantial change in the direction that we've undertaken with respect to our deterrent forces. A year ago Congress created a panel to look into the entire nuclear weapons enterprise to find out what has happened to it in the decades since the end of the Cold War and how we can build a more responsive complex that will in fact meet the needs of our foreign policy going forward. That panel is due to provide its report this fall, so it may converge well with the discussion we've been having here on nuclear weapons policy and arms control policy and so forth.

I think that the U.S. policy is beginning to recognize that something is amiss, and the reintroduction of nuclear weapons is part of the environment in which our foreign policy will be created is now upon us, and we will need to respond accordingly.

ROLAND FREUDENSTEIN:

Let me come back to what Andrei initially said about Putin. I think it's actually unfair to accuse him of having been a KGB agent. It explains a lot, in his case, but I would say dig deeper, look harder at his CV. What was he before he joined up? He was a street thug, a hooligan, in the best sense, and he's proud of it. He calls it his "street university." Masha Gessen, in *The Man without a Face*, describes these years – ages 10- 13 – in the backyards of suburban Leningrad at the time where there was a little extortion and lots of violence. And I would say that there are three things in what is happening now for which I find the best explanation in that part of Vladimir Putin's CV:

First, being a rather skinny and not too tall fellow, he had to constantly literally punch above his weight. Some call that asymmetrical warfare; that's the scientific term for it. Be aware that you don't have to be the stronger guy in physical terms; you just need to know where to apply the pressure at the right time.

Second, always leave the other side an option. Punch them in the face and then say, "well, now you have a choice. Do you want to escalate--do you want to be stupid – or do you want to be rational and sit down and negotiate?" Or the equivalent in the thug days of Vladimir Putin.

And the third brings me to today's main topic. The third is a keen sense, a masterful sense of spotting fear in the eyes of the opponent. For this he is richly rewarded in Germany these days.

So we go back to Andrei's description of Dmitry Kiselyov, arguably the most powerful man in Russian media these days. Mr. Kiselyov, on Sunday evening, March 2nd, right after it became clear that this was an occupation in Crimea, went on national television and talked about this radioactive dust. It was a caption in the background, "radioaktivny pepel" to which Russia can reduce the United States. And then there was an animation with silos and missiles coming out of the silos and there was a mushroom cloud. That was prime time news in Germany the next evening and it was the number-one item on prime time news on German state television on Monday, March, 3rd. Not happy enough with this excerpt from Kiselyov's show, German journalists then went to a senior citizens home and interviewed people about what it's like to live in war. And sure enough, these ladies and gentlemen said to the next and later generations: "Don't do it. Anything, but no more war." From the hooligan perspective, I would say Putin scored a point, has already achieved a small psychological victory by being aggressive and actually threatening more aggression, in this case the ultimate form.

The German debate is somewhere between not even wanting to imagine the unthinkable and on the other hand thinking about nuclear force modernization behind closed doors and let's please have no public debate about it. That's about it. So let me give you an update on nuclear forces in Germany today.

There used to be cruise missiles, Pershings and all kinds of tactical nuclear weapons, artillery shells, free-fall bombs and standoff missiles. This whole gamut of tactical and intermediate nuclear weapons is gone. There are now, on the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany, 20 free-fall B61 bombs that are aging fast. They are of course under American control. They would be carried into action by Tornado fighter bombers, planes that were designed in the late 1960s, but according to the German government will be operational for this mission-- because it needs a special variety of the Tornado-- until 2024.

Now, the B61s have to be modernized before that. In fact, there is a program initiated in 2012 for the life extension of these bombs. These free-fall bombs will be modernized in due time, and it will be the B61-12 variety.

All this is a conversational matter for maybe a total of about 100 people in Germany. There is no public debate and the government does not want any public debate about it. Don't forget that a major part of Germany's political culture, the Green Party, has protests against nuclear weapons and especially against their deployment in Germany and peace movement of the 1980s are at the core of their identity. This is now staple food for Germany's political culture, and that is why we are not having any public debate about this topic. And if it came, it would be an extremely difficult conflict for Germans.

