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Russia's Pivot North

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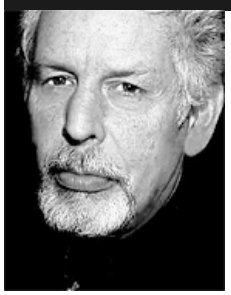
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The first shots in the "Arctic Wars" were fired on Sept. 18. Eleven warning shots were fired by the Russian border guard at Greenpeace activists intent on placing a Save The Arctic banner on Russia's first offshore oil rig in the Arctic. The international crew of the Greenpeace vessel Arctic Sunrise was arrested and charged with piracy, a charge that President Vladimir Putin has declared inapplicable.

Why is Putin taking a softer stance than the judicial system where verdicts can be phoned in from the Kremlin? Possibly Putin is relishing his newfound role as a peacemaker in Syria,

which has even gained him a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. This may also be a part of a charm offensive leading up to the Winter Olympics in Sochi beginning in February. Putin's prestige and thus to some extent his power rests on the successful outcome of the games. The two most likely disruptions at the games will come from terrorists or people protesting against Russia's anti-gay laws. Putin knows how to deal with terrorists: blast them in the outhouse or wherever they may be. Rough tactics to suppress protest against the anti-gay legislation will, however, backfire. To be pro-gay rights now is the touchstone of being modern, progressive and Western. Since Putin has no idea how to deal with the more amorphous countercultural threats like Pussy Riot and gay-rights activists, he tends to overreact.

But the Arctic is a very different order of business from Putin's image as peacemaker or his dealing with countercultural issues. Russia's very survival as an economy and a nation are at stake in the Arctic or so it seems to many in the top leadership. Dmitry Rogozin, the deputy prime minister in charge of the defense industry, recently said that if in the Arctic Russia "loses the battle for resources ... we will also lose in the big battle for the right to have sovereignty and independence." Russia is already beefing up its military presence in the north in preparation for an Arctic war.

In a sense, Russia is right to see the Arctic as its last stand. Since the Kremlin is not diversifying the economy — whatever happened to the famous nanotechnology project? — selling gas and oil remain essential to the country's economic and political survival. Although the Siberian fields are becoming exhausted, the fields in the Arctic Ocean off Russia's coast promise to deliver vast quantities of gas and oil.

Energy finds are not the only reason for Russia's pivot north. The melting of the summer ice because of global warming means that the Northeast passage now reduces shipping time between Europe and Asia by some 40 percent. Money can be made from that traffic.

Russia also has the world's largest fleet of ice breakers which will lengthen the shipping season. Of course, if a significant portion of the world's commerce is shipped through Russian Arctic waters, the Kremlin will thereby gain some of the same political clout that their gas pipelines gave them, which they abused to their own detriment. This is important now when China is obtaining gas and oil from Central Asia through pipelines that do not cross Russian territory.

A great deal is at stake in the Arctic, but it probably won't lead to war. Much more likely is some colossal environmental disaster, which is exactly what Greenpeace was trying to warn the world about in the first place.

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

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