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Russia: Consolidation or Collapse?

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WILL RUSSIA COLLAPSE? Few events could alter today's geopolitical landscape more dramatically. Despite the trauma of the USSR's demise, Russia remains the world's second strongest military power, retaining some 24,000 nuclear warheads.¹ With newly heightened awareness of terrorist aims and capabilities since 11 September 2001, the notion that many of Russia's 89 parts could suddenly become rogue nuclear mini-states tops the list of many policy makers' nightmare scenarios. Others argue that a break-up of Russia could in fact have benefits for both Russians and the world alike, giving Russians political units of more manageable size that could more plausibly seek entry into profitable and peaceful international entities like the European Union.

Western analysts have demonstrated no consensus on the likelihood of a Russian break-up, and the assessments given often seem to depend on the particular topic being discussed. In 1991, when ethnic nationalism seemed triumphant, many thought that Russia's collapse would follow hard on the heels of the disintegration of its former parent state, the Soviet Union. Today, when the emphasis is on lawlessness and failed reforms, many see in Russia an unstable 'asymmetric' federation plagued by insubordinate governors, weak or dysfunctional institutional infrastructure and ethnic separatism.² When talk turns to prospects for democracy, however, analysts tend to interpret the Russian state as being too strong, with a central government that exploits its regions and ethnic minorities. Chechnya is, of course, the prime example cited. But even in debates on the Chechen tragedy one hears different views about the stakes involved. While most critics of the war do not see the Russian Federation collapsing if Chechnya is allowed to go free, US President Clinton compared Russian President El'tsin to Abraham Lincoln in launching a just war for union preservation, arguably implying that the threat of a Russian break-up was in fact real.³ In terms of the Western debate, therefore, no consensus has yet emerged on the likelihood of a Russian collapse, with or without Chechnya.⁴

If we turn to the political discourse in Russia itself, we find that Russia's own leadership unambiguously warns of a clear and present danger of state implosion. In Putin's first major policy statement, published almost exactly at the moment he assumed his duties as acting President of Russia, he declared that Chechnya was not just any conflict but 'the place where Russia's future is being decided'.⁵ Shortly afterwards he told Russian soldiers that the reason they were fighting in Chechnya was precisely because of the danger of state collapse: 'I want you to know that the country really needs what you have been doing here. I do not merely mean protection

of the honour and dignity of the country. I mean more serious things. We are talking about putting an end to the disintegration of Russia. This is our task here'.⁶ About a month later, in his first major television interview as acting President, Putin elaborated: 'Contagion may go up the Volga and spread to other republics. And then we would face either the total Yugoslavisation of Russia or one would have to agree that this territory will be divided up into several independent states'.⁷ We must consider that Putin may not actually have believed all this. But the fact that the most popular and powerful politician in Russia thought such statements would build popular and political support just weeks before his presidential election at a minimum suggests that the probability of a Russian collapse is non-zero. Moreover, the fact that the Russian leadership itself is using such language certainly means that the issue deserves to be studied very carefully by policy makers everywhere. The stakes are simply too high to ignore.⁸

This essay seeks to assess (1) the likelihood that the Russian Federation will collapse in the foreseeable future and (2) the possible forms that such a dissolution might take. The latter question is extremely important, since it may determine whether a fragmented Russia would join the EU or bring the world its second nuclear war. Finally, we seek (3) to offer some preliminary advice for policy makers (Russian and Western) and political scientists studying the issue.

The following section launches our study with a discussion of some methodological issues involved in assessing future developments through political science theory and accumulated 'historical wisdom'. The next section examines the 'lessons' to be drawn from the collapse of the USSR and extrapolates them to today's Russia. The essay then turns to a section discussing the need to 'expect the unexpected', to go beyond the important exercise of empirical extrapolation to consider other theoretically possible scenarios of dissolution. The concluding section steps back to offer a tentative evaluation of the probabilities of different scenarios. It also offers some preliminary recommendations to policy makers.

Putting political science to use

While there is certainly value in pursuing knowledge for its own sake, one of the ultimate aims of political science is to empower us to improve our world. It can do so by allowing us to more accurately anticipate events, to better appreciate the consequences of our political actions, and thereby to improve our policies, our institutions and our behaviour. Unfortunately, how we draw practical conclusions from political science research is itself one of the most underdeveloped aspects of political science. Nevertheless, political scientists frequently hold consulting positions, render expert testimony before Congress or courts of law, and personally participate in other policy-making activity. It is good, then, for political scientists to subject the criteria they use in their private practices to public scrutiny, which we briefly attempt to do here.

The psychologist Philip Tetlock has documented many of the problems involved when 'experts' (including political scientists) seek to project into the future their understanding of the past and their theoretical perspectives, predicting major events in their areas of expertise. One of his studies is in fact directly germane to the purpose

of this essay: 'experts' with advanced graduate degrees were asked in 1988 to predict whether the Communist Party would remain in power in the USSR by 1993. Unfortunately, the accuracy of the experts surveyed (at the M.A. or Ph.D. level) was, on the whole, only slightly greater than that which anyone could have expected to obtain by simply guessing. Nevertheless, these same experts typically indicated in the surveys that they had greater confidence in their own predictions than 'just guessing'.⁹

Tetlock's further conclusions are more than a finding of professional over-confidence, however. His results clearly indicate that experts' political viewpoints (conservative/liberal) coloured their decisions on whether to reject or accept evidence about the USSR and that experts were, on the whole, very resistant to altering their frameworks of analysis even in the face of directly contradictory new information. Experts resorted to all kinds of *ad hoc* 'belief system defences' in order to explain away their own inaccuracies. While Tetlock generously notes that many of these defences were and are justifiable (for example, claiming that the mistakenly predicted event 'almost happened'), the findings certainly give cause for political scientists to be careful in constructing predictions of future developments.¹⁰

The approach adopted here combines what we call vertical and horizontal searches for predictive propositions from accumulated political science research. The vertical approach looks at the history of the country in question, going down through that country's own relevant experiences to extract and evaluate 'lessons' to be learned. Many scholars have noted the unique features of the post-communist world, and it hardly needs mentioning that country-specific factors can come into play in phenomena as complex as state collapse.¹¹ It therefore makes good methodological sense to pay special attention to cases where dynamics are most likely to be similar because environmental variables are held constant, as is in many ways the case with the USSR and the Russian Federation. Thus this study begins by looking at factors that have been said to have caused a multiethnic Russian-dominated state (the USSR) to collapse in the recent past, with an eye to considering to what degree these same 'proven' factors could come into play again in today's Russia.

A purely vertical approach, however, is fraught with methodological (and potentially political) danger. Even admitting the historian's admonition that 'he who does not know history is doomed to repeat it', knowing one's *own* history 'too well' can lead to the equally tragic error of 'fighting the last war again'.¹² That is to say, over-confidence that one's own past history contains all necessary lessons for one's future can lead one to neglect real possibilities that either might be found in the histories of *other* countries¹³ or have not yet been found at all in human experience. Tetlock has documented the dangers of 'certainty-of-hindsight bias' in the social sciences: for example, something that virtually no one predicted (like the collapse of the USSR) can become regarded as absolutely predetermined afterwards, once people have developed theories to explain the outcome.¹⁴ The opposite danger, however, is equally important and necessitates the need to 'think outside the box', to be bold enough to 'think the unthinkable' when a sober analysis of well-grounded theory leads one to do so.¹⁵ The horizontal search for predictive patterns, therefore, involves drawing on a wide range of cases and theories without tying oneself to the particular country context in which one is most interested.

Assessments of the future necessarily also imply a specific philosophy of social

science, notably a set of assumptions about the degree to which large-scale human events like the collapse of states are predictable and how many variables are likely to become important causal factors. Since a full defence of our viewpoint would be far beyond the scope of this essay, we want at least to make explicit the perspective from which it proceeds. Owing to the large number of variables that could become involved, the fuzziness of many relevant concepts, and the small number of cases available for study, we see the notion of state collapse as being more 'cloud-like' than 'clock-like'.¹⁶ That is, while we believe that important regularities can and should be identified, we argue that events like state collapse are best predicted in terms of probabilities rather than in terms implying 100% certain outcomes.¹⁷ While assigning concrete numbers to these probabilities is also problematic and would of necessity be too arbitrary to be satisfying, as a predictive and analytical exercise providing some descriptive estimation of likelihood remains more satisfying than ignoring non-zero probabilities of alternative events in order to assign 100% probability to one particular outcome.

