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The Five Futures of Russia

And How America Can Prepare for Whatever Comes Next

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Vladimir Putin happened to turn 71 last October 7, the day Hamas assaulted Israel. The Russian president took the rampage as a birthday present; it shifted the context around his aggression in Ukraine. Perhaps to show his appreciation, he had his Foreign Ministry invite high-ranking Hamas representatives to Moscow in late October, highlighting an alignment of interests. Several weeks later, Putin announced his intention to stand for a fifth term in a choiceless election in March 2024 and later held his annual press conference, offering a phalanx of pliant journalists the privilege of hearing him smugly crow about Western fatigue

over the war in Ukraine. “Almost along the entire frontline, our armed forces, let’s put it modestly, are improving their position,” Putin boasted in the live broadcast.

Читайте по-русски (Read in Russian)

On February 16, Russia’s Federal Penitentiary Service announced the sudden death of the opposition activist Alexei Navalny, aged 47, in a penal colony above the Arctic Circle, from which he had continued to reach his millions of followers with instructions on how to protest Putin’s plebiscite. A month later, the most one could say was that the Kremlin had at least waited until after the voting was staged to announce Putin’s victory.

Putin styles himself as a new tsar. But a real tsar would not have to worry about a looming succession crisis and what it might do to his grip on power in the present. Putin does; that is partly why he must simulate elections. He is now set in his office until 2030, when he will be in his 78th year. Male life expectancy in Russia does not even reach 67 years; those who live to 60 can expect to survive to around 80. Russia’s confirmed centenarians are few. Putin might one day join their ranks. But even Stalin died.

Putin’s predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, turned out to be that rare would-be tsar who named a successor and smoothed his path to power. In 1999, Yeltsin, facing chronic health challenges and fearing that he and his “family” of corrupt cronies might face prison after he stepped down, chose Putin to preserve his liberty and legacy. “Take care of Russia,” Yeltsin offered as a parting instruction. In 2007, aged 76, he died a free man. But the protector has refrained from emulating his patron’s example. In 2008, Putin briefly stepped aside from the presidency, in recognition of the same two-consecutive-term limit that Yeltsin faced. Putin appointed a political nonentity in his place, shifted himself to the position of prime minister, and came right back for a third presidential term in 2012 and then a fourth. Finally, he induced his counterfeit legislature to alter the constitution to effectively remove any term limits. Stalin, too, had stubbornly clung to power, even as his infirmities worsened. He refused to countenance the emergence of a successor; eventually, he suffered a massive, final stroke and fell into a puddle of his own urine.

Putin is not Stalin. The Georgian despot built a superpower while dispatching tens of millions to their deaths in famines, forced labor camps, execution cellars, and a mismanaged defensive war. Putin, by contrast, has jerry-rigged a rogue power while sending hundreds of thousands to their deaths in a war of choice. The juxtaposition is nevertheless instructive. Stalin’s system proved unable to survive without him, despite having an institutionalized ruling party. And yet, amid the breakdown that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union but lasted well beyond 1991, Putin consolidated a new autocracy. This fusion of fragility and path dependence derives from many factors that are not easily rewired: geography, a national-imperial identity, an ingrained strategic culture. (The nineteenth-century Russian satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin remarked of his country that everything changes dramatically every five to ten years but nothing changes in

200 years.) Still, whenever and however Putin might go, his personalistic autocracy and, more broadly, Russia already face questions about the future.

Putin's regime styles itself an icebreaker, smashing to bits the U.S.-led international order on behalf of humanity. Washington and its allies and partners have allowed themselves to be surprised by him time and again—in Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and central Africa. This has provoked fears about the next nasty surprise. But what about the long term? How, in the light of inescapable leadership mortality and larger structural factors, might Russia evolve, or not, over the next decade and possibly beyond?

Readers seeking odds on Russia's trajectory should consult the betting markets. What Western officials and other decision-makers need to do, instead, is to consider a set of scenarios: to extrapolate from current trends in a way that can facilitate contingency planning. Scenarios are about attempting to not be surprised. Needless to note, the world constantly surprises, and something impossible to foresee could occur: the proverbial black swan. Humility is in order. Still, five possible futures for Russia are currently imaginable, and the United States and its allies should bear them in mind.

Over the course of multiple presidential administrations, Washington has learned the hard way that it lacks the levers to transform places such as Russia and, for that matter, China: countries that originated as empires on the Eurasian landmass and celebrate themselves as ancient civilizations that long predate the founding of the United States, let alone the formation of the West. They are not characters out of the playwright George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, ripe for conversion from street urchins to refined ladies: that is, from authoritarian, imperialist regimes to responsible stakeholders in the U.S.-dominated international system. Efforts to remake their "personalities" invariably result in mutual recriminations and disillusionment. Leaders such as Putin and China's Xi Jinping did not capriciously reverse a hopeful process; in no small measure, they resulted from it. So Washington and its partners must not exaggerate their ability to shape Russia's trajectory. Instead, they should prepare for whatever unfolds.

