

No End to History

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From the standpoint of world history, the collapse of the Soviet Union is unremarkable. That this event took the world by surprise suggests that political analysts, their attention focused on current affairs, can overlook underlying trends and countertrends that eventually make even dramatic events seem secondary. When trends and countertrends are in equilibrium, they generate an illusion of stability. But in the long run, the possibility of disequilibrium approaches certainty and the result is discontinuity.

The Soviet Union's inherent predisposition towards collapse is implicit in the word "union," which is partly an acknowledgement of plurality and partly, wishful thinking. The same can be said of the United States of America, perpetually buffeted by centrifugal forces that will in time generate its own collapse.

Both will sooner or later be added to the roster of what one historian calls "vanished kingdoms."

These political entities had existed, or were imagined to exist, even as their identifying characteristics changed, but each of which eventually disappeared as a consequence of external conquest or internal dissolution. Sometimes a vanished kingdom reappears, as did the constituent states including Russia itself after the implosion of the Soviet Union.

But what is the "kingdom" we are speaking of in the context of Russian affairs? Is it Russia? Or the Soviet Union? Is it a state? A regime? A nation or an empire? A society or civilization? These words identify constructed historical

identities, not natural ones. All are to some degree arbitrary, chosen and defined according to purpose. We cannot say, independent of that purpose and its context, what characteristics distinguish Russia as a historical entity from other such entities or even from its environment. Historical entities persist despite changes in their characteristics and boundaries, but all are in the long run impermanent. It is therefore impossible to say which is more durable. Nations, understood as linguistic or ethnic entities, can outlast empires. But sometimes they do not because they have been absorbed, suppressed, or eliminated. Confederations are made and then unmade.

The word “civilization” may imply persistence, but what persists is vague and contested.

Students of foreign policy are not historians. They are concerned with assessing the significance of current events. In relation to Russia, these include ongoing Russian maneuvers in the near abroad; the slow unravelling of the European Union following its expansion into the former Soviet space and then its contraction with Brexit; the attempted revival of American global leadership after Trump’s electoral loss and abortive insurrection; and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes their concerns expand to include a longer-term trend such as the rise of China or the emergence of social media. Technological innovations, epidemics and migrations have been important in human affairs for millennia, but assessing their effects is usually left to historians. Policy analysts focus on how we can take advantage of such changes. They may occasionally contemplate regime change but seldom the complete disappearance of countries or civilizations.



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If we count back from the official date of the Soviet Union’s disbandment in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha in 1991 as many years as have passed since then to the present day, we will find ourselves at the beginning of the 1960s, when the international order that changed in the early 1990s was just being established. Remarkably, in the middle of that period, in 1975, the final documents of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe were signed. In a sense, that

was the culmination of a long process: as there was nowhere to go up further, a descent began, which, barely visible at first, snowballed into a real downfall.

What fell apart had not lasted very long: in fact, we have been living longer without it than we lived with it. Of course, for several generations of Soviet people it seemed that the USSR “had always been and would always be there,” but for others, the “end of history” began only with the end of the Soviet Union. Frankly speaking, what happened in 1991 looked unimaginable to me at that time, while now I am more inclined not to dramatize those events so much.

If we talk about what had the greatest international influence, then the collapse of the entire socialist system, associated with the Soviet crisis but still not exactly the same, seems to be much more important: gone were both solid organizational forms (CMEA and the Warsaw Pact) of the socialist system, and systematic ties and institutions, not always obvious, of influence and support for states, parties and movements around the world. Their collapse was not only radical, but also irreversible. Many things are possible in politics, including, technically speaking, any reaction and revanchism. But there is also something that cannot be undone or reversed. The disappearance of the USSR is among such events, but not in terms of power or politico-geographical configuration. Being the largest country in the world and having taken control of the nuclear weapons left after the Soviet Union and its place in the UN Security Council, Russia for some time appeared to the outside world as the leading country in the CIS that had succeeded the USSR. However, unlike the Soviet Union, Russia has ceased to be a world power. It is one of its peculiarities as an empire, that is, a large political space.

