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Tremors of Arab Youthquake Rumble East

By Richard Lourie

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Stability is the hot new commodity. If you can't deliver that, it doesn't matter much what else you can supply. This is especially true of energy. The current upheavals in the Arab world have suddenly cast Russia in a favorable light. Not long ago the buzz was that the Mikhail Khodorkovsky case proved that Russia was no place to invest. Now, however, Russia's power vertical is viewed not as a source of caprice and oppression but rather of dependable equilibrium.

The surge in the price of oil is filling the Kremlin's crisis-depleted coffers. Total, the major French energy company, recently invested $4 billion in Russian gas projects, its chief executive Christophe de Margerie citing Russia's "safer environment for investment." Prime Minister Vladimir Putin seconded the sentiment: "I am confident that the real long-term interests of the European economy lie with our resources. Nothing matters more than stability."

Repercussions of the Arab "youthquake" are being felt outside the Middle East. Oil-rich Azerbaijan, already being ruled by the son of its previous dictator, former KGB General Heidar Aliyev, had its first Facebook rally on Friday. It didn't come to much, but it rattled the authorities enough to cause a wave of arrests that makes a regime look both vicious and fearful.

Run by an aging, sonless tyrant, Uzbekistan is nervous too. State television has been attacking both Muslim extremists and "satanic" Western rock and roll. Meanwhile, in a sign of both corruption and anxiety, last year Uzbeks became the second-fastest growing nationality purchasing luxury residential properties in London (average sale $3.3 million). The fate of the country can be tracked in the local equivalent of TV Guide and London posh real-estate sales.

If Russia has benefited from the turmoil in the Arab world, China has gotten a case of the jitters as bad as Israel's. Two things worry China most — that the example set by the Tunisian and Egyptian masses will be emulated by their own sizable restive populations in Tibet and Islamic Turkic-speaking Sinjiang. Tibet is being tightened up for, as the regional party head put it, "without stability, Tibet will not develop." Foreigners are banned from Tibet in March, the 52nd anniversary of National Uprising Day and of the 2008 disturbances. Foreign correspondents are again being subjected to intense surveillance. Beijing is clearly concerned about the threat from within — for the first time Chinese spending on internal security ($95 billion) surpassed that of military spending ($91.5 billion).

But China is not only worried about its own internal tensions; China depends on Central Asia for a considerable portion of its energy needs. Disruptions in energy-producing and, just as importantly, energy-transshipping countries can damage the Chinese economy and thus endanger prosperity, the principal source of the Communist Party's legitimacy. China buys a lot of natural gas from Turkmenistan, but it has to be transshipped. Lately, China has been turning to neighboring Kazakhstan for more of its energy needs — 40 percent of its uranium, for example. China National Petroleum Corp. is developing gas deposits in western Kazakhstan for direct export to China via a pipeline under construction. Kazakhstan offers both stability and proximity, an unbeatable combination. The only problem is that a good percentage of energy shipments over land have to enter China via Sinjiang, which can easily become "enemy territory" subject to sabotage if disturbances break out.

Stability may have become the hottest commodity, but, as recent events have demonstrated, it has a highly unpredictable shelf life.

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