



Russia's icebreaker *50 Let Pobedy* moves into ice near Sabetta, Tyumen region, Russia, April 4, 2021 (Shutterstock)

# Friction Points in the Sino-Russian Arctic Partnership

By Adam Lajeunesse, P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Sergey Sukhankin, and Troy J. Bouffard

In 2018, China outlined its role and ambitions in the Arctic with a comprehensive white paper titled *China's Arctic Policy*.<sup>1</sup> In it, Beijing identified four key areas of interest: shipping, resource development, regional governance, and science. Underlying these specific priorities is an ever-present and overarching theme of respect and par-

ticipation: respect for China's interests in the Arctic and for the involvement of non-Arctic states in the region. In many ways, this policy announcement marked the high point of China's influence in the democratic Arctic. Since then, China's soft power in the north has suffered steady decline, as Arctic countries have digested the implications of

China's human rights abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang as well as its aggressive posturing in the South China Sea and against Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> Chinese "wolf warrior" diplomacy tactics<sup>3</sup> against some Arctic states have heightened a sense of distrust, making it difficult to separate Arctic dynamics from the principal challenge posed by China to

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long-term U.S. security and prosperity and those of its allies more generally.<sup>4</sup>

While the trend in the seven like-minded states (Canada, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) has generated a distaste toward engagement with China as an Arctic actor, Beijing has asserted a growing influence in Russia, where it has managed to consistently advance its Arctic interests in these four priority areas. Indeed, the Sino-Russian relationship in the north has tightened in the last couple of years, creating a mutually beneficial strategic partnership, an easy access point for China in the Arctic, and a willing financier and supporter for some of Russia's key northern development projects. Western sanctions imposed on the Russian economy in the wake of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine have only increased its need for Chinese investment, markets, and political support. And, in support of this partnership, China's diplomatic messaging toward the Russian Arctic is defined by the same "win-win" narrative that it applies globally, with specific attention to the value of Chinese investment, shipping, and resource development in the Russian north.

Today, there is a broad policy consensus in Russia about the desirability of keeping Sino-Russian relations on a positive trajectory in political and economic terms.<sup>5</sup> Chinese statements—and tacit acceptance of Russia's invasion of Ukraine—suggest that Beijing also sees strategic value in continuing to strengthen that relationship. This confluence of interest creates obvious dangers for the democratic Arctic states, which now openly recognize the economic, strategic, and military dangers posed by both authoritarian states in the Arctic and elsewhere.

Yet despite the seemingly close partnership, Sino-Russian relations in the north are not quite the friendly terrain of two like-minded states advancing a "friendship" with "no limits," as described by Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in February 2023. Arctic cooperation for the two authoritarian states remains a highly transactional partnership, underpinned by deep and abiding suspicion.

China's presence and activities in the Arctic have long concerned Russian leadership, and while the outward face of that partnership remains positive, the smiles and handshakes rest on an unstable foundation, riven by friction.

As the world has seen across the democratic Arctic, China's polar ambitions are subject to pushback when Beijing's ambitions conflict with local values and sensitivities. This article is an overview of Sino-Russian friction and points of vulnerability in their Arctic relationship. Downplayed by the Russian and Chinese governments and Arctic actors in those countries, each of these real or possible disputes has the potential to degrade the growing Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the region. In this article, we highlight three main areas of friction—navigation, resource exploitation, and infrastructure—that we see as exploitable gaps in the relationship. Western observers and commentators should not be neutral in observing this relationship; rather, we might benefit from shining a light on these issues that Beijing and Moscow have so assiduously sought to sidestep. In so doing, the like-minded Arctic states will be better positioned to address Russia and China as distinct regional challenges rather than an inherently unified front.<sup>6</sup>

### **China as a "Near-Arctic State" and the Role of Non-Arctic Actors**

Chinese strategic messaging regarding the Arctic promotes an image of China as a peaceful and friendly world power seeking win-win economic cooperation.<sup>7</sup> This narrative, common to Chinese messaging around the world, is designed to blunt foreign criticism while facilitating investment, scientific collaboration, and the entrenchment of Chinese facilities and programs in foreign states. In the Arctic context, this means securing access to shipping routes, Chinese direct foreign investment in energy and mining projects, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects, and (potentially dual-purpose) scientific research.<sup>8</sup> Although the Arctic still holds the *promise* of

resources and shipping routes that could one day be important as part of a global BRI as a "Polar Silk Road" (PSR),<sup>9</sup> many of these remain economically unviable. As such, China's short-term Arctic interests are more modest than many Western commentators suggest.<sup>10</sup>

