

Russian Regions Look to 'Survivors' Club'

by Jonathan Tennenbaum

While those factions in Moscow, who orient their interests and policies to the London and New York financial markets, continue to promote the delusion, that British and other Western investors are about to support Russia's economy by pouring in tens of billions of dollars, leaders in Siberia and other important regions of Russia are intensively organizing for closer cooperation with Asian countries—including especially China, South Korea, and Japan.

Exemplary is the launching of the Baikal Economic Forum at a Sept. 20-22 international conference in the Siberian city of Irkutsk. Devoted to “the integration of Siberia and the Russian Far East with the Asian-Pacific and world economy,” the event was attended by some 1,330 representatives from Russia's regions, central government and business circles, together with more than 270 guests from mainland China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Mongolia, as well as western Europe and the United States.

A Task of Planetary Proportions

Opening the conference, the chairman of the Russian Federation Council, Governor of Oryol Province Yegor Stroyev, stressed that “the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East is a task of epoch-making, even planetary proportions,” calling for “direct cooperation of the eastern regions with regions of central and southern Russia . . . with the Central Asian countries and the entire Asian-Pacific region.” He reminded his audience that “Russia is a Eurasian power,” and that Siberia is key to its future.

In the context of “concrete projects” to develop the vast mineral and energy resources of Siberia and the Russian Far East, Stroyev emphasized that “the real prospect of creating a transport corridor ‘Hokkaido-Sakhalin-mainland’ . . . will make it possible to promote the process of economic integration on the scale of the entire Northern Hemisphere.”

This project, reportedly a major subject of discussion during the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Japan in early September, involves construction of an approximately 50-kilometer-long tunnel from the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido to the petroleum-rich Russian island of Sakhalin, and a much shorter tunnel from Sakhalin to the Russian mainland. Once completed, the project would for the first time establish a land connection from Japan (whose

main islands of Hokkaido and Honshu are already linked by the 54-kilometer Seikan tunnel) to the Eurasian landmass. This ambitious project—included in Lyndon LaRouche's proposal for the “Eurasian Land-Bridge,” as outlined in the *EIR Special Report* “The Eurasian Land-Bridge: The ‘New Silk Road’—Locomotive for Worldwide Economic Development”—would complement the “energy bridge” from Japan to Sakhalin, which is already under negotiation between the Japanese and Russian governments, as well as the projected reestablishment and modernization of rail links between South Korea and North Korea, with continuation to Europe via Russia's Trans-Siberian Railroad.

The Irkutsk conference was also addressed by the official representative of Putin to the Siberian Federal Region, Leonid Drachevsky, who read a personal greeting from the President, as well as by Russian Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin. According to Russian press reports, a detailed program for joint economic development of Siberia and the Russian Far East together with China and East Asian nations, was presented to the conference by the Director of the Far East Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Mikhail Titarenko.

Not Just Talk

That these discussions are no mere empty talk, is underlined by recent reports in the Russian press, on a number of ongoing or just-completed infrastructure projects in the Asian part of Russia. These include completion of a huge bridge over the Ob River in western Siberia, a bridge over the Bureya River in the Amur region (near the border with China), and the ongoing construction of the 2,165-kilometer-long “Amur” federal highway from Chita in eastern Siberia to the major city Khabarovsk in the Far East. When opened for traffic following projected “first stage” completion in 2004, the highway will for the first time provide a continuous road connection running across the entire Russian Federation. It is notable, that Putin placed this strategically important project under his direct, personal supervision last July.

On Sept. 25, another major conference is to open in Russia's Pacific port city Vladivostok, with the title: “Russia-China-Japan in Northeast Asia: Problems of Regional Interaction in the 21st Century.” On the eve of this conference, a prominent article in the Vladivostok newspaper *Novosti* declared that “the question of China is the question of Russia's future existence.” The article cited several top China experts, blasting alleged attempts by “powerful West-leaning factions” in the Russian central government, to whip up “yellow peril” hysteria against China, in order to impose a “policy orienting exclusively to Europe and the U.S.A.” It should be recalled, that Chinese Parliamentary leader Li Peng recently completed a tour of Russia, during which he visited Vladivostok and other locations in the Asian part of Russia.