Many observers have suggested that activities in recent years by states like Russia and China outside their borders demonstrate the return of great power politics.\(^1\) It is certainly true that Russian efforts to strengthen its influence on its periphery have caused considerable anxieties for its neighbors, in Western Europe, and in the United States. Ultimately, Russia’s actions in places like Ukraine do more to damage its long-term prospects than they do to demonstrate (or re-create) its great power status.

Indeed, it is clear that Putin has used the nationalist discourse of Russians as a “divided people” to shore up domestic support for his regime. Russia chose to interpret the events in Ukraine in late 2013 and into early 2014 as a political coup fomented by the West. As Putin himself described it, “…with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line….After all, they were fully aware that there are millions of Russians living in Ukraine and in Crimea.”\(^2\) Dmitry Peskov, Russia’s Press Secretary, announced that Russia was the guarantor of security in the Russian world on March 7, 2014.\(^3\) This was a new claim that suggested a shift in official Russian perceptions of its role in Eurasia, implying that Russia’s status, rather than being a nation-state like any other is, rather, that of a larger, supra-national entity with boundaries that are eminently shiftable according to Russian interests and desires. If the Putin administration is serious about this claim, this is a dangerous development for the West, as it suggests the possibility of further aggressive foreign and military policies on Russia’s periphery, as well as the conception of Russia’s current borders as being much more flexible than the international community and certainly Russia’s neighbors would like.

Now, Russia is perceived by both the West as well as its neighbors with tremendous suspicion, if not animosity, as further aggressive moves at the expense of its neighbors can be anticipated given this new worldview. It is important to note that this view of Russia as a guarantor of security within a larger “Russian world” or sphere of influence is not exclusive to Putin; in fact, it bears striking resemblance to the kind of pan-Slavism espoused by the tsars in the waning decades of Imperial Russia. It was of course this same impulse that spurred Imperial Russia to support Serbia in 1914.

Today, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine have been severely compromised by Russian aggression. Despite Western rhetorical and financial support for Ukraine, it is clear that no Western power is willing to seriously risk war with Russia over Ukraine. That certainly suggests that any outside aid for Ukraine will continue to be sharply limited. This “Ukraine phenomenon” of Western rhetorical support but little material aid in the face of Russian aggression undoubtedly raises serious security concerns for countries like Estonia and Latvia in the Baltics, which also have significant ethnic Russian populations.

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\(^3\) Ibid.
Throughout the summer of 2016, Russia continued to surround Ukraine with new combat units.\textsuperscript{4} It has placed new units in the Crimea, with fresh convoys reportedly moving into the Crimea on August 11. The next day, Russia reportedly deployed advanced S-400 surface-to-air missiles in the Crimea. Russian naval forces have continued to sail into the Black Sea. Three additional motorized rifle brigades have been deployed close to the border with Ukraine, and a newly created division, the 150th Motorized Rifle Division, deployed to Rostov, east of the separatist-controlled area in the Donbas. Moreover, Russian military forces have continued to conduct drills and exercises with separatist forces in Moldova’s Transnistria region on the western border of Ukraine, meaning that Ukraine is almost entirely encircled by hostile territory. Separatists in the Donbas continue their operations, which has significantly increased the number of civilian casualties over the past few months, despite the supposed cease-fire.

We would do well to ask ourselves: why is this happening now? Why does there appear to be a new round of military operations—or at least the threat of such operations—in the offing? It is hard to ignore the upcoming Russian Duma elections taking place on September 18, 2016. Some observers suggest that Putin’s administration seeks to ramp up Russian nationalism in a lead up to the election as a distraction from potential electoral fraud.\textsuperscript{5} Clearly domestic political calculations are an important part of Putin’s calculus in Ukraine. Thus far, European and American reactions to continued Russian aggression in Ukraine have been anemic at best. The issue has garnered little traction in the United States in the midst of a contentious election season. The EU is currently in the process of debating the current sanction regime against Russia. In Germany, Angela Merkel favors continuing the current sanctions, while German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has suggested that the sanctions might be lifted if there is progress in the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine.\textsuperscript{6} There clearly has not been meaningful progress in the peace talks, however; Ukraine remains engaged in an existential conflict with few prospects for Russian withdrawal or meaningful concessions by Russia.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.