

8 Sino-Russian Arctic Resource and Infrastructure Engagement

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Abstract Since the mid-2010s, Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic region has emerged as yet another dimension of the multifaceted partnership between Beijing and Moscow. Both powers seemed to recognise the complementary nature of their interests in the Arctic that goes beyond the scientific exploration of the region. This chapter examines the nature of the Sino-Russian Arctic engagement, particularly in areas of resource extraction and infrastructure development, and illuminates what this signifies for both states and their relations in an era of growing global and regional uncertainties and challenges to the Western-led international order. The chapter concludes with an observation that, while Sino-Russian relations face challenges and even contradictions, there is room for further rapprochement between China and Russia, including in areas of strategic importance, such as the Arctic. Analytically, this chapter draws on Neoclassical Realism as a realist theory of foreign policy that allows for unit-level considerations in determining policy outcomes.

Keywords Sino-Russian relations, Arctic cooperation, natural resources, Northern Sea Route (NSR), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation have managed to substantially expand their bilateral political, economic, and military relations.¹ The two powers resolved their long-lasting border disputes, upgraded their strategic partnership several times, and began

1 For a brief overview of Sino-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War see, for example, Voskressenski, "China's Relations with Russia"; Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations*; Bekkevold and Lo, eds. *Sino-Russian Relations*.

to actively cooperate in non-Western multinational (formal and informal) institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS grouping (together with India, South Africa, and Brazil). The bilateral relationship is further strengthened by close high-level political exchanges. The Chinese and Russian leaders, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping and President Putin, have met over forty times, and their respective Heads of Governments have held twenty-eight meetings (as of 2023).² In economic affairs, Russia now fully supports the development of China's pan-Asian infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI);³ Russia has allowed Huawei to build its 5G network;⁴ and the countries' bilateral trade reached a new record of 200 billion USD by the end of 2023.⁵ In military affairs, Chinese and Russian armed forces regularly train together,⁶ with Russia agreeing to assist China in developing a critical component of strategic nuclear forces—a missile launch detection system.⁷ In light of these developments, China and Russia decided to elevate their relationship in 2019 to “a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” to strengthen strategic communication and coordination,⁸ while in early 2022 confirming that there would be “no forbidden areas of cooperation” in their bilateral ties.⁹ Sino-Russian relations continued to deepen even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as both states made a strategic choice to further embrace each other.¹⁰ For example, during the eighteenth round of their strategic security consultation in September 2023, China and Russia agreed to “work closely on strategic security cooperation, defend true multilateralism, and promote the development of global governance system in a more fair and reasonable direction.”¹¹

Given the continuous improvements in the Sino-Russian partnership, academics and pundits alike have been debating the nature of this relationship. For some, the state of their bilateral affairs can be described as “a quasi-alliance,

2 The Russian Government, “28th Regular Meeting of Russian and Chinese Heads of Government.”

3 Lee, “China and Russia Forge Stronger Eurasian Economic Ties.”

4 EUobserver, “China's Huawei.”

5 McCarthy, “China's Xi Jinping Hails Russia Cooperation.”

6 See, for example, Gady, “China Sends Strategic Bombers.”

7 Kashin, “Russia and China.”

8 Xinhua, “China, Russia Agree to Upgrade Relations for New Era.”

9 President of Russia, “Joint Statement.”

10 Lin, “The China–Russia Axis Takes Shape.”

11 Xinhua, “China, Russia to Deepen Strategic Security Cooperation.”

or entente,”¹² “moving closer to a fully-fledged alliance,”¹³ or an outright “alliance of autocracies.”¹⁴ Others would contend that this does not fully reflect the reality of their interactions and that limits, imbalances, and even contradictions exist within this relationship. The more sceptical observers point to pervasive mistrust rooted in historical grievances,¹⁵ a relative lack of close people-to-people ties,¹⁶ and fundamentally diverging perspectives regarding the international order (comparing China’s attempts to reform the order with Russia’s destructive approaches).¹⁷ Others would refer to the detrimental effects China’s economic and military rise had for Russia across the Eurasian continent, challenging its traditional spheres of influence (such as in Central Asia).¹⁸ Perhaps, as noted by Lo, the single most important variable that enables a closer Sino-Russian relationship could be the level of tensions in Sino-American relations, directly influencing the level of strategic and normative convergence between China and Russia (the higher the tensions, the higher the convergence).¹⁹ At the same time, statements made by high-level Chinese and Russian officials are adding a degree of ambiguity to these discourses. While the Chinese leadership is careful not to frame the Sino-Russian engagement as an alliance,²⁰ according to Lukin, Russian officials did previously use the word “ally” with respect to China, possibly as a strategic signal to the West that Moscow is ready to form an alliance with Beijing.²¹

Amid these debates, a new dimension of the Sino-Russian relations has been emerging over the past decade: engagement in the Arctic region.²² As a result of rising regional temperatures, Arctic sea ice, glaciers and permafrost have been retreating, adding to perceptions that the region is opening up and ready for commercial exploitation.²³ Overall, Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation, particularly in the economic domain, harbours great potential, as the two

12 Lukin, “The Russia–China Entente,” 363.

13 Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment*, 25.

