

POLICY MEMO

Preparing for the Final Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Dissolution of the Russian Federation

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The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev as president of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the start of the USSR's collapse—but not the collapse itself. While the USSR ceased to exist as a legal entity after 1991, the collapse of the USSR is still happening today. The two Chechen Wars, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the on-and-off border skirmishes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the 2020 Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan are just a few examples showing that the Soviet Union is still collapsing today.

However, future historians will likely describe Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine as the most consequential moment, if not the final moment, of the Soviet Union's collapse. When the

war in Ukraine will end is unknown, but it will likely mark the dissolution of the Russian Federation (the legal successor of the Soviet Union) as it is known today. Russia has undeniably suffered a major blow to its economy, devastation to its military capability, and degradation of its influence in regions where it once had clout. The borders of the Russian Federation will likely not look the same on a map in 10 or 20 years as they do now. As the final collapse of the Soviet Union plays out and as the Russian Federation faces the possibility of dissolving, policymakers need to start planning for the new geopolitical reality on the Eurasian landmass.

The goal of this policy memo is not to advocate for regime change in Russia—this will be a matter for the Russian people.

Nor does this paper predict exactly how Russia and the broader Eurasian region will emerge after the final collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Russian Federation. Instead, it establishes realistic goals for Western policymakers, outlines assumptions on which these goals are based, and highlights the questions that decision-makers should ask *now* to better prepare for the future.

Goals

After the dissolution of the Russian Federation, the United States should pursue a set of achievable goals that narrowly focus on the American national interest. Specifically, the US will need to:

- **Be realistic about Russia’s democratic and free market prospects.** The 1990s showed that geopolitical change (e.g., the legal dissolution of the Soviet Union) did not automatically transform Russian society as many had hoped. The US and its partners should learn the failed lessons of the 1990s and not waste resources trying to transform Russian society, economy, or government into a Western-style democracy. Attempts failed in the 1990s and would likely fail again. Policymakers should instead humbly acknowledge the limits of Western influence to create a democratized Russia.
- **Contain any spillover from internal Russian fighting.** Revolution, insurgency, and civil war—at both a national and regional level—could occur after the dissolution of the Russian Federation. Containing any internal fighting inside Russia’s current internationally recognized borders should be a top priority for the US and its partners.
- **Account for Russia’s stockpile of weapons of mass destruction.** There are almost 6,000 nuclear warheads in Russia, and the country is known to have a significant chemical and biological weapons program. Accounting for these weapons would be in the interest of the international community.
- **Spread stability on Europe’s periphery by expanding Euro-Atlantic integration and deepening bilateral relationships.** Euro-Atlantic integration has been one of the greatest drivers of stability in Europe since 1949. When the Russian Federation dissolves, NATO and the European Union should take advantage of Moscow’s weakness and push for a “big bang” enlargement for remaining candidate and aspirant countries. Planning for this, including the preparatory work for any institutional reforms needed to add new members, should start now. Where NATO or EU membership is not appropriate, the US should pursue stronger relations on a bilateral or multilateral basis—especially by leveraging regional groupings like the GUAM¹ or the Organization of Turkic States.
- **Maintain superior military strength in Europe.** After the end of the Cold War, many policymakers hoped for a so-called “peace dividend” in Europe. Based on this hope, multiple administrations reduced military spending and decreased America’s force posture in Europe. But the peace dividend never materialized, and the US and its allies were underprepared for Russia’s aggression. America should not make the same mistake now. Some will argue that the end of the Russian Federation will remove any need for a strong US military presence in Europe. But nobody knows what kind of Russia will emerge after Vladimir Putin’s reign. So the US and its partners should take steps to mitigate, marginalize, contain, deter, and if necessary defeat Russia for the foreseeable future.
- **When possible, hold those in Russia accountable for atrocities committed in Ukraine.** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made an interesting proposal,² supported by various Western parliamentary bodies,³ to create a Special Tribunal for the Punishment of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine. The tribunal would hold Russia’s most senior political and military leaders accountable for committing the crime of aggression against Ukraine. Even if the possibility of convicting Russian

political and military leaders is remote, the international community should still try. A chaotic situation inside Russia could create opportunities for the international community to hold these perpetrators accountable.

