Yeltsin's Political Leadership: Why Invade Chechnya?

George W. Breslauer

Professor, Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley

There are many ways to frame an analysis of political leadership. One could present an interpretation of the leader's values, goals, predispositions, and the like, and of how these evolved over time. Or one could explore the interaction between the leader's personal attributes and the varied constraints within which he or she was acting. Or one could go a step farther and attempt to evaluate the individual's effectiveness as a leader, whether in the descriptive sense of success in overcoming or "stretching" constraints, or in the normative sense of deciding whether to dub that person a "great" leader.

These are all respectable exercises. But instead of choosing among them, I have decided to analyze Yeltsin's political leadership in a way that subordinates aspects of each of the above approaches to an explanatory concern: why did Yeltsin order the invasion of Chechnya in December 1994? My choice is not dictated by topicality or drama, and it will not replace discussion of the more general flow of Yeltsin's career as a politician. But I find that the Chechen invasion fits a pattern that is striking, and that may teach us something about the interaction between personality and politics in Russia and elsewhere. Hence, I will use the Chechen invasion as a case that illuminates, in a telling manner, larger issues of political leadership.

My strategy will be to present an hypothesis, to marshal theoretical and empirical support for the hypothesis, to highlight the shortcomings of alternative explanations, and thereby to formulate an agenda for further research on the politics of leadership in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia.

The Hypothesis in Brief

Yeltsin rose to power within the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) during 1989–1991, when the USSR still existed. During that period of a little more than two years, he won three popular elections: to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies (March 1989); to the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies (March 1990); and to the Presidency of the RSFSR (June 1991). The messages he propagated during and between these electoral campaigns constituted the "platform" on which he initially built his authority. Two themes predominated, the first during 1989–1990. It argued that the nomenklatura of the Communist system had been thoroughly corrupted; there was no alternative but to "throw the bums out" and radically reform or replace the system. The second theme, which predominated during 1990–1991, argued that Moscow's domination of the republics of the USSR through the institutions of Soviet imperial power was preventing Russia from flowering as a nation and a state based on democratic principles and a liberalized economy. Yeltsin was careful to avoid calling explicitly for the dissolution of the USSR; indeed, he held out the promise of a confederation. But his "war of laws" with the Center, and his assistance to Baltic and Ukrainian independence movements, had the intended effect of accelerating centrifugal forces; these would eventually bring down the Union entirely.

Once the Union was dissolved, on Christmas day of 1991, Yeltsin was the President of an independent Russia. He would now assume responsibility for positive governance, unable to build his authority largely by attacking the communist and imperial systems, and unable to blame problems on the myopia or venality of Gorbachev. He had succeeded spectacularly up to then in helping to bring down the old system. After he successfully led defiance of the attempted coup of August 1991, his authority had reached mythic proportions. He stood in a genuinely charismatic relationship to the Russian population. His approval ratings in public opinion polls were in the 80–90 percent range, and remained so despite the popular and elite disorientation engendered by the decision to dissolve the Soviet Union.

That level of approval could not last, just as charisma cannot last without the regular repetition of miraculous acts. And Yeltsin now had to face the prospect of articulating a positive program of his own in a most unpropitious context of economic dislocation and political disorientation. He launched a variant of "shock therapy" for the

economy in January 1992, averring that the short-term pain, while severe, would subside within a year. He continued the pro-Western foreign policy launched by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, promising that it would result in large-scale Western economic assistance and investment that would help Russia turn around its economy, and Western good will that would help integrate Russia into Western institutions without sacrificing Russian security, autonomy or great power status. He insisted that cool heads prevail in relations with the former republics of the USSR, and promised that a "Commonwealth of Independent States" would foster cordial relations, a common defense and economic "space," mutual security, and economic improvements that would help people forget and forgive the collapse of the Union. And he promised to build within Russia a nation-state that would be civic rather than ethnic in identity, democratic in its institutions, and a cohesive federation that combined a "strong center" with "strong regions."

By the summer of 1992, Yeltsin was beginning to reformulate his program with an idea toward making it reconcilable with several highly salient concerns within the political establishment and the society: social protection against the pain of economic transformation; and the effort to define Russia's national interests in the world, to specify the limits of her willingness to make concessions, and to reconcile accommodation with the West with maintenance of Russia's claim to great power status. Yeltsin's shift did not disown his previous commitments and promises. Rather, it sought to forge a comprehensive package that would satisfy liberals and conservatives alike, though not radicals and reactionaries.

In the real world of 1992, both within Russia and beyond, there was no way that Yeltsin could reconcile these encompassing commitments—at least not in the short run and simultaneously. They amounted to an effort to "square the circle," promising both radical economic reform and limitations on pain, Westernization and great power assertiveness, etc. To the extent that his authority or popularity hinged increasingly on his ability to demonstrate that he could foster progress simultaneously along these conflicting tracks, he would be politically hostage to the disaffection that was certain to grow within the encompassing centrist coalition he had sought to forge. To the extent that the policies he tried to implement actually made the situation worse, at home or abroad, he would find himself very much on the political defensive. To the extent that external trends (such as the proposed expansion of NATO to the east) appeared to belie expectations engendered by his program, he would be challenged to restore his credibility. By 1994, with his approval ratings at all-time low levels as progress lagged far behind both popular and elite expectations, Yeltsin did indeed find himself severely challenged to justify the quality of his leadership, even though he had secured popular ratification of a Constitution that, formally at least, shielded him somewhat from threats of impeachment or legislative vetoes of his decrees. Nor was it irrelevant that, in 1995, "election season" would begin in anticipation of parliamentary elections scheduled for December 1995 and presidential elections scheduled for June 1996.

It was in this context that Yeltsin tackled the Chechnya problem. His first "State of the Federation" address, in February 1994, was significantly entitled, "The Strengthening of the Russian (Rossiyskogo) State." Indeed, political discourse in Moscow during 1994 came to be dominated by the issue of statehood (gosudarstvennost'). A treaty relationship was struck with Tatarstan in February 1994 that gave that region within Russia an exceptional level of autonomy, more than that accorded regions within Switzerland, Spain's Catalonia, or states within the United States. But the President of Chechnya would not accept the same terms. He insisted on independence from Russia, and on pursuing policies that threatened Russia's internal security.

Thus, a continuing challenge to the territorial integrity of Russia accompanied a sharp decline in Yeltsin's political popularity and credibility. In response, Yeltsin apparently decided to do whatever was necessary to demonstrate that, at minimum, he could defend Russia's statehood. This was the promise—the authority-rebuilding strategy—implicit in his February 1994 address. He succeeded with respect to Tatarstan; he was less successful with respect to Chechnya. First he tried negotiations; after six months of fruitless effort, these failed. Then, in Summer–Fall 1994, he tried covert military action. When that failed, he invaded.

