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The Cold Rush

By Richard Lourie

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In the beginning, Russia's history ran on a North-South axis. Vikings from the North conquered the Slavs of the South, intermarrying until they were assimilated. The next great force to shape Russia came from the East — the Golden Horde that shattered the country and ruled it for 250 years, severing it from the West.

Freed of the Mongols, Russia regrouped around Moscow, and now the push was to the East. The period between Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great was one of eastward expansion across Siberia to the Pacific.

From Peter the Great until today, Russia's orientation has been westward. Only Western ideas, institutions and technologies could make Russia competitive. The two great attempts at conquering Russia also came from the West — Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler in 1941. But it was a Western idea, communism, that conquered it.

Now the East beckons Russia again — the Russian Far East and Asia. China, Japan, and South Korea are all good customers for Russian gas and oil. Russia is discussing leasing 200,000

hectares of farmland to perennially starving North Korea. (But what will they pay with — ginseng as they offered the Czechs in payment of a $10 million debt? If anything, that might help the Russian birth rate.) And Russia is, of course, worried that China is eyeing the vast underpopulated Far East. There has been talk of a Siberian-Alaskan "chunnel" that would move goods by rail faster and cheaper than by container ship. Not new, this idea has been around since Nicholas II signed off on it in 1906 and probably will not prove productive. Besides, the needle in the compass of Russian history has begun pointing north again.

Russia is being impelled northward for obvious reasons. The Kremlin refuses to diversify the economy or society via a more independent judiciary, free press and opposition parties. Gas and oil will continue to account for more than 60 percent of Russia's exports. The Russian budget will continue to need oil around $120 a barrel to balance. And the deal between the rulers and the ruled will continue to be an exchange of prosperity for compliance. Therefore, Russia will continue to be driven to find more oil and gas.

Since the Siberian fields are depleting, the imperative now is to explore the Arctic fields that could hold 90 billion barrels of oil. This is why Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has just signed a multibillion-dollar exploration deal with ExxonMobil. The other nations with a claim to the Arctic — the United States, Canada, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Sweden — have balanced and diversified economies and so the treasures under the ice, though of course desirable, will not be a matter of life and death as they will for Russia.

Preparations for future conflict have already been observed. The Russians have resumed strategic bomber flights. The United States has sent nuclear-powered attack subs to the region.

History usually moves too slowly, or too suddenly, for its direction to be spotted in advance. But this time seems to be different. Russia's internal dynamics are propelling it along a definite course, one that could prove dangerous. The U.S. government has begun taking the situation more seriously, sending Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to a May meeting of the Arctic Council in Greenland, the first time anyone of Cabinet-level has attended. A comprehensive agreement is imperative for the Arctic nations to avoid any politically messy situation, thereby freeing them up to deal with the ecologically messy situations that are bound to occur.

Richard Lourie is author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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