Breaking up is hard to do: lessons from the Soviet collapse

If one were to attempt to draw lessons solely from the history of the Soviet Union (or perhaps even from the other communist states that collapsed), one would be led to Russia's ethnoterritorial divisions as the most likely lines along which any collapse of the Russian Federation would begin. The theoretical conclusions of many studies based on the USSR and the other communist-area cases strongly imply that this is in fact the case, as do the comments of President Putin cited above. Several empirical analyses, however, have pointed out critical differences between the USSR and Russia that make Russia much less vulnerable to this sort of collapse than was the USSR. Nevertheless, this analysis finds that certain major crises could still conceivably be the catalyst for a disintegrative chain reaction, notably potential moves by a Russian president to revoke ethnic autonomy, a bungled coup attempt in Moscow or a very severe and sudden economic crisis, none of which can be ruled out. Should such events occur, an analysis of accumulated wisdom on patterns of the Soviet break-up suggests the following. The likely leaders of such a path to break-up would include those ethnic regions that are least assimilated into Russian culture, boast a history of independence, are at the highest levels of economic development and possess a foreign border.

One of the most forcefully argued empirical conclusions that comes out of the study of the Soviet collapse (especially in the comparative perspective of all post-communist multiethnic states) is that 'ethnofederal' state institutions¹⁸ provide the most likely lines along which state collapse can take place.¹⁹ A large number of important works, for example, have stressed that, in the transition environment common to communist-bloc countries, only those states that had federal structures and that invested their regional governments with ethnic content (the USSR, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) collapsed while ethnically divided countries like Romania that retained unitary administrative structures did not.²⁰ The common theme in these arguments is that ethnofederal structures reinforced ethnic identities during the period of Soviet rule and then, during the transition period, gave regional political

entrepreneurs both incentives to 'play the ethnic card' to gain or maintain power and powerful institutional resources to use in doing so. Democratisation and decentralisation, therefore, set in motion a process of political competition in which separatists won out in key republics like Ukraine, to say nothing of the Baltic states, which had existed as independent polities between World Wars I and II.

While the authors just cited typically do not consider the Russian case, one practical implication of their work is that if Russia were to collapse, the collapse would be highly likely to take place along its 'ethnofederal' lines. Indeed, of the Russian Federation's 89 constituent units ('subjects of the federation'), 32 are officially designated for one or more ethnic minority groups. Together, these ethnic regions cover roughly 53% of Russian territory.²¹ The ethnic regions fall into three categories (republics, autonomous regions and autonomous districts), with the republics enjoying the highest level of formal autonomy. The remaining 57 regions, lacking a particular ethnic designation, comprise *oblasti* and *kraia*. The Soviet Union contained an additional administrative level of territorial division, consisting of 15 union republics, of which Russia itself was one. Each union republic was the official homeland to a specific ethnic group, even though several union republics (most importantly Russia) themselves contained autonomous republics (now just called 'republics' in today's Russia) and autonomous regions and districts designated for other ethnic groups. For example, the autonomous republic of Tatarstan (designated for ethnic Tatars) was part of the Russian union republic in the USSR. In light of the theories of 'ethnofederal instability' based on the Soviet and Yugoslav experience, therefore, Russia would at face value seem to be a prime candidate for collapse along the same patterns as the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

Analysts, however, have identified several differences between Russia and the USSR that, they argue, have tended to make the former more resistant to ethnofederal collapse than was the latter. Hanson, echoed by Alexseev and Lapidus, has noted that the Russian Federation did not face the same kind of legitimacy crisis as the USSR, which had to contend with the discrediting of the communist ideology with which the state was so tightly intertwined.²² Treisman, Solnick, Lapidus, Popov and Alexseev have all argued that Russia managed to keep its republics in line, at least in part, through a policy of strategic pay-offs to regions, whereas Treisman explicitly notes that the USSR had no such policy.²³ Other studies of Soviet separatism have noted the importance of 'demonstration effects', a kind of chain reaction in which early seceders like Estonia provided encouragement, 'blueprints', information, training and even activists for other republics considering a separatist course of action.²⁴ Russia is less susceptible to this kind of contagion than was the USSR since the various Russian republics are more spread out (sometimes in small clusters) and isolated from each other than were the Soviet republics. Because of these relatively weak inter-republic links, action in one non-Russian republic is less likely to spread to another than was the case in the Soviet Union (witness the isolation of Chechnya's drive to secede). Patterns of Western support have also been noted as a factor. While the Bush Administration pointedly refused public backing for the Baltic and Ukrainian separatist movements, the attention paid by Western governments (including at lower levels) nevertheless lent encouragement to would-be separatists in these same regions. As Hanson and Alexseev have observed, the general Western attitude has been much

more clearly hostile to the Chechen separatists (witness Clinton comparing El'tsin to Lincoln) than to, say, the Baltic states in 1990. The policy has been to avoid establishing virtually any significant direct relationships with any of Russia's republics.²⁵ This makes Russia's republic leaders and activists much less likely to believe they can count on Western support upon achieving *de facto* independence than were leaders in the USSR republics. Hale has also noted that the Russian Federation does not assign a single republic to the dominant group (Russians) as did the USSR with the giant RSFSR, instead dividing 'Russian' areas into 57 *oblasti* and *kraia*. As a result, the Russian Federation is much less susceptible to situations of dual power and ethnic security dilemmas characteristic of the Soviet ethnofederation.²⁶

The restraints on Russian collapse cited so far involve federal-level factors that tend to make Russia less likely to face a general ethnofederally inspired crisis of statehood than was the USSR. Nevertheless, it is clear that some Soviet and Russian republics have been much more eager to secede (for example, the Baltic states and Chechnya) than others (for example, the Central Asian republics and Chuvashia). Several studies have additionally sought the sources of the USSR's collapse (and Russia's survival) in factors that produce variation in levels of separatism among ethnic regions. Analysing these patterns provides us with yet another reason why the Russian Federation has been more stable than was the USSR over the past decade. The variety of secession-inducing factors recognised in these studies simply do not converge in Russia to produce a set of regions that both (a) have a high separatist potential and (b) are important enough to threaten the break-up of the federation. There *was* such a 'subversive' convergence in the USSR. A survey of several recent studies demonstrates this conclusion and allows us to consider where any 'ethnofederal dissolution' of the USSR is most likely to begin, should this unlikely event occur.²⁷

Cultural distinctiveness

Regions with the most culturally distinct ethnic groups tended to be the most eager seceders in the USSR. Cultural distinctions are often potent because they often involve barriers to understanding and make it easier for politicians to convince desired followers that they are threatened by other groups. Such distinctions do not 'naturally' define political cleavages, but it has been well documented how the Soviet state institutionalised certain forms of ethnic identity, placing special emphasis on language.²⁸ While ethnic consciousness does not necessarily or directly translate into separatism, historical experience has shown that it can facilitate mobilisation for this purpose.²⁹ Thus, the fact that Uzbeks had a fairly strong sense of national distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* Russians did not lead them to try to break radically from the USSR, but one reason Belarus clung so closely to the USSR was that Belorussians tended to be more assimilated. For example, fewer Belorussians claimed their 'own' language as their native one than did the titular groups in any of the USSR's other 14 union republics.³⁰

Strikingly, studies of the Soviet cases have shown that the size of the Russian population in a given republic mattered little in terms of its propensity to seek secession.³¹ Once they gained power in a republic, Soviet-era ethnic groups from Bashkortostan to the Baltics have proved very adept at winning over, 'buying off' or

otherwise disengaging from power even very large Russian populations.³² This is evident in the examples of Latvia and Estonia, which spearheaded the collapse of the USSR despite the fact that the titular groups there constituted only bare majorities in their own republics.

Applying these findings to the Russian Federation, we observe that the USSR's union republics tended to be much less linguistically russified than are the republics of the Russian Federation. While among the 15 Soviet union republics only Belarus and Ukraine had linguistic assimilation rates higher than 10%, over two-thirds of the ethnic groups in Russia's ethnic regions have assimilation rates greater than this.³³ Nevertheless, this Soviet experience might help us identify where potential Russian flashpoints lie. Republics in Russia with low rates of linguistic assimilation (10% or under, according to 1989 census data) are: Adygeya, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Tuva (Tyva) and Yakutia (Sakha).

Economic development and proximity to lucrative foreign markets

The most economically developed regions of the USSR tended to be the most radical separatists in 1990 and 1991, with the Baltic states and Ukraine leading the separatist charge while the more impoverished Central Asian republics resisted Soviet disintegration. Not all accounts agree on the particular way in which wealth is said to promote separatism. Roeder stresses a 'resource mobilisation' dynamic, where wealth provides resources for mobilising collective action against the central government.³⁴ Treisman argues that richer regions can more credibly bargain for central government subsidies and hence engage in 'ethnic activism' to do so.³⁵ And Hale implies an 'expected returns' logic whereby poor regions hope to benefit from the developed economies of the richer regions.³⁶ This correlation between economic development and separatism has been noted not only in the USSR but also in Yugoslavia, where the most developed republics of Slovenia and Croatia spearheaded the disintegration of that state.³⁷ While economic considerations were certainly not the only factors involved, the evidence does suggest that these incentives were important in shaping whether ethnic revivals took the form of secession or limited themselves to the promotion of local cultures and groups within the larger union.