The first crucial variable in my reconstruction is authority-maintenance: the timing of the invasion is a function of Yeltsin's declining credibility and popularity. The second variable is the nature of the issue: a potentially serious challenge to the state's integrity or security. It is this combination that explains the fact and the timing of the invasion. Let me defend the plausibility of this explanation through the use of two methodologies: (1) comparison with the behaviors of other leaders in analogous circumstances; and (2) highlighting of the limits of alternative explanations. To the extent that the hypothesis is bolstered by empirical generalizations derived from analogous

cases, and to the extent that alternative explanations are either implausible entirely, or insufficient due to their exclusion of a political variable such as authority-maintenance, we may be more confident in arguing that politics is a necessary, intervening cause of the fact and timing of the invasion.

Comparative Perspectives

In an important study, Richard Ned Lebow examined great power crisis-initiation in the 19th and 20th centuries and found a striking pattern. Examining the origins of that type of crisis he called "brinksmanship," he found that, quite frequently, crisis-initiation was preceded by several mutually-reinforcing conditions. The first, an external condition, was "the expectation by policy-makers of a dramatic impending shift in the balance of power in an adversary's favor." The second, an internal condition, was the "weakness of the initiator's political system." The third and fourth incentives for brinksmanship, which could exist regardless of the level of stability of the political system, were "the political vulnerability of a leader of government" and an "intraelite competition for power." Lebow also found that leaders who initiate such crises for one or more of these reasons often display a motivated bias toward wishful thinking: the conclusion that satisfactory resolution of the crisis through brinksmanship will be much easier to accomplish than it would turn out to be.

Lebow's argument can be condensed and reformulated as follows. When a threat of international reversal coincides with a threat to regime stability or leadership authority, the threshold for risk-taking is lowered dramatically, as is the threshold for wishful thinking. This squares with considerable theoretical literature on the psychology of risk-taking, which emphasizes that risk-seeking grows in the face of a threat of loss more than it does in the face of opportunities for gain. Moreover, Lebow's findings suggest an exceptional incentive for risk-seeking and wishful thinking: the threat of a double loss: the coincidence of an external threat to state interests and an internal threat to regime stability or leadership authority.

To apply this framework to the Chechen invasion requires some modifications: Chechnya was a case of war-initiation, not a "brinksmanship" crisis; the adversary was not another great power but a subunit of the state; and the stakes were not the balance of power in the international system at large. Moreover, Lebow concentrates on "objective" conditions, whereas my hypothesis works in a subjective dimension to explain the timing of risk-seeking.

While retaining many of Lebow's insights, I think we can stretch the framework to include crises that fundamentally threaten state interests, whether these originate abroad or at home. We can also fruitfully add an ideational dimension: how leaders justify their authority, and how these justifications are defended or redefined over the course of their years in office. If leaders articulate comprehensive programs that are highly ambitious, they will find themselves on the political defensive when the unrealizability of their promises becomes evident. Their credibility will be on the line, and they will be challenged to search for means of recouping authority by credibly redefining the visions, ends or means they employ to justify their leadership. Such a focus on (what I have called) authority-maintenance allows us to vary the magnitude of the actual threat to the state, going beyond Lebow's focus on the international balance of power, without necessarily varying the magnitude of the threat to the leader's authority. For this approach goes beyond objective conditions to specify the meaning of the threat, and the meaning of the response to that threat, in the eyes of elite actors involved in assessing the credibility of leaders. When we apply this approach to a comparison of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, we find parallels that help us better to explain the timing of the invasion of Chechnya.

Soviet and Post-Soviet Comparisons

Patterns of Similarity

If we think of Khrushchev's years in power, the Brezhnev administration, and Gorbachev's time at the helm, we find a pattern that is strikingly similar to that which we observe under Yeltsin, even though the institutions and procedures of decision-making and accountability varied greatly across the four cases. In all four cases, we notice a similar act of crisis- or war-initiation at an advanced stage of the leader's years in power: the Cuban Missile Crisis in

1962; the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979; the assaults on Vilnius and Riga in January 1991; and the invasion of Chechnya in December 1994.

In all four cases, we observe a leader who had built his authority on the basis of an ambitious program of domestic and international policies that promised to achieve that which proved to be unachievable. Khrushchev promised to reform the political system in ways that would unleash popular initiative and thereby create prosperity in the near term. Abroad, he promised to forge a stable US-Soviet cooperative relationship, for purposes of tempering the arms race and attaining US acknowledgement of Soviet equality as a great power, even as he promised to outcompete the United States in third areas and to maintain his commitments to the world communist movement. Brezhnev ended the flirtation with political reform, but promised to increase the efficiency and performance of the unreformed command system, in part by forging a detente relationship with the West that would bring in large sums of investment and large imports of Western consumer goods and technologies. At the same time, however, he promised, as had Khrushchev, to outcompete the United States in third areas and maintain his commitment to the "anti-imperialist struggle." Neither the domestic nor the international conditions of the times made these promises realizable.

Similarly, Gorbachev was boxed in by commitments that proved to be mutually contradictory. He promised to democratize the Soviet Union while maintaining the leading role of the communist party and preventing centrifugal forces from gaining ascendancy over the centripetal. He promised as well to marketize the economy half-way, preventing the ascendancy of private property over collective property. In the end, these half-way houses proved illusory. And Yeltsin, as noted above, promised to rescue from the ashes of the Soviet Union a viable Russian nation-state, recognized as a great power and on its way to economic betterment, political stability and integration into Western civilization. In sum, all four leaders had built up their authority by promising far more than they could possibly deliver.

In all four cases, we find that the act of violence takes place during that "stage" of the leader's time in power when his program's unrealizability has become evident to broad circles within the political establishment or electorate, and when he must now face the political consequences of that awareness. Khrushchev's programs at home and abroad had begun to fail in 1960, and had become obviously unworkable during 1961–1962. Brezhnev's comprehensive program began demonstratively to fail during 1973–75 on the domestic front and during 197678 on the international front. His efforts to rescue the detente relationship proved to be ineffectual in 1979, while his domestic economic program fell apart simultaneously on the agricultural, industrial and energy fronts in precisely that year. Gorbachev's credibility remained high during 1987–1989, but plummeted in 1990, as polarization within the political establishment largely eliminated the centrist political base on which his authority rested, as the economy began a stagflationary tailspin, and as events in East Europe and Iraq during 1989–90 raised the level of acrimony over his foreign policy. And Yeltsin's stock of political credit plummeted after his violent dissolution of parliament in October 1993, and as the deepening economic and social crisis of 1993–1994, including popular anger at widespread criminalization, proved immune to the cures he offered.

