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Strategic partnership setting for Sino-Russian cooperation in Arctic shipping

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the cooperation policies between China and Russia in the development of shipping in the Russian Arctic. This process is analysed as a part of a comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction, able to significantly affect the development of the Global Arctic. It is necessary to study the principals and opportunities of this partnership format which allows for mitigating discrepancies in the national interests of the two states. Via comparison of the Chinese 'Ice Silk Road' initiative and Russian plans for the development of the Northern Sea Route, this piece evaluates convergence/contradiction in national interests and willingness/unwillingness to compromise. With a key example of mitigating legal discrepancies, the author discusses the matter of the status-quo of the two states in the Arctic. Sino-Russian interaction should be viewed as a process, whereby success depends on the ability of the two governments to alter their behaviour, while considering the benefits of compromise. In turn, compromises are feasible to the extent that the harmony of national interests of the PRC and the Russian Federation in the Arctic is achievable.

KEYWORDS

Arctic; Sino-Russian relations; comprehensive partnership; strategic partnership; Arctic shipping; Northern Sea Route; Ice Silk Road

Introduction

Since 2001, Sino-Russian relations have evolved from 'the equal trusting partnership and strategic interaction' to a new status of 'comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction.' The scope of new-level relations has been extended, and now it includes the Arctic, a region of a significant value for global trade and security.[1] However, for the international community, it remains unclear if Sino-Russian cooperation may threaten Arctic's peaceful development. In the paper, it argued that that cooperation in Arctic shipping, including in terms of security, remains balanced and highly pragmatic, in line with principles of Sino-Russian comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction.

When looking at this bilateral cooperation from within the Arctic, the dynamic may raise concerns among Western scientists and policymakers about a possible formal

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[1]Konyshev and Sergunin. "Arktika na perekrest'ye geopoliticheskikh interesov," 43, 52.

alliance between the two states.[2] Meanwhile, the majority of evaluations point to contradictions involving Chinese and Russian national interests in the Arctic, legal discrepancies, and the overall ambiguity of bilateral cooperation. On the one hand, scientists note that the strategic importance of the Pacific Arctic and the Russian Far East, for both states, increases the value of cooperation in terms of developing new shipping routes.[3] On the other hand, they emphasise that the imbalance in economic development may complicate a sustainable partnership. In addition, the difference in motivation between the two actors is obvious. In the case of Russia, there is the strong political impetus of post-2014 Western sanctions on Moscow in the wake of the Crimea crisis. In the case of the PRC, Beijing's motives are more economic in nature, namely the need for new shipping routes and resources, as well as partnerships with key regional actors in conjunction with the expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[4]

Russian and Chinese experts also emphasise the complexity of bilateral interactions. In scientific discourse, the positive perceptions of joint Arctic development and shipping coexist with emphasising the need for Moscow to maintain its independence from the PRC, and vice versa.[5] The challenging point for Russian scholars is about understanding the long-term consequences of interaction with China in the Arctic. Experts presuppose that the strategic importance of the region for Beijing, as well as China's interests in expanding the rights of non-Arctic states, may threaten the politics of the Russian Federation and specifically its Arctic sovereignty.[6] In turn, Chinese experts consider short-term obstacles, namely the reliability of Russia as a partner in the Arctic. Experts emphasise that Russia is extremely wary of the presence of the PRC in the High North and, in case of a thaw in relations with the West, Moscow would inevitably prefer cooperation with Europe.[7]

Since experts mostly focus on the national interests of the two states in the Arctic, the key setting of the 'comprehensive partnership' is downplayed and perceived as an additional factor – either as one of an extraordinary nature or as simple political wording. This significant research gap illustrates the need to address this upper level of complexity. Via a neorealist approach in international relations (IR) theory, it is possible to provide a critical evaluation of the essence and motives of Sino-Russian interaction in Arctic

[2]Office of the Secretary of Defence. "Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," 114; kremlin.ru. "Zasedaniye diskussionnogo kluba "Valday". Vladimir Putin vystupil na itogovoy plenarnoy sessii XVI zasedaniya Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba "Valday"; U.S. Congress. "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020"; Federation of American scientists. "Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress. Report. Congressional Research Service"; Quinn, E. "U.S. stuns audience by tongue-lashing China, Russia on eve of Arctic Council ministerial"; Conley and Melino. "America's Arctic moment. Great power competition in the Arctic to 2050," 25–26.

