THE END OF WORK
Here, There, Everywhere

This issue of The American Interest starts by fulfilling, in part at least, the promise made last time: We are turning our ship to neither port nor starboard, but toward domestic political and cultural issues and a bit away from foreign policy and national security ones. Hence our lead cluster and our lead review essay tackle key torque points in our future:

- Can we create enough decent jobs for people, so that they can find and stand on their dignity, at a time when technological developments are putting ever more jobs in jeopardy? American democracy itself may depend on it.
- Can we reform our tax system in a way that is fair and that relieves the pressures of a ballooning deficit that threatens the entire U.S. and arguably the global economy? Trends suggest we’ve not a near-term prayer of doing that.
- Can we identify and remediate the white-collar crime wave of recent decades? The best book on the subject “misunderestimates” the structural sources of the problem, and that’s not helpful.

As is our wont, we like essays that use literature to skitter back and forth between past and present, when there is a useful purpose to doing so. So yet another essay casts its line back to the Salem witch trials, which may have more to do with contemporary affairs than some may think.

But note, too: American problems are not America’s alone. Echoes abound. The multibook review essay on “The Great Eurasion,” as well as references in the lead materials just noted, shows that the advanced democracies of Western Europe suffer many of the same challenges.

Then there is the fact, as usual, that subject matters often spill over artificial domestic and foreign categories. So one essay shows the relationship, then and now, between conceptions in the minds of national leaders and what sort of global arrangements end up congealing—for after all, there is no international “system,” only the collective projections of the state units that compose it.

And then there is the essay on the sad political trajectory of Turkey in recent years, which fingers Western governments and media for having all but abetted that country’s descent back into authoritarianism.

Finally there is the analysis we proffer of the recent Ken Burns docufab on the Vietnam War, a stellar if depressing example of the intermingling of domestic and foreign policy if there ever was one.

We can’t help it if the world is, as Ray Davies once said in a different context, “a mixed up, muddled up, shook up place.” Trust me: We’re doing the best we can trying to understand and keep up with it. It’s a bloody day job.
CONTENTS

INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

6  The End of Work
   by Brink Lindsey
   A terrible loss that shouldn’t be mourned, but properly understood.

15  The Tax Reform Man Cometh, and Goeth
    by Michael J. Graetz
    The coming tax “reform” cannot possibly be the great and simplifying stimulus to economic growth and jobs its proponents claim.

RETHOUGHTS

24  The New Old Fatalism
    by Aviezer Tucker
    The theory of historical inevitability just won’t die. There was nothing unavoidable about our current political crisis.

36  The New Old Normal
    by Seth D. Kaplan
    Once again, as before the age of European empires, political order has grown weak around the world.

45  The New Old Russia
    by Vladislav Inozemtsev
    Russia should be counted among the European colonial empires—the only one left standing. That’s the key to comprehending its future.
Managing Post-Democratic Turkey

by Henri J. Barkey

The United States must be patient but take a firm line to curb Erdoğan’s worst impulses.

Guilty Men

by Claire Berlinski

Turkish democracy didn’t die all at once in a single referendum; it’s been languishing for years. Why did so many in the West fail to notice?

Sideswiping the White Collar Crime Wave

by James S. Henry

Amid a rising tide of corporate crime in the United States, “white collar” criminal prosecutions and convictions are at their lowest levels in decades.

The Great Eurosion

by John Bew

Everyone can agree that the European body politic is sick, but about the diagnosis, let alone the cure, there is no consensus.

The War That Never Ends

by James Jeffrey

The Vietnam War gets Ken Burns’s signature “docutainment” treatment, and the result is a worthy one, if not always up to full scholarly standards.