RUSSIA AS FRANCE

France is a country with deep-seated bureaucratic and monarchical traditions—and also a fraught revolutionary tradition. Revolutionaries abolished the monarchy only to see it return in the guise of both a king and an emperor and then disappear again, as republics came and went. France built and lost a vast empire of colonial possessions. For centuries, France's rulers, none more than Napoleon, threatened the country's neighbors.

Today, these traditions live on in many ways. As the French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville shrewdly observed in his 1856 work *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, the revolutionaries' efforts to break definitively with the past ended up unwittingly reinforcing statist structures. Despite the consolidation of a republican system, France's monarchical inheritance endures symbolically in palaces in Versailles and elsewhere, in ubiquitous

statues of Bourbon dynasty rulers, and in an inordinately centralized form of rule with immense power and wealth concentrated in Paris. Even shorn of its formal empire, France remains a fiercely proud country, one that many of its citizens and admirers view as a civilization with a lingering sense of a special mission in the world and in Europe, as well as a language spoken far beyond its borders (60 percent of daily French speakers are citizens of elsewhere). But crucially, today's France enjoys the rule of law and no longer threatens its neighbors.

Russia, too, possesses a statist and monarchical tradition that will endure regardless of the nature of any future political system and a fraught revolutionary tradition that has also ceased to be an ongoing venture yet lives on in institutions and memories as a source of inspiration and warning. To be sure, the autocratic Romanovs were even less constrained than the absolutist Bourbons. Russia's revolution was considerably more brutal and destructive than even the French one. Russia's lost empire was contiguous, not overseas, and lasted far longer—indeed, for most of the existence of the modern Russian state. In Russia, Moscow's domination of the rest of the country exceeds even that of Paris in France. Russia's geographical expanse dwarfs France's, enmeshing the country in Europe but also the Caucasus, Central Asia, and East Asia. Very few countries have much in common with Russia. But France has more than perhaps any other.

A man wearing a shirt depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin, Saint Petersburg, May 2022

Anton Vaganov / Reuters

Contemporary France is a great country, although not without its detractors. Some decry what they deem its excessive statism, the high taxes necessary to underwrite uneven services, as well as a broad socialistic ethos. Others find fault with what they perceive as France's great-power pretensions and cultural chauvinism. Still others lament France's difficulty in assimilating immigrants. But it is possible to be disappointed in these or other aspects of the country and still recognize that it provides the closest thing to a realistic model for a prosperous, peaceful Russia. If Russia were to become like France—a democracy with a rule-of-law system that luxuriated in its absolutist and revolutionary past but no longer threatened its neighbors—that would constitute a high-order achievement.

France tramped a tortuous path to become what it is today. Recall Robespierre's revolutionary terror, Napoleon's catastrophic expansionism, Napoleon III's self-coup (from

elected president to emperor), the seizure of power by the Paris Commune, the country's rapid defeat in World War II, the Vichy collaborationist regime that followed, the colonial Algerian war, and the extraconstitutional acts of President Charles de Gaulle after he came out of retirement in 1958. One might be seduced by the notion that Russia needs its own de Gaulle to help consolidate a liberal order from above, even though no such deus ex machina looms on Russia's immediate horizon. But only hagiographers believe that one man created today's France. Notwithstanding the country's moments of instability, over generations, France developed the impartial, professional institutions—a judiciary, a civil service, a free and open public sphere—of a democratic, republican nation. The problem was not mainly that Yeltsin was no de Gaulle. The problem was that Russia was much further from a stable, Western-style constitutional order in 1991 than France had been three decades earlier.

RUSSIA RETRENCHED

Some Russians might welcome a transformation into a country that resembles France, but others would find that outcome anathema. What the world now sees as Putinism first surfaced in the Russian-language periodicals and volunteer societies of the 1970s: an authoritarian, resentful, mystical nationalism grounded in anti-Westernism, espousing nominally traditional values, and borrowing incoherently from Slavophilism, Eurasianism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. One could imagine an authoritarian nationalist leader who embraces those views and who, like Putin, is unshakable in the belief that the United States is hell-bent on Russia's destruction but who is also profoundly troubled by Russia's cloudy long-term future—and willing to blame Putin for it. That is, someone who appeals to Putin's base but makes the case that the war against Ukraine is damaging Russia.