[3]Bertelsen and Gallucci. "The return of China, post-Cold War Russia, and the Arctic: Changes on land and at sea," 244; Østreng, Shipping in Arctic Waters, 75.

[4]Lanteigne, "One of Three Roads: The Role of the Northern Sea Route in Evolving Sino-Russian Strategic Relations," 3; Sørensen and Klimenko. "Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Possibilities and Constraints," 37–39.

[5]Chen and Zhang. "Ledovyy Shelkovyy Put""; Konyshev and Sergunin. "Osvoyeniye prirodnykh resursov Arktiki: puti sotrudnichestva Rossii s Kitayem v interesakh budushchego," 6; Voronenko, "Perspektivy rossiysko-kitayskogo sotrudnichestva v oblasti osvoyeniya Severnogo morskogo puti i yego kommercheskogo ispol'zovaniya," 301; Morozov, "Kitay v Arktike: tseli i riski dlya rossiysko-kitayskikh otnosheniy," 30–32; Aleksandrov, "Perspektivy strategicheskogo al'yansa Rossii i Kitaya v Arktike," 35; Liu, H. "Yidai Yilu' Zhanlue Beijing Xia De Beiji Hangxian Kaifa Liyong," 117; Dou, "Dongbei Ya Sichou Zhi Lu Yu Zhongguo "Yidai Yilu" Zhanlue De Tazhan," 70–71; and Liu, N. "Zhongguo de xin sichou zhi lu he beiji."

[6]Khramchikhin, "Znacheniye Atrktiki dlya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossii, Kitay mozhet stat' arkticheskoy derzhavoy" 94–96; and Gudev, P. "Arctic ambitions of the Middle Kingdom."

[7]Qin and Lukin. "Perspektivy sotrudnichestva Rossii i Kitaya v Arktike i Rossiyskiy Dal'niy Vostok," 162.

shipping. The key research question for us is – how is the current Sino-Russian strategic partnership reflected in bilateral cooperation in Arctic shipping?

Research objectives include:

- Identifying of how the format of 'comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction' corresponds to the bilateral Arctic policy agenda
- Determining what national interests support the feasibility of cooperation between the two countries in the development of Arctic shipping
- Examining the mitigating of legal discrepancies in Arctic shipping by China and Russia

Materials and methods

Materials for the research include English, Russian, and Chinese sources, including official documents and statements published at the official websites of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, State Councils, Governments, as well as scholarly publications. Such an approach have allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the scope of opinions and key political concepts and the conducting of a comparative analysis of Russian and Chinese views.

The basic reasoning in the framework of research is a defensive neorealist IR theoretical approach, which suggests that the main concern of states is not to maximise their power, but to maintain the power balance so that the status quo, and security, can be affirmed. According to this approach, great powers will avoid conflict unless they feel directly threatened, and are unwilling to risk what they have in the hopes of getting more. At the same time, the approach stresses the priority of national interests coupled with inevitable mistrust between states amid the international anarchy.[8] We see such a perspective as the most effective for understanding Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic. This is due to, first, the critical policies of Russia to maintain its status quo in the region, which it perceives as a national task. In turn, China depends greatly on the Arctic states' goodwill in order to conduct any of its activities in the region. Second, the forthcoming maritime navigation possibilities in the region caused by erosion of the Arctic ice cap, both for civilian and military purposes, will influence international security and major power relations. Thus, it is necessary to consider the national interests of major actors which have high political and economic ambitions in the Arctic.[9] Third, in Arctic politics, the state governments of both countries control all aspects of activities, including the initiatives of non-state participants. This fact makes the states key actors in the High North relations.

The defensive neorealist approach is not meant to be a strict template for forecasting the relationship between the two states, but does provide a useful platform for understanding the motivations for Sino-Russian cooperation in Arctic policies, including in the shipping sector. This research considers Sino-Russian cooperation in the field of Arctic shipping as a case that reflects the principals of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction.[10]

[8]Waltz, "Realist thought and neorealist theory," 34–37; and Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," 39–41.
[9]Pincus, "Three-Way Power Dynamics in the Arctic," 40.
[10]Johnston, "Is China a status quo power?"