Indeed, there is more to the political dilemma than just the fact of lost credibility or the felt need to recoup lost authority. The acts of war or crisis-initiation took place at a time when the leader was suddenly faced with having to prevent or counter precisely what he had promised he would never let happen: an imminent challenge to fundamental state interests.

In Khrushchev's case, the evidence is overwhelming that, during the twelve months preceding the October 1962 crisis, the United States exposed Soviet strategic inferiority and implied a determination to exploit it. Thus, Khrushchev's optimistic claims that the correlation of forces had been shifting decisively in favor of socialism were not only belied but reversed. In Soviet eyes, the Kennedy administration was claiming a decisive shift in the balance of power. Khrushchev's Cuban adventure was designed to prevent that.

The year, 1979, was dissimilar but analogous. The SALT II treaty, signed by Carter and Brezhnev in June, was headed for defeat in the US Congress. This, along with the Cuban Brigade crisis (August) and the disinterest in according Moscow "Most Favored Nation" status, despite record levels of emigration from the USSR that year, suggested to Soviet leaders that anti-detente forces had reemerged ascendant in American politics. Worse, all this coincided with a year-long rapprochement between the US and China, which was rapidly assuming the dimensions of an anti-Soviet military relationship. And only days before the decision to invade was finalized, NATO announced

its decision to proceed with the deployment of US Pershing-2 and cruise missiles in Europe, as a response to the deployment of Soviet SS-20s in 1977. Robert Legvold reports being told at the time that, in light of all this, "'the old bosses felt in their bones' what they must do."

In 1990, Gorbachev faced the consequences of his contradictory policies, as centrifugal forces within the USSR intensified greatly. Declarations of "sovereignty" by several republics became harbingers of tendencies toward separatism and secession. The Baltic republics in particular had already thrown down the gauntlet. Gorbachev's promise to forge a "renewed Union," with strong republics and a strong center, was being challenged frontally. Should it surprise us in retrospect that the attacks on Vilnius and Riga took place in January 1991?

On this score, the timing of the invasion of Chechnya is analogous. Having proclaimed that 1994 would be a year for strengthening the Russian state, and with the rest of his domestic and foreign policy programs under serious chellenge, Yeltsin addressed the threat from Grozny in analogous fashion: with a determination to demonstrate that he could enforce state power on the territory on Russia.

There is still another similarity among the cases. In all four cases, the leader responded to an authority crisis either by narrowing or redefining the circle of his advisers and associates, or by ceding control of policy to hardliners in the leadership. The evidence suggests that Khrushchev did not consult widely about the necessity or advisability of putting missiles into Cuba. And, as his programs were exposed as failures, he became increasingly arbitrary during 1961–1962 in purging central and local officials, in circumventing the top leadership and revealing his preferred solutions publicly, and in railroading the Presidium into accepting his schemes.

Brezhnev had neither the health nor the incentive to mimick Khrushchev's political style. But we know that the decision to invade Afghanistan was made by a small subset of the Politburo, with very little consultation among the broader political or specialist elites. The decision to invade Afghanistan, we are told, was largely a product of forceful initiatives by Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko—the heads of the KGB, armed forces and Ministry of Foreign Affairs—with strong support from Suslov (the ideological secretary of the Central Committee), and with Brezhnev's acquiescence or approval.

Gorbachev initiated his famous "shift to the right" precisely three months before the January 1991 events in Vilnius and Riga. He broke with the radical democrats in September 1990 over the "500 Days" plan for marketization of the economy, arguing that it would result in the collapse of the USSR. In November 1990, he began a process of decisive movement to the right, coopting hardliners into key leadership positions, firing his more liberal advisers, and reorganizing institutions to the advantage of the imperial "power ministries." This was the context within which Eduard Shevardnadze angrily announced his resignation as Foreign Minister, only weeks before the crackdown in the Baltics.

We know somewhat less about Yeltsin's patterns of consultation during 1994, but his advisers aver in publications and private conversations that, during 1994, Yeltsin had narrowed the circle of his advisers to the hardline group within the Security Council that is generally considered to have been the decision-making body for the Chechnya invasion. Yeltsin, we are told, also drastically curtailed his earlier practice of asking a range of political voices to state their opinions, so that he might be exposed to an array of options and definitions of the situation before making his choice.

The narrowing of consultative patterns, or the ceding of control of policymaking to hardliners, reinforces another attribute of at least three of these cases: wishful thinking about the feasibility or cost of heading off reversal by the means chosen. From all accounts, Khrushchev convinced himself that Kennedy would back down, and was genuinely surprised, confounded and frightened by Kennedy's actual reaction. From all accounts, Soviet decisionmakers assumed the Red Army would prevail fairly easily in Afghanistan, and were confounded by the quagmire they fell into. Gorbachev's calculations, like his decision-making involvement, in January 1991 were less transparent. We know he was frightened by the prospect of an uncontrolled fragmentation of the Union, and determined, at least in principle, to prevent it. We know less about whether he really believed a show of force in Vilnius and Riga could reverse the centrifugal processes in motion at the time. Finally, Yeltsin, we are told, expected the invasion of Chechnya to be easier and cleaner than it turned out to be, in part because Dudayev's internal enemies had come so close to prevailing, with covert Russian assistance, in November, and in part because his Minister of Defense promised an easy victory.

It is difficult to measure a subjective phenomenon like wishful thinking. But there does seem to be a pattern in our cases. Leaders on the political defensive after the discrediting of their programs initiate or tolerate efforts to reverse a highly adverse trend through violence or crisis. That creates a (politically) motivated bias to believe that the initiative will succeed. In at least three of our cases there is evidence for the claim that they succumbed to this temptation.

How Comparable Are the Cases?: In Search of Covariation

My argument thus far draws upon three sources of support: (1) comparability to Great Power brinksmanship in the 19th and 20th centuries, as documented by Lebow, as well as consistency with psychological theories of risk-acceptance; (2) multiple sources of comparability to other cases of brinksmanship by post-Stalin Soviet leaders during analogous stages of their administrations; and (3) a specific theory of authority-maintenance in Soviet and post-Soviet politics that predicts variations in leaders' reactions to threats to state interests, depending on the fragility of their political authority at the time. Beyond these manifold similarities, which themselves suggest the existence of enough smoke to indicate fire, are these cases fully comparable?