Demography is a special sore point for Russia's blood-and-soil nationalists, not to mention the military brass and many ordinary people. Since 1992, despite considerable immigration, Russia's population has shrunk. Its working-age population peaked in 2006 at around 90 million and stands at less than 80 million today, a calamitous trend. Spending on the war in Ukraine has boosted Russia's defense industrial base, but the limits of the country's diminished labor force are becoming ever more evident even in that high-priority sector, which has around five million fewer qualified workers than it needs. The proportion of workers who are in the most productive age group—20 to 39—will further decline over the next decade. Nothing, not even kidnapping children from Ukraine, for which the International Criminal Court indicted Putin, will reverse the loss of Russians, which the war's exorbitant casualties are compounding.

Productivity gains that might offset these demographic trends are nowhere in sight. Russia ranks nearly last in the world in the scale and speed of automation in production: its robotization is just a microscopic fraction of the world average. Even before the widened war in Ukraine began to eat into the state budget, Russia placed surprisingly low in global rankings of education spending. In the past two years, Putin has willingly forfeited much of

the country's economic future when he induced or forced thousands of young tech workers to flee conscription and repression. True, these are people that rabid nationalists claim not to miss, but deep down many know that a great power needs them.

Washington has learned the hard way that it lacks the levers to transform Russia.

Given its sprawling Eurasian geography and long-standing ties to many parts of the world, as well as the alchemy of opportunism, Russia is still able to import many indispensable components for its economy despite Western sanctions. Notwithstanding this resourcefulness and despite the public's habituation to the war, Russian elites know the damning statistics. They are aware that as a commodity-exporting country, Russia's long-term development depends on technology transfers from advanced countries; Putin's invasion of Ukraine has made it harder to use the West as a source, and his symbolic embrace of Hamas's nihilism gratuitously strained Russia's relations with Israel, a major supplier of high-tech goods and services. At a more basic level, Russia's elites are physically cut off from the developed world: hideaways in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), however agreeable, cannot replace European villas and boarding schools.

Although a Russian authoritarian regime has once again proved resilient in war, Putin's grave lack of domestic investment and diversification, his furtherance of demographic distress, and his role in the country's descent into technological backwardness could yet compel hardcore nationalists—among them many elites—to admit that Russia is on a self-defeating trajectory. Many have privately concluded that Putin conflates the survival of his aging personal regime with the storied country's survival as a great power. Historically, at least, such realizations have precipitated a change of course, a turn from foreign overextension to domestic revitalization. Last summer, when the mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's death squad marched on Moscow, it did not elicit bandwagoning by military officers, which is one reason Prigozhin called it off. But neither did it galvanize the regime's supporters to defend Putin in real time. The episode furnished an unwitting referendum on the regime, revealing a certain hollowness inside the repressive strength.

Retrenchment could result from hastening Putin's exit, or it could follow his natural demise. It could also be forced on him without his removal by meaningful political threats to his rule. However it happened, it would involve mostly tactical moves spurred by a recognition that Russia lacks the means to oppose the West without end, pays an exorbitant price for trying, and risks permanently losing vital European ties in exchange for a humiliating dependence on China.

RUSSIA AS VASSAL

Defiantly pro-Putin Russian elites boast that they have developed an option that is better than the West. The Chinese-Russian bond has surprised many analysts aware of Beijing and Moscow's prickly relations in the past, including the infamous Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, which culminated in a short border war. Although that conflict was formally settled

with a border demarcation, Russia remains the sole country that controls territory seized from the Qing empire in what the Chinese vilify as unfair treaties. That has not stopped China and Russia from bolstering ties, including by conducting large-scale joint military exercises, which have grown in frequency and geographic scope in the past 20 years. The two countries are fully aligned on Russia's grievances regarding NATO expansion and Western meddling in Ukraine, where Chinese support for Russia continues to be crucial.

Chinese-Russian rapprochement predates the rise of Putin and Xi. In the 1980s, it was Deng Xiaoping who performed a turn away from Moscow more momentous than the one Mao Zedong had carried out in the 1960s and 1970s. Deng gained access to the American domestic market for Chinese producers, the same trick that enabled the transformation of Japan and then South Korea and Taiwan. Deng's divorce from the communist Soviet Union for a de facto economic marriage with American and European capitalists ushered in an era of astonishing prosperity that birthed a Chinese middle class. But China and Russia remained intertwined. Deng's handpicked successor, Jiang Zemin, who had trained at a Soviet factory, brought Russia back as a mistress without breaking the U.S.-Chinese marital bond. Jiang placed orders that helped resuscitate Russia's forlorn military-industrial complex and modernize China's own weapons production and military. In 1996, Jiang and Yeltsin proclaimed a "strategic partnership." Despite modest bilateral trade, China's domestic economic boom indirectly helped bring civilian Soviet-era production back from the dead by lifting global demand and therefore prices for the industrial inputs the Soviet Union had produced in low quality but high quantity, from steel to fertilizer. Just as the United States had helped forge a Chinese middle class, so, too, did China play a part in conjuring into being Russia's middle class and Putin's economic boom.

