

China-Russia Cooperation and Competition in the Arctic

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The current flare-up in the ongoing political stand-off between Russia and the US/ NATO over Ukraine occupies much of the current public conversation regarding Russia and its geopolitical objectives. The recent unrest in Kazakhstan, and Russia’s involvement in that theatre, came in at a distant second. Given the preeminence of these crises (and Western media’s understandable need to spill ink about them), Russia’s ongoing ambitions in the Arctic are being overlooked. By examining the cooperation – and competition – between Russia and China in the Arctic, NATO members and their allies can learn a great deal about interacting with Russia elsewhere in the world.

Much has been written about Russia’s Arctic interests and ambitions, and for the most part, it appears that Russia is transparent about them. An active participant in the Arctic Council (which consists of the eight Arctic States – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US – as well as thirteen non-Arctic observer states, including China), Russia assumed its two-year Chairmanship in May of 2021.

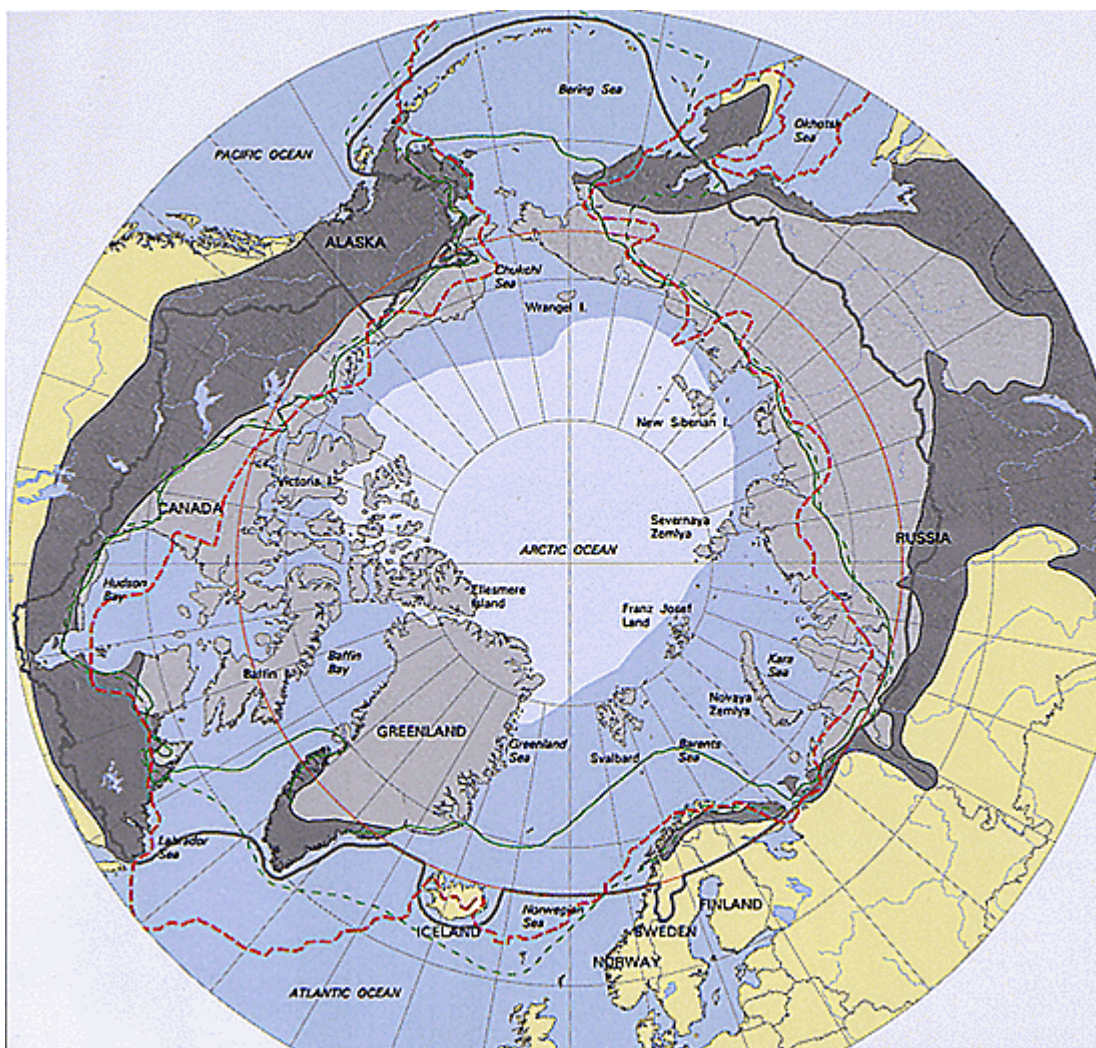
The public program of the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council involves multilateral cooperation in the following priority areas: People of the Arctic, including Indigenous Peoples; Environmental Protection, including Climate Change; Socio-Economic Development; and, Strengthening of the Arctic Council [1]. Under the leadership of Ambassador at Large for Arctic Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia and Senior Arctic Official of Russia to the Arctic Council, Nikolay Korchunov, Russia’s Chairmanship team has been putting their best foot forward during their two-year tenure to showcase Russia’s willingness to cooperate with the other Arctic states on various multilateral issues. This is not at all surprising: of all the Arctic Council member states, Russia has (arguably) the most to gain in the region, and the most at stake to defend the interests of its people residing there; with the longest Arctic coastline, as well as the greatest population and the highest levels of development in the North of any other nation, any conflict over Arctic issues would impact Russia (and the well-being of its people residing in the North) the most.