As a superpower, the Soviet Union had not only material resources, but also its own vision of the world order, which was formulated as an ideological and, therefore, a concrete political proposal to everyone who could be interested in it. In general, imperial space is dynamic, and an empire spreads its influence beyond its borders to the rest of the world. But added to space was time, that is, the endlessly postponed end of history, when the sickle and hammer from the Soviet coat of arms would cover the entire globe.

This ideological proposal, which could be called world socialism, the international labor and communist movement, the world revolutionary process, whatever, made the Soviet Union anchored in the old narrative of progress that combined scientific thought, technical achievements and political emancipation, which meant the demolition of all inequalities inherited from

hierarchies. Theoretically, even in the 1980s, it was still possible to present the USSR as an emancipatory alternative to the “First World,” at least at the level of official declarations. It would have been not just a language of self-description, but also a way to recruit and mobilize supporters, build an alternative economy, create career opportunities, and plan a political process.

But all this vanished, and the short-lived idea of global unity signified the triumph of the capitalist version of modernity.

I think we still have to make sense of those events: the entire left-wing agenda was based largely on the fact that socialism was still possible, albeit flawed, costly and ineffective, which meant that there had to be a left-wing political philosophy and critical sociology in the West in order not to let capitalism take its course.

The first feeling after the collapse of world socialism was that of a catastrophe, but not for us who had suddenly learned that there could be a “normal economy” in which everyone felt good, and that exploitation was a stupid myth.

No, it was a catastrophe for those who hated that normal economy and the society that was built on it. Current trends in political philosophy and social sciences are an echo of that trauma, but they have nothing to do with modern Russia and its search within the framework of this agenda.



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What made the collapse of the Soviet Union so special—indeed unique—in modern history is that it was in fact three momentous events wrapped up in one: it marked the demise of a political system *and* of an economic system *and*, most importantly, the disintegration of the Soviet state. These three elements of “the triple cataclysm” were not intrinsically interlinked and could have happened separately. China and Vietnam show that it is possible to exit the planned economy without jeopardizing state integrity or the established authoritarian political order, and most Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe managed to shed both the political and the economic straitjacket of communism without falling apart as states.

Only in those Eastern bloc states that were organized as ethnically defined federations—Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union—did the systemic collapse engender state disintegration. This may have stimulated secessionist movements in other countries with federation-like structures, such as Great Britain, Spain, Belgium, and Ethiopia, where separatist politics is on the rise. Ethiopia presents an intriguing parallel: the challenge to state integrity here, just like in the USSR, was unleashed when a determined reformer attempted to introduce more democracy. However, the contrast with Ethiopia is noteworthy: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had been willing to use massive, indiscriminate force to prevent the dissolution of his state—which Mikhail Gorbachev never did. There may be a connection here: the *perestroika* experiment had shown the world that democratization in a multiethnic federation could all too easily lead to state collapse. Perhaps the specter of further state disintegration in the Russian Federation under Boris Yeltsin is part of the background for the undermining of democracy under Vladimir Putin.

Communism as ideology and political system left the scene unlamented—the disappearance of the Soviet *state* was another matter altogether. President Putin is endlessly quoted as having said that the collapse of the USSR was “the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” Normally this is glossed as if he were belittling the horrors of World War II, although he used a Russian term for “largest” (*krupneishaya*) that does not imply any comparison. Still, his words reflect widespread feelings of great-power nostalgia (not necessarily revanchism) among many Russians. More to the point, however, is that, in the late *perestroika* period, apprehensions about what might happen if this colossus collapsed flourished also in Western capitals. In August 1991, U.S. President George H. Bush issued an anxious warning against dismantling the USSR in a speech in Kiev (soon dubbed by Cold War hawks as his “Chicken Kiev” speech).

Clearly, Bush Sr. wanted Gorbachev to succeed in his reform endeavors, but at the same time one—or *the*—major impetus behind the attitude of the U.S. president was concern about nuclear proliferation. But already in January 1992, in his State of the Union address, Bush could not resist the temptation to exploit the fall of the Soviet Union as being “his” victory in his (unsuccessful) attempt at re-election: “by the grace of God, America won the Cold War” (Plokhyy, Serhii, 2014. *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union*. Oneworld Books, p. 389). Gone was now all recognition of the decisive role of Gorbachev and his entourage, without which the dismantling of the

Soviet Union would surely have been far more violent. Here we may recall Paul Kennedy's prediction: "There is nothing in the character or tradition of the Russian state to suggest that it could ever accept imperial decline gracefully" (Kennedy, Paul, 1988. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Fontana Press, p. 664). Luckily, he was wrong, but things could have gone much worse with another leader in the Kremlin.