14 Leonhardt, “A New Axis.”

15 Erickson, “Friends with ‘No Limits’?”

16 Kim, “The Limits of the No-Limits Partnership.”

17 Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership,” 17–18.

18 Wood, “China–Russia Relations Reality Check.”

19 Lo, “Introduction,” 12.

20 For example, see a recent statement by Ambassador Fu Cong, the Head of the Chinese Mission to the EU: Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the European Union, “Transcript of Ambassador Fu Cong’s Exclusive Interview.”

21 Lukin, “The Russia–China Entente,” 369–370.

22 Hsiung and Røseth, “The Arctic Dimension.”

23 Roston, “How a Melting Arctic Changes Everything.”

powers seem to have complementary interests with regards to the region. For example, the Russian Arctic is abundant in natural resources, such as oil and natural gas, which China can use to plug some of its energy demands and diversify its energy imports. Possibilities are also open in the areas of Arctic Ocean shipping and infrastructure development along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), a transportation lane running across the northern coast of Russia. That being the case, this chapter aims to inquire into the nature of the Sino-Russian Arctic engagement, particularly in areas of resource extraction and infrastructure development, and to illuminate what this signifies for both states and their relations. In doing so, the chapter will follow the proposition by Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer that, in order to better understand where the Sino-Russian partnership stands and where it might be heading, analysts need to focus, among other things, on areas “where both countries have considerable vulnerabilities and/or overriding strategic interests,” such as the Arctic.²⁴ Additionally, the chapter seeks to contribute to the existing literature on the emerging Sino-Russian Arctic engagement by analysing the current level of Chinese economic presence in the Russian Arctic.²⁵

In terms of analytical approach, the analysis draws on Neoclassical Realism (NCR) as a realist theory of foreign policy that allows for unit-level (domestic) considerations in determining policy outcomes.²⁶ NCR posits that states, when conducting foreign and security policy, respond primarily to international systemic stimuli (i.e., power distributions among states—an insight adopted from Structural Realism) but at the same time holds that these responses are conditioned by variables found at the unit level, such as state–society relations, the nature and needs of domestic political regimes, strategic culture, the perceptions of state leaders, etc.²⁷ In the context of Sino-Russian Arctic economic engagement, the analysis conducted in this chapter will be concerned primarily with the domestic politico-economic

24 Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer, “Introduction,” 3.

25 For an example of this literature, see: MacDonald, “China–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic”; Kobzeva, “Strategic Partnership Setting”; Wishnick, “Russia and the Arctic in China’s Quest for Great-Power Status”; Alexeeva and Lasserre, “An Analysis on Sino-Russian Cooperation”; Zhao, “Zhong-E Beiji Kechixu Fazhan Hezuo”; Sørensen and Klimenko, “Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic”; Yi, “Eluosi Beiji zhanlve ji Zhong-E Beiji hezuo.”

26 For a classical statement on NCR see Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy.”

27 For a discussion of the unit-level variables and their application in NCR, see Chapters 1 and 3 in Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobel, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*.

priorities of the Chinese and Russian states to illustrate how these unit-level factors influence the levels of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation at a time of changes within the international system.²⁸

The chapter is composed of five parts. Following this introduction, Parts 2 and 3 briefly discuss Russia's and China's interests in the Arctic region as well as the main Arctic policy documents of these powers. Part 4 outlines the Sino-Russian Arctic economic engagement in terms of China's participation in the extraction of natural resources and shipping on the NSR. The chapter ends with a short conclusion focusing on broad observations regarding the Sino-Russian partnership.

The Russian Federation and the Arctic Region

With a long history of polar exploration, Russia is an established Arctic power that controls by far the largest portion of the Arctic region, both in terms of area and population (fifty-three percent of the Arctic coast and 2.5 million inhabitants).²⁹ The region has traditionally been a zone of special interest for Moscow where virtually all aspects of its national security—political, economic, technological, military, environmental, and those of natural resources—converge.³⁰ The region is deeply embedded in Russian national identity, history, and strategic culture³¹ and plays an important role in Russia's pursuit of great-power status and international prestige.³² The significance of the Arctic to the Russian state was underlined by President Putin, who declared that “the Arctic is an extremely important region, which will ensure the future of our country.”³³

Russia's main policy document regarding the Arctic—*Foundations of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035* (adopted in 2020)—identifies the following national interests of the Russian state in the Arctic: to ensure Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity; to preserve the region as a territory of peace, stability, and mutually beneficial partnership; to

28 For other works using NCR in the study of Sino-Russian relations see, for example, Korolev and Portyakov, “Reluctant Allies.”