Planning Assumptions

Although no one can predict what kind of Russia will emerge after the end of Putin's rule, some reasonable assumptions can help policymakers plan better. These planning assumptions include:

- **Russia will further fragment.** The dissolution of the Russian Federation, whether de facto or de jure, could shatter Russia geopolitically. This further fragmentation will likely not be as straightforward or “clean cut” as the emergence of the 15 new states after the legal dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Policymakers should assume that further fragmentation of Russia will be more like Chechnya in 1994 (brutal conflict) than Estonia in 1991 (peaceful and straightforward), for example.
- **Certain Russian regions will have a significant population of unemployed combat veterans.** A sizeable number of Russia's soldiers in Ukraine are from just a few regions of the Russian Federation.⁴ Thousands of young men from ethnic minorities will have combat experience from Ukraine and will return to their home regions with little economic or social future. Many of these regions have been prone to independence movements and insurgency in the past. This could make internal fighting more likely.
- **China and Turkey will try to fill the power vacuum across Eurasia.** China and Turkey will compete for influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus where Moscow has traditionally had a lot of clout. Competition may occur in the Russian Far East too.
- **Private armed groups will proliferate.** There may be a proliferation in the number of “private armies” (e.g., Wagner Group) or sub-national armed groups (e.g., the Chechen

141st Special Motorized Regiment, commonly referred to as Kadyrovites) when the Russian state collapses. These groups and their leaders will become important powerbrokers in a post-Putin Russia—especially in a society that will have tens of thousands of veterans from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

- **Putin's replacement will not be Thomas Jefferson.** In the immediate aftermath of President Putin's regime, whoever replaces him will be just as nationalistic and authoritarian. Western policymakers should stop hoping for a “moderate” Russian leader who wants peace with his neighbors and reforms at home.
- **Russia will be back.** Regardless of how bad Russia's defeat in Ukraine might be, and regardless of how degraded the Russian economy and military will become as a result, Moscow will never abandon its imperial designs on Eastern Europe. Even if rearming and rebuilding take several decades, Moscow will be a threat to its neighbors. The US and NATO have to base their force posture and strategies on this assumption.

Seven Questions Policymakers Should Ask Now

No one can offer concrete recommendations for policymakers regarding a post-Putin Russia. However, they should ask seven questions now, while considering the aforementioned goals and assumptions, to better prepare for the final collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Russian Federation.

1. What should the US do to coordinate an international response to the calls for independence and self-determination that will likely emerge across Russia?

The Russian Federation consists of 83 federal entities. Many comprise people with a shared culture, history, and language different from Russia's Slavic population. Some of these entities already have low-level independence movements.⁵

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Russian Federation, policymakers should expect some of these federal entities to declare independence. The United States needs to work with its partners to coordinate a response to these calls for self-determination in a way that is aligned with US interests and is in accordance with international law.

2. **How can the US and its partners keep internal armed conflict from spreading after the dissolution of the Russian Federation?** The breakup of the Russian Federation will likely lead to internal fighting between different centers of power. It is in America's interests that fighting and conflict remain inside the current borders of the Russian Federation and do not affect neighboring countries. So the US and willing partners will need to enhance bilateral cooperation across the Eurasian landmass to improve military, border security, law enforcement, and security sector capabilities.
3. **How can the US and its partners coordinate an international response to safeguard Russia's WMD stockpiles?** The Russian Federation's thousands of nuclear weapons, along with its chemical and biological weapons programs, pose a risk to global stability if there is no security or accountability. This issue should be a cause for common concern for the international community. The United States should think now about how it will lead efforts to address this matter. For starters, it needs to invest more in better detection capabilities at border crossings across the region.
4. **Should NATO and the EU take advantage of Moscow's weakness and push for a "big bang" enlargement for remaining candidate and aspirant countries?** There are several countries in Europe that aspire to someday join either the European Union, NATO, or both. For countries like Georgia and Ukraine, the primary stumbling block has been pressure and armed aggression from Russia. If the Russian Federation dissolves, the EU and NATO should consider accelerating the membership process for select countries.
5. **How can the US and its partners coordinate economic and reconstruction assistance for regions under Russian occupation that will be liberated?** Not only will the dissolution of the Russian Federation likely lead to calls for independence from certain regions inside Russia, but places where Russia currently occupies territory outside its borders will also likely be liberated. This includes Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali (also known as South Ossetia) regions in Georgia, and Crimea and other places in Ukraine currently under Russian occupation. Washington will have a unique opportunity to help these US partners restore their territorial integrity inside their internationally recognized borders. The faster and more effectively this is done, the more stable the situation will become.
6. **What does the US need to do to coordinate an international or regional response to resolving existing border disputes between the Russian Federation and some of its neighbors?** These include the disputed islands of Ukatnyy, Zhestky, and Maly Zhemchuzhny in the Caspian Sea,⁶ the Estonian-Russian de facto border,⁷ the status of the Northern Territories,⁸ and possibly the Karelian Question.⁹ These might seem small issues to Western policymakers located thousands of miles away, but each has the potential to become a regional problem that could have global implications.
7. **What can the US and its partners do to roll back Russian influence in other parts of the world, such as in Syria, Libya, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa?** Due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's influence in certain parts of the world has already decreased. If the Russian Federation collapses, the Kremlin's client states and proxy forces across the Middle East and Africa will also be affected. The US needs to start working now with its partners to develop a strategy on how to increase Western influence in regions where Russian influence is declining.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has changed the security situation in the North Atlantic region in a way not seen since World War II. The Eurasian landmass will not fully feel the consequences of Russia's invasion, especially if Ukraine is victorious, for years. Policymakers need to recognize the historical magnitude of the situation and start preparing accordingly.

