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Russia's BAM

Chronic food shortages and shoddy consumer goods give the impression that Russia is an economic cripple. Some wits have even described the USSR as the Third World's most developed nation. This view is deceptive. What really counts for the Kremlin is the steady development of Russia's strategic sinews. Here, the Russians can be very efficient.

The opening, last month, of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railroad (BAM) aptly illustrates the point. The \$13 billion BAM is a triumph of engineering, organization and sheer willpower. Russians may be justifiably proud of this Herculean achievement.

The 2,200-mile BAM begins in western Siberia at Ust-Kut and ends at Komsomolsk on the Amur River estuary that debouches on the Pacific. The railroad crosses some of the world's most inhospitable terrain — 17 major rivers, hundreds of streams and 22 mountain ranges, pierced by 20 miles of tunnels.

In summer, temperatures of 100F turn the Siberian wilderness into insect-infested swamp. Winter temperatures plunge to -50F. Permafrost underlying most of the route can twist steel rails and shoot telephone poles into the air. As if this were not enough, the BAM spans a zone of incessant earthquakes, mud-slides and avalanches.

Most of the BAM extends along the same latitude as Dawson Creek or Labrador. Construction materials had to be brought 5,000 miles from eastern Russia. Workers were kept on the job by a combination of pay incentives and appeals to patriotism. We do not have any reports yet of the use of convict labor, though this is not unlikely.

The opening of the BAM, which may still require another \$3-4 billion in facilities, comes not a day too soon for Soviet economic and military planners. They must be breathing a great collective sigh of relief.

Threat of energy shortages

Russia's eastern coal fields in the Donets and Kuzbask basins are rapidly becoming exhausted. As the threat of energy shortages mounts, Russia must quickly exploit its vast but remote resources in northwestern Siberia. The BAM line is expected to open 600,000 square miles in Siberia to coal mining, metal extraction and logging.

The Soviets are also hoping that resource-hungry Japan will use the BAM to boost its imports of Siberian raw materials — at the expense of British Columbia coal and timber exports. Russia also expects Japanese exporters to ship their goods to Western Europe along the Siberian railroads.

Important as these economic benefits may be, the real significance of the BAM centres on strategic security. Soviet strategists have long had nightmares about the vulnerability of Siberia and the Pacific coast region — Russia's soft and very exposed underbelly.

Russia is dependent on its railroads for transit across Siberia. Trucks are in perpetual short supply; even if they were plentiful, roads simply end at Lake Baikal, halfway across Siberia. Until the BAM, the only way of transiting the remaining 2,000 miles from Baikal to the Pacific coast of Vladivostok was along the old Trans-Siberian railroad.

Most heavy goods and military supplies for Russia's Pacific region had to come eastward along the Trans-Siberian. Russia's vital Pacific naval bases at Vladivostok, Nakhoda, Sovetskaya Gavan and Komsomolsk all relied on a single rail line. The important nuclear-submarine base at Pretropavlosk had to be provisioned by ship from Vladivostok — no roads connect it to the Russian mainland.

Danger to Soviet supply lines

This terrible vulnerability has been clear to the Russians since the Russo-Japanese War of 1903. Today, the simmering hostility between Russia and China accentuates the danger to Soviet supply lines. If war ever erupted with China, few observers doubt that Chinese commandos and aircraft could block the Trans-Siberian line.

One dynamited tunnel would cut off Siberia and the Pacific from the rest of Russia. Heavy supplies, too bulky for air transport, would have to come by ship from the Baltic or Murmansk, 9,000 miles of hostile waters. Last year, the Russians attempted to break a northern passage across the East Siberian Sea. Their supply fleet was caught by pack ice and almost perished.

Compounding this mammoth logistical problem, not very secret U.S. plans to cut the Trans-Siberian in wartime have added a new dimension to Russia's strategic problems. A few Green Beret saboteurs in Siberia could do as much damage as an entire U.S. division in Europe. Reports of possible joint U.S.-Chinese plans to cut Soviet rail transport have caused more consternation in Moscow.

These very real Soviet fears will be partly eased by the new BAM line. It runs parallel to the Trans-Siberian route, but 150 to 300 miles further north — away from the Chinese border. Like the Trans-Siberian, it will be protected and serviced by a large portion of Russia's 450,000 special corps of railway troops.

To North Americans, the BAM project may appear about as interesting as a new spur line from Duluth to Wabowden, Manitoba. But to Russians, for whom railroads have a mystical-patriotic quality, completion of the BAM is a major triumph.

It reminds Russians, grown apathetic and cynical, that on occasion they can still achieve great feats. Equally, the BAM project should remind us that Russia's inability to produce enough wheat or shoes comes precisely because it is relentlessly pouring resources into building its strategic power.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)