As the region's largest coastal state and the most capable Arctic power, Russia has long insisted that Arctic governance should remain the sole responsibility of Arctic states, and Moscow remains intent on protecting its dominant position in the region. Beijing, in contrast, seeks to alter the status quo by advocating a greater role in Arctic governance. For years, China has maintained that its interests and capabilities in the Arctic make it a "near-Arctic state" while promoting the perception of the Arctic as a global commons, rather than a strictly regional space.<sup>11</sup> As Dmitri Trenin, former director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has noted, "Russia is, in a word, a status quo power, while China is seeking to open up the region for the world and capitalize on that."<sup>12</sup> Disagreements over Arctic governance offer the most broad-based area for issues between the two states.<sup>13</sup>

In an illustrative article for the *Guangming Daily* in April 2021, Dong Yongzai, associate researcher at the Xi Jinping Strong Army Thought Research Center at the Academy of Military Sciences, echoes a common theme in Chinese political, academic, and media commentary: namely, that China "should play a constructive role in improving the rules of polar governance, promoting peace and stability in the polar regions, and safeguarding the common interests of all countries and the international community."<sup>14</sup> In so doing, it advances the *community of human destiny* in the polar regions.<sup>15</sup> This phrase is an increasingly dominant frame in Chinese messaging, which encompasses the idea that China must be more active in global affairs as it seeks "to realize the 'Chinese dream' of what Xi Jinping refers to as the 'great rejuvenation' (essentially, China's return to the center of world civilization)."<sup>16</sup>

Russia has naturally pushed back on this notion of Chinese rights, entitlement, and desire to internationalize the

Arctic. Indeed, its concern about China's emerging Arctic interests was a major impediment to Beijing's application for an Arctic Council observer position, obstructing the process for 7 years. Moscow reluctantly approved China's application to the council only after considerable pressure from Nordic nations and the drafting of the council's "Criteria for Admitting Observers," which required that new observers "recognize Arctic states' sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in the Arctic."<sup>17</sup>

In June 2020, in a revealing statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry's special envoy and senior official in the Arctic Council, Nikolai Korzhunov, stated that Russia is not interested in delegating its share of responsibility for the Arctic Region to other countries. Korzhunov stated, "The Americans are not prepared for this, either. In this respect it is impossible to disagree with U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's statement made in May 2019 that there are two groups of countries—Arctic and non-Arctic. He said so in relation to China, which positioned itself as a near-Arctic state. We disagree with this."<sup>18</sup> This statement—from one of Russia's highest-ranking Arctic officials, dismissing China's entire Arctic identity—is telling. It was surely planned to send a message and express a growing discomfort with China's growing self-defined Arctic identity.

The manifestations of China's near-Arctic state identity have also been unsettling to Russia. In the future, this may become more acute. While China's military has no Arctic presence, its growing icebreaker fleet and commercial activities give it more capability and leverage in the region. China's two icebreakers operate independently, and plans for a new nuclear-powered vessel comparable to the Russian *Arktika*-class, will give China the ability to match Russian access.<sup>19</sup> This growing access capability is concerning to the Russians, as it gives substance to China's broader claims to a near-Arctic identity.

There are also concerns within Russia that China's civilian presence will support a longer term military presence,

although these thoughts are rarely expressed through official channels. In 2016, Liu Huirong, dean and professor at the Ocean University of China's College of Law and Political Science, highlighted such Russian concerns that he saw surrounding dual-use technology, specifically hydroacoustic research.<sup>20</sup> Mapping the Arctic seafloor and studying ocean salinity and thermal layers as well as regional ice dynamics are all activities of China's civilian research program and are prerequisites to a naval presence—particularly when considering potential submarine operations.

For Russia, this is a persistent fear that was dramatically brought to the fore in June 2020 when Russian authorities arrested Valery Mitko, a professor at the St. Petersburg Arctic Academy of Sciences. Mitko was charged with high treason for providing Chinese intelligence services with classified materials relating to hydroacoustics and submarine detection methods. While the details of his activities are not public, Chinese interest in co-opting an Arctic submarine expert must have provoked new concerns over its long-term objectives.

As China increases its Arctic presence and capabilities, it will likely become more strident about its rights in the Arctic and more unilateral in its approach. Russia has never supported such a presence and is explicitly opposed to any direct Chinese role in Arctic governance. This divergence in policy and philosophy can be papered over while China's role in polar governance is limited by its minimal access and tempered ambitions. However, China clearly envisions its role expanding in the future, in lockstep with access capabilities and economic clout. As that happens, Russia will have to come to grips with increased Chinese say in a region deemed to be of vital economic, military, and psychological importance to the Russian state.