Today, Gorbachev is remembered far warmly in the West than in Russia—with good reason, as he contributed less (to put it mildly) to the prosperity of his country than to world peace. However, more credit should be given also to Ukrainian leaders than what they normally get. It is often said that the Ukrainians would not have been able to use "their" nuclear weapons if they had kept them, but that was not how Western leaders saw it at the time and is not how many Ukrainian nationalists regard the matter today. The latter believe that with a nuclear deterrence capacity they would have been better able to stand up to "Russian bullying." Ukraine has just as good reason to feel let down by the self-congratulating, "victorious" West as Russia does. Leaders in both countries believed that they should have received not only nods of appreciation but also substantial economic support to help them transit to becoming "normal" countries. How much realism there was in this expectation is an entirely different question.

Initially, the fall of the Soviet Union—the only superpower besides the USA—created a unipolar world. In January 1992, Bush Sr. jubilantly proclaimed the dawn of "a new world order" in which American values would triumph around the globe: "A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and preeminent power, the United States of America." But this was not destined to last; instead, what we got was a multipolar, or perhaps more accurately: a classic anarchic world order. One superpower melted into thin air; the other lost its ability to dictate world politics.

This latter development should not be regarded as a logical or necessary consequence of the end of the Cold War, except perhaps indirectly: the disappearance of the Soviet threat created a hubris in Washington, which emboldened American leaders to act recklessly. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that in Afghanistan and Iraq, post-Cold War U.S. presidents acted in the interests of neither their own country nor of the world at large. Admittedly, it is hard to see how the U.S. and its NATO allies could fail to "do something" in Afghanistan after 9/11, but the war in Iraq was not only unnecessary: it was sheer folly.

However, the Americans do not have a monopoly on reckless behavior: Putin's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine fit that characterization as well. I believe history will conclude that this is another case of a country acting against its own best interests.

The melancholy conclusion is probably that the Cold War strategists did have a point when they insisted that "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) served to cool down hotheads on both sides of the Atlantic.

The consolation will have to be that at least we have been spared having to find out what the consequences of a deployed MAD strategy might have been.



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Chronology is always politicized. It is now obvious that the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 marked the collapse of the international system, the consequences of which can still be felt thirty years later. In 1979, the Soviet Union sent its troops to Afghanistan and pulled them out in 1989. In 2001, the United States, in turn, carried out its own intervention, and withdrew troops only in 2021. "Any empire will perish," historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle (1917-1994) said, because the time will come when the gap between its material resources and territorial ambitions becomes unacceptable. In 1991, the USSR collapsed for three main reasons: economic stagnation caused by an arms race, the striving of the peoples that made up the Soviet Union for historical independence, and, above all, the end of collectivist convictions embodied by the CPSU's complete loss of legitimacy. The ideological dimension is most difficult to grasp, because ideas are still circulating: thirty years on, an analysis of the events of 1991 justifies (or not justifies) the Kremlin's choice and orientation both inside and outside the country.

Another pivotal event deserves special attention since, from France's point of view, it undoubtedly had more direct consequences than the collapse of the USSR—the year 1989. What should one recall: Tiananmen Square or the Berlin Wall? In June 1989, the Chinese government brutally suppressed public protests. In November, the GDR government allowed the wall to be demolished. Today, China behaves like a "superpower suffering from amnesia" (Simon Leis),

constantly reaffirming the Communist Party's absolute monopoly on political power and stating that China will be able to become the world's number one power by 2049. Germany, in turn, reunited and put an end to the bipolar division of Europe. Germany has made European construction the main target of its foreign policy, while becoming an exporting nation.

Globalization steadily deepened for three decades. This led to significant economic convergence, which was facilitated, in particular, by China's accession to the WTO in 2001. China and Germany play a leading role in trade, industry, and technology. They have been the two main engines of globalization since 1991. In the 1980s, China accounted for 2 percent of global GDP, compared to 20 percent today. Germany generates almost a third of the eurozone's GDP. The two countries maintain close economic relations. Globalization is now causing a deep political divergence between the two models of capitalism. On the one hand, there is the Western model based on the separation of powers, and on the other hand, there is the Chinese model based on the unification of forces under centralized control. Which milestones will be most significant in the long run—June 1989, November 1989, or December 1991?

