The West is playing into Vladimir Putin’s hands by treating Russia’s annexation of Crimea as the return to a world in which Russia and the United States are once again principal adversaries. Yet a trio of current and former NATO secretaries general took exactly this position at the Brussels Forum over the weekend, announcing that 2014 marked the end of the post-Cold War era. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) said that Putin “has reignited a dangerous, pre-1991, Soviet-style game of Russian roulette with the international community.” Michael McFaul, the most recent U.S. ambassador to Russia, has written that the annexation “ended the post-Cold War era in Europe.”

Many at the Brussels Forum seemed almost relieved to return to the verities of the Cold War, when the United States and Western Europe stood shoulder to shoulder against the threat of Soviet aggression. The script is familiar: It requires an increase in European defense spending and a tighter transatlantic alliance. The Group of Eight turns back into the Group of Seven; Moscow is the bad guy.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that Crimea makes clear that Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 was not a one-off but instead part of a larger strategy. A strategy of what, exactly? Kaadri Liik, a senior fellow at the European Council of Foreign Relations, argues that Putin wants a “new world order” that rejects the principle that “countries are free to choose their alliances,” re-legitimizing “the idea of geopolitical spheres of influence that Europe thought had been consigned to the dustbin of history.”

But this is a red herring. NATO has no intention of admitting Georgia or Ukraine precisely because we are not willing to go to war with Russia over them. Both nations have strong European ties but also Russian ties in their history, geography and culture. And while the United States and Western Europe reject, in theory, the idea of spheres of influence, Washington regards foreign intervention in Latin America very differently than intervention elsewhere and the European Union has an explicit “neighborhood policy.”

More broadly, the United States would do well to tone down its sanctimony. Putin’s annexation of Crimea violated international law. But so did the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the NATO intervention to protect Kosovo, even if the latter was, to many, including me, a legitimate violation. Insisting that this is a new era because Moscow is bent on violating international law may indeed propel the world into a new era. But that would be a choice of our making, not Russia’s.

Moreover, that choice would strengthen Putin and undercut the democratic movement in Russia. Just because members of the band Pussy Riot were imprisoned and Alexei Navalny was not
elected mayor of Moscow and the size of protests against Putin’s government ebb and flow does not mean that this spirit has been crushed. On the contrary, these protests are like an aspen grove; fueled by social media, they spread in ways we cannot see until the next opportunity for their flowering emerges. Meanwhile, elevating Russia to global enemy No. 1 feeds the hard-liner narrative in Moscow just as it does in Iran. A better strategy would be to tone down the rhetoric and let Europe take the lead, while making clear that a Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine would be met with the strongest possible economic response.

Ultimately, the absence of that invasion is the most striking event of the past month. The Soviet Union would have sent troops into Ukraine at the first sign a pro-Soviet government was in trouble. Indeed, as protests mounted on the Maidan in Kiev, the risk of direct Russian intervention was high; had Putin not sought to keep the world’s goodwill before and during the Sochi Olympics, all of Ukraine might already be back under Russia’s sway with a government willing to use whatever violence is necessary to suppress a pro-European opposition.

Instead, a new Ukrainian government just signed an association agreement with the European Union. That is a Ukraine without Crimea, a dismemberment that should not be recognized by the international community. Meanwhile, however, the United States and the European Union should do everything possible to strengthen Ukraine’s government and hold it accountable for serving the interests of ordinary Ukrainians. We should not take those steps as a way of keeping Russia out, nor to prove that countries in “our” camp fare better than countries in “their camp.” Ukraine, Moldova, Transnistria, Georgia and others in Russia’s “near abroad,” with which it shares deep historic ties, will flourish over the long term only if they have strong relationships with both Russia and the European Union, just as countries in Southeast Asia must have strong relationships with both China and the United States.

For some frustrated with the complexity of the post-Cold War world, redividing the globe along an East-West axis would be comforting. Yet doing so serves military and defense interests all too well, as George Kennan understood as he watched his original doctrine of containment become an entrenched enmity licensing military adventures in the name of anti-communism.

That vision of the world does not reflect present realities. It would become a self-fulfilling prophecy that strengthens autocracy in Russia and increases the likelihood of Russia reverting to what the West considers a rogue state. Other nations that have reason to resent what they see as an imposition of Western values would view Moscow as a leader of an independent coalition of states dedicated to protecting national sovereignty. It will be the world Putin wants. We should not let him have it.