In the meantime NATO continues to consider nuclear weapons as part of its arsenal, quite legitimately. I quote from the Strategic Concept for the Defense and Security of the

Members of the North Atlantic Alliance from 2010: “As long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.” There are countries other than Germany that have nuclear weapons on their territory. Among them are Italy, Belgium and possibly two or three other NATO member states, which are also not happy with the fact that these nuclear weapons are there. Again, these are only the B61 free-fall bombs, nothing else for the moment.

But I think the first consequence of what we’ve just heard, what is coming from Russia now, is that the whole thing is frozen. And maybe that’s a good sign; here is the good news. It was a very publicized initiative of then German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle to make Germany a non-nuclear country. In 2009 he actually managed to get it into the coalition agreement with Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats to actually get rid of these last 20 freefall bombs and thereby render a service to posterity.

Although Angela Merkel, in her classic passive resistant style, let it be written into the coalition agreement, she added we can only do this in cooperation with our NATO allies. So nothing happened. The bombs are still there. And as much as I don’t see any debate on an extension of nuclear deterrence in Germany emerging in the next couple of years, I also don’t see any continuation of the efforts to get rid of these 20 weapons. They are going to be there.

In summation, their presence is quite literally symbolic. It is a psychological. It’s a means of deterrence but to what extent this is credible, especially with regard to the carrier systems, is a different question.

One last word about Poland; the Polish debate is of course in view of what has happened in Crimea and Ukraine and what is happening in other countries of Eastern Europe. And it is also that one element of the 2009 Zapad military exercise by Russia in Belarus now takes on a very ominous character.

If you remember, Zapad in 2009 was the exercise of Poland and Lithuania attacking Belarus for its bad treatment of the Lithuanian minority. There are people who are saying that what was really exercised there was actually invading another country in order to protect a minority. So, if Zapad 2009 was ostensibly about defending against a ludicrous NATO attack, it was actually also about exercising such an attack, which then happened exactly four-and-a-half years later in Ukraine.

But now comes the punch line: What did Zapad 2009 end with? A tactical nuclear strike against Warsaw. At the time the Poles laughed it off. Now they take it much more seriously. Indeed, there is a budding debate about nuclear weapons on Polish territory. And I do not think any serious politician or even expert in Poland says Poland should acquire nuclear weapons.

Some experts have started thinking about—and have demanded in some cases—for U.S. nuclear weapons to be deployed in Poland under the assumption that a country in which nuclear weapons are based is safer against conventional attack. That’s the argument.

But I tell you, you will not find a single statement by a government politician in Poland that even takes up this argument. This is a debate among some experts.

The National Center for Strategic Studies in Warsaw, which is very small, started thinking about this issue. There were immediate reactions from politicians saying that this is not on the table right now. Nevertheless, the Polish reaction about a TV program like Kiselyov's and "radioaktivny pepel" (radioactive ash) is quite different from the German reaction.

Yes, there is worry, there is fear, but I think anyone counting on Poland lowering its resolve to actually face up to Putin and to the new threat from the East is wrong. And I think we've seen it already. The Poles didn't wait until Crimea to start massively modernizing their military forces, not with the primary goal of overseas use, but with the primary goal of territorial defense. That program was initiated after 2008 Georgia.

Now, as Toomas Ilves, the Estonian president, likes to say, Georgia 2008 was a wakeup call but we've been hitting the snooze button ever since. The Poles have not hit the snooze button. They have started. In two years' time, they will have the largest-standing tank force in continental Europe, and that's a consequence of Georgia 2008. The same goes for all aspects of the military threat up to the nuclear one. And I think in due time, I can see a more serious and more open debate even about nuclear weapons in Poland, but for the moment this is not the case.

So where does all that leave us? I don't dare to make a prediction about the nuclear aspects, but if it comes to reacting to the threat from Russia, indeed, as Ed Lucas likes to say, we're in for a very, very, very long chess game here. And we have to see that as chess is a zero-sum game, so is our confrontation with this new Russia, which is new in many aspects. We'll have to confront Putin's Russia. We'll have to strengthen the European Union. And we'll have to rebuild the Atlantic Alliance, nothing short of that.