Comparison of 'ethnic' distributions of development in the Soviet and the Russian republics shows that, on the whole, the ethnic regions within Russia were notably less developed than the leading Soviet separatists (the Baltic states, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) during the late Soviet period. This is illustrated in Table 1, where union republics are indicated in bold type, with the leading seceders among the union republics in bold italic. The only Russian regions now having the status of republic that had higher levels of wealth (as measured by retail commodity turnover) than the Russian average in 1988 were Yakutia (Sakha), Komi and Karelia. Unlike the Baltic republics, however, the wealthiest Russian republics are severely lacking in other secession-inducing factors considered in this article (such as low assimilation rates). This in and of itself does not mean that Russia's republics will never be more separatist than their Soviet counterparts. But it does suggest that it may be more difficult to push them to 'Soviet' levels of separatism since their relative poverty acts

TABLE 1
LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT IN SOVIET AND RUSSIAN REPUBLICS

<i>Republic</i>	<i>Retail Commodity Turnover (1988)^a</i>	<i>Income (1999)^b</i>
<i>(Union republic in bold)</i> <i>(Leading seceders italic)</i>	<i>(000 rubles per capita)</i>	<i>(monthly, rubles per capita)</i>
<i>Estonia</i>	1.97	
<i>Latvia</i>	1.86	
Yakutia (Sakha)	1.79	2,840.6
Komi	1.63	2,058
<i>Lithuania</i>	1.61	
Karelia	1.46	1,654.4
Belarus	1.41	
Russia (average, including all ethnic regions)	1.4	1,608.6
Buryatia	1.3	1,060.5
Khakassia	1.27	1,197.3
<i>Ukraine</i>	1.21	
Gorno-Altai	1.21	846.9
Udmurtia	1.19	1,009.3
Tatarstan	1.17	1,243.7
<i>Moldova</i>	1.14	
<i>Georgia</i>	1.13	
Chuvashia	1.11	763.9
Marii-El	1.1	696.1
Mordovia	1.1	825.6
North Ossetia	1.1	1,162.4
<i>Armenia</i>	1.09	
Bashkortostan	1.09	1,246.9
Kabardino-Balkaria	1.08	865.7
Kalmykia	1.08	579
Karachaevo-Cherkessia	1.08	649.9
Tuva	1.08	785
Kazakhstan	1.07	
Adygeya	0.9	771.1
Kyrgyzstan	0.88	
Turkmenistan	0.88	
Dagestan	0.77	597
Uzbekistan	0.76	
Azerbaijan	0.75	
Chechen-Ingushetia	0.73	367.3 (Ingushetia only)
Tajikistan	0.68	

Sources: ^aGoskomstat SSSR, *Narodnoe Khozyaistvo SSSR v1989g* (Moscow, Finansy i Statistiki, 1990).

^bGoskomstat Rossii, *Regiony Rossii: Statisticheskii Sbornik* (Moscow, Goskomstat Rossii, 2000) p. 18–20.

as a restraint on separatist activity. To the extent that wealth encourages separatism, therefore, the Soviet experience would lead us to pay the most attention to Karelia, Komi and Yakutia (Sakha), the only three Russian republics wealthier than the Russian average.

Violent victimisation by Moscow

In every major case where the USSR brought in troops and shed blood to quell a

separatist uprising during the Gorbachev era, it tended to galvanise local support around separatist forces. This proved true for Soviet military action in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Latvia and Lithuania. The only republic to suffer violent victimisation at the hands of modern Russia (as distinct from the USSR) has been Chechnya, and it hardly needs to be said that the pattern fits there.

Republic status and foreign borders

When the USSR collapsed, it disintegrated into those constituent units that were at the highest level beneath the Soviet government itself: the union republics. No autonomous republics, districts or regions managed successfully to secede. There are several likely reasons for this clear pattern. In part, it is probably due to the fact that Soviet rulers bestowed more 'ethnic' resources on the union republics than on the autonomous republics due to their higher administrative rank. Union republics, for example, typically had their own academies of sciences where many aspects of national culture could be preserved and even developed at various times during Soviet rule.³⁸ Union republic separatism was probably also partly due to the fact that the leaders of these structures had more mobilisational resources at their disposal than did units at lower hierarchical levels owing to the autonomy and authority granted them in the spheres of economics and politics.³⁹ Furthermore, Russia's republics were by definition all subordinate to the Russian union republic, which was in turn subordinate to the central USSR government. Hence Russia's republics would have had to cut through two layers of state structure in order to achieve independence instead of just the one that faced the union republics.

In addition, it is important to note that the union republics all had usable foreign borders during the Soviet period, whereas none of the ethnic regions in Russia did while Russia was part of the USSR (not counting Arctic Sea or arctic Pacific Ocean access).⁴⁰ Indeed, the presence of a foreign border was a key criterion for being granted union republic status in the first place, since union republics were legally entitled to secede under the Soviet Constitution. This is important since no ethnic region without a foreign border has ever actually seceded. With the union republics having become independent states, the autonomous republics have now become known simply as 'republics' in Russia, and a few autonomous regions have upgraded their status to that of republic (for example, Khakassia).

Analysis of this aspect of the Soviet experience, then, would draw our attention to full-fledged republics with foreign borders (or ready sea access to a foreign country) as possible sources of separatism. These would include Buryatia, Gorno-Altai, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Karelia, North Ossetia, Tuva, Khakassia and Chechnya.

A history of independence

The Baltic drive to bring down the USSR demonstrates the power of this factor in driving secessionism since Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were all independent states between World Wars I and II and the symbols of their historical statehood played a large role in their independence movements.⁴¹ In Russia, the only republic to have had

TABLE 2

RUSSIAN ETHNIC MINORITY REGIONS RANKING HIGH IN SECESSION-INDUCING FACTORS

<i>Ethnic distinctiveness</i>	<i>Wealth</i>	<i>Violent victimisation</i>	<i>Republic status/ foreign borders</i>	<i>History of independence</i>
Adygeya	Karelia	<i>Chechnya</i>	Buryatia	<i>Tuva</i>
<i>Chechnya</i> -Ingusheti a	Komi		Gorno-Altai	
Dagestan	Yakutia		Dagestan	
Kabardino-Balkaria			Ingushetia	
Kalmykia			Kabardino-Balkaria	
Karachaevo-Cherkessia			Kalmykia	
<i>Tuva</i>			Karachaevo-Cherkessia	
Yakutia (Sakha)			Karelia	
			North Ossetia	
			<i>Tuva</i>	
			Khakassia	
			<i>Chechnya</i>	

an independent political existence in the twentieth century is Tuva, also a state between the first and second world wars.

Summing up regional-level secession-inducing factors in Russia

In order to assess the likelihood of a secessionist avalanche bringing down the Russian Federation, the Soviet experience with national separatism suggests that we should track events particularly closely in regions where multiple secession-inducing factors are concentrated. While Table 2 should be read with caution since it captures neither the relative degrees of importance of different factors nor differences among the republics in each high-risk category, it does give us a broad idea of how widely recognised secession-inducing factors are arranged in the Russian republics. Most notably, it shows that Chechnya and Tuva are the only two Russian republics to rank highly on as many as three of the above factors associated with secessionism. With the lone exception of Karelia, all of the others that rank high on two factors are in the North Caucasus area (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia). If a separatist wave is to sweep across Russia from Chechnya, therefore, it is likely to spread first to Tuva and then to the North Caucasus and Karelia before moving 'up the Volga' as Putin feared.

Overall, however, the overwhelming conclusion from the totality of the above arguments is that the separatist potential of regions in Russia is generally much weaker than was the potential of the USSR's union republics in 1991. Moreover, unlike the Soviet Union with its Baltic union republics, Russia does not possess a core group of states where virtually all of the most important secession-inducing factors are present. Nor is there a single republic at 'high risk' that is considered essential to the survival of the Federation, as Ukraine was often regarded in the USSR. Instead, as seen above, the various secession-inducing factors tend to cross-cut each other in different Russian republics, never converging to produce a separatist mix potent enough to get the separatist ball rolling—with the exception of Chechnya.