Witch Way to Go?

by Helen Peppe

Katherine Howe’s novels mine her witchy ancestors, but there’s nothing old about the danger of witch hunts.
When the Soviet banner was lowered over the Kremlin on December 25, 1991, and replaced by the old Russian flag, it was widely celebrated as the fall of communism. Many assumed that this would lead to the “end of history” and to the dawn of a new world order based on the principles of political democracy and economic freedom. But the end of a political system does not necessarily lead to the demise of the country that employed it. And in truth, the Soviet Union was brought down not so much by economic crisis or ideological disillusionment following the end of communism as by its constitutive republics’ attempt to reclaim sovereignty all at once.

While both Russian and Western academics have noted the role of this secession in Russia’s decline, they rarely observe that the European colonial empires underwent much the same process as they fell. Russian intellectuals are even reluctant to admit that Russia’s history was indeed one of colonization. Vassily Klyuchevsky, one of the most influential Russian historians of the late 19th century, contended that Russian colonization was distinct from that of other European powers because “the history of Russia is the history of a country that colonizes itself; the area of colonization inside it has grown alongside its [formal] state realm—sometimes shrinking, sometimes expanding, this eternal cycle has continued to the present.”

Others admit that Russians mainly colonized not “their own lands” but rather those belonging to other people, yet still distinguish them from other Europeans. As the Russian philosopher Georgy Fedotov put it, “Unlike all the Western powers, [Russia] was built not through violence, but through peaceful expansion; not by conquest, but by colonization.” But Russia resembles the European empires much more that commonly thought—and it is a comparison that bears on the country’s future.

Russia’s Colonial History

Russia’s history of colonialism does differ greatly from all other colonial adventures, but not because it was “peaceful” and “consensual.” This becomes apparent as we survey its three eras of colonization. The first era spanned the 11th to 14th centuries, during which Muscovy, Russia’s ancient
predecessor, arose. Between 1000 and 1150 C.E., young princes of the Kievan Rus’ founded the towns that later became Muscovy’s anchor points—Vladimir, Suzdal, Ryazan, and Moscow itself. These settler colonies became more powerful not only as they grew, but as the Kievan metropolis declined due to dynastic quarrels. Up until the 1230s, this part of what would become “Russia,” called the Suzdalia, expanded quite remarkably, stretching between Tver and Nizhny Novgorod and between Moscow and Ustyug. At the time, it was bigger than any European state except the Holy Roman Empire.

In 1238 the Mongols devastated the whole principedom, later destroying the remnants of the Kievan Rus’ as well. Though they controlled the former Kievan colony by force, obliging the inhabitants to pay tribute and supply conscripts to the Mongol army, they allowed some elements of self-rule. Indeed, this area occupied a unique position inside the Mongol empire (or “ulus”): Since their lands were not considered integral parts of the empire, the Moscow princes were relatively free to reconfigure the local balance of power and concentrate secular and religious authority in their own hands. Eventually, Muscovy became conscious of a “national” self and threw off the Mongol yoke. So even at the very beginning of Russia’s history we see two features that distinguish the country from others: It was developed as a settler colony by another principality; and it was treated as a possession by a hostile force. No other European colonial empire had such a history.

In the second era, Russia emulated the Europeans’ colonial adventures. As the Europeans began their overseas expeditions in the early 16th century, the Muscovites started their expansion to the north and east. They captured the Yugorian lands by 1502 and reclaimed Ryazan by 1520. They conquered the Kazan Khanate in 1552 and the Astrakhan Khanate in 1556, abolished the Great Nogai Horde in 1557, and took the Siberian Khanate in 1582. These conquests coincided roughly with the Spanish appropriations in Central and South America: Haiti in 1496, Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1508, New Spain in 1519–21, Peru and Rio de la Plata in 1535–36, and Florida in 1565. But the Russians amassed even more territory, continuing their Drang nach Osten well into the next century: By 1610 they had absorbed the Pegaya Horde, reaching the Yenisey River, and by the mid-17th century they were approaching the border with China. By 1689 they had conquered all of northeastern Eurasia to the Bering Strait.