Nevertheless, societal and cultural relations between the two peoples remain shallow. Russians are culturally European, and few speak Chinese (compared with English). Although some elderly Chinese speak Russian, a legacy of Moscow's erstwhile centrality in the communist world, that number is not large, and the days when Chinese students attended Russian universities in great numbers are a distant memory. Russians are apprehensive of China's power, and many Chinese who hold weakness in contempt ridicule Russia online. Stalwarts of the Chinese Communist Party remain unforgiving of Moscow's destruction of communism across Eurasia and eastern Europe.

And yet the profundity of the personal relationship between Putin and Xi has compensated for these otherwise brittle foundations. The two men have fallen into a bromance, meeting an astonishing 42 times while in power, publicly lauding each other as "my best friend" (Xi on Putin) and "dear friend" (Putin on Xi). The two kindred souls' authoritarian solidarity is undergirded by an abiding anti-Westernism, especially anti-Americanism. As China, the former junior partner, became the senior partner, the two autocratic neighbors upgraded relations, announcing a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2013. Officially, trade between Russia and China surpassed $230 billion in 2023; adjusting for inflation, it had

hovered around $16 billion three decades earlier and stood at just $78 billion as recently as the mid-2010s. The 2023 figure, moreover, does not include tens of billions more in bilateral trade that is disguised using third parties, such as Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and the UAE.

China still buys military aircraft engines from Russia. But otherwise, the dependence goes in the other direction. Western sanctions accelerated the loss of Russia's domestic vehicle industry to China. Moscow is now holding a substantial pile of renminbi reserves, which can be used only for Chinese goods. But despite innumerable meetings over decades, there is still no final agreement on a major new natural gas pipeline that would originate in Siberia and make its way to China through Mongolia. The Chinese leadership has keenly avoided becoming dependent on Russia for energy or anything else. On the contrary, China is already the global leader in solar and wind power and is working to displace Russia as the top global player in nuclear energy.

Besides raw materials and political thuggery, the only things Russia exports are talented people.

Russian elites, even as they vehemently denounce an imaginary U.S. determination to subjugate or dismember their country, have by and large not raised their voices against Putin's subordination of Russia to China. And lately, Russian commentators have taken to retelling the tale of Alexander Nevsky, who in the thirteenth century reigned as prince of Novgorod, one of the states folded into Muscovy, the precursor to imperial Russia**.** When faced with a two-front challenge, Nevsky chose to fight the crusaders of the west, defeating the Teutons in the Battle of the Ice, and to accommodate the invading Mongols of the east, traveling across central Asia to the capital of the Mongol Golden Horde to be recognized as grand prince of Russia. In this telling, the Western Christians were determined to undermine Russia's Eastern Christian identity, whereas the Mongols merely wanted Russia to pay tribute. The implication is that today's accommodation of China does not require Russia to relinquish its identity, whereas a failure to confront the West would.

This is bunkum. It took Russians centuries to free themselves from what their school textbooks uniformly called the Mongol yoke, but Russia has survived relations with the West for centuries without itself ever becoming Western. Being non-Western, however, does not necessarily mean being anti-Western—unless, of course, one is struggling to protect an illiberal regime in a liberal world order. Russia existed within its post-Soviet borders for two decades before Putin decided the situation was intolerable. Now, having burned bridges with the West and blamed it for the arson, he has little recourse other than to rely on China's good graces.

The great and growing imbalance in the relationship has induced analysts to speak of Russia as China's vassal. But only China decides whether a country becomes its vassal, whereby Beijing dictates Russian policy and even personnel, and assumes the burden of responsibility. It has no binding treaty obligations with Russia. Putin possesses only the 70-

year-old Xi's word—and Xi, too, is mortal. Nonetheless, the two leaders continue to denounce the United States' bid for hegemony and cooperate closely. A shared commitment to render the world order safe for their respective dictatorships and dominate their regions is driving a de facto vassalage that neither fancies.

RUSSIA AS NORTH KOREA

In deepening Russia's dependence on China, Putin or his successor could draw paradoxical inspiration from the experience of North Korea, which in turn could give Xi or his successor pause. During Beijing's intervention to rescue Pyongyang in the Korean War, Mao, employing a proverb, stated that if the lips (North Korea) are gone, the teeth (China) will be cold. This metaphor implies both an act of buffering and a condition of interdependence. Over the years, some Chinese commentators have doubted the value of propping up North Korea, particularly after the latter's defiant nuclear test in 2006. Faced with UN sanctions, which China joined, North Korea's leadership pressed forward aggressively with its programs for nuclear weapons and missiles, which can reach not just Seoul and Tokyo but also Beijing and Shanghai. Still, China's leadership eventually reaffirmed its backing of Pyongyang, in 2018. Given North Korea's extreme dependence on China for food, fuel, and much else, Beijing would seem to have its leader, Kim Jong Un, in a vice grip.