Lessons from the Soviet collapse

From the perspective of Russia's own history, then, Russia's survival looks to be overdetermined in light of comparisons with the USSR. But ethnic politics in the USSR once looked quite stable too, before conditions arose that put separatist dynamics into play. What kinds of conditions might turn the seemingly impossible into reality? In the Soviet case the immediate precipitating factor was a virtual collapse of central state institutions when the August 1991 coup failed and split the military at the same time that it confirmed fears in many republics that Russia could never fully be trusted. While a full analysis of such 'triggering' events is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to lay out some scenarios that could conceivably (though not probably) beset Russia in the foreseeable future.

- *Economic collapse.* For one thing, one could conceive of a total economic collapse, far worse than the August 1998 crisis, perhaps involving sustained hyperinflation. If such a severe depression were to render the federal government virtually useless (or even harmful) to its citizens, this could trigger a combination of secession and state collapse as regions decide that they are better off trying to go it alone.
- *Failed Russian nationalist coup.* It is also not completely unthinkable that ethno-centric Russian hardliners could attempt another coup and fail again, directly mimicking the events of August 1991 and the rest of that autumn. In addition, the Russian economy could plunge even further than it has in the past.
- *Foreign invasion.* The advent of the nuclear age makes it extremely unlikely that any foreign army would ever try actually invading Russia (even if Russia invaded first) and makes success in any such foolhardy endeavour even less likely than the odds that faced Napoleon and Hitler. Nevertheless, let us assume that a war were for some reason to break out between Russia and a major foreign power. A stalemate or Russian defeat could reduce the legitimacy and/or power of Moscow to such a degree that regional leaders could invoke ethnic distinctions in an effort to justify the establishment of their own forms of order locally.
- *Clumsy attempts to eliminate republics' ethnic status.* Soviet experience also suggests that ham-fisted government attempts to coerce republics, perhaps pre-emptively, into giving up their special status as ethnic regions can backfire. Russia's military has had enough trouble handling tiny impoverished Chechnya and it may struggle mightily if it has to stretch its resources to take on many restive republics. Coercive intervention is thus likely to fall short of complete victory. This means that attempts to use force or coercively subjugate ethnic regions may well simply reinforce local popular support for separatists (as did Russia's moves against Chechnya and the Soviet attacks on Baku, Vilnius and Tbilisi) at the same time as they demonstrate Russia's military impotence. This proved to be a disaster for the USSR in August 1991, and the consequences could be equally serious for Russia in the months and years ahead. Russia would be well advised, therefore, to abandon notions of subsuming the republics into larger, non-ethnic regions that would then be given local supremacy. Russia simply could not enforce such a move in the face of significant republic resistance, and this could provoke the very kind of separatist activity that it would be intended to prevent. Putin's more subtle approach of creating seven 'federal districts' that include but do not eliminate

republic structures could, however, conceivably 'de-ethnicise' Russia's federation without provoking a mass uprising. This could be done so long as these structures only very gradually acquire new powers at the expense of regional leaders, thereby not giving these a clear and dramatic cause around which to rally their efforts at any given time. Even then, however, still a careful 'downgrading' could provide additional fuel for any ethnic revival movements that might emerge in the future for any number of reasons.

Research on the dynamics of state collapse and separatism in the USSR, therefore, suggests that Russia is unlikely to follow the Soviet 'ethnofederal' path of disintegration. While Chechnya might be compared to Lithuania, the Russian Federation certainly has no Ukraine and the rest of its republics have relatively low separatist potential. As a result, the Soviet experience suggests that only extreme traumas, much greater than those that facilitated the Soviet collapse, would be likely to drive the Russian republics actually to try to secede en masse. By the ethnic criterion, therefore, the Russian Federation appears safe indeed.

The limits of 'lessons': expecting the unexpected in Russia

Generals are reputed to prepare to fight the previous war rather than the next. Political scientists should guard against an analogous tendency to conceive of the next crisis as a carbon copy of the last one. Around 1980 the common wisdom was that overseas colonies were likely to break away but contiguous areas would not, even when ethnically distinct. After all, no contiguous state had broken up recently. Biafra's costly failure to separate from Nigeria was the rule, while Bangladesh's success in seceding from the distant rest of Pakistan confirmed the need for non-contiguity.

Hardly anyone apart from H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse considered the ethnic issues in the Soviet Union to be gravely serious before Gorbachev came to power. But even those sovietologists who paid attention to ethnicity tended to see Islamic Central Asia as a more likely flashpoint than the tiny Baltic states.⁴² Once the USSR and Yugoslavia broke up, these cases replaced Biafra as a measuring stick. The new common wisdom has now become: 'Even contiguous states may break up if they are multiethnic'. But the previous section of this essay has shown that ethnic break-up is a non-starter in the case of the Russian Federation, at least in the absence of a state trauma far more severe than that which faced the USSR and Yugoslavia. Thus separatist threats voiced by various regional leaders in today's Russia often boil down to bluff, attempts to bargain for more resources from Moscow.⁴³

But if only extreme crises are likely to make an ethnic-led break-up of Russia probable, it is also important to note that, in such conditions, ethnic or ethnoterritorial ('republic') lines are certainly not the only ones, nor even necessarily the most likely ones, that can matter. Prior to the late 1980s conventional wisdom paid virtually no attention to the secessionist potential of republics; it may now overemphasise republic status.

Things do happen that have no precedents. The only clean precedent in world history for the peacetime crumbling of any large continental empire, mono- or multi-ethnic, may have been the Mayan empire more than 1,000 years ago. Yet in our

days the USSR did crumble without outside attack. Some ethnically (relatively) homogeneous cases of empire collapse where no major foreign incursion was involved may also include the Egyptian Old Empire, the Chou in China, Kievan Rus' and the German Holy Roman Empire, although their ethnic homogeneity at the time may have been more limited than it looks in retrospect. More recent cases tend to involve chiefly non-contiguous territories such as the American Thirteen Colonies, the other English-speaking Dominions from Britain, and the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Latin America. On a smaller scale, Belgium separated from the contiguous Netherlands in 1830, following neither French–Dutch language lines nor Catholic–Protestant religious lines but something in between. Thus while there are some examples of state break-up not directly connected with ethnic difference, they are few and sometimes very far between.

What are the ways in which the break-up of the Russian Federation is conceivable in the face of extreme circumstances apart from the 'ethnic' scenarios noted above? The large sweep of history suggests at least three major possibilities, including lines defined by war, geography and economics.

War

In the past, empires frequently crumbled in the wake of military defeat and there is no reason why a war-induced break-up would be limited to taking place along ethnic lines. Were Russia to find itself in conflict with either a Western force or an Eastern one, and were it to lose, it is not inconceivable that China might seek the creation of a satellite Far Eastern and/or Siberian state to relieve some of its demographic pressures. Also, Western forces might encourage parts they might occupy or influence to follow the path of West Germany after World War II, accepting heavy investment and integration into Western economic structures. Even without foreign attempts to impose order, ethnically Russian regional leaders might have great incentives to establish their own forms of order locally even if other regions or Moscow-based authorities did not want to go along with them.

Long-run geographical strain

In principle, one must consider three possibilities for Russia's foreseeable future in terms of geography. It could reincorporate some formerly dominated areas, remain at its present size, or contract. Over the last 5,000 years history shows an average trend toward ever-larger polities. Extreme empire building during the nineteenth century, however, was followed by a reverse move towards smaller states. One could argue that cases like the Soviet collapse point to a continuation of this reverse trend, although others could claim that integrative trends in Europe and even North America foreshadow a resumption of the trend towards larger states.

At least two issues are involved here: state capacity and economies of scale. The difficulties involved in administering large territories in a way that responds to local needs and values and ensures the optimal provision of public goods tend to militate against large states.⁴⁴ From this perspective, being the world's largest state in terms of area, Russia would seem a prime candidate for shrinking, a point seemingly

reinforced by the great state-building difficulties it has faced over the past decade.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the advent of modern communications technology and the spread of economic integration are expanding the ability of states to manage large territories and to therefore take advantage of 'economies of scale', modes of production that become more efficient when larger production volumes are unhindered. Without appropriate state capacity to establish the rule of law and institute productive economic policies throughout their territory, however, states are most likely to be unable to realise the advantages to scale that can result from large size. If Russian state capacity continues its decline of the past two decades for a long time to come, and if neighbouring smaller states are seen to consistently grow economically during this time, even ethnically Russian regions could come to see their ethnic tie to Moscow as being outmoded and a burden. Indeed, some of the provinces that now make up Russia at times experienced relative autonomy or even political independence at more distant points in history, traditions that could be invoked under certain conditions.

For those Russian provinces cultural distinctions are of course minor—as minor as those of the Thirteen Colonies compared to Britain. But the distances are huge: Vladivostok is slightly further from Moscow than New York is from London. Some provinces are relatively far from Moscow and closer to lucrative markets: Vladivostok to Japan, St Petersburg and Kaliningrad to the European Union. Moreover, Kaliningrad is non-contiguous to Russia, and the larger St Petersburg area remembers the greatness of the medieval merchant republic of Novgorod. All of these areas have foreign borders.