Other European powers soon joined the Spaniards and the Portuguese in dividing up the Americas, and the British took the lead in exploring its northeastern shores. Once again, the Russians kept up. The first Siberian towns emerged practically simultaneously with American ones: Tobolsk (1587), Surgut (1594), Tomsk (1604), and Krasnoyarsk (1628) are only a bit older than Jamestown (1607), New York (1624), and Boston (1630). Russian Siberia was the same kind of a settler colony as New England, Québec, Australia, and New Zealand, all territories we might describe, to borrow from Angus Maddison, as “Western offshoots” of their mother countries, since the colonists greatly outnumbered the indigenous populations. (Much of those populations were exterminated, of course; when a local tribe rebelled, Russian pioneers commonly killed up to half of it.)

The Russians succeeded so extraordinarily in colonizing the Eurasian landmass because they had already been colonists for centuries. After years of Mongol rule, they had also adapted the techniques of their conquerors. According to one estimate, in terms of total square kilometers controlled each year the Russian Empire was the largest in area and the most durable in time of all historical empires, covering 65 million square kilometers per year versus 45 million for the British Empire and 30 million for the Roman.

If we leap forward two hundred years, we see another striking similarity between Russia

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1The mighty state of the Kievan Rus’ covered huge territories from Pskov and Novgorod in the north to Pereyaslavl in the south and from the current Ukraine-Hungary border in the west to Smolensk in the east. At this time, it was expanding further to the northeast.

and the other European powers. When both exhausted their supply of colonists, they opted for a different kind of adventure relying only on military superiority. They secured control over vast new lands without massive population transfers, this time not to the west or the east, but to the south. By the second half of the 19th century the British had conquered much of Africa, India, and Malaya; the French controlled Indochina, West Africa, and parts of the Middle East; and the Dutch, Portuguese, Belgians, and even the Germans followed suit. By 1885 the deal was done, and the Treaty of Berlin made it official: The Europeans had divided up Africa between them.

At the same time, the Russians also turned southward, beginning their third period of colonialism: Between 1804 and 1810 the Empire absorbed all of Georgia, Abkhazia, and Armenia, and by 1859 it had concluded a series of wars with the North Caucasian tribes. From 1864 to 1876, imperial troops occupied the Emirate of Bukhara and both the Kokand and Khiva Khanates, putting them at the foot of the Hindu Kush mountain range, the only barrier between them and Britain’s territory.

These new possessions—both the European ones in Africa and South Asia and the Russian ones in Central Asia and the Caucasus—should not be counted as colonies, since few colonists lived there. In 1898, only 120,000 servicemen safeguarded the whole British Empire, and the number of British civilian personnel was even smaller. The same applied to the Russian territories in the south: By 1897, the share of Russians in the Syr-Daryinsk oblast (region) stood at 2.1 percent of the population, in the Samarkand oblast 1.4 percent, and in the Fergana oblast a mere 0.5 percent. We ought therefore to distinguish between colonies—territories conquered by the European powers and consequently populated mostly by Europeans—and dependencies—states forcibly subjected to European rule and controlled without a huge resettlement of European populations. This will help us to structure our analysis going forward.

European powers opted to create dependencies only after they were deprived of their colonies. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, European powers faced unrest and later revolution, leading to the detachment of their overseas colonies from their empires. Indeed, the nature of this secession underlines the difference between colonies and dependencies: The American Revolution and the Latin American uprisings did not stem from a rejection of European values or principles; on the contrary, the colonists embraced the political traditions of their motherlands. They sim-

In terms of total square kilometers controlled each year, the Russian Empire was the largest in area and the most durable in time of all historical empires.
was firmly attached to historical Muscovy. Indeed, the Ambassadors’ Office (Посольский приказ) stopped overseeing it in 1596, after which it was treated as a remote but indispensable part of Russia. Also, in contrast to the Europeans, Russia’s rulers were never interested in creating a powerful regional elite. (The first Siberian university, founded in Tomsk in 1878, opened its doors 242 years after Harvard University in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.) For these and similar reasons, Siberia never tried to secede from Muscovy, and the Russians embarked on their southern expansion while still in possession of their settler colony. The majority of the European powers, as a result, owned either colonies or dependencies, while Russia became the unique country that had both at the same time.