One objection would be methodological, and would cite my failure to explore empirically whether covariation exists on the independent and dependent variables. I have, in effect, selected my cases based solely on the dependent variable: brinksmanship during the late stages of a leader's administration. If analogous acts of brinksmanship occurred during earlier stages of administration—during the struggle for political succession, or during the intermediate period of the ascendancy of the leader and his sponsorship of a comprehensive program for progress at home and abroad—we could not credibly claim that such acts are products of the political circumstances of the stage of "decline" that follows the discrediting of the comprehensive program.

To be sure, Soviet brinksmanship or invasion had manifested themselves during earlier stages of administrations. The invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) took place during the stage of political succession struggle. Khrushchev's ultimatum to the West regarding Berlin (November 1958) took place after he had consolidated his political ascendancy. Soviet interventions, or threats to intervene, in the Middle East—in 1967, 1970 and 1973—took place at varied stages of administration. Thus, political defensiveness per se is not a prerequisite for military intervention or crisis-initiation.

I must concede that this counter-argument is difficult to refute. The best I can do at the moment, and pending further research, is to argue that the Middle East has always been a special case in Soviet foreign policy, and that the interventions in Eastern Europe were fairly predictable, based on the assumption that post-Soviet collective leaderships (before Gorbachev) were unprepared to "lose" Eastern Europe and had not lost their collective will to use force. Similarly, settlement of the German problem under Khrushchev, by threat and confrontation if necessary, was equally a matter of substantial consensus (though not unanimity) within the leadership. By contrast, military intervention of the sort opted for in our four cases was less predictable and less a matter of consensus within the leadership. The Cuban Missile Crisis, the invasion of Afghanistan, the assaults on Vilnius and Riga and the invasion of Chechnya took most outside observers by surprise, and were far from consensual decisions of the leadership as a whole.

A corollary to this methodological challenge would inquire into another aspect of covariation. It would ask whether there were times when similar conditions of political authority existed but the response to challenges to fundamental state interests was different. Put differently, were there cases during the late stages of administration that such challenges occurred but the response was not to intervene? The two examples that come to mind are Poland in 1980–81 and East Germany in 1989. The first of these is easy to explain: the Polish government's crackdown on Solidarity and imposition of marshal law were responses to Soviet threats to intervene militarily with Warsaw Pact troops if the Polish authorities did not do so themselves. In a sense, this was "surrogate" brinksmanship. The second example is somewhat more difficult. Gorbachev's failure to use military force to prevent the reunification of Germany within NATO was certainly inconsistent with past Soviet patterns of behavior. The case would not undermine our theory, however, if one interpreted Gorbachev's comprehensive program of 1987–89 as already precluding the use of force to retain control of Eastern Europe, and his fall-back position of 1990 as retaining the

right to use force to prevent disintegration of the USSR per se. There is a good deal of evidence for this interpretation.

One other case of apparent brinksmanship superficially, but strikingly, would appear to contradict my theory. In November 1991, at the early stage of his administration, Yeltsin mobilized police (MVD) forces for use against Grozny in the wake of Dudayev's declaration of Chechnya's independence of (what was then called) the RSFSR. Given that Yeltsin was not then on the political defensive, we have here still another instance of lack of covariation of the first type discussed above.

But while the case is striking because it also concerns military intervention in Chechnya, it may not challenge the theory as much as it would seem to. Yeltsin's level of commitment to this action was quite low, and the action itself barely got off the ground. A fairly small contingent of MVD forces were sent to Grozny in the expectation that their very presence would restore "order." The troops did not initiate action; they were unexpectedly fired upon by Chechen troops, and did not escalate in response. When his parliament objected to the police action, and in the face of Chechen gunfire, Yeltsin immediately backed off and recalled the contingent, even though he had the juridical right to follow through despite parliament's disapproval, and even though his Vice-President, Aleksandr Rutskoi, strenuously advocated escalation.

It is difficult to imagine Yeltsin behaving the same way once he had committed to action in November/December 1994. The determination to follow through in the later period stood in sharp contrast to the ease and rapidity of decommitment in the earlier period. Is it possible that the difference is to be explained by the greater political defensiveness of 1994? Deeper exploration of the political and psychological context of the November 1991 decisions may yet allow us to reconcile it with our theory.

How Comparable are the Cases?: Variations in the Magnitude and Character of the Threat

Clearly, the magnitude and character of the threats to fundamental state interests posed by each of our crises was dissimilar. Does that not invalidate the comparison, or at least cast doubt on the extent to which the cases are comparable? Perhaps so, but I would argue that we should not rush to such a conclusion. The four crises highlighted in this article share the quality of representing challenges to what the broad leadership at the time defined as fundamental state interests: Soviet status as a co-equal superpower (1962); Soviet capacity to prevent defeat in a war on its borders (1979); the territorial integrity of the USSR (1991); and the territorial integrity of Russia (1994). And yet, in contrast to preventing the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe from the 1950s through the 1970s, it was far from clear—to Soviet leaders and to foreign observers—that invasion or brinksmanship were required to contain or reverse the trend. In contrast to Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the Soviets had the option of employing other means to blunt the threat; they also had the option of deferring action.

If it is the case that other choices were available, consistent with maintenance of the political establishment's highest priorities, then we would need to explain why the militarized response was forthcoming. The theory I have proposed is an explicitly political one, highlighting the political meaning of the threats in the wake of the failure of the leader's earlier, comprehensive program. Put differently, the threshold for intervention was lowered by the fragile credibility of political authority at the time. Threats that otherwise might have been parried by other means were magnified, and made seemingly more urgent, by the prior political history of the administration in power.

A Political Coalitional Perspective

My comparison of the four cases has searched for patterns that transcend the unique features of each leader's personality, and that also transcend differences among them in the amount of political power they enjoyed at the time the decisions were made. By emphasizing the role of ideas, perception and choice, I have looked at problems of authority-maintenance and the patterns of behavior typical of leaders whose authority is under challenge.

Still another problem with this formulation is that it assumes the leader had substantial autonomy to make the decisions to intervene. This was probably true of Khrushchev; perhaps also true of Yeltsin. But in the case of Brezhnev, there remains some question as to the extent of his involvement in the decision, though the evidence is

consistent with an image of Brezhnev as a vetoer and approver, rather than an active initiator, of decisive action. In the case of Gorbachev, who was certainly healthy and involved in high politics, we are not sure whether he made the final decision (while retaining "plausible deniability" of responsibility), simply tolerated it, or was surprised by it. As for Yeltsin, it appears to be the case that he made the decision, but our knowledge of this matter is still quite murky.