In this scenario, hotspots would be likely to include (a) the Far Eastern region around Vladivostok, combining distance with its own brief history of political 'autonomy' under Japanese occupation during the Russian Civil War period,⁴⁶ and (b) Kaliningrad, separated geographically from the rest of the Russian Federation. Some have argued that by annexing the Baltic states Stalin built a time bomb into the Soviet Union. Might he have built another time bomb by attaching Kaliningrad to the Russian Federation?

Economics

Economic pressures for non-ethnic disintegration may arise in two ways. First, the central Russian state may gain a reputation for being primarily predatory or destructive, a provider of 'negative public goods' (which it has certainly seemed in danger of doing at times). If, at the same time, a change in the central government's behaviour comes to be seen as impossible, regional leaders may find it in their interest to mobilise popular support around a separatist option. Arguably, similar sentiments lay behind Southern leaders' decisions to secede in nineteenth century America, correctly interpreting emerging government policies as threatening their form of economy. One could also make the case that the Thirteen Colonies sought to throw off the British yoke in part for such reasons. Second, Russian regions may come to compare the public goods offered them by Russia with those offered them by neighbouring states or associations of states. In this case one would also expect the hotspots to be the European parts of Russia (particularly Kaliningrad and the St

Petersburg–Leningrad area, which are closest to European areas of prosperity) and Russia's Far Eastern regions that border Asian maritime markets that are likely to continue growing in prosperity. Additionally, at least in the European case, units smaller than Russia are likely to have the greatest chance of joining European economic and political structures, providing an additional incentive for the break-up of the Federation.

While it is still overwhelmingly likely that the strength of Russian identity will serve as a consolidating force over the next couple of decades, the flip side of this statement is that broad identity conceptions can break down or be overshadowed by new ones in unusual times. Laitin, for example, has tracked strong incentives for identity shifts that are taking place in the Baltic states since the collapse of the USSR, documenting a very high likelihood of major identity changes to come with the next generation. For example, a large number of ethnic Russians in independent Estonia have increasingly been coming to see themselves as 'Estonian Russians', or part of an 'Estonian Russian-speaking nationality'. They have largely reconciled themselves to the collapse of the USSR and are largely content to be part of an Estonian prosperity that shows every sign of outpacing that of Russia in the foreseeable future (and of bringing them into the European Union).⁴⁷ By the same logic, it is at least possible that a long continuation of the current social crisis in the Russian Federation could also turn into a psychological identity crisis. Indeed, observers have long noted Russia's struggle to define a unifying identity for itself apart from its empire.⁴⁸ A sense of victimisation by Moscow, already used by many ethnically Russian regional leaders, could snowball quickly in the face of certain chronic crises that might be plausibly blamed by these leaders on Moscow.

Ironically, Putin's push to effectively 'enlarge' Russia's regions, perhaps ultimately merging them into the framework of the seven 'federal districts' he created in 2000, could ultimately make the collapse of Russia *more* likely. For one thing, reducing the number of regions makes it easier for their leaders to cooperate in opposition to the federal government. This possibility sounds most ominous when one recalls that none other than the Russian Federation played the key role in the Soviet break-up.⁴⁹ Furthermore, investing these macroregions with real economic and political content may serve to foster perceptions that these units (especially those near prosperous foreign markets) would be economically viable as independent states. It could also promote the development of distinct macroregional identities that could serve as the eventual basis for independent state formation.

The international dimension

Since so much of statehood depends on the 'juridical' element, especially international recognition, the reaction of the world community of countries is likely to play a part in whether Russia endures as a unified state should it face a grave crisis of the kind discussed above.⁵⁰ While active foreign military intervention would of course matter most directly, here we are discussing not the exercise of military or economic power but simple decisions to be made by the broader international community regarding whether or not to accept breakaway regional governments as legitimate actors on the global stage. The international community's decisions to

recognise the former Soviet and former Yugoslav republics but not Chechnya, Abkhazia or the Transdnister Republic have certainly had some influence on the achievement of stable independence by the former but not the latter. How the international community responded to a fundamental Russian crisis of statehood would be likely to depend on what the perceived effects of Russian state collapse would be.

Undoubtedly, a break-up of the Russian Federation would bring problems akin to those that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet empire: at a minimum, the disruption of economic channels, nuclear weapons in the hands of at least some successor states, and a degree of border warfare. In the case of the former Soviet republics these challenges proved manageable to the broader international community, despite wreaking considerable havoc within much of the earlier USSR's territorial domain. Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan gave up the nuclear missiles they inherited. Warfare was more limited than had been the case in Yugoslavia, engulfing mainly a few peripheral regions (Transcaucasia, Moldova, Tajikistan) and staying, for the most part, localised.

What would be different if the Russian Federation itself broke apart? It is likely that international opinion on this matter would differ—much as the opinions of the present co-authors differ on this particular point. Since the disagreements themselves are illustrative of the essential points, the authors temporarily diverge in the following sub-sections to present their points of view briefly on an individual basis.

A pessimistic view of Russian break-up

Judgments about the likely implications of a Russian collapse for the international community should at least in part depend on the particular chains of events considered likely to bring about any potential collapse. Indeed, this essay has noted several very different paths to possible disintegration. Nevertheless, it is helpful to think about certain general implications that are likely to apply should the survival of the Russian Federation ever be at stake. In this particular exercise the assumption is that, if such a debate actually becomes topical, the people of at least one major region of Russia have determined that for some reason they no longer want to continue a political association with Russia. The question therefore does not concern whether Russians *currently* want to preserve their union (which an overwhelming majority now clearly do and which should be treated with respect), but whether the international community more generally has an interest in the continuation of the Russian polity once enough Russian citizens have cast doubt on this continuation to make it an issue.

If we assume that Russia thus finds itself teetering on the brink of collapse in anything like the current environment, I argue here that the dissolution of this geopolitical giant would be fraught with danger and should not be recognised by the international community unless it becomes essentially a *fait accompli*. Of course, the more democratic and consensual any such break-up becomes (for example, the Czechoslovakian model), the more probable subsequent dangers are likely to be minimised and the more willingly the international community should recognise it.

The relatively peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union was a very peculiar case rendered possible by a rare confluence of circumstances. Notably, a non-violent man (Gorbachev) was at the helm and he had enjoyed strong Western approval of his effort to make the USSR a 'normal' country on the international stage. Critically, an astoundingly incompetent coup attempt somehow managed, through indecisive and ill-conceived action, to split the military and thereby to undermine its leaders' confidence in its ability to intervene with any hope of success at the critical moment of state collapse, thereby precluding military-initiated violence. The contrast with the fate of Yugoslavia, as well as that of Chechnya and even the United States in the 1860s, could not be more stark. Violence seems more likely to be the norm, or at a minimum a sufficiently likely (and deadly) outcome to make its avoidance a key consideration in policy making. Of course, a policy aimed at averting a violent break-up must also be careful not to encourage the use of brute force in the name of union preservation, as is currently taking place in Chechnya.

A fragmenting Russia could pose extreme security concerns for the West, of which the nuclear danger is the most obvious. While the former Soviet republics were willing to cede their arms to Russia, a collapsed Russia would be likely to have no clear single 'successor' to which the weapons would best be transferred. This could make it nearly impossible to consolidate Russia's nuclear arsenal, which would in turn seriously complicate international diplomacy. Indeed, given the tendency of some Russian regional leaders to spout anti-Semitic slogans or otherwise thumb their noses at norms of human rights, their hold on nuclear weapons could radically increase the likelihood that these weapons might fall into the hands of terrorists or other groups that would like to use them for more than just defensive deterrence. Even if this likelihood is small, the possible outcome is sufficiently grave to merit significant effort to prevent it from occurring.

The collapse of Russia could also prove detrimental to democracy. Of course, net 'liberal gains' will depend on whether the Russian central polity itself is democratic at the given time. This said, one would have to take the present behaviour of regional leaders as at least indicative of what they would be likely to do on their own. While some might gravitate toward democracy, it currently seems probable that the majority would more closely resemble a bevy of 'little Lukashenkas', answering to nobody but themselves, than 'little Havels'. Indeed, the pull of European-style liberal democracy has so far not been terribly strong for those countries that were most tightly woven into Soviet society, especially Belarus.

In general, the most noticeable trend in the economically developed world over the past century has been the integration of economic space, seeking to capture the benefits of economies of scale and free trade while retaining enough local control to avoid the worst vagaries of the purely free market. Sharp breaks in these economic spaces, inextricably linked to politics, have often led to significant coordination problems and economic hardship, as hit both the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia despite the severe dysfunctionality of these economies.