### **Arctic Sovereignty: Chinese and Russian Disagreements**

When China became an accredited observer to the Arctic Council in 2013, it did so on the condition that it "recognize Arctic States' sovereignty, sovereign

rights, and jurisdiction in the Arctic."<sup>21</sup> This mollified many existing Russian concerns over China's Arctic objectives, and in the intervening years there have been no disputes over sovereignty or jurisdiction. This harmony has been facilitated by China's relative absence from the Arctic, where its ships make up only a small percentage of the voyages across northern Russia.<sup>22</sup> Beneath this harmony, however, remains deep disagreement on the question of sovereignty and jurisdiction, which strikes at the heart of Russia's position in the Arctic. As Chinese shipping and activity increase, this disagreement may be exacerbated.

Central to Russia's position in the Arctic is its assertion of sovereignty or control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR), or Northeast Passage. While the precise nature of that sovereignty remains somewhat ambiguous, Moscow claims to control key straits along the NSR as historic waters, while its published maps appear to extend its jurisdiction to the limits of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which Russia claims to manage in the same manner as its internal waters.<sup>23</sup>

As Russia's strategic thinking has increasingly emphasized sovereignty, its national regulations related to shipping along the NSR have been strengthened. In 2013, an authorization procedure for ships to pass through the NSR was introduced, and between 2017 and 2019, Russia proposed further limitations. In December 2017, the amendments to the merchant shipping code of Russia granted exclusive rights to vessels sailing under the Russian state flag to transport hydrocarbon resources produced in Russia and loaded onto vessels located in the NSR. In 2018, Russia banned the use of ships built outside the country to transport oil and gas extracted from the Russian Arctic. The following year, Russia added a new notification procedure for foreign warships passing through the territorial sea of the NSR. The new procedure means that a foreign state needs to submit a notification concerning the planned passage no later than 45 days prior to the start of the proposed passage. It also (under specific circumstances) requires mandatory icebreaker piloting by Russian-appointed



U.S. Army and Canadian soldiers practice and conduct tactical insertion on open ice skiway delivered by ski-equipped LC-130 Hercules of 109<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing, New York Air National Guard, on frozen oceanic Arctic ice near Cornwallis Island, Nunavut, Canada, March 15, 2023, as part of exercise Guerrier Nordique 23 (U.S. Army/Mikel Arcovitch)

personnel in the NSR.<sup>24</sup> Under international law, such regulations and requirements should be illegal.

The Kremlin, therefore, views the NSR as being firmly within its (ill-defined) sovereignty. It is central to its core national security concerns and an important pillar of its economy and future development. Given these views, the Kremlin is committed to protecting its position in the region and would almost certainly react strongly to any efforts that it perceives to threaten that position.<sup>25</sup>

China has not forcefully asserted its position on Arctic maritime sovereignty regarding the NSR but is unlikely to align with Russia's views. China's 2018 Arctic white paper and statements backed by senior officials stress that Arctic shipping routes should be open to all and governed by existing international agreements.<sup>26</sup> That position is inflexible, given China's commercial reliance on transit rights around the world. In Chinese expert circles, the Polar Silk Road is also of growing interest. In Chinese academic

and media commentary, these northern routes (and the NSR in particular) are—by a wide margin—the most discussed elements of China's Arctic interests.

Of note, Chinese-language academic research and media commentary consistently assert China's rights of passage.<sup>27</sup>

Historically, Russia has shown an aversion to a Chinese presence on this route. In 2012, Russia blocked Chinese vessels from operating in the NSR, causing China to suspend its research activities during its fifth Arctic expedition.<sup>28</sup> As recently as the summer of 2021, Russia denied access to Chinese sailor Zhai Mo, a famous state-sponsored Chinese adventurer who was attempting to circumnavigate the Arctic Ocean (though access was later granted). While officially a private citizen, Zhai has a history of asserting Chinese state sovereignty in disputed areas, a fact that may have concerned the Russian authorities.<sup>29</sup> To date, many Russian experts claim that their government does not accept the PSR moniker, which uncomfortably subsumes the NSR into

a China-sponsored initiative.<sup>30</sup> Despite misgivings, Russia has adopted a cooperative position, given its need for Chinese investment in the region.