In sum, the Soviet Union inherited a complex history—in which Russia was conqueror and colonizer as well as conquered and colonized. Given the course of European history and general societal trends, this reincarnation of the greatest empire in the world was always unlikely to survive into the 21st century. But even now the lessons of the Soviet collapse are not well understood either inside or outside of the Russian Federation.

**The Soviet Collapse**

When Russia became the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the old imperial legacy blended with the new Communist ideology, with each dominating in different periods. Imperial flashbacks pushed Soviet leaders to fight for the restoration of “Old Russia,” reconquering Central Asia and reestablishing the central government’s control over most of the Empire’s territory by 1922. These also led to the reconciliation with Germany in 1939, followed by the immediate “liberation” of western Belarus, western Ukraine, and Bessarabia and later by the annexation of the three Baltic states in 1940. The admission of the quasi-independent Tyva Republic in southern Siberia into the USSR in 1944 and of East Prussia in 1945 were the last Soviet territorial appropriations, whereupon it began installing puppet states across Central Europe.

Communist aspirations, however, necessitated enthusiastic praise for the “national-liberation movements” that aimed to dismantle the Western empires. The Soviets thought of them as facilitating the creation of new states that would inevitably choose the “socialist path” as the only viable strategy for their independent development. But while the U.S. foreign policy establishment had good reason to promote self-determination (especially where it might hurt the Brits), the Soviet Union found it rather more difficult. The constitution of every Soviet republic declared its right to secede from the Union for any reason, citing the inalienable rights of sovereign states. In 1944 the Soviet government strengthened this commitment to their sovereignty by permitting two republics, Ukraine and Belarus, to become founding members of the United Nations. Indeed, the very different regions of the former Russian Empire gained equal rights as quasi-sovereign states only inside the Soviet Union. Given the likelihood of secession movements within these republics, it was quite an audacious move to proclaim the Soviet Union only a “federation,” not to mention to encourage the Western empires’ possessions to fight for full independence.

Despite this, the Soviet Union still managed to outlive all of the other European colonial empires, which began shedding their dependencies after World War II. Yet as the Soviet economy continued to decline and political reforms became inescapable, the old conflicts surfaced with tremendous force. Democratization became closely connected with the republics’ aspirations to build new national identities. Even the eventual breakup of the Union has its roots in Russia’s complicated colonial past—in ways that continue to influence Russia’s post-Soviet structure and policy.

As mentioned, the Soviet Union was built of both colonies and dependencies. This caused a phenomenon that is sometimes called “self-colonization,” in which the colonies gain prominence at the expense of the core. At the time of Soviet collapse, Russia was no classic metropolis trying to save the whole enterprise but failing; rather, it pushed the dismantlement forward. It was a unique case of the periphery teaming up with the center to crush some phantom,
overarching empire that neither considered to be acting in its interests.

This unusual partnership occurred because Russia feared what the European powers never did: that the Russian nation was dissolving into some broader “people.” The European empires of the 20th century were geographically and politically separated from their overseas dependencies and did not experience a huge influx of people from them. Indeed, by 1950 there were less than 20,000 “non-white” foreign-born residents in the whole British Isles, while in the Netherlands and Belgium the numbers were even smaller. The one exception, France, formally encompassed three Algerian territories—Oran, Alger and Constantine—as full départements, but their population of about 2.2 million increased the share of non-French residents of the French Republic to only about 5 percent.

By contrast, the Soviet Union was a politically unified and geographically contiguous country. According to the last census in 1989, Russians accounted for just 50.8 percent of the overall population. Furthermore, the structure of the Soviet Union de-emphasized Russian nationhood—the Communist Party of Russia was created only in June 1990, before which every Soviet republic possessed its own communist party except the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Russians believed that by dismantling the empire they were preserving their national identity, a motive they ironically shared with their “subjects.” So the Soviet Union became the only empire to be dissolved by its former masters, instead of falling due to peripheral uprisings and quarrels.