The success of Ukraine on the battlefield against Russia could offer a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put Russia back inside

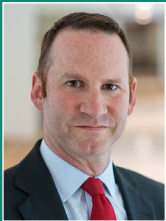
its geopolitical box for a generation. This would create a new geopolitical reality not seen in a generation. As policymakers plan for this new geopolitical reality, they should learn the lessons from the 1990s when Western decision-makers naively hoped for democratic governance and economic reforms in Russia that never materialized. If Moscow's behavior on the world stage since 1991 has shown anything, it is that Russia is unlikely to become a responsible global actor in the foreseeable future. Instead of focusing on the unachievable, American decision-makers should pursue pragmatic and realistic policies that advance the national interest of the US.

Endnotes

- 1 The Organization for Democracy and Economic Development–GUAM is a regional bloc that encourages cooperation between Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova
- 2 President of Ukraine, “We Must Create a Special Tribunal on the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine - Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Participants of the Public Debate ‘War and Law’ in Paris,” October 5, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mayemo-stvoriti-specialnij-tribunal-shodo-zlochynu-agresiyi-78285>.
- 3 For example, the European Parliament. See “Ukraine: MEPs Want a Special International Tribunal for Crimes of Aggression,” News European Parliament, September 5, 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220517IPR29931/ukraine-meps-want-a-special-international-tribunal-for-crimes-of-aggression>.
- 4 Amy Mackinnon, “Russia Is Sending Its Ethnic Minorities to the Meat Grinder,” *Foreign Policy*, September 22, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/23/russia-partial-military-mobilization-ethnic-minorities/>.
- 5 A few examples include movements for an independent Circassia, the proposed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, an independent Tatarstan, and an independent Bashkortostan. A small number of people from these regions have also volunteered to fight alongside Ukrainians.
- 6 Both Russia and Kazakhstan claim these islands. Crucially, they are in an offshore energy producing region of the Caspian Sea.
- 7 When Estonia enjoyed a brief period of independence between the two world wars, its border with the Soviet Union was based on the 1920 Treaty of Tartu. In 1945, after the Soviet Union annexed Estonia, Moscow redrew the administrative border between the Soviet Union and the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic in such a way that 10 percent of Estonian territory, as outlined in the Treaty of Tartu, was transferred to Russia. After Estonia regained its independence in the 1990s, officials in Tallinn, for the sake of peace, agreed to drop any territorial claims and keep the de facto border based on the 1945 border—even though this meant handing 10 percent of the country's territory to Russia.
- 8 The Northern Territories encompass the four southernmost islands of the Kuril Islands chain. These islands were unilaterally annexed by the Soviet Union in 1945 and remain administered by Russia today. The Japanese dispute Russia's claims to the islands. The US recognizes Japanese sovereignty over the islands.
- 9 The Karelian Question deals with the status of the Karelia, Salla, and Petsamo regions that Finland ceded to the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–44) and whether Finland should seek to regain sovereignty over these territories. While it is not the official position of the Finnish government to regain control over these territories, the matter remains one of public debate in some parts of Finnish society. The dissolution of the Russian Federation would bring the Karelian Question back to the forefront of public debate.



About the Author



Luke Coffey is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. His work at Hudson analyzes national security and foreign policy, with a focus on Europe, Eurasia, NATO, and transatlantic relations. Coffey was previously director of the Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation from 2015 to 2022, in which role he oversaw and managed a team covering most of Heritage's foreign policy and international affairs work. From 2012 to 2015, he was the Margaret Thatcher fellow at Heritage, focusing on relations between the United States and the United Kingdom and on the role of NATO and the European Union in transatlantic and Eurasian security.

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