One cannot rule out a scenario in which the dissolution of Russia is the best option, as noted above. But to the extent that staking out a general position for the international community is possible, as is necessary in this essay's predictive exercise, there are good reasons for the world's countries to give presumption to the

preservation of a united polity and economy should this ever be seriously called into question by Russians themselves.

An optimistic view of Russian break-up

The preservation of the Russian core of the former Soviet Union made parts of the earlier transition, such as control of nuclear weapons, easier. Yet in other ways Russia played a destabilising role, such as when it helped foment ethnic warfare in Moldova and Abkhazia and applied economic pressures on the Baltic states. Thus the positive and negative impacts of maintaining a residual core may cancel out, so that further break-up could create roughly as many problems as the previous stage.

The independence of the Soviet union republics came at a time when some economic and social reserves still existed. The emergency aid required from abroad remained minimal. In contrast, a break-up of the Russian Federation would take place in a context of utter economic dilapidation, social disruption and psychological exhaustion. Ironically, this may also be taken to mean that the optimal moment for dissolution has already been missed.

All things considered, it may be asked how hard the world should try to prevent the Russian Federation from splitting into more manageable pieces. It is not a question of outsiders dividing up the Federation or encouraging centrifugal forces within it but rather a matter of no unconditional support for the centralising forces either.

For the international community the main advantage of a Russia formally undivided is maintenance of the *status quo*. Known ills are preferable to unknown ones, as Hamlet well realised (though it did not save him). A basic principle of international relations is that changes to the political map are unwelcome, be it annexation of Kuwait or secession by the Kurds. Most governments, including the US, discourage such changes, regardless of the particular case, because they make all states feel more insecure regarding their borders.

President Bush Sr followed this principle when he expressly discouraged independence in talking to Ukrainians during his visit to Kiev in mid-1991. He actively took sides in a domestic matter, thus contravening the equally hallowed principle of non-interference in a state's internal affairs. Indeed, even though the US had steadfastly refused since 1940 to recognise the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states, the Bush administration back-pedaled when de-annexation became a realistic possibility in the late 1980s and urged the Balts to go slow.

The corollary of *status quo* maintenance is that once an area successfully asserts its independence, despite international reluctance, the change soon becomes part of a new *status quo*. Temporary exceptions occur, like the continuing refusal to recognise Chechnya for what it is—a separate state. More generally, however, '*status quo*' does not carry the original meaning of *status quo ante*, aiming at restoration of the previous configuration, but rather *status quo nunc*, maintenance of the present one.

American diplomats will extend congratulations to Ukraine or Latvia on the occasion of their Independence Days, and no local dignitary will remind them that the US recommended going slow on independence at a time when American help would have come in handy. This is not only politeness on the part of the locals. They

know that now that they have become part of the *status quo* US support will go beyond congratulations. Witness the Baltic Charter and US support for NATO expansion.

However, while preservation of the momentary status quo is a sensible guideline, it should not be a blind article of faith. At times other considerations enter. These may be moral, as was the case in dismantling the West European colonial empires. At other times the situation on the ground may have slipped irretrievably, so that the defence of *status quo ante* is in conflict with *status quo nunc*. Support of the past status may then only prolong a painful grey period. During his visit to Kiev President Bush Sr was in just such a bind. This is not to say he should have voiced support for Ukrainian independence, but he should have avoided taking sides.

It is hard to foster ever more separatist pressures around the world. Preservation of the existing situation is a sound precept when applied in moderation—and when this existing situation is well defined. In times of rapid change, however, it should not be a knee-jerk reaction based on possibly outdated givens. Information lag time—both physical and psychological—should be taken into account. Little is gained by fighting a riptide head on.

What is the actual situation in the Russian Federation? It is a crazy mix of centralisation, supported by tradition and an ultra-strong presidency, and *de facto* anarchic sub-unit autonomy. Add the quasi-feudal industrial and banking magnates, and there have been and may again be times when one must ask to what degree Russia still exists as an organised state.

One possible reply is that it had better exist, even under a dictator, because the alternatives are too horrible to contemplate, given the nuclear hardware and know-how floating around in the area. This is a good reason for propping up the central government for as long as possible. But for the same reason, one should prepare for the eventuality of its collapse or, worse, falling into a prolonged coma. Unless one prepares in time for various outcomes (and this includes contacts with local power-holders), the worst options may materialise—complete anarchy, nuclear weapons in unknown hands, fighting, famine and millions of refugees trying to make their way somewhere, mainly west.

Genuine non-interference implies neutrality between the centripetal and centrifugal forces within the present Russian Federation. The only active stand voiced by the international community at the state level should be assurances that no external power would be allowed to use Russian weakness to carve out pieces for itself. Internal break-up is one thing; a land grab from the outside would upset the status quo in vastly more dangerous ways. In particular, major powers must make it very explicit that no Chinese annexations in the Far East would be tolerated. The fall of the Soviet Union inevitably boosted China's position as a great power. A break-up of the Russian Federation would reinforce this trend. Whether it is considered desirable or not, such consequences should be thought through in advance.

If break-down of the Russian Federation occurs, independence would probably be a temporary stage for most successor states. There is every reason to believe that some of them would solve the democratisation and marketisation conundrum about as quickly as Poland or Romania. Success is not guaranteed everywhere, but its chances would be enhanced in many regions and reduced in none. Given the common culture,

a nucleus of co-operation would be likely to emerge among the most successful successor states.

This new core might admit new members if and when these were sufficiently reformed so as not to be a drag on the others—the pattern of expansion so far in the European Union. The new centre might be St Petersburg or some unanticipated place. In this sense, the road to a healthy, genuinely decentralised Russian Federation could be through a temporary disengagement, while a desperate attempt to keep the present structure together could prolong the misery indefinitely.

An alternative perspective is successful Russian states gradually joining the European Union. Perhaps this could be the smoothest way to reintegrate Russia into Europe. The entire Russian Federation, even if it becomes a going concern, would obviously be too big to join the European Union without causing many disruptions.

One should be cautious about trying to give history a push. The impetus for splitting up must come from the inside. It is not other states' business to encourage it. But neither should they automatically view it as an utmost calamity, one to be actively discouraged under any circumstance. An open break-up of Russia may become preferable to a hidden one. If and when such a possibility looms, then a future American or European head of state visiting St Petersburg, Kazan' or Vladivostok should not do what Bush Sr did in Kiev.

Conclusion

It would be great if we could marshal data on trends that extrapolate clearly toward break-up or consolidation of the Russian Federation. But a break-up by definition represents a discontinuity where the previous continuous trends fail. We can, though, analyse trends in state stability and consider possible eventualities that could trigger such a discontinuity.

The timely discussion of the potential for collapse, be it the fall of the Shah of Iran, the dismantling of the Soviet Union or the break-up of the Russian Federation, can encounter two rather contradictory objections. According to the first, collapse is claimed to be so unrealistic that it is pointless to consider it. According to the second, it is seen as so eerily realistic that one had better not conjure the ghost by mentioning its name. Both objections can actually occur simultaneously, if it is felt that by denying something one can make it go away.

If Westerners discuss Russia's break-up, it could conceivably affect the course of history in three ways: (1) it may precipitate the break-up itself by crystallising new understandings or perceptions of the possible; (2) it may provoke a hardline reaction in Russia; (3) it may promote the preservation of Russia by calling attention to threats that might otherwise go unobserved. Of course, the purposeful avoidance of discussion may also affect history in precisely the same directions: (1) facilitating the break-up through the failure to recognise important threats; (2) facilitating a hardline reaction to catastrophic events to which policy makers and/or moderates are unprepared to respond; and (3) facilitating the preservation of Russia by helping keep the very idea that it might collapse out of people's minds.

Could the very discussion of Russia's potential break-up cause it to happen? We doubt it. If a structure is so weak that talk can tilt it, then it is already on its last legs.

Moreover, Putin has for over 2 years been talking about this possibility as a driving central cause behind his presidency, making the avoidance of collapse a centrepiece of his policies. For these same reasons, ignoring the question is quite unlikely to do any good and is most likely to be damaging. While discussion, if widespread and resonant with experienced reality, may call attention to new pathways for action, so can this same discussion, if resonant with experienced reality, promote the understanding in both Russia and the West necessary to prevent a Russian collapse, or at least avoid its worst possible forms.

But could Western talk about a break-up play into the hands of Moscow hardliners who would cite it as evidence of a Western conspiracy to sunder Russia like the Soviet Union before it? Of course they may make use of it. But these extremists will always find their excuses to criticise the West, be it Western humanitarian concerns about the Russian war in Chechnya or any other commentary that is not glowingly positive. Indeed, one could argue that the greater danger is for Russia and the international community *not* to be prepared should Russia come to face a calamitous situation. Hardliners thrive in situations of crisis where their simple answers find resonance in societies that do not know what to expect or what to do.