While Russians saw the value in ridding themselves of dependencies, the breakdown of the Soviet Union involved a separation far more wrenching—the secession of Ukraine. That country cannot properly be called Russia’s colony or dependency, because it had been Moscow’s metropolis for many centuries. Indeed, the very term “Russia” in its modern sense dates from the mid-16th century, around the time when Muscovy succeeded in incorporating “Ukraine” into a unified state. With Ukraine’s departure, “historical Russia” suffered an unparalleled blow—as if it had been reduced from Russia back to Muscovy. Zbigniew Brzezinski once famously observed that “without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire.” Russia was willing to release its dependencies, but while the outside world regarded Ukraine as one of these possessions, their historical ties made Ukraine integral to Russia and devastating to lose. This explains why the Russian leadership intervened at the moment when the division seemed to become irreversible, starting a war between the two “brotherly peoples” in 2014. When Russians look at Ukraine, they are not thinking only of the 1980s, but rather of the 1080s—or earlier. It is the colonial past, not the Communist past, that haunts them.

If Siberia stopped supplying commodities today, Russia’s exports would be smaller than Hungary’s.

Losing its former metropolis made the Soviet Union unique among European colonial empires in its collapse, but so did another factor: It maintained its giant, resource-rich settler colony even as the possessions departed (or simply were abandoned). Indeed, Russia sustained only a minor economic setback from the loss of its possessions. The combined GDP of Russia’s new neighbors in the post-Soviet space comes to only $540 billion (based on the IMF’s 2016 estimates); in contrast, Russia’s GDP is evaluated at about $1.27 trillion. Per capita GDP is also higher in Russia than in all the post-Soviet nations except the Baltics, which are now part of the European Union and the Eurozone.

After their departure Siberia became not only much more important to Russia, but simply its main economic asset. The entire territory to the east of the Ural Mountains accounted for 52 percent of the imperial landmass, 7.5 percent of the overall population, and 19 percent of the Empire’s exports in 1897; these figures grew to 57 percent, 10.5 percent, and
46 percent respectively in the USSR in 1985. In 2014, Muscovy’s colony covered 75 percent of the nation’s territory, was inhabited by 20.5 percent of its population, and provided between 76 and 78 percent of exports. If Siberia stopped supplying commodities today, Russia’s exports would be smaller than Hungary’s. With more than 55 percent of its federal revenues in some way derived from the use and export of natural resources, Russia is in the unusual situation of feeding off a settler colony that itself remains poor and underdeveloped. Imagine if the 13 American colonies hadn’t seceded from Britain or 19th-century Brazil decided to remain a part of the Portuguese Empire: The core of Russia is as dependent on its settler colony as the current UK would be on the United States, or the current Portugal on Brazil.

Unfortunately, Russia now spends its energies on tussling with Ukraine and coveting its former dependencies, not safeguarding its most precious asset. Instead, it should abandon all post-imperial designs, stop nursing old wounds, and refocus on creating a more balanced and better-managed internal structure that allows its colony the influence it deserves. If this task is regarded as secondary and unimportant for much longer, Russia’s future might well become extremely uncertain.

Current Risks

New Russia, born in 1992, inherited from both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union conflicts with both its constituent parts and its neighbors. These represent the greatest challenges to the country—greater than its reliance on natural resources or its troubles with adopting democratic forms of governance.