The 'bilateral partnership' setting

When talking about the new level of Sino-Russian partnership, it is worth clarifying what this format means in practice. Russia is not a unique case in the long list of China's partnerships since the 1990s, involving a variety of states and actors including the EU and several individual European states.[11] Such diversity emphasises the key feature of partnership format, namely, the opportunity for the parties to stay flexible in terms of any kind of obligations peculiar to blocs and alliances.[12] In case of a crisis, it also allows for neutrality or even disapproval of the partner's actions, while maintaining a good neighbourly attitude, as has repeatedly happened in the Sino-Russian format (as it was after the Georgia conflict in 2008). Thus, a partnership avoids the alliances' limitations which sometimes require sacrificing one's own interests for those of the partner. This format also provides an opportunity to pursue a pragmatic policy and maintain contacts, even with partners' opponents.[13]

In terms of defensive neorealism, the partnership framework provides a favourable environment both for balancing and independence and for pursuing national goals. In particular, it is due to this format that we may see the forceful move to join ambitious largescale initiatives – such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In spite of the heavily debated competition between Russia and China in Central Asia, and of Moscow's initial caution towards the very idea of the BRI, currently both states have managed to develop an effective dialogue.[14] Moreover, the so-called 'conjunction' of the two projects will likely include the development of Arctic sea routes, judging by the authorities' speeches.[15]

At the same time, yet Sino-Russian cooperation has typical features of the partnership format discussed above, the current high level of trust between the two states is unprecedented. The first factor, which explains such confidence, is the strategic leadership role of the two presidents as the cornerstone of current Sino-Russian relations.[16] The Russian and Chinese presidents personally oversee their national long-term activities in the bilateral format, and their friendship supports this mutual dialogue. This political variable could lead to the fragility of the relationship, however, the strengthening powers of both leaders provide strategic immunity to the internal political forces which may impede cooperation. For the Arctic, that stipulates the stable collaborative scenario as the most viable in the foreseeable future. However, with no misinterpretation, that means no more than the will to cooperate reliably and in line with its own national interests. Simultaneously, this factor explains why, with no guarantees from the leadership of both states, many bilateral initiatives in the Arctic remain ink on paper.[17]

[11]Strüver."International Alignment between Interests and Ideology: The Case of China's Partnership Diplomacy," 13–14.
[12]People's Daily. "Wen stresses importance of developing China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership"; and Feng, "Will China and Russia form an alliance against the United States? The new geostrategic game," 9.
[13]Korolev and Portyakov. "China-Russia Relations in Times of Crisis: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation. Asian Perspective," 418; and Waltz. "The origins of war in neorealist theory", 620.
[14]Alexeeva and Lasserre. An analysis on Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic in the BRI era," 279–282; Gabuev. "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia," 62–63.
[15]TASS. "Kitay i Rossiya idut v nogu so vremenem."
[16]kremlin.ru. "Sovmestnoye zayavleniye Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki o razvitii otnosheniy vseob"yemlyushchego partnerstva i strategicheskogo vzaimodeystviya, vstupayushchikh v novuyu epokhu"
[17]Li, Zhan, and Ma. "Zhongguo Kaifa Haishang Dongbei Hangdao De Zhanlue Tuijin Gouxiang," 50.

The second factor is the so-called Russian 'turn to the East' policy that became the most popular wording among Russian authorities, especially after the 2014 sanctions. A good part of Russian experts' queries about the reality of Moscow's 'turn' point at the persistent Russian focus on European markets, as well as on the European identity of Russia. However, more active Russian political engagement with Asian states gathers pace and the High North is one of the best examples.[18] Arctic politics have benefited by new strategic national plans aimed to develop enormous territories using their capabilities to supply European and Asian markets.[19] In domestic terms, this has brought a key emphasis on the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and attempts to unite far-flung Russian territories legally and administratively, including via the establishment of the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic in 2019.[20] In foreign policy terms, these policies stimulated cooperation with many Asian states including China. In this regard, Russian regional relations with the PRC, (currently promoted with an emphasis on two projects, of transport corridors Primorye-1 and −2) were eventually linked to the Northern Sea Route's overall development.[21]