While both China and Russia have sidestepped the question of sovereignty and jurisdiction, as Chinese activity increases these tensions will be harder to ignore. This difficulty will manifest for Russia if Chinese shipping comes to dominate the route—and particularly if China leverages its dominant economic and political position to deploy its own icebreakers in support. Increased shipping will also put China in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between continuing to implicitly (or even explicitly) respect Russian maritime sovereignty or adopting a clearer line on the freedom of the seas. The former flies in the face of Chinese Arctic and broader maritime policy, while the latter would seriously aggravate the relationship with Russia and highlight the considerable gap between the two on a political and legal issue of crucial importance to Russia.



COAST  
GUARD

USCGC *Healy* crewmember Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup>  
Class Patrick Edge stands bear watch from  
bridge wing during on-ice science equipment  
installation in Beaufort Sea, August 12, 2023  
(U.S. Coast Guard/Briana Carter)



## Marine Scientific Research and Chinese Encroachment

Over the past 20 years, China has undertaken extensive marine scientific research in the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas. Chinese narratives surrounding this research program center on questions of environmental research, geophysics, and other purely scientific pursuits. Despite this, automatic identification system tracking of the Chinese icebreakers *Xue Long* and *Xue Long 2* demonstrates a serious interest in resource mapping and deep seabed mining. Historically, most of this work has been undertaken on the American continental shelf north of Alaska. In Washington, this was disconcerting enough to prompt a shift in U.S. marine scientific research policy surrounding core sampling.<sup>31</sup>

Because little Chinese survey work has been undertaken on the Russian continental shelf or extended continental shelf, this activity has not generated much friction. In 2020, however, that may have changed when China announced the research program for *Xue Long 2*'s maiden Arctic voyage, which centered on a survey of the Gakkel Ridge. This area of seafloor is suspected to contain sulfides, rich in copper, zinc, and other minerals. Just outside of Russia's claimed EEZ, the ridge was in a section of ocean dubbed "the Area" by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), where access to resources is subject to governance by the International Seabed Authority and, through it, any state that applies for a mining license.<sup>32</sup>

Russian authorities reacted quickly in 2021 (before *Xue Long 2*'s voyage), altering their submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to include the area being surveyed by China. This was a clear reaction to China's activities, representing concern over the Chinese presence there. Despite this new Russian assertion of jurisdiction, China followed through with its survey, collecting seafloor samples and geological studies that could facilitate later development.

Russia's position on seabed mining and jurisdiction over the Arctic Ocean more generally is diametrically opposed

to China's. While both states accept UNCLOS as the governing structure for the region, Russia has long sought to maximize Arctic state jurisdiction while minimizing the extent of seafloor that might be considered "the common heritage of mankind" (Article 136 of UNCLOS)—open to exploitation by non-Arctic states. A central objective of China's Arctic policy has been to maximize influence and access for itself and other non-Arctic states in the region. Its position has been that it should play a leading role in the development of deep seabed development outside of coastal state jurisdiction (as outlined in Part XI of UNCLOS).

While the economics and technologies for developing these resources are not yet sufficiently mature to render exploitation a near-term possibility, continued geological research by Chinese vessels on the Russian shelf will invariably generate political friction. To date, all Chinese resource development activities in Russia have been as minority partners and with the full cooperation of Russian state enterprises. Chinese research activities on the continental shelf, however, are independent, suggesting that Russian partnerships may not be required. As such, this research poses a direct challenge to Russia's broader position that Arctic resources should be developed by Arctic states and, potentially, its direct control over what it declares to be its sovereignty and control over the continental shelf.

## Chinese Investment: Both Limited and Exploitative

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Crimea and the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014, Moscow has turned to China for the investment and markets needed to advance Arctic resource projects. Moscow has had some success, most clearly the Yamal liquid natural gas (LNG) project, of which 29.9 percent is owned by the China National Petroleum Corporation (20 percent) and the Silk Road Fund (9.9 percent). Yet despite targeted Chinese investments, this relationship has seen more rhetoric than real investment. While many joint projects have been announced, few have moved forward.

In 2009, Hu Jintao and Dmitri Medvedev announced more than 200 joint projects. Five years later, less than 10 percent were actually progressing. In 2014 and 2015, Russia created 20 special economic zones to attract foreign investment to its Far East. Only six have secured Chinese investment, which totaled a mere \$38 million between 2015 and 2018. Genuine cooperation has often been held back by red tape, poor infrastructure (both maritime and land-based), and corruption.<sup>33</sup> Some of the most promising Arctic infrastructure projects have also stalled. China's Poly Group's proposal to invest \$5.5 billion in the port of Arkhangelsk is a clear example.<sup>34</sup> Instead, China frequently opts to invest in infrastructure projects supported by other Arctic actors, such as Finland, Iceland, and Denmark.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, given the high costs of natural resource extraction in harsh climates, Chinese investors have questioned the viability of investments with uncertain returns and frequently opt to conclude lucrative and long-term energy deals with other actors.<sup>36</sup>