Yet Pyongyang loyalists sometimes warn that the teeth can bite the lips. As ruling circles in Beijing have discovered time and again, Kim does not always defer to his patrons. In 2017, he had his half brother, Kim Jong Nam, who was under China's protection abroad, murdered. Kim can get away with defiance because he knows that no matter how much he might incense Beijing, China does not want the regime in Pyongyang to fall. If the North Korean state imploded, the peninsula would be reunited under the aegis of South Korea, a U.S. treaty ally. That would amount to China, at long last, losing the Korean War, which for more than 70 years has remained suspended by an armistice. A loss of the Korean buffer could complicate Beijing's options and internal timelines regarding its hoped-for absorption of Taiwan, since China would face a more hostile external environment close by. Historically, instability on the Korean Peninsula has tended to spill over into China, and an influx of refugees could destabilize China's northeast and potentially much more. So Beijing appears to be stuck in a form of reverse dependence with Pyongyang. Xi would not want to find himself in a similar position with Moscow.

Russian service members march in a military parade, Moscow, May 2023

Maxim Shemetov / Reuters

Russia and North Korea could scarcely be more different. The former is more than 142 times as large as the latter in territory. North Korea possesses the kind of dynasty that Russia does not, even though each Kim family successor gets rubber-stamped as leader by a party congress. North Korea is also a formal treaty ally of China, Beijing's only such ally in the world, the two having signed a mutual defense pact in 1961. (Some Chinese commentary has suggested China is no longer obliged to come to North Korea's defense in the event of an attack because of Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons, but the pact has not been repealed.) North Korea faces a rival Korean state in the form of South Korea, making it more akin to East Germany (which of course is long gone) than to Russia.

Despite these and other differences, Russia could become something of a gigantic North Korea: domestically repressive, internationally isolated and transgressive, armed with nuclear weapons, and abjectly dependent on China but still able to buck Beijing. It remains

unclear how much Putin divulged in Beijing, in February 2022, about his plans for Ukraine when he elicited a joint declaration of a Chinese-Russian "partnership of no limits" that soon made it appear as if Xi endorsed the Russian aggression. Not long after China released a peace plan for Ukraine, Xi traveled to Moscow for a summit, at one point appearing with Putin on an ornate Kremlin staircase that, in 1939, Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister under the Nazis, had descended with Stalin and his foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, while cementing the Hitler-Stalin pact. And yet a Kremlin spokesperson spurned the possibility of peace, even though Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's government accepted China's vague document as worthy of discussion. (China's low-level peace mission to Kyiv fell flat.) Later, after Chinese diplomats bragged to all the world and especially to Europe that Xi had extracted a Russian pledge to not use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Putin's regime announced it was deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. (China went on to criticize the deployments.) It is not likely that any of these episodes were intended as explicit slights. But they made observers wonder about Russia's evolution toward a North Korean scenario, for even if unintended, they revealed the potential for Moscow to embarrass Beijing without suffering consequences.

Since the Prigozhin mutiny, Xi has stressed what he calls "the fundamental interest of the two countries and their peoples," implying that the special relationship would outlast the Kremlin's current leadership. In truth, an authoritarian China could hardly afford to lose Russia if that meant ending up with a pro-American Russia on its northern border, a scenario parallel to, yet drastically more threatening than, a pro-American, reunited Korean Peninsula. At a minimum, access to Russian oil and gas, China's partial hedge against a sea blockade, would be at risk. But even if China were gaining little materially from Russia, preventing Russia from turning to the West would remain a topmost national security priority. An American-leaning Russia would enable enhanced Western surveillance of China (the same way, in reverse, that U.S. President Richard Nixon's rapprochement with Mao enabled Western surveillance on the Soviet Union from Xinjiang). Worse, China would suddenly need to redeploy substantial assets from elsewhere to defend its expansive northern border. And so China must be prepared to absorb Pyongyang-like behavior from Moscow, too.

RUSSIA IN CHAOS

Putin's regime wields the threat of chaos and the unknown to ward off internal challenges and change. But while keenly sowing chaos abroad, from eastern Europe to central Africa and the Middle East, Russia itself could fall victim to it. The Putin regime has looked more or less stable even under the extreme pressures of large-scale war, and predictions of collapse under far-reaching Western sanctions have not been borne out. But Russian states overseen from St. Petersburg and Moscow, respectively, both disintegrated in the past 100-odd years, both times unexpectedly yet completely. There are many plausible

hypothetical causes for a breakdown in the near future: a domestic mutiny that spirals out of control, one or more natural catastrophes beyond the authorities' capacity to manage, an accident or intentional sabotage of nuclear facilities, or the accidental or nonaccidental death of a leader. Countries such as Russia with corroded institutions and legitimacy deficits can be susceptible to cascades in a sudden stress test. Chaos could well be the price for a failure to retrench.