It is also safe to say that the partnership format allowed for officially including the Arctic in the bilateral agenda, while regularly mentioning it in annual Joint statements. Certainly that the first precedent was made early in 2003 when studying the Arctic was mentioned in an agreement on cooperation in the field of research and use of the world's oceans. In a point of fact, that document set the groundwork for further steps.[22] The following stages clearly appeared in the Joint Statement of 2017, which indicated the intention to conjointly develop shipping via the NSR, (as well as to participate in the conjunction of the EAEU and BRI), and then evolved in 2018 and 2019.[23] Paragraph 17 of the 2018 Joint Statement noted that the two states would support departments and companies involved in the construction of infrastructure and the development of the NSR.[24] In 2019, both sides expressed their intention to expand cooperation in the Arctic in a range of areas, including shipping. The noteworthy statement here is that cooperation will be 'based on the rights and taking into account the interests of the coastal state.'[25] In fact, this step defuses some of the PRC's ambitions stated in the White Paper in 2018, in particular, the idea of freedom of navigation in the Arctic on the pretext of UNCLOS.[26] On one hand, these steps enriched the scope of mutually recognised principals of cooperation in the Arctic. On the other, they set the foundation for mitigating legal discrepancies, which tend to perceived as critical ones for both states in the Arctic. This last issue will be addressed in the third part of this paper.

[18]Larin, "Povorot Rossii na Vostok»: vse o nom slyshali, no kto yego videl?"
[19]Sevast'yanov and Kravchuk. "Uskorennoye razvitiye Arktiki i Dal"nego Vostoka: sinergiya proyektov," 8–9.
[20]RosBiznesConsulting. "Vlasti otkazalis' ot rasshireniya granits Severnogo morskogo puti".
[21]Ministry of Commerce of the PRC. "Programma razvitiya rossiysko-kitayskogo sotrudnichestva v torgovo-ekonomicheskoy i investitsionnoy sferakh na Dal'nem Vostoke Rossiyskoy Federatsii na 2018–2024 gody.
[22]Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Soglasheniye mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Pravitel'stvom Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki o sotrudnichestve v oblasti issledovaniya i ispol'zovaniya mirovogo okeana"; and TASS. "Rossiya i Kitay razrabatyvayut memorandum o sovmestnom osvoyenii Arktiki"
[23]kremlin.ru. "Sovmestnoye zayavleniye Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki o dal"neyshem uglublenii otnosheniy vseob"yemlyushchego partnerstva i strategicheskogo vzaimodeystviya"
[24]kremlin.ru. "Sovmestnoye zayavleniye Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki"
[25]kremlin.ru. "Sovmestnoye zayavleniye Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki o razvitii otnosheniy vseob"yemlyushchego partnerstva i strategicheskogo vzaimodeystviya, vstupayushchikh v novuyu epokhu"
[26]The State Council of the People's Republic of China. "Full Text: China's Arctic Policy."

Comparison of national interests

The case of Arctic shipping reflects the partnership ability to balance national interests. While addressing the weak points of Arctic shipping development for the two states, one can compare two initiatives of Russia, (the development of the Northern Sea Route), and China (the Ice Silk Road), and one can determine the difference of national interests of China and Russia in the two initiatives and elucidate whether the ISR and the NSR support each other's development or stay as separate as it is possible.[27]

To start with, the Russian idea is of a purely domestic nature, since its location and the eventual outcome directly relates to RF territory and development. The analysis of Russian motives demonstrates the crucial value of the Northern Sea Route for Russian state survival, since it invigorates weak points of the country's economy, and therefore maintains a status quo.[28] The first weak point is due to socio-economic challenges, as a lack of infrastructure threatens the ability to manage the Siberian/RFE regions, which has huge reserves of natural resources. The NSR is the only option that provides Russian territorial control, socio-economic development, construction of mining projects, and the delivering of products to the domestic and international customers. For this reason, today the NSR has assumed the role of a national transport corridor, oriented towards the world market. Accordingly, the key criterion for any project in the Russian Arctic is the ability to facilitate maritime cargo shipping for the NSR in order to reach the ambitious threshold of eighty million tons of cargo transported annually via that route by 2024.[29]

The second weak point relates to regional security challenges – both traditional and non-traditional. The long Russian Arctic coastline includes many underdeveloped territories, naturally requiring security control and monitoring, especially due to the new condition of international accessibility. The threats of terrorism, illegal immigration, poaching, smuggling, and environmental pollution all indicate the need for Russian security actors to operate more robustly in the country's Arctic waters, and develop adjacent infrastructure and plans for search and rescue (S&R) stations. As well, the Arctic routes along the Russian border flow around lands which are greatly significant for strategic deterrence. The Kola Peninsula and the Bastion defence in the Barents Sea, as a legacy from the Soviet period, and the adjacent waters to American strategic forces in the North Pacific, extended by a Far East Bastion defence, remain areas of special concern for the Russian government. These issues lead to an obvious response of maximising power in order to safeguard the area. In this regard, the strategic value of the NSR always remains subtly connected to relations with any state in the Circumpolar North, including with the PRC.[30]