If Khrushchev clearly initiated action on the decision, Yeltsin probably did, but Brezhnev did not and Gorbachev may not have, how can we theorize about the nature of Soviet and post-Soviet politics in a way that would explain all four of these choices? Perhaps an authority-maintenance perspective, with its focus on an individual leader making a clear choice with an eye to shoring up his political position, is too restrictive an approach. Rather than replacing it with a political-sociological approach that denies leadership autonomy and attributes outcomes solely to impersonal institutional forces (the "military-industrial complex," the "party apparatus," the "party of war" and the like), I would suggest that we merge an approach based on ideas and choice with a political-coalitional perspective. This would highlight both the political constituencies on which leaders base their policies and the relative autonomy of the leader from his political base. Let me explain.

If we compare the evolution of all four administrations, we find that they go through comparable stages to which I have already alluded: succession struggle; ascendancy; and decline. Now let us redefine these stages in terms of the breadth or narrowness of the political coalitions that the leader sought to build at the time. I would rename the stages: consolidation; expansion; and re-contraction.

Under Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev, the leader initially consolidated his power and authority by appeasing the interests of the dominant hardline constituents: the party-ideological apparatus and the military-industrial complex. This was true of Khrushchev in 1953–54, of Brezhnev in 1965–68, and of Gorbachev in 1985–86. Once they were confident of having consolidated their positions and outflanked rivals within the leadership, all three men moved toward the center of the political spectrum in the comprehensive programs they presented, expanding their coalitions to embrace more transformative policies than they had earlier advocated. After each of these programs failed, each leader re-contracted his coalition, selectively playing to the hardliners in hopes of maintaining a political base. This is how Khrushchev behaved in both domestic-economic, domestic-administrative and foreign policies from mid-1960 through the Cuban Missile Crisis. It describes Brezhnev's realigment on domestic policy after 1973–75, when the unfeasibility of his earlier promises was becoming evident, and before he became chronically ill. And it describes Gorbachev's behavior on domestic policy from September 1990 through April 1991. It was during these periods of contracted political coalition, and deferral to harder-line forces, that the interventions we have discussed took place.

Yeltsin's administration can be periodized in analogous fashion, although the content of the political constituencies was quite different. During 1990–1991, Yeltsin initially allied with the system-destroyers—the "democrats"—in order to consolidate his power and authority with those forces that had seized the political initiative at the time. This behavior took him to victory in the Russian presidential elections of June 1991, through victory against the August 1991 coup attempt, through the collapse of the USSR and through the "shock therapy" and concessionary foreign policies of early-1992. But it became increasingly clear that Yeltsin had based himself on a narrow institutional coalition. By Summer 1992, Yeltsin began to expand his coalition to incorporate a broader range of centrist political forces, appealing to selected constituencies within the military-industrial, agro-industrial and energy complexes, and identifying with a spirit of great power nationalism that had broad support across the political spectrum. When this newly-defined comprehensive program lost credibility by late-1993, Yeltsin contracted his coalition, moving still farther in a hardline direction, and basing himself more fully on the statists (gosudarstvenniki). This period of contraction coincided with the redefinition of Chechnya as an urgent matter.

Thus, all four leaders met the challenges to fundamental state interests at a time when they had contracted their coalitions and thereby advantaged hardline political constituencies. This does not mean, of course, that they were simply prisoners of others who were actually in charge. The extent to which each political leader retained freedom of maneuver, and relative autonomy from his political constituents, varied among the four. But what they shared was a political field within which hardliners had either seized the initiative, been encouraged to seize the initiative or been allowed to seize the initiative. The mobilized audience for the redefined authority-maintenance strategy was a more hardline constituency than the leader had appealed to during the middle stage of his administration.

From this perspective, Brezhnev's incapacitation and Gorbachev's denial of responsibility do not invalidate our theory. Each of these interventions was facilitated by the leader's prior decision to recontract his political coalition and to cede the initiative to hardliners.

Alternative Explanations for the Invasion of Chechnya

Let us now return to the invasion of Chechnya and consider several alternative explanations for that specific decision. To the extent that such explanations prove deficient, they open the way for further development of my preferred, political explanation. In the literature published in the Russian press, and in interviews in Moscow during summer 1995, I have been exposed to a range of interpretations. Some of these treated the outcome as largely inevitable, and likely to have been taken regardless of who was in power in the Kremlin, given Dudayav's unwillingness to compromise on a matter of fundamental Russian interest. By contrast, others viewed the outcome as far from inevitable, and as largely a reflection of Yeltsin's personality. In between stand those who viewed the outcome as the product of a process of incremental commitment, in which uncertainty and unanticipated consequences accumulated to the point that the leadership unwittingly stumbled into a desperate situation. Let me evaluate each of these explanations in turn.

Neo-Realism

A theorist of international relations who embraces neo-realist perspectives might simply argue that reference to domestic politics is unnecessary. States do not tolerate secessions, and that is what Dudayev was trying to do. Whatever the condition of Yeltsin's political authority, he would have felt the desire or need to eliminate separatism. The territorial integrity of the state, and the territorial reach of state power, are "first principles" for decision-makers, whatever their levels of political legitimacy or defensiveness.

While superficially appealing, this strikes me as an overgeneralization. For one thing, this theoretical perspective cannot explain the peaceful collapse of the USSR. For another, it cannot explain most of the previous three years of Moscow's relations with Chechnya before the invasion. Yeltsin's initial response to the Chechen declaration of independence in November 1991 was as neo-realists might have expected: he impulsively called upon Russian security forces to quell the secession. But his parliament's response did not conform to neo-realist expectations; nor did Yeltsin's quick reversal of his decision.

Thereafter, the Chechnya issue remained on the backburner for over two years. Dudayev continued to proclaim his republic's independence from Russia, and Moscow did not press the issue, instead striking deals with other republics and regions that granted them varying degrees of autonomy short of secession. Why did Moscow essentially ignore Dudayev for over two years? And why did Chechnya come to the front burner in 1994, with Moscow ending its tolerance? Without factoring in considerations other than invariable state interests, one cannot persuasively answer these questions.

Incremental Engagement

From this perspective, the Russian leadership was incrementally "sucked into" an ever-deepening commitment in Chechnya. If the neo-realist perspective eliminates contingency, the incrementalist raises contingency to a high level.

According to this viewpoint, the following facts are salient. Moscow engaged Dudayev in intensive negotiations already at the beginning of 1994, as part of a larger effort to develop treaty relations with the most autonomy-seeking ethnic republics. However, in contrast to the government of Tatarstan, Dudayev was unwilling to accept maximal autonomy within Russia. The negotiations lasted for about six months, at which time Moscow had the option of dropping the issue or of escalating the pressure. Moscow chose to help arm and supply the resistance to Dudayev, and to engage in covert operations to attempt to topple him, but to deny involvement if the covert operations became public. These operations almost succeeded in November 1994, but then suddenly failed at the end of that month. At that point again, Yeltsin could have dropped the issue. But the media in Moscow seized upon

the issue and publicized Russian military involvement in the Chechen resistance. This publicity challenged the government to demonstrate that it could finish a job it had started and could avoid defeat on the part of a secessionist force.