Even amid anarchy, however, Russia would not dissolve like the Soviet Union. As the KGB's final chief analyst lamented, the Soviet federation resembled a chocolate bar: its collective pieces (the 15 union republics) were demarcated as if with creases and thus were ready to be broken off. By contrast, the Russian Federation mostly comprises territorial units not based on ethnicity and without quasi-state status. Its constituents that are national in designation mostly do not have titular majorities and are often deeply interior, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Mari El, and Yakutia. Still, the federation could partly disintegrate in volatile border regions such as the North Caucasus. Kaliningrad—a small Russian province geographically disconnected from the rest of the federation and sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland, more than 400 miles from Russia proper—could be vulnerable.

Were chaos to engulf Moscow, China could move to retake the expansive lands of the Amur basin that the Romanovs expropriated from the Qing. Japan might forcibly enact its claims to the Northern Territories, which the Russians call the southern Kurils, and Sakhalin Island, both of which Japan once ruled, and possibly part of the Russian Far Eastern mainland, which Japan occupied during the Russian civil war. The Finns might seek to reclaim the chunk of Karelia they once ruled. Such actions could spark a general unraveling or backfire by provoking a Russian mass mobilization.

Amid chaos, even without major territorial loss, criminal syndicates and cybercriminals could operate with yet more impunity. Nuclear and biological weapons, as well as the scientists who develop them, could scatter—the nightmare that might have accompanied the Soviet collapse but was essentially avoided, partly because many Soviet scientists believed a better Russia might emerge. If there were to be a next time, it's impossible to predict how Russians might weigh their hopes against their anger. Chaos need not mean a doomsday scenario. But it could. Armageddon might have only been postponed, instead of averted.

CONTINENTAL CUL-DE-SAC

A Russian future missing here is the one prevalent among the Putin regime's mouthpieces as well as its extreme-right critics: Moscow as a pole in its version of a multipolar world, bossing around Eurasia and operating as a key arbiter of world affairs. "We need to find ourselves and understand who we are," the Kremlin loyalist Sergei Karaganov mused last year. "We are a great Eurasian power, Northern Eurasia, a liberator of peoples, a guarantor

of peace, and the military-political core of the World Majority. This is our manifest destiny." The so-called global South—or as Karaganov rendered it, "the World Majority"—does not exist as a coherent entity, let alone one with Russia as its core. The project of Russia as a self-reliant supercontinent, bestride Europe and Asia, has already failed. The Soviet Union forcibly held not just an inner empire on the Baltic and Black Seas but also an outer empire of satellites, ultimately to no avail.

Russia's world is effectively shrinking despite its occupation of nearly 20 percent of Ukraine. Territorially, it is now farther from the heart of Europe (Kaliningrad excepted) than at any time since the conquests of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. More than three centuries after appearing on the Pacific, moreover, Russia has never succeeded at becoming an Asian power. That was true even when World War II presented it with opportunities to avenge itself against Japan for the defeat Russia suffered at its hands in 1905, to reestablish the tsar's position in Chinese Manchuria, and to extend its grasp to part of the Korean Peninsula. Russia will never be culturally at home in Asia, and its already minuscule population east of Lake Baikal has contracted since the Soviet collapse.

Russia's influence in its immediate neighborhood has been diminishing, too. The bulk of non-Russians in the former Soviet borderlands want less and less to do with their former overlord and certainly do not want to be reabsorbed by it. Armenians are embittered, Kazakhs are wary, and Belarusians are trapped and unhappy about it. Eurasianism and Slavophilism are mostly dead letters: the overwhelming majority of the world's non-Russian Slavs joined or are clamoring to join the European Union and NATO. Without Russia menacing its European neighbors, NATO's reason for being becomes uncertain. But that means Russia could break NATO only by developing into a durable rule-of-law state, precisely what Putin resists with all his being.

Separating Russia from China would be a tall order.

There is no basis for Russia to serve as a global focal point, drawing countries toward it. Its economic model offers little inspiration. It can ill afford to serve as a major donor of aid. It is less able to sell weapons—it needs them itself and is even trying to buy back systems it has sold—and has been reduced in some cases to bartering with other pariah states. It has lost its strong position as a provider of satellites. It belongs to a pariah club with Iran and North Korea, exuberantly exchanging weapons, flouting international law, and promising much further trouble. It's not difficult to imagine each betraying the other at the next better opportunity, however, provided they do not unravel first; the West is more resilient than the "partnerships" of the anti-West. Even many former Soviet partners that refused to condemn Russia over Ukraine, including India and South Africa, do not view Moscow as a developmental partner but as scaffolding for boosting their own sovereignty. Russia's foreign policy delivers at best tactical gains, not strategic ones: no enhanced human capital, no assured access to leading-edge technology, no inward investment and new infrastructure, no improved governance, and no willing mutually obliged treaty allies, which

are the keys to building and sustaining modern power. Besides raw materials and political thuggery, the only things Russia exports are talented people.