29 Arctic Council, “The Russian Federation.”

30 President of Russia, “Meeting of the Security Council.”

31 Buchanan, “Russia's Arctic Strategy,” 32.

32 Grajewski, “Russia's Great Power Assertion.”

33 President of Russia, “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin.”

increase the quality of life of its Arctic population; to develop the region as its strategic resource base and the NSR as a competitive national transportation passage in the global market; and to protect its environment and preserve the native lands and traditional way of life of Arctic Indigenous peoples residing in the Russian Arctic zone.³⁴ In order to implement these objectives, President Putin also approved the *Strategy for Developing Russia's Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035* in October 2020.³⁵ Charged with safeguarding the security and development of the Russian Arctic zone is an interagency commission on national interests in the Arctic at Russia's Security Council, consisting of thirty members from across the Russian government.³⁶

The aforementioned *Foundations* establish ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity as the top priority of Russia's Arctic policy while pointing out that one of the main challenges to Russia's national security in the Arctic is military buildup by foreign states and an increase in the potential for conflict in the region.³⁷ This indicates a strong focus on security- and military-related issues of the Russian state in the Arctic. Additionally, a considerable part of the Russian Navy is stationed on the Kola Peninsula and along the White and Barents seas, which include aircraft, surface ships (including Russia's only aircraft carrier), and nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. The whole Russian Arctic coast is also undergoing a military upgrade in which Moscow is focusing on reopening Soviet-era air and naval bases and border guard stations along the NSR as well as building new ones.³⁸ Russian officials explain that this is to provide Russia with control over shipping on the NSR, protect oil and gas installations, and maintain maritime domain awareness.³⁹ Klimenko adds that we should expect further programs aimed at the modernisation of military infrastructure in the Russian Arctic, since these will ensure Russia's continuous enforcement of its sovereignty in the region.⁴⁰

At the same time, Russia has vital interests in the region aimed at the development of natural resources and transportation along the NSR that are considered essential to Russia's social and economic development. The Russian Arctic currently produces ten percent of Russia's GDP and twenty

34 President of the Russian Federation, *Foundations*.

35 President of Russia, "Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone."

36 The Arctic, "Commission on National Interests in the Arctic."

37 President of the Russian Federation, *Foundations*.

38 Konyshchev, Sergunin, and Subbotin, "Russia's Arctic Strategies," 117–119.

39 Humpert, "New Satellite Images."

40 Klimenko, "Russia's New Arctic Policy."

percent of its exports.⁴¹ Indeed, the resource potential of the Russian Arctic is immense. It is responsible for a large part of Russia's gas and oil production as well as chromium, diamonds, manganese, platinum-based elements, and huge quantities of copper, gold, rare earth elements, etc.⁴² With regards to the utilisation of the NSR, the Russian leadership set the ambitious goal of increasing the annual goods volumes on the route to 80 million tons by the year 2024⁴³ (in 2022, the total volume was 34 million tons).⁴⁴ In support of these ambitious plans, Russia plans to increase the capacity of its Arctic fleet in the coming years. This will include the construction of forty new vessels—nuclear icebreakers plus hydrographical and various support and rescue ships.⁴⁵ Additionally, to spur container shipping activities along the route, Russia's state-owned company Rosatom intends to invest 7 billion USD into Arctic shipping to rival the traditional shipping lanes that run through the Indian Ocean.⁴⁶ Given the emphasis on security and economic interests, the Arctic is seen by the Russian leadership as a main source of growth for the Russian economy—a source that is central to Moscow's efforts to maintain the prosperity of the Russian state and to ensure Russia's position as an internationally acknowledged great power.⁴⁷

However, in order to develop the full potential of its Arctic zone, Russia needs to resolve a series of issues pertaining to the region, including renovating and building new infrastructure (ports, roads, search and rescue stations) and organising technologically challenging drilling activities, all of which incur high investment costs.⁴⁸ Yet Russia's military interventions in Ukraine (in 2014 and 2022) are impacting its efforts to develop many of its Arctic projects, as Western nations imposed a series of sanctions on the Russian economy, forcing multinational corporations to exit the Russian market—including the energy sector⁴⁹—and pause their cooperation with Russia in the Arctic

41 Klimenko, "Russia's New Arctic Policy."

42 Dobretsov and Pokhilenko, "Mineral Resources."

43 Staalesen, "Shipping on Northern Sea Route."

44 Center for High North Logistics, "NSR Shipping."

45 Staalesen, "Moscow Adopts 15-Year Grand Plan."

46 For comparative purposes, the total annual amount of cargo being shipped through the Suez Canal is around 980 million tons. Additionally, there is a lot of scepticism about the economic feasibility of container shipping on the NSR due to various factors (shallow straits, environmental concerns, etc.). Humpert, "Rosatom to Invest."