This interpretation cannot explain why, after the failure of negotiations in summer 1994, Moscow decided to escalate. What prevented Moscow from returning the issue to the backburner, where it had stood throughout 1992–1993? Why could Moscow not have continued to live with Dudayev's criminal challenges, as long as he did not engage in frontal assaults against Russian vital interests, such as sabotage of the oil pipeline or pogroms against ethnic-Russian citizens of Chechnya? The argument that Chechnya had become the center of a vast criminal underworld, running arms and drugs, and engaged in hijackings of trains and theft of oil and gas, may have weighed on the minds of Russian decision-makers, all the more so because the incidence of such criminalization had grown during 1991–1994. It is plausible that the growth and spread of Chechnya's intrusion on Russian economic and social interests raised the cost to Russian decision-makers of temporizing. But it would still need to be demonstrated that most decision-makers considered it urgent to end those challenges as soon as possible, rather than to live with and contain them, or to blunt them only by means short of invasion.

Similarly, after the defeat of covert operations, it is difficult to believe that the media provoked Yeltsin and his associates to do what they were otherwise disinclined to do. They could have disengaged and simply tried to contain the Chechnya problem; they could have blockaded the region; they could have attempted further covert operations, including perhaps further efforts to assassinate Dudayev; they could have stepped up their efforts to bolster the political opposition to Dudayev in anticipation of Chechen elections scheduled for October 1995; they could perhaps have found still other ways to temporize. Instead, they chose to invade. Rather than blame publicity, embarrassment or anger for their decision, even if these factors played a role, I am more inclined to seek an explanation that encompasses the entire, year-long pattern of events. Why was Yeltsin so determined to force the issue toward formal resolution, and to prevail, in precisely this year? I have difficulty answering this question without reference to the political difficulties in which he found himself, including both the popular alienation caused by many of his programs, the announced centrality of the issue of statehood in 1994, and the prospect of parliamentary elections in December 1995. The media hype and attendant emotions might have played upon, and interacted with, these considerations; but they did not create them.

The strength of this explanation, however, lies in its highlighting of the stages through which Russian policy proceeded during 1994. It is indeed possible that the political stakes, and the personal reactions, were different at each stage, and that these changes made it more difficult, politically and emotionally, to disengage rather than escalate. When we have more information about the decision-making process during 1994, we may be able to specify more fully the strengths and weaknesses of this perspective.

Personality: The Need for Struggle

According to this interpretation, the invasion of Chechnya is simply a reflection of Yeltsin's personality. From this perspective, Boris Nikolaevich has a personality that is intolerant of ambiguity and predisposed to attack problems and conquer them through a titanic struggle. Chechnya was simply the most recent in a series of such campaigns.

Certainly there is truth in the claim that the invasion was consistent with a behavioral tendency that Yeltsin has displayed throughout his life. Any biography of Yeltsin reveals that, while a provincial party leader in Sverdlovsk, he was oriented toward attacking problems in traditional Bolshevik fashion. His behavior in some respects paralleled that of Khrushchev: an uncorrupted campaigner who expected others to work as hard as he, and who was not averse to boxing the ears of slackers. In his years as head of the Moscow party organization (1985–1987), Yeltsin mobilized his enormous reserves of energy for a struggle against the political machine that had run the city for years under his predecessor, Victor Grishin. He wanted to attack the problem frontally and to destroy entrenched and corrupt officials, in part to ensure his own domination of city politics. As he lamented at one point, he was dismayed to find that corruption went very, very deep and that there seemed to be no end to the number of officials it might be necessary to purge to uproot it.

When frustrated in trying to implement perestroyka by means of struggle and attack within Moscow, Yeltsin identified the Central Committee Secretariat, and Yegor Ligachev in particular, as the obstacle to his doing what

needed to be done. His frustration built up until it overflowed. Breaking the norms of unity and secrecy within the Politburo, Yeltsin rose before a meeting of the Central Committee in Fall 1987 to denounce the slow pace of reform and to blast Ligachev as an obstructionist.

He paid a huge political price, and allegedly suffered a heart seizure in consequence. But when Gorbachev instituted multiple-candidate elections to a real parliament, the conditions existed for Yeltsin to launch a new struggle: this time for political resurrection. The 1989 electoral campaign in Moscow allowed Yeltsin to return to the fray in fighting corruption and communist apparatchik domination in the name of the people, not the party. The content of his struggle had changed, as had the legitimizing principles, but the intensity had not. He vanquished his officially-sanctioned opponent, sweeping 90 percent of the vote in Moscow.

His political resurrection continued thereafter, as he struggled through two more popular elections, again with a platform that offered people a binary choice: either the communists or the democrats. Simultaneously during 1990–91, he struggled against Gorbachev and the Soviet institutions that were preventing Russia from defining and pursuing its own destiny. He dramatically resigned from the Communist Party in July 1990, an act which, by his own admission, was psychologically very difficult for him. These battles were capped by the greatest struggle of all: against the August 1991 coup attempt, during which Yeltsin mobilized all his inner reserves to defy the "Emergency Committee" in the name of "the people" and the "Russian nation."

As we survey the landscape of Yeltsin's first two years as President of independent Russia, we see periodic manifestations of this shock trooper approach to politics and policy: the introduction of "shock therapy" for the economy in January 1992; the referendum of April 1993, in which the populace was again offered a binary choice between the "good guys" ("democrats") and the "bad guys" ("old guard"); the dissolution of Parliament in September 1993 and its violent dispersal two weeks later. The invasion of Chechnya, by this accounting, was simply Yeltsin's issue of choice in 1994, and his typical way of solving problems. The extreme variant of this explanation would treat Chechnya as Yeltsin's annual dose of intense struggle, required to achieve psychodynamic catharsis. If there had not been a Chechnya, he would have had to invent one.

Rejoinder on Personality: The Limits of Struggle

The problem with the interpretation I have just outlined is that it sells Yeltsin vastly short, and ignores the other side of his personality and record of achievement. He is far more multifaceted than a mere recitation of his struggles would suggest. For one thing, his communist upbringing instilled in him a measure of prudence and pragmatism that constituted a competing set of predispositions within his personality. For another thing, his experience during 1989 interacting with democrats, Andrei Sakharov in particular, appears to have given him a clearer sense of what he stood for to supplement his sense of what he was struggling against. This amounted to a learning process—specifically, an ambivalence-enhancing process—that checked or competed with his authoritarian dispositions.