As a response, it would be useful to recall that repressions in Tiananmen Square began immediately after a visit to Beijing by Mikhail Gorbachev, who had come there to celebrate the Soviet-Chinese reconciliation. The Soviet Communist party leader's striving for openness, the liberation of the Baltic countries, and the reunification of Germany led to the fall of the Soviet empire. This event still affects the relations that Putin's Russia maintains with its partners. In 2005, Putin described the collapse of the USSR as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." In 2019, European Council President Donald Tusk, on the contrary, saw this event as "a blessing to Georgians, Poles, Ukrainians and the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, and also to Russians." Mikhail Gorbachev realized that Moscow no longer had the means or desire to maintain its empire. Today, this experience is seen as unambiguously negative by Beijing, where many think tanks have patiently analyzed the causes of the Soviet Union's collapse. In their opinion, Mikhail Gorbachev lost because he had failed to defend the Soviet Communist Party and abandoned ideology. On the contrary, Berlin and other European capitals considered it far-sighted that he had refrained from using force to prevent the fall of the system that Soviet people no longer believed in because of its economic inefficiency. Today, Russia is between Berlin and Beijing. Since joining the WTO in 2001, the country has firmly adhered to

the principles of economic globalization. Germany and China are its two main economic partners.

Politically, Moscow is openly critical of the EU, realizing that globalization Chinese style in the long run could pose a threat to the European Union.

Moscow's spirit is hardly felt today, as evidenced by the development paths chosen by the former Soviet republics, which perceive Belin's spirit through the EU discourse or Beijing's spirit due to its One Belt One Road project. Not to mention the spirit of Tehran, Ankara, New Delhi and, of course, Washington. Thirty years after the collapse of the USSR, the international system has become multipolar, but not multilateral, which puts China and the United States at the center. The two countries jointly account for more than a trillion dollars' worth of military spending per year, more than 40 percent of global GDP and over 40 percent of CO₂ emissions. What will happen to them in thirty years?



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It is common to say that “everyone expected American domination to last forever.” That is not true. Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History* was almost universally pilloried when it came out in 1992. Why? Because the United States for two decades had been staving off decline and over-investing in its military. It was widely assumed that the public debt would somehow strangle the economy. American cities, infrastructure—even their political system—looked shoddy.

And just as professors of Western Europe, people like Paul Kennedy were muttering that the U.S. was soon to follow the Soviet Union, the U.S. struck gold in Silicon Valley. The U.S. share of the global economy shot up. “Made in the USA” again became a positive brand. Maybe it was a case of “to the victor go the spoils” or perhaps a testimony of the American blend of freedom, individualism, capitalism, and the rule of law. Maybe it was blind luck. The U.S. invented a new tech economy, in which it excelled.

The U.S. entered the new millennium unrivaled. But in a surprisingly short time China caught up economically.

From having an economy the size of Russia's in the 1980s, China's total GDP is set to pass that of the U.S. soon. For a long time that did not concern U.S. leaders, busy with the responsibilities that come with being "the indispensable nation" as one Secretary of State called it. Much like the European powers had discovered in the 1970s when the Soviets and the U.S. simply cut them out of their summits, Russia now had to get used to ordering from the same menu as second-rate powers like Britain and Germany.

Meanwhile European powers and the European Union are shrinking from the global stage. While the Europeans embraced decline as destiny, Russia was not ready to abandon its great-power pretensions. Under President Putin, the country carefully husbanded its resources with a view for some future date when the cards would be dealt anew. Steeped in history, Russia concluded that war would surely come and woe to those who are unprepared. In the U.S., few had given much time to what would follow unipolarity. Most simply assumed that the liberal internationalist gospel of values and norms would replace power and interests, leaving them on top.

China, meanwhile, rose peacefully—some would say stealthily. It built its juggernaut economy while underinvesting in its armed forces, as Deng Xiaoping had prescribed. This was to avoid raising fears that it would challenge the U.S. Under Donald Trump, parts of the U.S. woke up to the fact that the 1990s had not been a renaissance, it had been a phase. But the country's elites seemed uninterested in fighting for dominance. Some simply invested in China, others did their best to hobble the country through identity politics.

