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A Recipe for Floating Arctic Chernobyls

By Richard Lourie

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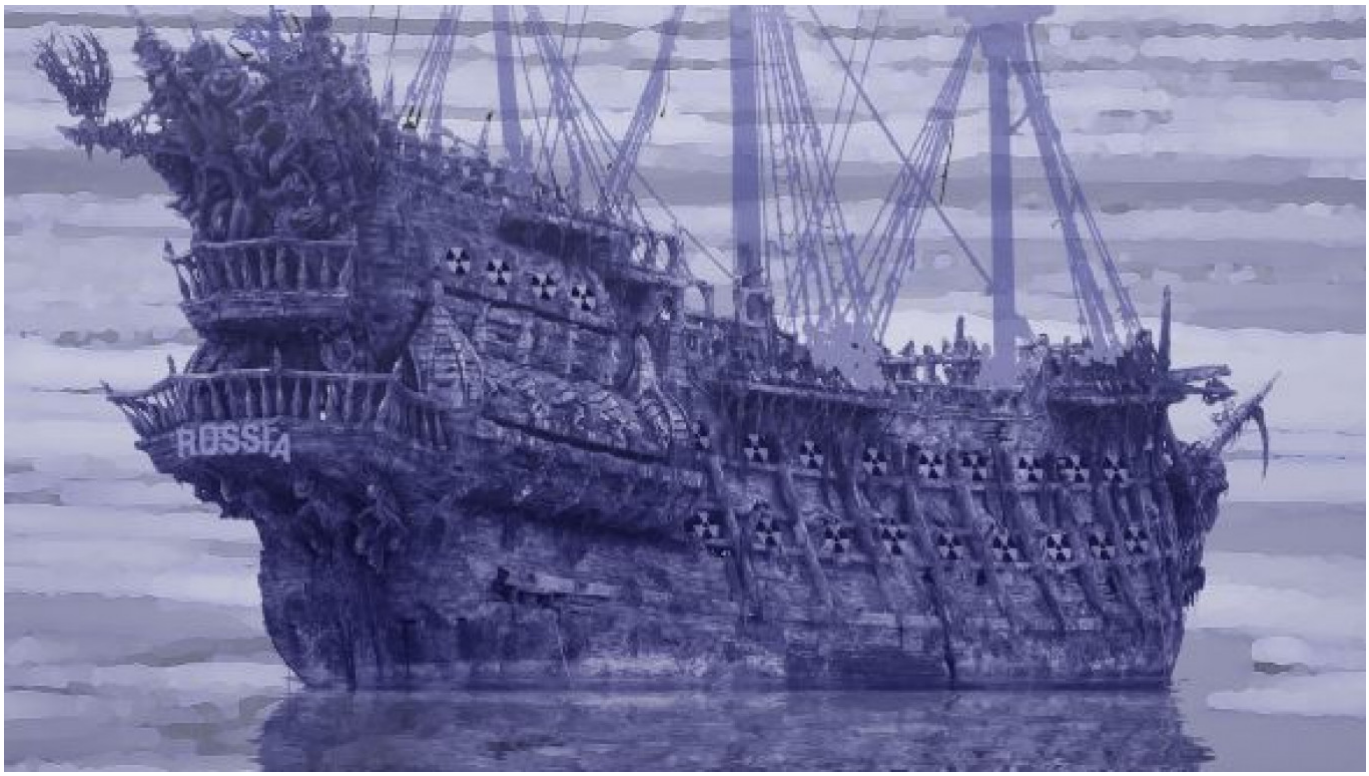

I must have been down with the flu or sailing up the coast of Burma, but somehow I missed the story when it first came out. When I finally ran across a 2009 article from The Observer while doing research on the Arctic a couple of weeks ago, the story struck me as somewhere between hilarious and calamitous. Its opening sentence read, "Russia is planning a fleet of floating and submersible nuclear power stations to exploit Arctic oil and gas reserves." This would not have been alarming news if the Norwegians were doing it, but when the Russians are building nuclear power stations in the middle of the Arctic, it causes a lot of concern — particularly considering the fact that they have historically equated caution with cowardice.