Indeed, we can point to many aspects of Yeltsin's policy record that reflect a prudence, pragmatism, tolerance of ambiguity, and conscious avoidance of a "struggle" mentality. During his struggles with Gorbachev in 1990–91 over relations between the republics and the Center, for example, "one of his most spectacular political achievements...was the skillful separation of the notion of 'Russian' from the notion of 'Soviet.'" This was a by-product of struggle, to be sure, but it also required subtle political tactics and innovative rhetoric, for Yeltsin was simultaneously trying to avert a chaotic collapse of the Union.

At the same time, Yeltsin continuously propagated a liberal-civic, inclusive and tolerant definition of Russian citizenship, resisting and denouncing the ethnic-exclusive definitions being advanced by others within the elite. Thus, while reclaiming the independence and glory of Russia as a state, he insistently referred to his constituents as Rossianye, not Russkiye. The terminological difference was crucial. The first denoted residency of the territory of the Russian state; the second denoted ethnic Russian heritage. Yeltsin was arguing that the 30 million ethnic non-Russians living in Russia were of fully equal citizenship status. By implication, at times explicitly, he was denouncing those politicians who would conduct the political "struggle" within Russia by playing the ethnic card.

With respect to centrifugal forces within Russia itself, Yeltsin also resisted the attack approach. During 1990–91, when Gorbachev was struggling to hold the Union together, Yeltsin traveled to the Russian provinces, which were

also demanding "autonomy" and "sovereignty" from both the Soviet and the Russian Center, and told them to "take all the autonomy you can swallow." Rather than resist a tidal wave, he chose to ride it. But unlike Lenin, who did the same in 1917 in order to destroy the Provisional Government, but who then tried to rein things back in by force once the wave had subsided, Yeltsin adopted a more compromising approach after Russia became independent. He struck deals with individual regions and ethnic republics, sought continuously to negotiate a Federation Treaty, and tried to create new structures within which regional leaders could be represented. His treaty with Tatarstan in 1994 gave that republic a great deal of autonomy in managing its own affairs.

Now it may be true that Yeltsin in many respects lacked a coherent overall strategy, and was more reacting to events than shaping them. It may also be true that his appointment of presidential representatives in place of elected regional leaders in Fall 1991 was an effort to recentralize power. And, admittedly, the Constitution he forced through in December 1993 was a recentralizing document that provided both for a strong presidency and a strong center. Nonetheless, Yeltsin had the option of adopting much more forceful measures at numerous points in time, and his Constitution is a document that bears relatively little relationship to the real balance of power between the center and the regions. Instead of forcing the issue, as he did in Chechnya, Yeltsin opted for negotiation and mutual compromise. The results may have been incoherent or unenforceable, but they emanated from a politician who resisted a "storming" approach to the problem.

Moscow's relations with Ukraine are another striking example of Yeltsin's capacity for prudence and restraint. After the collapse of the USSR, the response of many "democrats" in Moscow was anger and frustration. They had not counted on a permanent separation of Russia from Ukraine and Byelorussia, or from the "Russian-speakers" in northern Kazakhstan. Many of them demanded border revisions, the return of Crimea from Ukraine to Russia, and other such measures to prevent disintegration from cleanly following the territorial lines of the USSR's republics as of 1991. Even Yeltsin's office made threatening noises along these lines.

But Yeltsin quickly backtracked and, for over three years, has attempted to negotiate with Ukrainian leaders (Kravchuk, for the most part) pragmatic compromises over the thorny issues of the division of Red Army forces and assets stationed in Ukraine, possession of the Black Sea Fleet and the location of its bases, the status of Crimea, and Ukrainian nuclear weapons. Rather than embrace either a capitulationist or a maximalist position on these issues, Yeltsin has hugged the middle of the policy spectrum and sought to: (1) split the difference with Kiev over the Red Army and the Black Sea fleet; (2) discourage Crimean transfer from Ukraine but encourage a federal or confederal treaty relationship between Kiev and Simferopol (the capital of Crimea); and (3) work with the United States on a structure of incentives that would reward Ukrainian denuclearization. He has repeatedly denounced as irresponsible those within Moscow's political establishment who have demanded Ukrainian capitulation on these issues and who have tried to "ethnicize" Ukrainian politics by claiming that Russians within Ukraine are being systematically persecuted.

Similarly with respect to the Baltics, Yeltsin pushed hard for protection of the rights of Russian minorities within Estonia and Latvia. He threatened to delay withdrawal of Russia's troops from those countries until citizenship laws adopted in Tallinn and Riga became more accommodating of Russian-speakers. In the end, mutual compromises were struck and Russian troops withdrew.

Yeltsin has also adopted centrist positions, and has sought pragmatic compromises, in relations with the United States and Western Europe. This has not been easy. For about six months after the collapse of the USSR, he continued Gorbachev's concessionary foreign policies (now, at the expense of foreign aid to Afghanistan and Cuba) and liberal-internationalist justifications for them. But this could not last for long. An independent Russia would have to define its "national interests" as it struggled to define its national identity.

The Soviet Union under Gorbachev had followed a concessionary foreign policy toward the West that had become increasingly difficult to justify. Yeltsin briefly continued with concessions in hopes of winning massive Western economic assistance and investment. But, in the difficult new geo-political and geo-strategic circumstances following the Soviet collapse, and with the rise of the nationalist right-wing in Russian politics, it became increasingly difficult to justify cow-towing to Washington's definitions of Russian national interest. We have therefore witnessed a "toughening" of Russian rhetoric and policy toward NATO, ratification of arms control treaties, Yugoslavia, and arms sales to Third World countries. But this has been a correction, not a pendular swing, and the record of Yeltsin's relations with "the West" during 1992–1995 has been a record of centrist effort to

influence Western policy toward positions more accommodative of Russian interests, rather than a record of right-wing reaction. He has held the line in favor of pragmatic centrism even as anti-Western sentiment has risen dramatically within Moscow's political circles and intelligentsia.

My characterization of Yeltsin's posture vis-a-vis Ukraine, Baltic troop withdrawals, and East-West relations as restrained and prudent should not be misunderstood. I am neither endorsing the specific policies nor ignoring the many examples of blackmail and and military pressure he has employed in quietly expanding Russian military rights in Georgia, Azerbaidjan and Tajikistan, and in exploiting the vulnerabilities of states in the "Near Abroad" to force them to make political, economic and military concessions to Russia. For our purposes, however, the issue is not whether Yeltsin's policies are self-denying or not, but whether his personalistic penchant for frontal assaults on problems displays itself sufficiently broadly to qualify as the likely explanation for the Chechnya invasion. Clearly, Yeltsin's problem-solving style contains a broader repertoire than that.