47 Staun, "Russia's Strategy in the Arctic," 328.

48 Alexeeva and Lasserre, "An Analysis on Sino-Russian Cooperation," 270–273.

49 Boston and Maloney, "Global Companies."

Council (AC), the preeminent regional forum for regional governance.⁵⁰ In light of the evolving international situation, the Russian leadership decided to update its Arctic policy—the *Foundations*—in February 2023.⁵¹ According to Liudmila Filippova, a senior research fellow at the Institute of China and Contemporary Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the updated version, in terms of Arctic international collaboration, mentions the “development of relations with foreign states on a bilateral basis, within the framework of appropriate multilateral structures and mechanisms” while simultaneously removing references to engagement with Arctic states. This, Filippova notes, could imply boosting involvement and cooperation with a much wider range of countries.⁵² Indeed, President Putin has already indicated Russia’s willingness to include more extra-regional states and associations in the development of the Russian Arctic zone.⁵³

The PRC and the Arctic

China has been engaged in the Arctic region for more than twenty-five years now, with its first Arctic scientific expedition launched aboard its research ice-breaker, the *Xuelong*, in 1999. Since then, the Chinese government has managed to organise thirteen research expeditions to the region (as of September 2023) and set up a dedicated Arctic research station—the Yellow River Station, on Norway’s Svalbard archipelago—in July 2004. An acceleration of Chinese activities in the Arctic is noticeable after 2012, when Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the CCP and China’s paramount leader. In 2013, China became an observer at the AC; together with Nordic partners, it established the China–Nordic Arctic Research Center, and its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) began conducting trial shipments on the NSR and investing in Arctic energy projects, including in the Russian Arctic. To underline its interests in regional affairs, the CCP leadership appointed a Special Representative for Arctic Affairs in 2016⁵⁴ and linked Arctic shipping routes with the BRI in 2017 in order to build a Polar Silk Road (PSR). China also managed to establish a second research station in Iceland and deploy some specialised polar

50 Edvardsen, “Arctic Council Paused.”

51 President of Russia, “Changes to Basic Principles.”

52 Filippova, “China’s New Role.”

53 President of Russia, “Meeting on Arctic Zone Development.”

54 Yang, “Observer Activities Report.”

observation equipment, including a second research icebreaker, experimental polar orbiting satellites, unmanned underwater vehicles, buoys, and meteorological stations.⁵⁵ Chinese leaders and policymakers were also collectively referring to China as an important Arctic stakeholder.⁵⁶

A dedicated Chinese Arctic white paper was unveiled in January 2018. The policy document regards the changing Arctic conditions as an issue with global implications and international impacts while noting that states from outside the region have rights with respect to scientific research, shipping, fishing, and the laying of submarine cables in the high seas of the Arctic Ocean. It describes China as a near-Arctic state and outlines the country's policy goals in the region in terms of (1) understanding the Arctic (focusing on improving capacities in Arctic scientific research); (2) protecting the Arctic (responding to regional climatic changes and promoting ecological resilience); (3) developing the Arctic (emphasising Arctic technological innovation and economic and social development, including Arctic shipping, hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation, the conservation and utilisation of fisheries, and tourism); and (4) participating in Arctic governance through regional forums such as the AC and on the basis of existing framework of international law such as UNCLOS.⁵⁷

China's engagement with the Arctic region also serves broader Chinese domestic politico-economic considerations and foreign policy objectives.⁵⁸ For example, the Chinese Arctic white paper notes that the Arctic environment and its changes have a direct impact on China's climate system and, therefore, on its economic interests in agriculture, forestry, and the marine industry.⁵⁹ Through an active Arctic scientific programme, Chinese scientists improve their understanding of these changes to better assess their impact on China. In terms of China's national strategy—the Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation, which would see China as a wealthy and prosperous nation that commands international influence and prestige⁶⁰—Bertelsen and Gallucci note that the Arctic as a potential source of energy supplies and raw materials could contribute to Chinese desires for domestic prosperity, while China's participation in Arctic regional governance

55 Sørensen and Hsiung, "The Role of Technology in China's Arctic Engagement," 5–9.

56 For example, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Video Message by Foreign Minister Wang Yi."

57 Xinhua, "Full Text: China's Arctic Policy."

58 Sørensen, "Intensifying U.S.–China Security Dilemma Dynamics," 445–448.

59 Xinhua, "Full Text: China's Arctic Policy."

60 Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory."