As a result, the figurative Chair of the Arctic Council is currently occupied by what’s been

described as a “friendly bear” – but however friendly, it nevertheless remains a “bear in the chair” [2]: Russia is further ahead than any other nation in militarizing its Arctic territories, and it hasn’t hesitated in the past to vociferously defend potential encroachments on its Arctic sovereignty.

Enter China and its self-declared status as a “near-Arctic state”, along with its unveiling of what it calls the “Polar Silk Road” component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a 2018 White Paper on the country’s Arctic strategy.

Russia was initially resistant to China receiving permanent observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013, and previously prevented Chinese research vessels from entering its Exclusive Economic Zone and navigating in the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Russia rightly considers the NSR part of its internal waters, similar to Canada’s position on the Northwest Passage, and imposes rules and regulations (to include an escort by Russian icebreakers) on foreign vessels wishing to transit through the NSR.



However, as Russia has become increasingly alienated from the West amid escalating sanctions following the events in Ukraine in 2014, and against the backdrop of NATO’s encroachment on the NSR, with some countries taking their vessels to the very limit of the sea route (in what they maintain is international waters, but which Russia is arguably justified in defending), it appears that there has been a rapprochement between Russia and China in relation to Arctic issues.

Strategic agreements and lofty declarations by politicians aside, concrete actions signal that Russia and China are willing to cooperate in the Arctic. The most tangible example is the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) project: Chinese ownership in the project totals nearly 30%, with Chinese investors having provided up to 60% of the total capital, which has allowed China to receive millions of metric tons of LNG a year, transported from the Yamal plant in northwest Siberia through the NSR to Chinese markets [3, 4].

It remains to be seen how much further Russia becomes integrated into China's "Polar Silk Road", and whether additional projects of a scale similar to Yamal will concretize. However, what has become clear is that Russia was willing to soften its position when it had to: as sanctions forced Russia to pivot away from Western investors and court Chinese capital for the Yamal LNG project, the NSR was effectively opened up to China, allowing the latter to diversify its energy supply chain (a critical requirement in meeting its seemingly insatiable energy needs). This apparent compromise on Russia's part may well open the door to Chinese vessels eventually transporting commodities through the NSR (for example, from Chinese ports to European markets).

This is not to say that the relationship does not still have its sticking points. For example, China continues to promote the notion of internationalizing the Arctic, viewing the region as neutral territory similar to Antarctica and arguing that its use should not be the exclusive domain of the littoral states. China promotes this view ostensibly in the name of scientific research, but neither Russia nor the other Arctic States support this argument, primarily due to the obvious economic and sovereignty implications. However, despite inevitable disagreements, the geopolitical factors that unite Russia and China – and how those factors influence their cooperation, and competition, in the Arctic – may be more compelling than those that push them apart. As noted by Dr. Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS)/Norwegian Defence University College (NDUC) and associate research fellow at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs (UI) [4]:

"Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic is, so far, mostly economically focused. On a general level, there is growing interdependence between the two economies with Russia providing commodities that China needs (notably oil and gas) and China contributing capital and increasingly advanced industrial technologies – all components of relevance to the Arctic and its development. More broadly, the impact of intensified global strategic rivalry between China and the US, which also affects the Arctic, coupled with persistent US/NATO- Russia tensions in Europe, are pushing Beijing and Moscow even closer together – which is underpinned further by an apparently close, or at least, mutually respectful personal relationship between China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin."

So what does all of this signal to NATO and the US about dealing with Russia on other issues, such as the situation in Ukraine? Quite simply, Russia's dealings with China in the Arctic show us that, given the right set of conditions, Russia may be incentivized to give something up in order to get what it wants. While this might be true in any negotiation (after all, it's been said that a good compromise leaves everyone unhappy), it might not always be obvious when dealing with Russia, whose President has shown that he's willing to use every lever at his disposal to accomplish his goals. What it also shows us is that despite Russia's various rivalries in the region, it understands that there is room (and a need) to cooperate, with benefits to all partners.

Even if its amassing of troops and equipment on Ukraine's eastern border is mere posturing, Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014 demonstrated that Putin is willing to go all in when he believes the gamble will pay off. What remains to be seen is whether NATO and the US will call Russia's (perceived) bluff, or whether they might instead raise the stakes to keep Russia at the table. What is certain is that, as in its dealings with China over Arctic issues, Russia will play its hand with care and cunning in dealing with NATO and the US over Ukraine. And if the Alliance is not on its game, Russia may well walk away with all the chips.

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Notes

1. "Russian Chairmanship 2021-2023". *The Arctic Council*, Jan. 2022, <https://arctic-council.org/about/russian-chairmanship-2/>.
2. George, Jane. "As Arctic Council chair passes to Russia, 'we could see a very friendly bear,' expert says". *Nunatsiaq News*, 17 May 2021, <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/as-arctic-council-chair-passes-to-russia-we-could-see-a-very-friendly-bear-expert-says/>.
3. Guo, Ling and Steven Lloyd Wilson. "China, Russia, and Arctic Geopolitics". *The Diplomat*, 29 Mar. 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-russia-and-arctic-geopolitics/>.
4. Weidacher Hsiung, Christopher. "The Emergence of a Sino-Russian Economic Partnership in the Arctic?". *The Arctic Institute*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/emergence-sino-russian-economic-partnership-arctic/>.

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