Russia has never sustained itself as a great power unless it had close ties to Europe. And for Putin or a successor, it would be a long way back. He undid more than two centuries of Swedish neutrality and three-quarters of a century of Finlandization (whereby Helsinki deferred to Moscow on major foreign policy considerations), prompting both countries to join NATO. Much depends on the evolving disposition of Germany: imagine the fate of Europe, and indeed the world order, if post–World War II Germany had evolved to resemble today's Russia rather than undergone its remarkable transformation. Germany played the role of bridge to Russia, securing peaceful unification on its terms and lucrative business partnerships. But as things stand, Moscow can no longer cut deals with Berlin to revive its European ties without fundamentally altering its own political behavior, and maybe its political system. Even if Russia did change systemically, moreover, Poland and the Baltic states now stand resolutely in the way of Russian reconciliation with Europe as permanent members of the Western alliance and the EU.

Russia's future forks: one path is a risky drift into a deeper Chinese embrace, the other an against-the-odds return to Europe. Having its cake and eating it, too—enduring as a great power with recaptured economic dynamism, avoiding sweeping concessions to the West or lasting subservience to China, dominating Eurasia, and instituting a world order safe for authoritarianism and predation—would require reversals beyond Russia's ability to engineer.

IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

Russia's basic grand strategy appears simple: vastly overinvest in the military, roguish capabilities, and the secret police, and try to subvert the West. No matter how dire its strategic position gets, and it is often dire, Russia can muddle through, as long as the West weakens, too. Beyond Western disintegration, some Russians quietly fantasize about a war between the United States and China. West and East would maul each other, and Russia would greatly improve its relative standing without breaking a sweat. The upshot would seem to be self-evident: Washington and its allies must stay strong together, and Beijing must be deterred without provoking a war. The conventional options, however, have severe limits. One is accommodation, which Russian rulers occasionally need but rarely pursue—and, when they do, they make it difficult for the West to sustain. The other is confrontation, which Russian regimes require but cannot afford, and the opportunity costs of which are too high for the West. The path to a better option begins with a candid acknowledgment of failures, but not in accordance with received wisdom.

Calls to recognize Russia's "legitimate" interests are frequently heard in critiques of U.S. policy, but the great-power stability purchased by indulging coercive spheres of influence always proves ephemeral, even as the agonies of sacrificed smaller countries and the

ignominy of compromising U.S. values always linger. Consider that in the aftermath of Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's maneuvering, China and Russia are closer than ever. Arms control is effectively dead. Détente died before many people even knew what the word connoted, but the damage in Indochina, Latin America, South Asia, and elsewhere remains palpable even now. Kissinger might have argued that these disappointing results were the fault of others for failing to adhere to his practice of shrewd balancing in international affairs. But any equilibrium that depends on the dexterity of a single person is not, in fact, an equilibrium.

Many advocates for and past practitioners of engagement assert that the multidecade U.S. policy of engaging China was smarter than it looked, that American policymakers were always skeptical that economic growth would lead China toward an open political system but believed it was worth trying anyway. Some also claim they hedged against the risk of failure. Such retrospective image burnishing is belied by the glaring insecurity of global supply chains (as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic) and the pitiful state of the U.S. defense industrial base (as revealed by the war against Ukraine). In the case of Russia, Washington did hedge, expanding NATO to include almost all of eastern Europe and the Baltic states. But that had less to do with an unsentimental assessment of Russia's possible trajectory than with the shame of Yalta, when Washington proved powerless to deliver on its promises of free and fair elections after World War II, and the post-1989 pleas of the potential new entrants for admission. Critics of NATO expansion, for their part, blame it for Russia's revanchism, as if a repressive authoritarian regime that invades its neighbors in the name of its security is something unexpected in Russian history and wouldn't have happened anyway had the alliance not expanded—leaving even more countries vulnerable.

Russia can muddle through, as long as the West weakens, too.