could support its ambitions for international recognition.⁶¹ Additionally, technological innovation and complex engineering associated with the development of polar observation equipment (icebreakers, unmanned systems and vehicles, etc.) can further enhance the overall development of China's technological capabilities, which is one of the priorities of China's national development, as exemplified by the adoption of the *Made in China 2025 strategy*, which ultimately seeks to reduce China's dependence on foreign technology.⁶² Sørensen further notes that the state which first develops and masters advanced technology capable of operating under the most challenging polar conditions (resource extraction, communication, port development, etc.) could gain an advantage in the global great-power competition.⁶³ Such a zero-sum notion is very well understood in Chinese elite circles, which view global politics as an endless competition between nation-states.⁶⁴

Sino-Russian Arctic Interactions

Russia is China's key partner in the Arctic, and the two powers have gradually recognised the complementary nature of their overall Arctic interests. However, this has not always been the case. China had to deal with Russian distrust and suspicion toward its Arctic endeavours on numerous occasions. For example, in 2003, during China's second Arctic research expedition, Russian authorities did not allow China's research vessel to enter the Russian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Arctic; in 2012, during China's fifth Arctic research expedition, Russia prohibited Chinese researchers from conducting maritime research while sailing on the NSR; and in 2013, Russian security agencies rejected a proposal for a collaborative project between Chinese and Russian scientists in the Arctic.⁶⁵

This attitude, however, shifted in 2014 after the imposition of Western economic sanctions on Russia in the wake of Moscow's annexation of Crimea. Russia had to abandon its cautious approach towards China and start to reconsider the country as a viable source of capital and technology in the hopes of improving Russia's economic prospects.⁶⁶ Since then, Sino-Russian Arctic

61 Bertelsen and Gallucci, "The Return of China," 241.

62 Sørensen and Hsiung, "The Role of Technology in China's Arctic Engagement," 10.

63 Sørensen, "China and the Arctic," 23.

64 Heilmann and Schmidt, *China's Foreign Political and Economic Relations*, 2.

65 Bai and Zhang, "Zhongguo Beiji kexue kaocha" 261–262.

66 Alexeeva and Lasserre, "The Evolution of Sino-Russian Relations," 73.

interactions have been steadily expanding. In the science realm, for example, China and Russia managed to organise several joint scientific expeditions in the Arctic Ocean to fill “in the blanks in the history of the Sino-Russian Arctic research.”⁶⁷ In September 2016, the Harbin Institute of Technology and the Far Eastern Federal University announced the establishment of the Russian–Chinese Polar Engineering and Research Center, intended to promote industrial development of the Arctic.⁶⁸ References to Arctic cooperation were also included in high-level bilateral documents. The 2019 *Sino-Russian joint statement on developing comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination in the new era* contains an Arctic dimension and requires both countries to focus on the development of Arctic-specific ties. The document states that China and Russia will collaborate on, among other things, the development of Arctic shipping routes, energy resource exploration, infrastructure, and polar tourism,⁶⁹ indicating a robust focus on commercial opportunities. This was further underlined in March 2023 when Xi Jinping visited Russia and both parties agreed to cooperate more closely in the Arctic energy and transportation sectors.⁷⁰

Resource and Infrastructure Engagement

China is currently the largest energy consumer in the world, and despite the CCP’s efforts to reshape the country’s energy mix towards the reduction of carbon emissions, its energy consumption is expected to go up in the short term.⁷¹ This being the case, energy security and strong considerations of energy supply diversification are a strategic element of China’s national economic development.⁷² Given the perceived abundance of energy resources in the Arctic region, some in the Chinese academic community view the region as a possible future energy resource base for China⁷³ that could contribute to China’s energy security and supply diversification.⁷⁴ In this regard, the

67 Hu, “Zhong-E shouci Beiji lianhe kekao.”

68 The Arctic, “Far Eastern Federal University.”

69 Xinhua, “Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo.”

70 Humpert, “Putin and Xi Discuss.”

71 Sinopec, “Sinopec Releases China Energy Outlook 2060.”

72 Ding, “Zhongguo jiaqiang lushang nengyuan zhanlve buju.”

73 Liu, “Beiji hangxian.”

74 Sun and Wu, “Beiji Anquan Zhili,” 55–56.

Arctic is at times seen as “the second Middle East” by Chinese news outlets.⁷⁵ There are research institutions in China, such as the China Geological Survey (CGS), that investigate the resource potential of the polar regions. CGS has established the Research Center of Polar Geosciences, which, among other things, is tasked with surveying and evaluating energy resources in the Arctic.⁷⁶ Additionally, several Chinese SOEs and banks have already provided funding for energy resource development projects in the Russian Arctic zone.

