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Stalin's Worst Nightmare

By Richard Lourie

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Drunk after a late night with his cronies in the Kremlin, Josef Stalin collapses into bed. He dreams he has traveled through time and is reading the April 8 edition of The Moscow Times. The first line of one article terrifies him: "Activists from the Communist Party have begun a hunger strike to protest plans to allow NATO to use an air base in Ulyanovsk as a transit point for Afghanistan."

"What? Communists on a hunger strike? But the people in power never go on hunger strikes, and so that can only mean ...

"And the communists are on a hunger strike to protest what? Letting NATO use a Russian air base? How can you let your mortal enemy establish a military air base on your territory? And establish it in Ulyanovsk, the very town where Lenin was born!"

What would have been unthinkable for Stalin is now, less than 60 years after his death, perfectly possible. Palmerston's dictum: "There are neither eternal allies nor eternal enemies. Only interests are eternal ... " should perhaps be amended to read, "And this is what people

eternally forget."

Russia and the United States learned to heartily detest each other during the Cold War. It became a habit, and habits are easy to fall back on, especially in the heat of the moment or for political needs. Mitt Romney can glibly call Russia the United States' "No. 1 geopolitical foe" and then backpedal when satiric jibes started flying at him. One of the best was by blogger Ben Domenech: "Good news: A nation with a GDP one-tenth of ours, with a defense budget one-fourteenth of ours, is our No. 1 geopolitical enemy."

Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the spectrum, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went so far as to call Russia an "ally." There's more to be said for her position than Romney's original stance. Although Russia has done some fairly despicable things lately — rigging the parliamentary elections, siding with Syria, treating the new U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul quite shabbily — it has also done some positive things as Clinton pointed out: lining up against Iran and allowing the United States and its allies to move military equipment across Russian land and air space into Afghanistan.

Soon enough, it will be time to move enormous amounts of men and materiel out of Afghanistan, and the Russians will be important in that effort as well. The Russians have also been good about letting the United States hitch rides to space now that the shuttle program has ended. It would have had an ideal opportunity to gloat.

What doesn't get enough mention is Moscow's decision to break its contract to sell Iran the

S-300 anti-aircraft and anti-missile system. This has transformed the situation in the Persian Gulf, allowing time for Washington's efforts of sanction and diplomacy to work, staying Israel's impatient hand.

Russia and the United States will never be allies as in World War II when they were united by a single, truly hated enemy. At best, they will remain prickly rivals cooperating when their interests coincide. With too many internal problems of their own, neither Russia nor the United States can afford the romance of the mortal enemy.

Both sides must remember that what seems impossible today could be commonplace tomorrow. One can even imagine some current Russian leader dreaming that he's reading an article in some future edition of The Moscow Times that begins: "Today, Russia's first openly lesbian president declared ... "

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

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