First, Russia’s remaining dependencies are a drag on its economy. These dependencies, including the majority of the North Caucasian “republics,” are alienated from the metropolis and have few ethnic Russian inhabitants to keep them anchored to the core. In the late Soviet era, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian people made up 24.3, 9.3, and 8.5 percent of the populations of Kyrgyz SSR, Uzbek SSR, and Tadjik SSR respectively. Today the figures for Daghestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia, all formal parts of an “indivisible and united” Russian Federation, are as low as 3.6, 1.9 and 0.7 percent and declining further. In addition, the current dependencies rely almost exclusively on subsidies from the central government (the Daghestani region receives only 26.7 percent of its funds from locally collected taxes, the Chechen 26.1 percent, and the Ingush 22.2 percent). The Kremlin’s efforts have only raised the average incomes to 74.3, 61.2, and 41.6 percent of Russia’s average respectively.

To pump more money into the central budget, the Russian leadership continues the economic exploitation of Siberia. The overall share of regional tax revenue accruing to the Siberian government dropped from 51 percent in 1997 to less than 34 percent in 2014—the central government not only introduced new taxes and duties, but created state corporations that operate in Siberia but have their headquarters in Moscow or St. Petersburg, where they pay regional taxes. Therefore, the regional gross product generated in the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg exceeds the regional gross product of the whole area from the Urals to Sakhalin and Kamchatka. Formally, Russian statistics counted only 9.2 percent of the nation’s exports as originating in the Siberian Federal District in 2016, since the official “exporters” are Moscow-based companies. Russian natural gas thus appears to be pumped exclusively inside the Moscow ring road. All this exploitation causes massive underinvestment and the persistence of low living standards in Siberia. With this obsession with “national unity” and “territorial integrity,” which prompts it to hang onto its remaining dependencies at any cost, Russia risks losing, or perhaps ruining, its colony.

The new Russia also suffers from a state structure based on the Soviet model, albeit in a more controversial form. The Soviet Union consisted of 16 formally equal republics, the majority of which were additionally divided into oblasts. It was a multinational federation with each member possessing the right to opt out. These days Russia is a formal federation to which a new territorial entity may be admitted (such as Crimea in 2014, and perhaps South Ossetia or the Donbas in the future) but which no one is allowed to leave (as was proven by Chechnya in 1994–2002). Regional governors
are handpicked by the Kremlin and installed via shoddy elections. But the biggest challenge is the fact that today there are around two dozen national “republics” and close to sixty predominantly Russian oblasts combined in the same state. No other nation in the world has such a strange—and potentially explosive—territorial arrangement, composed of a single region that bears the federation’s name along with many smaller territories. The “national” names of the republics also obscure their vastly different ethnic compositions, since the share of “title” nationals varies from 95.1 percent in Chechnya to 22.4 percent in the Komi Republic to a mere 1.96 percent in the Khanty-Mansi autonomous district. Since ethnic Russians account for a healthy 82 percent of the overall population, the “federation” looks like a mono-ethnic state cut up into artificial “national” entities, a pure product of the Soviet legacy. The Russian Empire, by contrast, was built up exclusively of gubernias, or governorships, completely free of any ethnic or national features. Without a reconfiguration of the country’s current landscape, no one can be sure of Russia’s future and many attempt to forecast when and how the country will break up.

Along with the political restructuring, the new Russian state underwent a massive change in population. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the most extreme case of the people of a colonizing nation being openly expelled or gradually squeezed out of dependencies (both of those that regained their full sovereignty, like Kazakhstan, and those that formally remained inside the Russian Federation, like Chechnya). Between 1989 and 2009, when the outflow of the Slavic population was almost exhausted, at least 4.3 million Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians left the former Soviet Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The number of ethnic Slavs in Kazakhstan decreased during these years from 44.4 to 26.2 percent, in Kyrgyzstan from 24.3 to 6.9 percent, and in Tajikistan from 8.5 to 1.1 percent of the total population. In contrast, the largest migrant flow caused by the struggle against European domination, the exodus of the French pieds-noirs from Algeria, affected only 860,000 people.