The largest and most prominent of such energy projects is the Yamal LNG project on the Yamal Peninsula, in which the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Silk Road Fund hold twenty-percent and 9.9-percent stakes, respectively. In addition, the project received significant loans from China’s EXIM Bank and the China Development Bank. Yamal LNG began operations in 2017, with an expected production capacity of around 16.5 million tons of LNG per year.⁷⁷ A quarter of this capacity is reserved for the Chinese market,⁷⁸ with the first deliveries of LNG reaching China in July 2018.⁷⁹ In connection with this project, another Chinese SOE, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), was tasked to deliver compressor modules (made in China) necessary for the production of the LNG.⁸⁰ The successful implementation of this project has prompted Chinese and Russian companies to consider a joint development of the Arctic LNG 2 on the Gydan Peninsula, just opposite Yamal. Slated to be fully operational by 2026, this project should have an annual production capacity of nearly 20 million tons of LNG, with thirty percent contracted for China.⁸¹ China’s CNPC and CNOOC each control a ten percent stake in the Arctic LNG 2.⁸² As a sign of growing energy ties between China and Russia, China has received a record amount of LNG from the Russian Arctic and Far Eastern regions in 2022 and is becoming the world’s largest LNG importer.⁸³ Additionally, in November 2022, the head of Russia’s biggest oil company, Rosneft—Igor Sechin—invited Chinese partners to participate in the development of the massive Vostok oil field in the Russian Arctic.⁸⁴

75 For example, see Zhang and Ni, “Kaifa Beijing: Zhongguo bu neng luoxia.”

76 China Geological Survey, “Zhongguo Dizhi Diaocha.”

77 Humpert, “Novatek’s Yamal LNG.”

78 Ecns.cn, “China, Russia Jointly Launch.”

79 Reuters, “Russia’s Novatek Ships First LNG Cargo.”

80 Reuters, “CNOOC Delivers Final Compressor.”

81 Spivak and Gabuev, “The Ice Age.”

82 Humpert, “China Acquires 20 Percent Stake.”

83 Humpert, “China Receives Late-Season LNG.”

84 Staalesen, “Putin’s Top Oilman Praises Xi Jinping.”

Besides these projects, other Chinese SOEs were also involved in natural resource development of the Russian Arctic. For example, the China Oilfield Services Limited (COSL), a subsidiary of CNOOC, conducted seismic surveys in the Barents Sea in 2016 and in 2017; its deep-water semi-submersible drilling rig Nanhai 8 operated in the Kara Sea and discovered a large natural gas field. Operations by this Chinese drilling rig continued in the Kara Sea throughout 2018, 2019, and 2020.⁸⁵ In 2019, China National Chemical Engineering was contracted to supply crude oil processing equipment for the development of the Payakha oil fields in the Yenisei River delta, which are estimated to hold large oil reserves.⁸⁶ Going beyond oil and natural gas, the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) partnered in 2023 with the Russian company Titanium Resources to develop titanium and other raw material deposits in the Komi Republic in Russia's Arctic zone.⁸⁷

Given their potential to cut costs and time, the utilisation of Arctic shipping routes, and the NSR in particular, has also been an area of growing Sino-Russian cooperation. The Chinese Arctic white paper calls for the establishment of the Polar Silk Road and the development of regular commercial operations on Arctic shipping routes while, as indicated previously, Russia seeks to increase the transport potential of the NSR. The very idea of establishing a PSR emerged in the mid-2010s, when China and Russia began to contemplate the joint development of the shipping potential of the NSR,⁸⁸ but the vision became more concrete when Arctic shipping routes were incorporated into the BRI in 2017 as part of China's efforts to create a blue engine for sustainable development and economic growth.⁸⁹ To facilitate Chinese involvement in Arctic shipping and to introduce Arctic shipping conditions (such as weather, sea ice, international treaties regarding the region, sailor training requirements, etc.) to the Chinese shipping sector, in 2014, the Chinese Ministry of Transport published a first-of-its-kind set of Chinese-language guidelines for sailing on the NSR.⁹⁰

In this regard, China's largest shipping SOE, COSCO, is a major non-Russian company that is actively engaged in the utilisation of the NSR. Although there is scepticism about the economic viability of the NSR for large-scale transit