Chinese capital is clearly not as anxious to rush into Russian projects as Russian state media makes it seem. Nor has Chinese investment in the Russian north been as beneficial for Russia as the state has advertised. The most significant business transaction was the construction of the Power of Siberia pipeline to export Russian gas to China. The pipeline began operations in December 2019, marking an important step in Russia's economic pivot to Asia. While the project was sold to Russians as evidence of the country's broader economic options and reduced reliance on the West, it does so on reportedly poor terms. When the project was negotiated, Russia was in a weak negotiating position, and China took advantage of this reality. In essentially all respects, China dictated the terms of engagement, including when to go ahead with the pipeline, after more than a decade of bilateral talks. The route of the pipeline closely followed Chinese preferences, and gas pricing has been extremely competitive, to the detriment of the pipeline's profitability.



USCGC *Polar Star* transits south in Bering Strait, January 19, 2021 (U.S. Coast Guard/Cynthia Oldham)

The Chinese were able to set the route of the pipeline and took advantage of Russian weakness on pricing as well. While exact pricing is not public, it was widely reported that an oil-linked price had been agreed on, with an effective slope of 10 percent. This suggested a price of \$10 per million British thermal units at an oil price of around \$100 per barrel.<sup>37</sup> The linking of the gas price to oil was a major Chinese win and a hit to profitability, according to Sberbank CIB experts.<sup>38</sup> Low returns on the piped gas must also be weighted against the project's extraordinary capital costs, estimated at \$55 billion (including resource development). Russian attempts to secure \$25 billion in Chinese prepayments failed, leaving Russia to bear the full expense.<sup>39</sup>

In May 2018, the Sberbank CIB investment advisory group released a report questioning the profitability of the project and suggesting that its rate of return is likely to be lower than the cost of capital to Gazprom and to be unprofitable to Russia even though the government exempted it from the mineral extraction

and property tax.<sup>40</sup> Some analysts believe that when prices of oil fall below \$60 to \$70 per barrel, Russia may effectively be sending gas to China at a loss (when amortized capital costs are considered).<sup>41</sup>

Sitting at around 55° North, the Power of Siberia may only be a “near-Arctic” pipeline (to steal Chinese phrasing); however, it should be held up as a cautionary tale for future joint infrastructure projects. Moscow has already announced that the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, drawing gas from Arctic fields, will replace Nord Stream 2 by delivering 50 billion cubic meters of gas per year to China.<sup>42</sup> At present, these projects are used in Russian propaganda to bolster the relationship and build support for the Russian government. Western analysts have an opportunity to flip that script, highlighting the Power of Siberia 1 line (and potentially the Power of Siberia 2) as examples of China using its economic and political leverage to exploit a weakened Russia. Likewise, Chinese investment more generally should be looked at in a different light: from plentiful and productive to anemic and exploitative.

Following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, many of these trends have become even more apparent as Russia has been disconnected from the global financial system. Despite continued public support for Russia, China has moved to limit its own exposure to the country. The Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank froze all its activities relating to Russia and Belarus, citing “adherence to international law” and the need to “safeguard the financial integrity” of the bank.<sup>43</sup> Belt and Road Initiative projects have also been put on hold. According to the report published by the Green Finance and Development Center of Fudan University, no Chinese economic engagement regarding the Russia-related part of the BRI occurred in at least the first half of 2022.<sup>44</sup> This decision likely relates to Chinese fears of secondary sanctions as well as the growing volatility and instability of the Russian market.<sup>45</sup>

Chinese support for Russian energy projects has also been thrown into a state of limbo. On the surface, the





Members of China's research team set up ocean profiling float at short-term data acquisition location near icebreaker *Xuelong*, or "Snow Dragon," in Arctic Ocean, August 18, 2016 (Xinhua/Alamy Live News/Wu Yue)

future of this business relationship looks promising, with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce openly stating that China will not support oil-related sanctions or jeopardize Chinese businesses.<sup>46</sup> Behind such statements and implied support, however, this relationship faces growing challenges. Chinese multinational oil companies are loath to run afoul of Western sanctions, and China's embrace of Russia has not stopped Chinese energy firms from discreetly pulling back from new projects. Despite its official position in opposition to sanctions, the Chinese government seems to recognize the difficulties that they can cause multinational companies. In March 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly summoned officials from the three major energy companies (Sinopec, China National Petroleum Corporation, and China National Offshore Oil Corporation) to review their business ties with Russia and