This caused deep trauma to the Russian psyche. In response, Russians developed the concept of a “Russian world,” thinking of their nation as spread around the whole post-Soviet space as well as around the world—and in need of reunification. Russia’s policymakers became preoccupied with trying to reengage the territories that had seceded from the Soviet Union. Since that was, and is, politically infeasible, the Kremlin now dreams of a predominantly economic integration, which costs Russia tens of billions of dollars in subsidies and loans to the former Soviet republics. It fails to provide any benefit for the Russian economy; not only are the economies of these nations small and underdeveloped, they are just as dependent on commodity exports as Russia.

Long before the current rift between Russia and its most heavily subsidized partner, Belarus, opened up, I called the emerging Eurasian Union “Putin’s useless toy.” Today, that toy is not only useless, but hazardous. The inability of contemporary Russia to concentrate on its own affairs, coupled with its attempts to transcend its national borders to help “compatriots” abroad, risks political confrontations both along its borders and further afield. We may witness many unpleasant surprises before Russia’s nostalgia for its colonial past—its greatest weakness—finally evaporates. Until it does, we behold the new old Russia.

**Siberia’s Future**

With its historical dependencies either gone or reduced in value, Russia must refocus on its single most precious asset: its settler colony, Siberia. Converting the “Siberian curse” into a “Siberian blessing” should become the major goal for Russia’s government in the coming decades. The region, however, should not be so much “developed” as allowed to develop itself, as a resource-rich colony should.

What Russia needs today is the development of the private sector to balance the state-controlled sector. The best way to achieve this would be to provide Siberian residents with unique entrepreneurial freedoms. This does not mean privatizing the huge state-owned corporations that now operate in the region, but rather deregulating many kinds of economic
activity to allow people to acquire land for personal use; invest in infrastructure; build roads, railroads, and airfields; and develop new oil and gas fields or other natural resources. All of Europe’s prosperous colonial territories—from the American West, Canada, and Alaska to Argentina, Australia, and South Africa—were developed not through the state’s efforts, but by making full use of colonists’ enthusiasm, ingenuity, and courage. Russia should convert all of Siberia and the Far East into an economic zone free of the many taxes and regulations that the state imposes on businesses. And not just in name only—the Russian government has tried to launch new “open economic zones” before, but they all fail because they are not really open. The Siberian zone should have access to international markets, as it is situated close to seaports, and should be encouraged to develop modern industrial facilities. What Moscow loses in taxes it will more than make up in long-term economic benefits.

To achieve growth in Siberia, Russia must encourage local and, more important, foreign investment in its colony to achieve the highest possible standards of living there. The history of remote and resource-dependent territories shows that local residents typically have much higher incomes than the country’s average. If they didn’t, one could not expect either natural population growth in these regions or any internal migration to them. For example, there is a remarkable difference between Alaska’s median income of $73,400 and the U.S. median income of $55,700. The same applies to Canada’s Northwest Territories, where the median income of $112,400 (in Canadian dollars) compares very favorably to the country’s median income of $78,870 (in 2014) or Western Australia’s median household income of $72,800 (in Australian dollars) compared to Australia’s median of $66,820 (in 2008). Russia is the exception to this rule: The median monthly income in the Siberian Federal District stood at 23,584 rubles in 2015 versus the national median of 30,474.

The means of attracting investors should be simple: The Russian government could issue free licenses to explore and extract natural resources in the region on the condition that they are not exported, but instead processed into finished industrial products inside the region. Domestic prices for many natural resources are low in Russia, so such an arrangement, combined with tax-free operations, might attract big international corporations. Their arrival in the region will accelerate growth and improve living conditions. The island of Sakhalin provides an example: Firms like Exxon, RoyalDutch Shell, Mitsubishi, and Mitsui have engaged in production-sharing schemes in oil and gas exploration there since the mid-1990s, and the island has jumped from 19th to 3rd place in the ranking of Russia’s regions by per capita gross regional product.

