



PERSPECTIVES

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Russia Will Likely Collapse from the Inside

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russia is historically prone to internal collapse, as is shown by numerous examples from both the imperial and Soviet periods. The collapse usually takes place as Russia rests on the laurels of recent military victories while internal economic and social troubles grow. History teaches that the best way to deal with Russia is to keep intervention to a minimum and wait for its internal troubles to bring about its collapse.

When one power is defeated by another, the primary reason for its defeat is often internal weakness – military, social, or economic. Such weaknesses undermine state efforts to produce a fitting response to an enemy onslaught.

In the Russian case, these fundamental problems are compounded by another major flaw: geography. Russia's harsh climate affects the central government's ability to project its power efficiently. Long land borders with potential enemies add to the problem. Internal economic and technological weaknesses are a major hindrance to the state's ability to succeed over the long term.

The implication of these fundamental flaws is that Russia is prone to internal collapse. The question is one of timing: whether or not the Russian Federation will collapse in the coming decade.

The Soviet example gives a good overview of the Russian predicament. When WWII ended, the US saw the prospect looming of a direct multipolar confrontation with the Soviets. George Kennan, a young US diplomat in Moscow, wrote a report commonly referred to as "The Long Telegram" in which he described a strategy to contain and defeat the Soviet Union.

Many works have been produced based on his ideas, with most concentrating on his idea of containment. Often disregarded, though, is his far more important idea that ultimate American victory was essentially assured as early as the 1950s

because the Soviet system, burdened by its economic form and flawed state management, would eventually fail. Kennan, who was a student of Soviet systemic inefficiencies, probably also knew that failure from within was a problem that had haunted Russian leaders throughout the country's history.

Consider the Time of Troubles in the late 16th to early 17th century. During that period, internal disturbances led to the Polish occupation of the Russian heartland, including Moscow. We can also look to the end of the Romanov era in 1917 – another good example of Russian state collapse. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 is of course the most recent example. In every case, a complete breakdown of social order followed the collapse.

Note that these Russian defeats were not military. Their major cause was internal economic weakness coupled with military inefficiency that had grown over decades. To put it another way, when Russia was economically strong (and thus militarily strong) it was able to defeat the two largest land operations in world history: in 1812 against Napoleon, and in 1941 against Hitler. When weak and left to its own devices, Russia repeatedly collapsed in on itself and transformed into a new system.

All these precedents have one thing in common: Russia's economic underdevelopment caused internal instability and a subsequent change of system. But they also explain why discussions inside Russia about enemies within have always been common – during the time of the Romanovs, during the Soviet era, and today.

Particularly since the 2014 crisis over the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, western analysts and politicians have argued about the best way to deal with Russia. Military solutions are not put forward (as too many historical examples show that a direct military clash with Russia is suicidal). The optimal solution might be a new containment strategy that combines military and economic moves with an understanding that the current Russian government will eventually collapse because of the system's fundamental deficiencies.

A new containment policy against Russia would bring results – not necessarily because of America's economic and military strength, but because of Russia's inability to reverse internal economic downturns, build a powerful military (despite expenditures in the tens of billions, the Russian military is still no match for the rising Chinese and already established American armies), impose effective control over large swaths of hostile Eurasian land, become a center of gravity for neighboring states (primarily former Soviet countries), and so on.

Surprisingly, Russian collapse often takes place following decades of relative peace on the country's borders, when there were no serious military confrontations on a par with Napoleon's or Hitler's invasions. Rather than use these relatively peaceful periods to develop the economy and build technologies to stay abreast of the Western democracies, Russia lagged behind while resting on the laurels of its military victories.

Though it is impossible to know definitively when Russian internal troubles will transform into crisis/collapse mode, many signs indicate that if no change is made to foreign policy, no broad economic reforms are made, and internal corruption is not fought, protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg will only grow. Around 50,000 people protested on an August weekend in Moscow.

Also, there are hints in the Russian media that the domestic elites are starting to talk about possible solutions to the country's foreign and internal crises. If the elites are openly discussing different scenarios, we can infer that there has been a shift in perception among the Russian public – an indicator that the country is facing serious problems.

The old Russian habit is revealing itself once again: the regime is savoring its victories against Georgia and in Syria, its annexation of Crimea, and the war in Ukraine while disregarding the country's real challenge – its technological, military, and economic underdevelopment. A clever western politician would sit back and wait until the situation in Russia brews into crisis mode.

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