Peace comes through strength, combined with skillful diplomacy. The United States must maintain concerted pressure on Russia while also offering incentives for Moscow to retrench. That means creating leverage through next-generation military tools but also pursuing negotiations in close cooperation with U.S. allies and partners and aided by so-called Track II exchanges among influential but nongovernmental figures. Meanwhile, Washington should prepare for and assiduously promote the possibility of a Russian nationalist recalibration. In the event that Russia does not become France any time soon, the rise of a Russian nationalist who acknowledges the long-term price of extreme anti-Westernism remains the likeliest path to a Russia that finds a stable place in the international order. In the near term, a step in that direction could be ending the fighting in Ukraine on terms favorable to Kyiv: namely, an armistice without legal recognition of annexations and without treaty infringement on Ukraine's right to join NATO, the EU, or any other international body that would have it as a member. Putin might well achieve his war aims before a Russian nationalist officer or official gets the chance to accept such terms,

but the high costs to Russia would persist, as the conflict could shift from attritional warfare into a Ukrainian insurgency.

As strange as it might sound, to create the right incentives for retrenchment, Washington and its partners need a pro-Russian policy: that is, instead of pushing Russians further into Putin's arms, confirming his assertions about an implacably anti-Russian collective West, Western policymakers and civil society organizations should welcome and reward—with visas, job opportunities, investment opportunities, cultural exchanges—those Russians who want to deconflate Putin and Russia but not necessarily embrace Jeffersonian ideals. It would be a mistake to wait for and reward only a pro-Western Russian government.

The West should also prepare for a Russia that inflicts even greater spoliation on a global scale—but not drive it to do so. Some analysts have been urging U.S. President Joe Biden (or a future president) to pull off a reverse Nixon-Kissinger: to launch a diplomatic outreach to Moscow against Beijing. Of course, China and the Soviet Union had already split well before that previous American gambit. Separating Russia from China today would be a tall order. Even if successful, it would necessitate looking the other way as Moscow coercively reimposed a sphere of influence on former Soviet possessions, including Ukraine. The tightness of the Chinese-Russian relationship, meanwhile, has been mutually discrediting, and it has bound Washington's allies in Asia and Europe much more closely to the United States. Rather than a reverse, Washington could find itself in an updated Nixon-Kissinger moment: asking China to help restrain Russia.

OPPORTUNITY ABROAD, OPPORTUNITY AT HOME

The supreme irony of American grand strategy for the past 70 years is that it worked, fostering an integrated world of impressive and shared prosperity, and yet is now being abandoned. The United States was open for business to its adversaries, without reciprocation. Today, however, so-called industrial policy and protectionism are partially closing the country not just to rivals but also to U.S. allies, partners, friends, and potential friends. American policy has come to resemble China's—right when the latter has hit a wall.

To be sure, technology export controls have a place in the policy toolkit, whether for China or Russia. But it's not clear what the United States is offering in a positive sense. A strategic trade policy—reflected by initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which Washington crafted but then abandoned—might be a nonstarter in the current domestic political climate. A nimble administration, however, could repackage such an approach as an ambitious quest to secure global supply chains.

World order requires legitimacy, an example worth emulating, a system open to strivers. The United States was once synonymous with economic opportunity for its allies and partners but also for others who aspired to attain the prosperity and peace that the open U.S.-led economic order promised—and, for the most part, delivered by reducing

inequality on a world historic scale, raising billions of people out of poverty globally, and fostering robust middle classes. But over time, the United States ceded that role, allowing China to become synonymous with economic opportunity (as the leading trade partner of most countries) and manufacturing prowess (as a hub of technical know-how, logistics mastery, and skilled workers). To recapture lost ground and to restart the engine of social mobility at home, the United States, which has a mere 1.5 million mathematics teachers and must import knowledge of that subject from East Asia and South Asia, needs to launch a program to produce one million new teachers of math within a decade. It makes little sense to admit students to college if, lacking the universal language of science, engineering, computers, and economics, they are limited to majoring in themselves and their grievances.

The turret of a destroyed Russian tank near Robotyne, Ukraine, February 2024

Stringer / Reuters

The government and philanthropists should redirect significant higher education funding to community colleges that meet or exceed performance metrics. States should launch an ambitious rollout of vocational schools and training, whether reintroducing them in existing high schools or opening new self-standing ones in partnership with employers at the ground level. Beyond human capital, the United States needs to spark a housing construction boom by drastically reducing environmental regulations and to eliminate subsidies for builders, letting the market work. The country also needs to institute national service for young people, perhaps with an intergenerational component, to rekindle broad civic consciousness and a sense of everyone being in this together.

Investing in people and housing and rediscovering a civic spirit on the scale that characterized the astonishing mobilizations of the Cold War around science and national projects would not alone guarantee equal opportunity at home. But such policies would be a vital start, a return to the tried-and-true formula that built U.S. national power in conjunction with American international leadership. The United States could once again be synonymous with opportunity abroad and at home, acquire more friends, and grow ever more capable of meeting whatever future Russia emerges. The American example and economic practice bent the trajectory of Russia before, and it could do so again, with fewer illusions this time.

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