
Conclusion: Losing Empire

Although some non-Russian states may have no choice but to engage in what Karen Dawisha calls “autocolonization,” such an outcome will be stable beyond the short run only if the Russian state is strong enough to sustain it.¹ And that of course is a big if. Empire presupposes that the core elite is able to marshal resources and information from the periphery and to funnel them toward a variety of imperial ends. At present and for the foreseeable future, however, the Russian state is too fragmented and too weak to enable the Russian elite to play such an extractive and coordinating role effectively vis-à-vis the Russian Federation’s own ethnofederal units and even more so with respect to other entities.² Not only is a renewed Russian empire almost certain not to be a replica of the Soviet Union but it is likely to emerge in a condition of advanced decay and thus be especially prone to attrition.

How could such a decaying and declining imperial system not succumb to attrition? Of the four intervening factors discussed in chapter 3, two do not apply and two might. Totalitarian political controls are too expensive to be revived, whereas geopolitical isolation and external noninterference would be irrelevant to an empire suffering from such advanced decay. Strategic alliances with great powers, such as the United States or NATO, are possible, if far-fetched, but unlikely to stem disintegration in so vast a geographic space as Russia. Only Russia’s enormous natural resources could—especially with the assistance of solicitous Western firms—generate sufficient

easy money to keep energy-dependent polities in the fold, maintain a large or effective military, and hold the empire together.³

More important, so brittle an imperial entity will be especially susceptible to all manner of shocks, even relatively minor ones. Although it is impossible to predict when such stress surges will strike, we can imagine that they will involve drastic reductions in easy money, perhaps as a result of falling energy prices, and/or in the continued, or growing, refusal of the Russian Federation's regions and republics to pay taxes to a core that may not be able to compel them to do so anyway. Either way, such an empire would not survive. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that an imperial state so brittle yet so over-extended could even disintegrate.⁴ Only if partial reimperialization were to creep into place during the next two to three decades, thereby enabling Russia to grow stronger relative to the non-Russians, could it avoid advanced decay, brittleness, and well-nigh inevitable collapse.

Although the Russian state's collapse may be good news for non-Russian nationalists, the disintegration of a decaying empire and huge state is unlikely to be entirely peaceful. One need not be a pessimist to suspect that the stability and security of Russia, its neighbors, and Western Europe can only deteriorate.⁵ Is there no alternative to this gloomy forecast? Several, even gloomier, possibilities exist. If the Czech Republic, Hungary, and especially Poland fail to join the European Union before, say, 2005, the total overlap of political and economic institutions I referred to earlier may be delayed for some years.⁶ If the European Monetary Union produces social distress, economic dislocations, and political infighting, Euroland could turn into an awkward amalgam of squabbling states.⁷ And if, in addition to Bosnia and Kosovo, NATO experiences a few more blows to its self-esteem, it too might lose its élan.⁸ If any or all of these eventualities come to pass—and the odds may not be quite as long as they seem—Euroland's expansion would be far less significant institutionally than I have suggested. Alternatively, if Russia becomes outwardly imperialist, NATO is likely to respond by bringing the Baltic states and even Ukraine into its fold.

Because structural conditions are not amenable to easy change, and because the deepening and widening of NATO and the EU appear to have acquired their own irresistible momentum, the stability and security of East and West may have become mutually exclusive. Imperial collapse, Russia's disintegration, and the unremittingly unhappy consequences thereof may

therefore be forestalled if European integration stalls or if Russia turns nasty. Although such a trade-off is to no one's ultimate benefit, it appears to be the only way out of the cul de sac created by postimperial conditions in the East and post-cold war developments in the West. The only alternative to the fire may, alas, be the relative comfort of the frying pan. *Ceteris paribus*, of course.