Similarly, my observations about Yeltsin's dealings with regional leaders of Russia, and his liberal-inclusive definition of Russian citizenship, is meant to show that he has explicitly resisted the storming mentality of portions of the nationalist right wing in Russian politics. It is not meant to prove that he is a "democrat." This is a complex but separate issue that I will not address at length. Certainly Yeltsin has displayed a preference for personalistic leadership based on plebiscitarian forms of legitimation. This combination ensures that a populist mentality, and a predisposition to mobilize "the people" or "the nation" against institutionalized political forces, will at times shape his responses to dilemmas, as indeed we have seen in the many examples of his struggles. But personalistic leadership can be used in defense of radical, conservative or reactionary policies. Personalistic leadership perhaps made possible Yeltsin's deals with Kravchuk over Ukraine, his deals with some regional leaders within Russia, and his resistance to reactionary voices regarding the definition of Russian nationalism. But personalism per se has not always led to populist mobilization and plebiscitarian legitimation of policies. And that is the issue when we ask whether a personal need for struggle explains the decision to invade Chechnya.

Conclusion

In-depth research into the background of the Chechnya invasion may yet undermine my preferred explanation for the decision. Specifically, it would be crucial to know more about the extent to which Yeltsin felt himself to be politically on the defensive in 1994. This may be the weakest empirical foundation of my argument, for we know that relations between parliament and executive during that year were far more stable than they had been during the year preceding adoption of the December 1993 Constitution, which provided for a strong presidency and a weak legislature, and which formally shielded the President against easy impeachment. If Yeltsin believed in the strength of these formal arrangements, he should not have felt himself exceptionally on the political defensive. He could then have faced the Chechnya issue with less of a sense that his ability to prevail that year was crucial to his political security. Presumably, he could have reacted differently to the failure of negotiations with Dudayev and/or the failure of covert operations. New revelations may help us to sort this out, though they can never conclusively prove the counterfactuals. In the meantime, I prefer to stick with my theory for the following reason.

I would argue that politics in weakly institutionalized regimes works somewhat differently from politics in strongly institutionalized regimes. Politics in Moscow, both Soviet and post-Soviet, has been marked by large measures of uncertainty about the tenure of leaders in office. These leaders and their political dependents have therefore felt the need constantly to worry about how to insure themselves against premature political retirement. In contrast to leaders in more strongly institutionalized (or constitutionalized) regimes who may seek only "minimal winning coalitions" on policy, both Soviet and post-Soviet leaders have felt the need to overinsure themselves. This may explain why they all embraced programs that promised a great deal to almost everybody, and that therefore proved impossible to fulfill. In the presence of dashed promises, the insecurity of tenure becomes ever-more-salient and the leader becomes ever-more-sensitive to a growingly hostile or skeptical climate of opinion within the political establishment. When threats to fundamental state interests, at home or abroad, coincide with this stage of an administration, the conditions sufficient for brinksmanship or military intervention may have crystallized.

To be sure, Brezhnev in 1979 cannot be described as a leader seeking to insure himself against premature political retirement. Indeed, from all accounts, Brezhnev was at that time bemoaning the fact that he wanted to quit and enjoy his last years, but was hemmed in by a political coterie that insisted on his remaining in power. As the leader of a

vast and powerful patronage machine, Brezhnev's retirement would have threatened the power, security and privileges of his entire coterie. It was that large coterie that had a stake in maintaining its political credibility. Or, in political-coalitional terms, the hardline forces to which Brezhnev had earlier ceded the political initiative had a stake in maintaining its hold on power and authority.

The differences among our cases, then, are real, and can be elaborated further without undermining the theory. For example, both the levels of political defensiveness surrounding the leader and coterie, and the magnitude of the threats to state interests, varied across the cases. Hence, militarized responses may be products of a quotient, in which, say, an "objective" threat of very high magnitude may interact with a degree of political defensiveness that is not that high; or in which a lower-magnitude "objective" threat may interact with very high levels of levels of political defensiveness. What this theory could not withstand would be a demonstration that militarized responses are products of only one factor or the other.

For example, how threatening was Dudayev's claim of Chechen independence? The international community refused to recognize it, and the Chechen authorities could not ally with other states to affirm their independence from Moscow. Moreover, some elites in Moscow considered the existing level of Chechen defiance to be quite tolerable, while others even advocated divesting Russia of the burden of holding onto a rebel, Muslim region. But whether the Chechnya situation was tolerable or threatening depended ultimately on subjective considerations: both one's vision of Russia and, in the case of the top leaders, the extent to which one's political authority was linked to a particular vision.

Thus, both threats and defensiveness can perhaps fruitfully be treated as subjective categories. To specify the magnitude of threats and defensiveness that lead to militarized responses, we must first specify the visions and expectations ascendant within the political arena at the time, and the extent to which a leader's, or coalition's, political standing is tied to the realization of those visions.

Hence, it would be useful to glean additional new evidence about Yeltsin's levels of perceived political vulnerability in 1994. It would also be useful to explore the sources of the ascendancy of the issue of statehood in 1993–1994. When did this discourse begin to rise in salience? At whose initiative? Did Yeltsin initiate, encourage, or tolerate it? What exactly did different political actors mean by statehood, and by the need to "strengthen" it? Why did Yeltsin link his authority so closely to the "strengthening of the Russian state" in his February 1994 address? Did his rhetoric imply a preferred method of "strengthening" statehood? Did it imply a price at which such strengthening was no longer worth it?

These empirical issues may be easier to document than is the more intangible matter of political defensiveness. But they are equally important. For the theory I have advanced presupposes a threat to the integrity of state power. If "tolerating Dudayev" was not defined by Yeltsin, or by many significant politicians, as such a threat to the "strength" of the "state," it would be difficult to explain the invasion as a product of Yeltsin's felt political needs. Were that the case, we would have to search elsewhere for the explanation.

A political "explanation" does not deny the role of personality, incremental engagement and invariant state interests in decision-making processes. Rather, it treats these as insufficient to explain the outcome of this case, or to explain variation among analogous cases. An intervening political variable is presumed to be necessary. In some respects a political interpretation may be incompatible with some forms of other explanations. If one finds significant dissensus within the leadership over whether to invade Chechnya, for example, it becomes difficult to endorse the perspective that the invasion was inevitable because, allegedly, "states do not tolerate secessions."

With such exceptions, though, a full specification of necessary and sufficient conditions would probably include elements of personality, politics and unanticipated consequences. The burden of this article has been to make the case that similarities and differences among a larger number of cases may be inexplicable without attention to a perhaps-decisive, political factor.