This essay has not, however, argued that the Russian Federation is doomed or is even *likely* to collapse in the foreseeable future. Instead, it has concluded that collapse is an *extremely unlikely* event that could result only from extreme circumstances, such as a precipitous economic collapse, compared to which the August 1998 crisis is but a bump in the road. It could also come from long-term institutional decay and corruption, a lost war or an implosion of central state institutions brought about by gross leadership incompetence, unrepentant corruption, a disastrously failing coup attempt or something similar. Even then, collapse is not the most probable result.

This study *has* argued, however, that the probability that such a catalytic event or process could occur is greater than zero. To be sure, Russian history has surprised us before, sometimes taking those who made the history themselves unawares, and more than once. In historically fragile systems it is prudent to remember that chance plays a major role. Such scenarios, therefore, deserve to be considered by Russian policy makers as well as the global community since Russia's fate so clearly has a potential impact on that of the rest of the world.

Should Russia fall into a grave crisis of the kind mentioned above, we argue that the most serious flashpoints are likely to be the Far East, Kaliningrad, the North Caucasus, Karelia and Tuva. The former two regions stand out because of their greater chance of joining wealthier economic and political communities and their distance from Muscovite power structures, while the latter three stand out owing to their propensity to mobilise around ethnic claims. Importantly, a Russian collapse could take place along non-ethnic lines as well as ethnic ones, meaning that observers should beware of building an intellectual Maginot line, preparing to 'fight the last war' again by anticipating only nationalist threats to Russia's Federation. Certainly, if one had expected the USSR to collapse in the same way that the Russian Empire had, one would have been sorely misguided.

The way any Russian collapse is most likely to occur will depend on the nature of any precipitating events or processes. 'Ethnofederal' collapse is most probable if a Russian government reduces the number of ethnic Russian regions and embarks on a

coercive strategy of eliminating the ethnic status of Russia's republics or otherwise engages in aggressive Russification. Non-ethnic collapse is most likely if war or chronic economic and state capacity decline combine with an obvious and steady rise in the prosperity of neighbouring countries (especially Asian ones), the pull of which could eventually prove too powerful for proximate Russian regions (mostly non-ethnic in designation) to resist. While ethnically Russian regions may not actively join a disintegrative process led by minority regions, it is highly likely that Russia's ethnic republics would eventually follow any disintegrative process led by the 'non-ethnic' Russian regions.

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¹ Graham T. Allison, 'Why Russia's Meltdown Matters', *The Washington Post*, 31 August 1998, p. A21.

² Examples include Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, 'Central Weakness and Provincial Autonomy: Observations on the Devolution Process in Russia', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 15, 1, January–March 1999, pp. 87–104; Steven L. Solnick, 'Is the Center Too Weak or Too Strong in the Russian Federation?', in Valerie Sperling (ed.), *Building the Russian State: Institutional Crisis and the Quest for Democratic Governance* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 2000), pp. 137–156; and John Glad's (former Director of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies) commentary on Voice of America, 'Talk To America', 1 June 2000. For regular and more detailed information on developments in Russia's regions see the *Russian Regional Report* (with versions in both English and Russian) published by the East–West Institute and edited by Robert Ortung. It is available online through <http://www.iew.org>.

³ *New York Times*, 22 April 1996, p. A1.

⁴ For some recent debates on the issue see the excellent chapters in Mikhail A. Alexseev (ed.), *Center–Periphery Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia: A Federation Imperiled* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999); Gail W. Lapidus, 'Asymmetrical Federalism and State Breakdown in Russia', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 15, 1, January–March 1999, pp. 74–82; Gail W. Lapidus & Edward W. Walker, 'Nationalism, Regionalism, and Federalism: Center–Periphery Relations in Post-Communist Russia', in Gail W. Lapidus (ed.), *The New Russia* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1995), pp. 79–113; Fakhrraddin Akhmedov, 'The Trial and Error Approach to Russian Reforms: Will There Be Breakthrough or Breakdown?', *Analysis of Current Events*, 10, 9–10, September–October 1998, pp. 5–6; Steven L. Solnick, 'Will Russia Survive?', in B. Rubin & J. Snyder (eds), *Post-Soviet Political Order* (London, Routledge, 1998); David Hoffman, 'Russia is Sinking into the Void of a "Failed State"', *Herald Tribune (International)*, 27–28 February 1999, p. 1; Graeme P. Herd, 'Russia in Crisis: The Disintegration of the Federation?', London Defence Studies Paper No. E99, 23 July 1999. The outlook has fluctuated, reaching a relative low point after the August 1998 economic meltdown. Oil profits and El'tsin's resignation improved the prospects in early 2000. Irrespective of the momentary outlook in 2002, the question remains.

⁵ Vladimir Putin, 'Russia at the Turn of the Millennium', essay published in English on the official Russian Government website, www.pravitelstvo.gov.ru, 31 December 2000.

⁶ *Trud*-7, 6 January 2000.

⁷ ORT, Channel 1, 7 February 2000.

⁸ Even Russians not known for their sympathy for Putin have argued in recent years that the disintegration of the Russian Federation is a real possibility. See for example quotations from Grigory Yavlinsky and Nikolai Petrov in *The Boston Globe*, 10 September 1998, p. A28.

⁹ Philip E. Tetlock, 'Theory-driven reasoning about plausible pasts and probable futures in world politics: Are we ...?', *American Journal of Political Science*, 43, 2, April 1999, pp. 335–366; Philip E. Tetlock, 'Close-call counterfactuals and belief system defenses: I was not almost wrong but I was almost right', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 3, 1998, pp. 639–652.

¹⁰ Tetlock, 'Theory-driven reasoning ...'; Tetlock, 'Close-call counterfactuals ...'.

¹¹ Valerie Bunce, 'Comparing East and South', *Journal of Democracy*, 6, July 1995, pp. 87–100; and Valerie Bunce, 'Should Transitologists Be Grounded?', *Slavic Review*, 55, Spring 1995, pp. 111–127.

¹² That this is a real danger is indicated by Dan Reiter, 'Learning, Realism, and Alliances: The Weight of the Shadow of the Past', *World Politics*, 46, 4, July 1994, pp. 490–526.

¹³ This problem can be restated as a form of selection bias, the generation of systematically inaccurate estimates of the importance of key causal factors due to the failure to consider the full range of relevant cases. For a discussion of such issues see Robert O. Keohane, Gary King & Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 115–149; and David Collier & James Mahoney, 'Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research', *World Politics*, 49, October 1996, pp. 56–91.

¹⁴ Philip E. Tetlock. 'The Logic of Counterfactual Thought Experimentation in the Rise-of-the-West Debate', paper presented to the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, September 2000, and forthcoming as a chapter in Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow & Geoffrey Parker (eds), *Unmaking the West* (New York, Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁵ We find it hard to interpret even real signals in the direction of previously unthinkable conclusions. In his masterly *Dilemmas of Reform in The Soviet Union* (New York, Council of Foreign Relations, 1986), Timothy Colton presented an impressive set of flashing red lights: a decrease in life expectancy that was unprecedented in modern world history, an economic slowdown that extrapolated toward zero and negative growth, a lag in computerisation, increased ethnic friction and 'a general loss of vitality and hope'. Why then did he conclude that the USSR was in 'pre-crisis' rather than potentially terminal crisis? We can almost sense a certain thought process: all this points toward a situation in which collapse becomes possible, but what would people think if I published such an outrageous thought? And so he points out that during its 70 years the Soviet Union has overcome many crises and the establishment has tremendous reserves, all things that are certainly true and that make the Soviet collapse so puzzling. Colton predicted moderate reform, but not anything more drastic. He correctly pointed out that in a multiethnic state political relaxation could quickly spill over into ethnic demands but concluded that, *therefore*, no Soviet leader would try it—again, eminently reasonable and, given the odds, arguably the best prediction to make at the time. When Gorbachev nonetheless undertook this path, was it a needless blunder (committed because he ignored the ethnic factor) or an inevitable last-resort move in face of the decay of not only the command economy but also 'command society'? The authors themselves tend to share different opinions on this issue, but both agree that at the time of Colton's writing the collapse of the USSR appeared much less likely (to the extent of 'virtually unthinkable') than we now think it in fact was.

¹⁶ Gabriel Almond & T. Genco, 'Clouds, Clocks and the Study of Politics', *World Politics*, 3, 1977, pp. 489–522.