“urged them not to make any rash moves buying Russian assets.”<sup>47</sup>

As a result, the corporate response has been one of caution. In March 2022, Sinopec Group suspended its talks with Russia's Sibur for a USD 500 million petrochemical investment and a gas marketing venture. The reported reason for the cancellation was Chinese concerns over secondary sanctions that might impact Sinopec's global operations. According to the Russian side, this caution was primarily motivated by Chinese producers' fear of sanctions that could come from the side of the European Union.<sup>48</sup> Sinopec also suspended talks over a gas marketing venture with Novatek over concerns that Sberbank (one of Novatek's shareholders) is on the latest U.S. sanctions list.<sup>49</sup> Construction of the Arctic LNG 2 project has also been dealt a serious blow by a Chinese yard's decision to cease production on

critical modules. As a result of this and other sanctions-related work stoppages, Novatek has halted construction on the two unfinished trains (of three) on the project. Production of LNG was originally due to start in 2023, but time schedules are now in flux.<sup>50</sup>

As the Chinese government and its state-owned entities digest the reality of Russia's war with Ukraine and adjust its approaches, investment may yet begin to flow. The most likely scenario, however, is exploitation. As one of the only major markets remaining for Russian resources and the only clear source of investment, China will hold extraordinary leverage. One-sided oil or gas contracts or infrastructure agreements can be used as a clear demonstration of Russian subordination. The failure of Chinese investment to materialize, meanwhile, would be a clear indication that the Russian pivot to the east has failed. Either of these

likely scenarios would belie the win-win Arctic narratives being advanced by both Russian and China.

## Conclusion

Russia and China's cooperative approach to Arctic investment, shipping, and governance has been presented as a key component of those states' growing partnership. In China, it offers a new source of hydrocarbons and demonstrates the country's growing global influence, while in Russia, it channels funds to key projects and counters the impression that the country has been isolated by Western political and economic sanctions. More broadly, the Arctic has been presented as an area where the two Great Powers can demonstrate a degree of solidarity as part of their continuing economic and strategic conflict with the West.

In October 2022, the U.S. National Security Strategy noted the growing dangers of Great Power competition in the Arctic. Russian remilitarization and aggressive behavior represent military threats, while a rapidly growing Chinese regional presence presents longer term economic and hybrid security risks.<sup>51</sup> Individually, China and Russia each represents dangers to the democratic Arctic states; combined, those dangers are far greater.

Yet this partnership remains skin-deep, transactional, and deeply vulnerable. Important disagreements over Arctic governance, sovereignty, and development have been successfully papered over in support of overarching economic and geopolitical objectives; however, these sticking points remain just beneath the surface. Conflicts between the two authoritarian powers are also likely to become harder to disguise, as Chinese activity in the region increases and its global ambitions expand.

From a strategic messaging perspective, these disagreements (both real and potential) offer a gap that could be exploited by the West. Reframing the conversation away from the win-win narrative being sold by Moscow and Beijing both undermines their own messaging and forces a reckoning that these governments would prefer to avoid. Chinese

shipping and marine scientific research are facilitated by a policy of purposeful ambiguity toward Russian sovereignty. Simply put, Russia does not ask China to explicitly recognize its sovereignty, which allows Beijing to avoid telling Moscow something that might create a rift. This arrangement works because the question is ignored. Western observers have an opportunity to press the issue, highlighting the difference in positions and making that ambiguity harder to maintain. Likewise, questions of economic exploitation, pipeline routing, and research should be elevated in Western conversations to a strategic level. These issues have traditionally been relegated to footnotes or obscure technical publications, yet these points have broader implications that directly impact the ability of Russia and China to maintain their "friendship with no limits" in the Arctic. If China is exploiting Russian weakness to secure cheap Arctic gas, that is a point that should be amplified. When Chinese research vessels work on Russia's extended continental shelf, Western observers should seek out clarification of China's position on Russian jurisdiction.