Meanwhile, Russia should rethink the role of its eastern region in its great geopolitical “game.” The Kremlin is still obsessed with Russia’s relations with China, counting Beijing as the principal ally in its opposition to the West. But the alliance with China is less beneficial for Russia than it once was: It requires the construction of massive, immovable infrastructure that can only be used for trade with the People’s Republic; it will fix Russia’s position as an exporter of resources, since China, the world’s largest industrial power, has no interest in helping its neighbor industrialize; and, because China never tried to go north, it lacks experience in successfully developing projects in extreme Siberian conditions. Unsurprisingly, Sino-Russian cooperation programs have thus far ended in the construction of new resource-extracting facilities close to the Russian side of the border and new, sophisticated industrial plants on the Chinese side.

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It might be much more productive to establish ties with Japanese and Korean companies, which could act as the biggest investors, and with Canadian, American, and even Australian ones, which can provide the necessary expertise in the sustainable development of vast, resource-rich regions. Stronger ties with these nations would also reduce the geopolitical risk: Russia must beware of a Chinese attempt to “re-colonize” its colony, as Beijing has already resettled large numbers of citizens in the region and would settle more if investments increased. One may agree that the Russian Far East needs migrants, but it would be much better if they came from different, and even competing, countries, and if the country that supplied most of the migrants did not also supply most of the businesses operating in the region. Thus, if Russia wants to develop its Siberian colony with a minimum of risk, it has no alternative but to cooperate with the Pacific nations.

In acquiring Siberia, Russia became a continental power well before the United States did. But while the Americans succeeded in rapidly developing their Pacific coast so that California became the largest U.S. state both in terms of population and gross regional product, the Russians considered their Far East a mere military outpost in an inconsequential part of the world. Today, Russia must develop the same kind of structure for a continental power that the United States achieved more than a hundred years ago. It must develop, if not two “cores,” then two “edges”: one facing west toward Europe and the Atlantic, and the other looking east toward the Americas and the Pacific.

As Samuel Huntington argued, colonies “refer to the settlements created by people who leave a mother country and travel elsewhere to establish a new society on distant turf,” a definition that is “entirely different from a ‘colony’ in the later meaning given the term, that is, a territory and its indigenous people ruled by the government of another people.” The very term “colony” goes back to antiquity, when colonization was the most common means of exploring new territories without directly conquering them. Colonies served not so much as outposts for military expansion as “trade missions” established by the most advanced nations. According to various estimates, from the 10th to the 6th century B.C.E., the Phoenicians founded more than 200 settlements with a total population of 450,000 people all over the Mediterranean and even on the Atlantic coasts of today’s Spain and Morocco. From the 9th to the 5th century B.C.E., the Greeks founded about 1,500 colonies from the coast of the Black Sea to Gibraltar, which at their peak were inhabited by more than 1.5 million people—in remote areas a new polis might even be created in partnership with local tribes. All these cities nurtured the cultural, social, and political traditions of the regions from which their founders came, maintaining close relationships with them.

Though it embarked on an expansionist path of development together with its fellow European nations in the 15th century, Russia stands alone after half a millennium as a great power that has preserved its giant settler colony. Many of those who witnessed the scope and the wealth of Siberia believe that this land could become Russia's greatest treasure, if only Moscow is ready to recognize its real value. Today it is in both Russia's and the West's interests to develop Russia's eastern regions, creating another edge of the Western presence along the Pacific. If we understand the colonial nature of Russia’s east properly, we see that Russia and the United States, as two products of European culture and European politics, can indeed develop a sustainable partnership and consolidate their presence on the Pacific Rim. If it does not realize this agenda and secure its periphery, Russia will fail to become a successful 21st-century nation. Worse, it may follow the path of the old European empires, causing a crisis incommensurate even with that of the early 1990s.

For centuries Russia was a nation that tried to expand into neighboring lands. There is nothing shameful in that—Americans are proud of their ancestors who turned a vast land into a modern and prosperous nation. Russians must rethink their past and present in order to meet today’s challenges: They must forget about their dependencies and concentrate on their enormous colony that, if properly managed, may once again elevate Russia to a position among the world’s most powerful nations.