85 Staalesen, "Two Chinese Rigs."

86 China National Chemical Engineering, "Zhongguo Huaxue Gongcheng."

87 Humpert, "Russian Mining Company Partners with China."

88 Tillman, Yang and Nielsson, "The Polar Silk Road," 347.

89 Lanteigne, "Who Benefits from China's Belt and Road in the Arctic?"

90 Zhao, "China to Release Its First Guidebook."

shipping.⁹¹ COSCO has been increasing the number of shipments on the NSR since it began operating there in 2013, and, pre-COVID 19, the Chinese were among the largest foreign operators of vessels on the NSR.⁹² Additionally, in 2019, Novatek, COSCO, Sovcomflot, and Silk Road Fund agreed to establish a joint venture that would focus on the development of the transportation of LNG produced in the Russian Arctic along the NSR.⁹³ According to reports, Chinese state-owned companies have stakes in nine out of the fifteen ice-class LNG carriers that ferry LNG from the Russian Arctic to customers in Eurasia.⁹⁴ To further enhance Sino-Russian cooperation on the NSR, Russian President Putin announced in 2023 that Russia was ready to create with the Chinese a joint working organ on the development of the NSR,⁹⁵ while Rosatom, the Russian administrator of the NSR, declared its intention to partner with China to acquire satellite-based data to improve navigation on the route.⁹⁶

In conjunction with these developments, Chinese business actors have also shown interest in infrastructure projects (such as ports, railways, etc.) along the NSR. For example, it was reported that Chinese investors were previously considering investing in ports in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk⁹⁷ as well as in the Belkomur railway project, which would link western Siberia with Arkhangelsk.⁹⁸ Likewise, CCCC's titanium extraction project reportedly includes the construction of a railway and a deep-water port for shipments on the NSR.⁹⁹ There seems to be a sense of cautious optimism on the Russian side when it comes to Chinese investments in the Russian Arctic. During meetings with potential Chinese investors in 2023, Yuri Bezdudiy, the governor of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, declared that "in the new economic realities between Russia and China, these [the Chinese] are our strategic and reliable partners," while Murmansk Governor Andrei Chibis, in a similar setting, stated that "we are entering a new level of partnership with China."¹⁰⁰

91 For example, see Beveridge et al., "Interest of Asian Shipping Companies."

92 Humpert, "Chinese Shipping Company COSCO." According to reports, however, no Chinese vessels were transiting the NSR in 2022. See Staalesen, "Chinese Shippers Shun Russian Arctic Waters."

93 Novatek, "Novatek, COSCO Shipping, Sovcomflot and Silk Road Fund Sign an Agreement."

94 Humpert, "Chinese Shipping Company COSCO to Send Record Number of Ships."

95 Staalesen, "Arctic Shipping and Energy on Putin's Agenda."

96 Humpert, "Lacking Own Satellite Coverage."

97 Tillman, Yang and Nielsson, "The Polar Silk Road," 355.

98 Sukhankin, "Russia's Belkomur Arctic Railway Project."

99 Humpert, "Russian Mining Company Partners with China."

100 Staalesen, "Russian Arctic Regions."

However, many within the academic community would argue that the Sino-Russian Arctic engagement is facing its own set of challenges. For example, some have pointed to their diverging views about the participation of extra-regional states in Arctic affairs. China, the argument goes, sees the region as more of a global space in which extra-regional states and the broader international community should be involved, while Russia would like to preserve the dominant position of Arctic states in regional affairs.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, examples of failed deals (such as Russia's unsuccessful sale of stakes in Vankorneft, which controls oil and gas fields in Eastern Siberia, to Chinese SOEs) or stalled projects (such as the aforementioned Belkomur railway and deep-water harbour projects in Arkhangelsk) are seen as either limits of China's willingness to bankroll Russian projects,¹⁰² a reflection of Russia's uneasiness to fully embrace Chinese investors,¹⁰³ or a sign of China's strengthened bargaining position that allows it to demand from the Russians a better deal that would include access to more resources, more managerial positions, and more equipment to be manufactured in China.¹⁰⁴ Others would point to challenges associated with the development of the NSR. Alexeeva and Lasserre note that, while Russia sees China as a major user of the NSR and an investor to modernise and construct infrastructure along this shipping route, it does not consider it an effective partner with whom it would share responsibilities over the administration of the logistic network along the Russian Arctic coast.¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, Gao and Erokhin from Harbin Engineering University conclude that China and Russia "are still far from launching effective cooperation in the spheres of shipping and engineering in the North" and that Chinese investments in the Russian Arctic "do little to address major impediments to the vision of the NSR as a viable network for transportation and trade" such as scarcity of infrastructure or underdeveloped systems of navigation aids.¹⁰⁶ A further impediment to Sino-Russian Arctic relations was supposed to be Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent Western economic sanctions imposed on Russia.¹⁰⁷

101 For example, see: Trenin, "Russia and China in the Arctic"; Greenwood and Luo, "Could the Arctic Be a Wedge"; MacDonald, "China–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic," 200; Kobzeva, "Strategic Partnership Setting," 11.