As Chinese Arctic activity grows and Russia becomes more desperate for Beijing's economic and political support, the opportunity to highlight these gaps will only grow. That relationship benefits from a lack of scrutiny, and the time is ripe for a more coordinated effort to reframe the conversation about Russia's partnerships in the Arctic from that win-win friendship to something more accurate: an exploitative relationship built on fragile foundations. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *China's Arctic Policy* (Beijing: State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, January 2018), <https://www.uaf.edu/caps/resources/policy-documents/china-arctic-policy-2018.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> This decline in soft power has been tracked across the Arctic by several surveys and studies in recent years. A sampling of these includes Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," Pew Research Center, October 2020; Jesse Hast-

ings et al., *Chinese Chess in the Wild West: How Icelanders View the Growing Iceland-China Relationship* (Reykjavik: Institute of International Affairs, 2015); Steven Chase, "Eight Out of 10 Canadians Say China Has Negative Influence on World Affairs: Poll," *Globe and Mail*, November 7, 2022; Pål Vegard Hagesæther, "Bought by China," *Aftenposten*, December 9, 2021; Ties Dams, Xiaoxue Martin, and Vera Kranenburg, eds., *China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times* (The Hague: European Think-Tank Network on China, April 2021).

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017); *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "Driving a Wedge Between China and Russia Won't Work," *War on the Rocks*, August 24, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Adam MacDonald, "China-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: A Cause for Concern for the Western Arctic States?" *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 27, no. 2 (2021), 194–210.

<sup>7</sup> *Focus 2020* (Oslo: Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2020), 70.

<sup>8</sup> For overviews, see Linda Jakobson, *China Prepares for an Ice-Free Arctic* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2010); Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); P. Whitney Lackenbauer et al., *China's Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018); Nong Hong, *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed* (London: Routledge, 2020); Justin Barnes et al., eds., *China's Arctic Engagement: Following the Polar Silk Road to Greenland and Russia* (Peterborough, Ontario: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2021); Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang, *Northern Expedition: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, April 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Henry Tillman, Jian Yang, and Egill Thor Nielsson, "The Polar Silk Road: China's New Frontier of International Cooperation," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2018), 345–362; Yang Jian and Zhao Long, "Opportunities and Challenges of Jointly Building the Polar Silk Road: China's Perspective," *Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law* 12, no. 5 (2019), 130–144; Camilla T.N. Sørensen, "Belt, Road, and Circle: The Arctic and Northern Europe in China's Belt and Road Initiative," in *China's Belt and Road Initiative: Changing the Rules of Globalization*, ed. Wenxian Zhang, Ilan Alon, and Christoph Lattmann (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 95–114.

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<sup>11</sup> Camilla T.N. Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Possibilities and Constraints*, Policy Paper 46 (Stockholm: SIPRI, June 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and China in the Arctic: Cooperation, Competition, and Consequences,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Townsend and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, *Partners, Competitors, or a Little of Both? Russia and China in the Arctic* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2021), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Dong Yongzai, “Polar Security: A New Frontier for National Security” [极地安全: 国家安全的新疆域], *Guangming Daily* (Beijing), April 25, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Sometimes translated to “community with a shared future for mankind” [人类命运共同体].

<sup>16</sup> Stella Chen, “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind,” China Media Project, April 2021, [https://chinamediaproject.org/the\\_ccp\\_dictionary/community-of-common-destiny-for-mankind/](https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/community-of-common-destiny-for-mankind/).

<sup>17</sup> Hong, *China’s Role in the Arctic*.

<sup>18</sup> “Russia Has No Intention of Delegating Responsibility for Arctic to Other Countries—Envoy,” TASS, June 16, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Liu Zhen, “China to Develop New Heavy Icebreaker for ‘Polar Silk Road,’” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), November 13, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Liu Huirong, “Analysis of the Value and Significance of Arctic Sea Routes in the Context of the ‘One Belt One Road’ Strategy,” *Strategic Study of Chinese Academy of Engineering* 18, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>21</sup> “Arctic Council Observers,” Arctic Council, n.d., <https://arctic-council.org/about/observers/>.

<sup>22</sup> S.K. Pestsov and A.B. Volynchuk, *Strategiya razvitiya Dal’nego Vostoka: (ne) tipichnyy sluchay sovremennoy rossiyskoy regional’noy politiki* [Far East Development Strategy: (Not) Typical Case of Modern Russian Regional Policy], *Istoricheskaya i sotsial’no-*

*obrazovatel’naya mys’* [Historical and Social-Educational Thought] 10, no. 3/1 (2018), 82–92. In the most recent shipping year, there were no Chinese ships making the transit across the Northern Sea Route.