One thing I always find amazing is how eager American scholars are to speak ill of their own country when abroad. I do not mean to call anyone out, but most people from most countries are like my own people on that score. We may criticize our country at home, to our countrymen. Never abroad to foreigners, call it loyalty or patriotism. The divisions in the U.S. plummeted to new depths under President Trump and have shown few signs of abating under Biden. The eagerness of the new president to undo all the deeds of the predecessor included one of the key geopolitical tenets of Trump: driving a wedge between Russia and China. This was abandoned.

In 2021, the U.S. is facing a potential Moscow-Beijing Axis. China is eager to draw on Russia's military prowess, Russia on China's economy. For Russia this partnership can easily end up like the pig and the hen that join up to make eggs and bacon. Think of the Habsburgs hitching their wagon to Germany prior to WWI. The U.S. is—not unlike in the 1980s—facing challenges in almost every

regard but one: militarily. Under President Biden, the county has decided to attempt to decouple itself from the Chinese economy and retry some version of containment policy. What happens next comes down to one point: Can the U.S. break out of the slump?

Can the Americans transform the dust of this age into gold, as they have done so many times in the past? It is worth keeping in mind that anyone that bet against the West in the past few centuries, have lost.



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The continuing spread of the epidemic and large-scale interethnic conflicts have made the whole world see “another real America.” In recent years, some of the steps taken by the U.S. authorities, especially individual politicians who, for the sake of so-called elections, neglect the health of the American people and international cooperation for combating the epidemic, have caused serious damage to America’s global leadership and soft power.

One has only to look at the past thirty years in the history of America after the end of the Cold War to see how the United States has got itself into such a mess. The real reason is that the growing instability of the international situation after the end of the Cold War led American domestic and foreign policy into an impasse.

Having spent the “dividends” of the Cold War, the United States ended up in a difficult situation due to its own political decline.

After the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the Western camp led by the United States was at the top of the world pyramid and received innumerable dividends from the Cold War. Blinded by the victory, American politicians, considering themselves right in everything they did and acting without due account for the opinion of others, made a series of political mistakes: by encouraging a clash of different cultures, the U.S. inspired the spread of terrorism; by promoting democracy in the outside world, it fueled color revolutions and political street protests; by using sanctions and putting pressure on dissenters, it repeatedly provoked conflicts between great powers, and so on and so forth.

Thirty years ago, many states pinned “great hopes” on the United States, believing that it would be able to manage globalization and world trade, as well as stimulate the growth of the global economy, and scientific and technological innovations. However, thirty years on, it is already clear that the American administration is doing exactly the opposite.

Over the past thirty years, the United States has turned from the global leader in its prime into a “source of international instability.”

After the end of the Cold War thirty years ago, the share of U.S. GDP fell from 1/2 of global GDP in the post-war period to 1/4, and now to 1/7 of GWP. The country did not pay enough attention to domestic development because it was constantly fighting abroad. Over the past thirty years, the United States has started many wars, including Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries.

According to Duke University’s estimates, U.S. direct war spending in recent years has exceeded \$6 trillion, not counting post-war pensions and treatment expenses. Over the past twenty years, the United States continued its military intervention and democratic reforms in Afghanistan, which is the main reason for its failure there. It is not surprising that Americans are angry: the country wastes money on wars but lacks funds for health insurance.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States had the largest combined power and relied not only on a solid military and economic foundation, but also on soft power.

Unfortunately, modern American politics is chaotic and does not stop at “fighting the whole world.”

Americans “kill the economy” by “severing ties,” and carry out “political terror” through “sanctions.” Thirty years ago, the United States was behind the fall of the Berlin Wall, but now, on the contrary, it is building “walls” that divide the world. It has gone even further to raise the Iron Curtain in the field of cultural, educational, scientific and technical exchanges and fence itself off from the rest of the world. This taints the international image of the United States badly and “disperses” the soft power it is so proud of.

For the past hundred years, the United States has been viewed by the international community as an excellent country. Americans are a sincere and tolerant nation. The key to the success of American society lies in its courage to innovate and respect for freedom. American society shows spiritual values, such as vitality, competition, freedom, and creativity. However, in recent years, internal political degradation, the deteriorating quality of democracy, and the alienation of freedoms have led the United States into a political and administrative impasse.