102 Shagina and Zogg, "Arctic Matters," 3.

103 Sukhankin, "Russia's Belkomur Arctic Railway Project."

104 Ekaterina Klimenko in Thompson, "An Uneasy Alliance."

105 Alexeeva and Lasserre, "An Analysis on Sino-Russian Cooperation," 279.

106 Gao and Erokhin, "China–Russia Collaboration," 365–366.

107 Kopra, "The Ukraine Crisis."

Yet, despite these challenges, the Sino-Russian Arctic partnership kept on evolving. CNOOC and CNPC, the Chinese SOEs with stakes in Russian Arctic LNG projects, continue their operations in Russia despite Western sanctions,¹⁰⁸ while the bilateral energy trade has increased, with significant shipments of oil and natural gas heading to China via the NSR.¹⁰⁹ As indicated previously, the Russians also seem to be willing to give China a larger stake in the development of the NSR and associated infrastructure. Furthermore, the joint statement issued at the end of the Sino-Russian summit in March 2023 notes that Beijing and Moscow want to preserve the Arctic as a place of peace, stability, and constructive cooperation—suggesting, according to Filippova, a deepening of the dialogue between China and Russia on Arctic issues.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The Sino-Russian Arctic engagement is a rapidly emerging dimension of the expanding relations between Moscow and Beijing at a time of ongoing shifts in the international system. Besides maintaining the security and sovereignty of its Arctic zone, Russia also has vital economic interests in the region pertaining to natural resource extraction and shipping along the NSR. The Russian leadership considers the Arctic a main source of growth for the Russian economy. Yet, in order to advance its Arctic economic agenda and to build new infrastructure along the NSR, Russia gradually turned to Asia, and China in particular, for investment, especially in the aftermath of the 2014 Crimea crisis. By developing a Sino-Russian Arctic economic partnership, Russia could alleviate issues pertaining to funds, technologies, and resources needed for Arctic development and acquire a larger stake in China's energy market.¹¹¹

China, for its part, sees the economic potential of the Arctic region, especially as an alternative source for its energy supply and shorter shipping routes between Asian and European markets. To underline its interest in the Arctic, in 2017, China incorporated Arctic shipping lanes into its BRI and published an Arctic white paper in 2018. At the same time, the Chinese are aware of the fact that the extraction of Arctic natural resources will require development of innovative new technologies that will be able to function

108 Eiterjord, "Amid Ukraine War, Russia's Northern Sea Route Turns East."

109 Ramzy, "China Is Gaining Long-Coveted Role in Arctic."


110 Filippova, "China's New Role."

111 Yang and Zhao, "Opportunities and Challenges," 137.

in severe Arctic conditions and that could incur high investment costs.¹¹² However, the necessity of developing these technologies is why Chinese investments in the Arctic projects are of importance to the Chinese party-state, since they can provide Chinese SOEs with knowledge about resource exploration, logistics, planning, and production under polar conditions.¹¹³ China's participation in the Yamal LNG project demonstrates, according to experts, the country's entry into the international high-end hydrocarbon equipment market as well as showcasing its expertise in cold-weather engineering that could be integrated into other Arctic-related projects.¹¹⁴

Broader Sino-Russian bilateral relations are continuously developing. We should not expect Moscow and Beijing to fully align in their national and foreign policy priorities, as such a complex relationship is bound to face challenges and even contradictions. Yet, rapprochement is possible despite historical animosities.¹¹⁵ This is for several reasons. For example, Kaczmarek notes that Putin's regime does not perceive China as a threat to its survival; Chinese and Russian elites seem to have converging worldviews, while security forces within Russia and China seem to be sharing "best authoritarian practices" such as limiting the operational space of NGOs.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, successful conclusion of cooperative projects may lead to synergies in the same or other fields as well as to the alteration of previously sceptical perceptions about one another and the gradual building up of trust.¹¹⁷ In the Arctic, an area of strategic importance to Russia, the successful development of resource and energy projects has led, according to Deng, to policy coordination and strategy docking which has further consolidated bilateral cooperation and contributed to fostering mutual trust, normalising cooperative regimes and exchange channels.¹¹⁸ Perhaps, post-February 2022, what we are witnessing emerging is a new era of Sino-Russian engagement in the strategic area of Arctic cooperation,¹¹⁹ further underlining the deepening partnership between China and Russia.

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112 Jia, "Beiji diqu youqi ziyuan kantan kaifa xianzhuang."

113 Xinhua, "Yamaer xiangmu."

114 Deng, "Shipping Matters," 9.

115 Kirchberger, Sinjen and Wörmer, "Introduction," 4–5.

116 Kaczmarek, "Domestic Politics," 61.

117 Kirchberger, Sinjen and Wörmer, "Introduction," 4.

118 Deng, "Shipping Matters," 11.

119 Filippova, "China's New Role."

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