¹⁷ On the necessarily probabilistic nature of social science 'laws' see Adam Przeworski & Henry Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (New York, Wiley, 1970), pp. 3–30. Keohane, King & Verba, p. 56, distinguish between 'systematic' and 'nonsystematic' components of social phenomena.

¹⁸ The term comes from Philip G. Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization', *World Politics*, 43, 2, January 1991, pp. 196–232, referring to a federal political system in which territorial administrative units are invested with ethnic character.

¹⁹ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996); Valerie Bunce, 'Subversive Institutions: The End of the Soviet State in Comparative Perspective', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 14, 4, 1998, pp. 323–354; Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999); Carol Skalnik Leff, 'Democratization and Disintegration in Multinational States: The Breakup of the Communist Federations', *World Politics*, 51, January 1999, pp. 205–235; Philip G. Roeder, 'Liberalization and Ethnic Entrepreneurs in the Soviet Successor States', in Beverly Crawford & Ronnie D. Lipschutz (eds), *The Myth of "Ethnic Conflict"* (Berkeley, CA, International and Area Studies Research Series, No. 98, 1998), Columbia International Affairs Online database; Philip G. Roeder, 'Peoples and States After 1989', *Slavic Review*, 58, 4, Winter 1999, pp. 854–882; Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism ...'; Yuri Slezkine, 'How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review*, 53, 2, Summer 1994, pp. 414–452; Anthony Smith, 'Ethnic Identity and Territorial Nationalism in Comparative Perspective', in Alexander Motyl (ed.), *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities* (New York, Columbia, 1992) pp. 45–65; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Notably Bunce, 'Subversive Institutions ...'; Bunce, *Subversive Institutions ...*; Leff, 'Democratization ...'.

²¹ Goskomstat SSSR, *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v1989g.* (Moscow, Finansy i Statistiki, 1990); Georgii Vachnadze, *Goriachie Tochki Rossii* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo 'Kniga', 1993).

²² Stephen E. Hanson, 'Ideology, Interests, and Identity: Comparing the Soviet and Russian Secession Crises', in Mikhail A. Alexseev (ed.), *Center-Periphery Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia: A*

Federation Imperiled (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999); Alexseev (ed.); Lapidus, 'Asymmetrical Federalism ...', pp. 75–76.

²³ Some of these works disagree on exactly what the policy of 'strategic pay-offs' has been. Daniel Treisman, *After the Deluge: Regional Crises and Political Consolidation in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 1999); Solnick, 'Is the Center ...' Steven L. Solnick, 'Hanging Separately? Cooperation, Cooptation and Cheating in Developing Federations', version 1.5, later draft of paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, 3–6 September 1998; Steven L. Solnick, 'Big Deals: Territorial Bargaining and the Fate of Post-Colonial and Post-Soviet States', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, 31 August–3 September 2000; Lapidus, 'Asymmetrical Federalism ...', p. 76; Vladimir Popov, 'Fiscal Federalism in Russia: Rules Versus Electoral Politics', 2001, available at <http://www.nes.ru/public-presentations/Papers/Popov.htm>; Alexseev (ed.), p. 260.

²⁴ Paul Goble, 'Ethnic Politics in the USSR', *Problems of Communism*, 38, 4, July–August 1989, p. 10, reprinted in Gail W. Lapidus (ed.), *The 'Nationality' Question in the Soviet Union* (New York, Garland Publishing, 1992), pp. 293–306; Gail W. Lapidus, 'From Democratization to Disintegration: the Impact of Perestroika on the National Question', in Gail W. Lapidus & Victor Zaslavsky with Philip Goldman (eds), *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 45–70 at p. 59; Henry E. Hale, 'The Parade of Sovereignties: Testing Theories of Secession in the Soviet Setting', *British Journal of Political Science*, 30, 2000, pp. 31–56.

²⁵ Hanson, 'Ideology, Interests and Identity', p. 36; Alexseev (ed.), pp. 260–261.

²⁶ Henry E. Hale, 'Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal Survival and Collapse', paper prepared for presentation at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

²⁷ The rest of this section summarises conclusions from the following scholarly works: Kisan-gani N. Emizet & Vicki L. Hesli, 'The Disposition to Secede: An Analysis of the Soviet Case', *Comparative Political Studies*, 27, 4, January 1995, pp. 492–536; Hale, 'The Parade ...'.

²⁸ Slezkine, 'How a Socialist ...'; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001).

²⁹ John R. Wood, 'Secession: A Comparative Analytical Framework', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 14, 1, March 1981, pp. 107–134. Southern separatism leading up to and during the US Civil War is the primary exception, although there certainly were cultural issues at stake there too.

³⁰ Data from 1989 Census of the USSR, vol. 7, table 2 (St. Paul, Minnesota, Eastview Press).

³¹ This point has been made both in Treisman's study of post-Soviet Russia and in Hale's study of late Soviet-era separatism. See Hale, 'The Parade ...' and Daniel Teisman, 'Russia's Ethnic Revival', *World Politics*, 49, 2, 1997, pp. 212–249. For a different point of view see Lapidus & Walker, 'Nationalism ...', p. 87, and Lapidus, 'Asymmetrical Federalism ...' p. 75.

³² For example see Henry E. Hale, 'Bashkortostan: The Logic of Ethnic Machine Politics and the Consolidation of Democracy', in Timothy J. Colton & Jerry F. Hough (eds), *Growing Pains: Russian Democracy and the Election of 1993* (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 1998); and Elise Giuliano, 'Who Determines the Self in the Politics of Self-Determination? Identity and Preference Formation in Tatarstan's Nationalist Mobilization', *Comparative Politics*, April 2000, pp. 295–316.

³³ 1989 Census of the USSR, vol. 7, table 2.

³⁴ Roeder, 'Soviet Federalism ...'; Roeder, 'Liberalization ...', p. 12.

³⁵ Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, 1995); Timothy M. Frye, 'Ethnicity, Sovereignty and Transitions from Non-Democratic Rule', *Journal of International Affairs*, 45, 1992, pp. 599–623.

³⁶ Teisman, 'Russia's Ethnic Revival'.

³⁷ Hale, 'The Parade ...'.

³⁸ Slezkine, 'How a Socialist ...'.

³⁹ Bunce, *Subversive Institutions ...*, pp. 137–138; Alexseev (ed.), p. 258; and Lapidus & Walker, 'Nationalism ...', p. 85, also argue that the greater powers held by elites in the union republics as opposed to Russia's republics after the USSR collapsed constituted an important difference between the USSR and the Russian Federation.

⁴⁰ Lapidus, 'Asymmetrical Federalism ...', p. 75. If one counts Caspian Sea access to Iran, then Dagestan and Kalmykia are exceptions.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75; Bunce, *Subversive Institutions ...*, p. 148; Hale's 2000 statistical analysis found this variable not to be a significant predictor of separatism, but this may be due to the fact that there were only four republics out of all of those studied that had had some form of sustained independent political existence in the twentieth century (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Tuva), not providing much

leverage for a statistical study. There is sufficient evidence from case studies to suggest that these national experiences deserve treatment here as a factor making separatism more likely, leaving open the possibility that they might in fact be less important than other factors.

⁴² See for example Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire: The Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt* (New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1981) pp. 267–268; and Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia*, revised edition (Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 1990) pp. viii–ix.

⁴³ Treisman, 'Russia's Ethnic Revival'.

⁴⁴ For a theoretical discussion of such issues see Alberto Alesina & Enrico Spolaore, 'On the Number and Size of Nations', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 11, 4, November 1997, pp. 1027–1056.

⁴⁵ Rein Taagepera, 'Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia', *International Studies Quarterly*, 41, 1997, pp. 475–504.

⁴⁶ See Alexseev (ed.) for an excellent discussion of incentives (and disincentives) for separatism in Primorsky *krai*. For a brief description of the Far Eastern Republic see *Columbia Encyclopedia*, sixth edition (New York, Columbia University Press, 2001), online at <http://www.bartleby.com/65/ru/RussFarE.html>.

⁴⁷ David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ For outstanding analyses see Roman Szporluk, 'Dilemmas of Russian Nationalism', *Problems of Communism*, 38, 4, July–August 1989, pp. 15–35; Fiona Hill, 'In Search of Great Russia: Elites, Ideas, Power, the State, and the Pre-Revolutionary Past in the New Russia 1991–1996', Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, Harvard University, March 1998; and Astrid S. Tuminez, *Russian Nationalism Since 1856: Ideology and the Making of Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

⁴⁹ John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994); Jack F. Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire* (New York, Random House, 1996); Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991* (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution, 1997); Stephen Cohen, *Failed Crusade* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2000); Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁵⁰ Robert H. Jackson & Carl G. Rosberg, 'Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood', *World Politics*, 35, 1, October 1982, pp. 1–24.