In fact, the United States should have taken the opportunity to correct its own mistakes, using its internal restraining and compensatory mechanisms. But what did the United States do instead? It did not look for the causes of problems at home, but upset its own political “mental equilibrium” for fear of losing hegemony and because of internal political struggle. Electoral policy arbitrarily came to the fore in the American political strategy, focusing on the current moment, rather than a distant future. As a result, many of the political initiatives of that period were contradictory, impractical, and unfounded.

The global leader, previously considered the strongest, has turned into a global source of unrest: the present-day United States does not resolve conflicts and difficult problems in trouble spots around the world, but creates them by provoking international conflicts and interethnic strife. The U.S. does not engage in equal dialogue with other countries, but acts arrogantly, builds groupings, carries out provocations, and makes enemies around the world.

Various steps taken by the United States in recent years have led the international community to doubt the reliability of the U.S. government, as well as the stability, predictability, and seriousness of its policies. A country where political egoism, strategic egoism, xenophobia, and isolationism flourish can also alienate other states, despite its glorious past.

The desire to replay the Cold War is an attempt to reverse the wheel of history.

The United States is to blame itself for its current decline. It should not bellicosely blame it on others or, above all, take it out on China.

Recently, we have witnessed the internal split in the U.S.-led West. At the same time, there are attempts to unite the West and other American actions to isolate China and Russia. It can be stated that some politicians want to replay the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the U.S., restore its results and turn back time. But these attempts are useless and cannot succeed.

In the eyes of some hawkish American politicians, the world is a “battlefield” where you and I fight, and the international community is just an “arena for fist fights” and “a do-or-die contest—if there are you, there is no me.”

In Chinese culture, the world is a “big stage” that opens up the diversity of human cultures, “a large garden where a hundred flowers bloom.”

A strong Russian-Chinese relationship is the positive energy of the modern world.

Russian-Chinese relations have rich internal content, a wide range of objectives and powerful internal driving forces. From this moment forward,

China and Russia must resist external pressure, further strengthen relations at the political level, and give impetus to the development of internal drivers in their bilateral cooperation.

In 2019, when the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Russia was celebrated, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Ministry officials repeatedly praised Russian-Chinese relations, describing them as “strategic partnership” and emphasizing that they are better than an allied relationship. China, in turn, put forward a slogan of “three highest” levels of relations between the great powers: the highest level of mutual trust, the highest level of cooperation, and the highest level of strategic significance.¹



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It was supposed to be more than simply peace in our time. It was supposed to be peace for all time. History had ended, in the triumphal judgment of an American sociologist, Francis Fukuyama. The titanic ideological struggle of the 20th century among fascism, communism, and liberal democracy had ended in a total victory of the West with the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 forty-six years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. To survive and thrive in the decades to come a nation had no choice but to follow the tenets of liberal democracy, grounded in individual freedom and free markets, or such was the prevailing hope in the United States.

Fukuyama himself did not believe this meant conflict would end, just that the ideological struggle was over. And no American policymaker thought universal peace was at hand. But the feeling was pervasive in the United States that its system had been vindicated by history. It would now lead the world into the 21st century, spreading American-style democracy and free markets across the globe. Russia would be the prize. If the United States could integrate Russia

1 70年风雨兼程 中俄关系何以成就“三个最高” // 求是网, 2019 [Despite Difficulties, Russia-China Relations Have Reached the Highest Level in Seventy Years]. QSTheory.cn, 2019. Available at: http://www.qstheory.cn/zdwz/2019-06/05/c_1124583809.htm [Accessed 28 September 2021].

into the Euro-Atlantic community of free-market democracies that would only seal the verdict of history. And so American leaders set off to build a strategic partnership grounded in liberal democratic values with its once bitter foe, even if they worried that Russia might still revert to its illiberal, imperialist past.