But wait — it gets worse. The prototype station, the Akademik Lomonosov, has been pronounced perfectly safe by Andrei Fomichev, the head of the St. Petersburg shipyard that is building it. In a Reuters story titled "Can Nuclear Power Plants Float?" Fomichev said: "All possible emergency situations have been tested. Safety testing began under the Soviet Union." Now that's reassuring. Nobody could have been more safety conscious than the Soviet Union, which tested 138 nuclear weapons in the Arctic from 1955 to 1990. During this period, it dumped 14 nuclear reactors into the Arctic seas and scuttled close to 20 submarines,

sometimes in only 30 meters of water when international conventions require 3,000 meters.

In fact, the Soviet radioactive legacy may even pose a greater threat to the Arctic than the floating nuclear power plants. The environmental group Bellona cites a Russian Academy of Sciences study that says, "When drill bits hit the ocean floor, there is a danger of disinterring a vast portion of the Soviet Union's irresponsible nuclear legacy, which threatens to contaminate at least a quarter of the world's Arctic coastline."

But floating nuclear power plants are hazardous enough and still preventable. James Brooke, in a Voice of America column from Dec. 22, 2011, chronicles the Kolskaya oil rig disaster. It was being towed back to port two months after the end of the safe deadline for towing rigs. The captain called his wife saying "the mission was suicidal." The rig was carrying 67 people, most of whom were not needed aboard. The rig capsized, and nearly everyone on board died. This also highlighted the inadequacy of Russian rescue capabilities, an essential ingredient of any serious Arctic exploitation program.

Who would believe that Russian floating nuclear power plants would be any better protected from tsunamis, which is a real risk in the Kamchatka Sea, or from terrorists, collision, leakage or any of the other myriad hazards inherent in such a venture better than the captain and crew of the Kolskaya were protected?

President Vladimir Putin has tagged tranquilized polar bears and called for an Arctic "spring cleaning," but those deeds and words are meant more to reassure foreign critics and investors and win votes than to rouse his nation to action. The fact is that Russia remains a petro-state and has done too little to diversify its economy. As its older oil fields continue to yield less gas and oil, the Arctic, with its immense oil reserves, will assume much greater importance for Russia than for the other Arctic-coastline countries — the United States, Canada, Norway and Denmark (via Greenland) — whose economies are much less dependent on oil exports. Moscow has already announced that the Arctic will be a vital interest by 2020 and has filed a claim to a huge (285.000 square kilometers) portion of the undersea continental shelf claiming it to be an extension of Russian territory as provided for by the Law of the Sea. That claim, which is possibly justified and definitely controversial, has yet to be given its final ruling. The Russians are proceeding along the diplomatic and legal fronts but have also been engaging in displays of bravado and force. In 2007, strategic bombers resumed flights over the Arctic, while a Russian submersible planted a titanium Russian flag on the sea floor at the North Pole.

The U.S. disputes Russia's claim to control over the Northern Sea Route, a lucrative source of revenue as the Arctic ice cap continues to recede. Using this route, sailing distance from Japan to Holland could be cut by 40 percent in the near future. Admiral James Stavridis, supreme allied commander for Europe, noted the increased potential for conflict in the Arctic while also seeing competition and cooperation as possibilities. But even in a best-case scenario, floating nuclear power plants seem like a very bad idea.

On March 14, the New York Times reported that the Interior Department informed Shell Oil that it must provide a "detailed plan addressing numerous safety and operational issues that plagued its efforts to extract oil beneath the Arctic Ocean." Shell's issues included the grounding of a rig, though no oil was spilled or lives lost. Shell will not be allowed

to resume drilling until the government is satisfied that new planning and procedures are in place.

In the territorial waters of the Arctic that Russia claims is theirs, the problem is that the principal drilling will be done by Gazprom and Rosneft, the government-controlled gas and oil companies, with no Interior Department to restrain them. Toss in a dozen or so floating nuclear power plants, and a few are bound to become small, drifting Chernobyls. Now that the U.S. has given some ground on missile defense in Europe, it's a good time for Washington to begin persuading Moscow to keep the worst idea in the world from becoming a reality.

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

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