<sup>23</sup> Lawson W. Brigham, “Arctic Shipping Routes: Russia’s Challenges and Uncertainties,” *Barents Observer*, August 12, 2022; Cornell Overfield, “Wrangling Warships: Russia’s Proposed Law on Northern Sea Route Navigation,” *Lawfare*, October 17, 2022; Vasilii Erokhin et al., “The Northern Sea Route Development: The Russian Perspective,” in *Arctic Maritime Logistics: The Potentials and Challenges of the Northern Sea Route*, ed. Igor Ilin, Tesselno Devezas, and Carlos Jahn (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 283–303.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Anthony, Ekaterina Klimenko, and Fei Su, *A Strategic Triangle in the Arctic? Implications of China–Russia–United States Power Dynamics for Regional Security* (Stockholm: SIPRI, March 2021), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Townsend and Kendall-Taylor, *Partners, Competitors, or a Little of Both?*

<sup>26</sup> *China’s Arctic Policy*.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Guo Zhen, “China’s Ocean Rights in the Arctic—Based on an Analysis of UNCLOS” [中国在北极的海洋权益及其维护—基于《联合国海洋法公约》的分析], *Theoretical Studies on PLA Political Work* [军队政工理论研究], no. 1 (2014); Wu Jun and Wu Leizhao, “An Analysis of China’s Ocean Rights in the Arctic—Based on the Perspective of International Maritime Law” [中国北极海域权益分析—以国际海洋法为基点的考量], *Wuhan University Journal* (Philosophy & Social Sciences) [武汉大学学报(哲学社会科学版)] 67, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>28</sup> Ling Guo and Steven Lloyd Wilson, “China, Russia, and Arctic Geopolitics,” *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Zhang Zhilong, “Chinese Boating Extraordinaire Sets Sail to Mark Claim Over Disputed Islands,” *Global Times* (Beijing), August 16, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, “Will Russia Put China’s Arctic Ambitions on Ice?” *The Diplomat*, June 5, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Executive Office of the President, Proclamation 10071, “Revision to United States Marine Scientific Research Policy,” *Federal Register* 85, no. 182 (September 18, 2020), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/09/18/2020-20847/revision-to-united-states-marine-scientific-research-policy>.

<sup>32</sup> Companies sponsored by United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea member states can receive 15-year contracts from the International Seabed Association authorizing exploration for polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides, and cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts in the deep seabed. The association may receive a request for such a contract applying to the Gakkel Ridge at any time and from any sponsored company. Normally, the first to ask

receives the contract.

<sup>33</sup> Mikhail Krutikhin, “Power of Siberia or Power of China?” *Al Jazeera*, December 19, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Wishnick, “Will Russia Put China’s Arctic Ambitions on Ice?”

<sup>35</sup> John Grady, “Panel: China Investing in Infrastructure Near the Arctic,” *USNI News*, April 27, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, “Sino-Qatari LNG Deal: A New Phase for Doha-Beijing Relations?” *Gulf International Forum*, June 16, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> James Henderson, “Russia’s Gas Pivot to Asia: Another False Dawn or Ready for Lift Off?” Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, November 2018, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ludmila Podobedova, “Profit for Contractors: How Much Gazprom Shareholders Lose on Construction Sites,” in Russian, *RBC.ru*, May 21, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*; Krutikhin, “Power of Siberia or Power of China?”

<sup>41</sup> Hardy Graupner, ed., “Russian Gas Boost Fuels Moscow’s China Pivot,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 13, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> “Moscow Says Power of Siberia 2 Pipeline to China Will ‘Replace’ Nord Stream 2,” *Euronews*, September 15, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Paola Subacchi, “Is Asia’s Development Machine Stuttering?” *IPS*, November 7, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Christoph Nedopil, *China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report H1 2022* (Shanghai: Green Finance and Development Center, FISE, Fudan University, July 2022).

<sup>45</sup> Kirill Sokolov, “Investments in Russia Through China’s Global Project Fell to Zero,” in Russian, *RBC.ru*, July 25, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> “FT: Independent Refineries in China Increased Purchases of Russian Oil,” *Kommer-sant* (Moscow), April 5, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Chen Aizhu, Julie Zhu, and Muyu Xu, “China’s Sinopec Pauses Russia Projects, Beijing Wary of Sanctions—Sources,” Reuters, March 28, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> “Upstream: In China, a Number of Shipyards May Stop Work on the Construction of Modules for the Arctic LNG-2,” *Rosbalt*, May 12, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Aizhu, Zhu, and Xu, “China’s Sinopec Pauses Russia Projects.”

<sup>50</sup> Atle Staalesen, “Biggest Arctic Construction Sites Could Turn into Ghost Towns,” *Barents Observer* (Norway), May 17, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022), 44–45. On China’s hybrid threats, see Rebecca Pincus and Walter A. Berbrick, “Gray Zones in a Blue Arctic: Grappling with China’s Growing Influence,” *War on the Rocks*, October 24, 2018.