Russia faced a different reckoning. The collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War had come as a crushing defeat for a country that prided itself on being the other superpower. Many Russians took what comfort they could from the leading role that they themselves had played in the overthrow of Marxism-Leninism not only in Russia but around the world—even if the Chinese remained nominally communist, they too abandoned the ideology in practice. But no matter what their political convictions, all sought the revival of Russia. The dream was not idle. Russia after all had collapsed in the past only to return to the heights of glory—for a stirring example of Russia's undying worth one had to look no further than to the victory over Hitler. History did not trace an arc of progress for Russians, as it did for Americans. Rather, it was a tragic-triumphant cycle of collapse and restoration.

Russian leaders sought the first steps towards restoration in partnership with the United States. Although they felt acutely the asymmetry in power and fortune, they believed the United States should be prepared to treat Russia as an equal in gratitude for its part in ending the Cold War and in recognition of the great-power role it had played in the past. Russia might have been down in its luck, but it remained a great power nonetheless. Moreover, Russia, as it had in the past, was prepared to adopt certain aspects of the Western system, now American-led, to restore its power and standing in the world. That too spoke for partnership with the United States.

In short, the United States wanted to change Russia to vindicate further its victory in the Cold War. Russia wanted to restore its power to overcome the trauma of that war. The destinations were far apart. Yet curiously each country thought that partnership was the road to its goal.

Thirty years on, the United States and Russia find themselves locked in an adversarial relationship that scrapes the depths of Cold War animosity. The hopes of 1989 have long since passed away. Why did partnership elude these two countries?

There is no simple answer. Broadly speaking one might venture that history has returned with all the complexities of relations between Russia and the United States that have existed since the two countries emerged as rivals at the end of the 19th century—although the truth of the matter is that history never

ended. The aspects of discord simply remained submerged under the weakness and disarray of Russia in the first post-Soviet years. They reemerged as Russia slowly regained its power and its pride. The pride returned first during the last years of Yeltsin's presidency, symbolized by Yevgeny Primakov's defiant U-turn over the Atlantic in 1999 to protest the beginning of the U.S. bombardment of Yugoslavia. The power returned gradually under President Putin's determined policies beginning in 2000, which have restored Russia as one of the three most active geopolitical actors on the global stage today, along with the United States and China, even if huge asymmetries in power and fortune continue to separate Russia from those two powers.

As before, the tension between the United States and Russia has an ideological and a geopolitical dimension. Ideologically, America's drive to transform Russia into a liberal free-market democracy in its own image crashed against Russia's determination to preserve what it considered its unique character, which is fundamentally anti-democratic in American eyes. American democracy promotion efforts inside Russia, initially welcomed by the Kremlin, were gradually reassessed as threats and gave birth to Putin's creeping crackdown on civil society starting in the mid-2000s.

With the eruption of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism once again came to define U.S.-Russian relations in American eyes, although the Kremlin would perhaps phrase it as a struggle between America universalism and Russia's defense of sovereignty, self-determination, and diversity. The burgeoning use of cyber tools to exacerbate domestic tensions in the rival country is part of this ideological struggle. Both Russia and the United States engage in such activity, although publicly available information suggests Russia has been by far more aggressive, attacking elements of America's critical infrastructure directly or through proxies.

Geopolitically, Russia's determination to erect a security perimeter beyond the borders of Russia proper in the former Soviet space—in line with Russia's historical search for security in strategic depth, buffer zones, and regional hegemony—ran counter to the American historical mission of expanding what it saw as a democratic zone of peace. The clashes over Georgia and Ukraine are the most visible manifestations of that conflict, but the tensions exist all along Russia's long periphery in Europe and Asia. Tensions have also flared in the Middle East, Latin America, and to some extent in Africa, but these regions are peripheral to the core of the U.S.-Russian rivalry in Eurasia.

The thirty years since the breakup of the Soviet Union has thus been a long journey from point A to point A, an extended detour from the path of rivalry that has largely defined U.S.-Russian relations since the United States emerged as a great power in the late 19th century. As such, they underscore the enduring power of tradition and the resilience of national character and purpose in both the United States and Russia, even in the bewildering kaleidoscope of events that seemingly portend great change today. Change, of course, does take place: today's world is hardly the same as the world of 1991; the geopolitical landscape has shifted notably with the rise of China; disruptive technology has altered the way we communicate, work, relax, and fight.

But the change is not nearly as radical as we sometime hope or fear it to be. We deny the force of continuity at our own peril, as the course of U.S.-Russian relations makes so clear.