Nevertheless, it is important to note that from the Russian perspective the strategic importance of Arctic routes implies not only the need to control the waters within its jurisdiction but also to maintain a 'zone of peace'. Any conflict within the territories is

[27]Waltz, "Realist thought and neorealist theory," 36.
[28]The Northern Sea Route is a navigable channel of 5600 km from the Kara Gate to Cape Dezhnev. kremlin.ru. "Poslaniye Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu"
[29]garant.ru "Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 5 marta 2020 g. N 164 "Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035 goda"; kremlin.ru. "Prezident podpisal Ukaz "O natsional'nykh tselyakh i strategicheskikh zadachakh razvitiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii na period do 2024 goda."
[30]Official Internet resources of the President of Russia. "Morskaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii, utverzhdennaya Prezidentom Rossiyskoy Federatsii N Pr-1210"; Bertelsen and Gallucci. "The return of China, post-Cold War Russia, and the Arctic: Changes on land and at sea." 244–245.

fraught with an irrevocable loss of a hopeful future, mentioned earlier, and, in the 'nightmare' scenario, with a disintegration of the state. In this sense, despite the vibrant domestic motivation and the high priority of the military component, the maritime strategy of Russia arguably remains a defensive one, with a strong focus on the Arctic.[31]

The third, political weak point relates to the country's position in the global arena. The Russian core idea of being one of the main powers in a multipolar world is threatened by both the international indignations over the RF's politics after the Ukraine crisis, as well as internal socio-economic problems. The NSR addresses these issues and raises the value of Russia as an international partner. In terms of image-making, it shows that Russia is capable of realising incredibly challenging projects in the High North, and providing all necessary conditions for international business, (including icebreaker and navigation support, the delivery of the LNG to customers by ice-class tankers, etc.). In terms of internal politics, the successful development of the NSR will become a subject for national pride, since it will help Russian citizens to perceive the state as an advanced one. In this regard, it is possible to agree with the opinion of an expert at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (Russian Academy of Sciences), Voronov K., that the Arctic is the very field where Russia *de facto* plays a role of an independent major power, thus hoping to secure such a status.[32]

The abovementioned points explain why Moscow has thrown much effort into the development of the Northern Sea Route in spite of the high costs and all the difficulties of operating in Arctic waters.[33] For the implementation of national tasks, the government makes outstanding efforts including state support for commercial initiatives, tax exemptions, and establishing special economic regime that favours private companies and investors in eight Support Zones along the Arctic coast.[34] The updated set of measures include modernisation of icebreakers and other vessels, in order to ensure the country's unchallenged leadership in this sphere, the development of the port infrastructure, adjacent railways, and support for container transportation.[35]

When comparing China's Ice Silk Road initiative, it is fair to say that it on contrary comes from the global ambitions of the PRC, (if only because China's territory is far from the Arctic). However, there is no unanimity in the evaluation of the nature of the ISR – it is more of economic, either of strategic and political value.[36] Analysing comparable areas of weaknesses allows an understanding of what goals does China's Arctic involvement serve.

The first socio-economic weak point is usually considered as a clue to China's activities in the High North.[37] As a growing economy with a lack of energy resources, the PRC seeks new opportunities to meet future demand. The development of Arctic

[31]Burilkov and Geise. "Maritime Strategies of Rising Powers: developments in China and Russia," 1046–1047; The Russian Government. "Osnovy gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2020 goda i dal"neyshuyu perspektivu."

[32]Voronov, "YEES, Kitay, Rossiya i Arktika: strategicheskiye imperativy."

[33]Restrictions on the deadweight of 40 thousand tons, a limited list of cargoes, expensive icebreaker services, difficulties with information support for navigation, etc.

[34]Kola, Arkhangelsk, Nenets, Vorkuta, Yamalo-Nenets, Taimyr-Turukhansk, North Yakut, Chukotka Support Zones. The Russian Government. "Soveshchaniye po voprosam razvitiya Arktiki".

[35]The Russian Government. "Postanovleniye Pravitel'stva RF ot 21 aprelya 2014 g. N 366 "Ob utverzhdenii gosudarstvennoy programmy Rossiyskoy Federatsii "Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoye razvitiye Arkticheskoy zony Rossiyskoy Federatsii"; The Russian Government. "Utverzhdon plan razvitiya infrastruktury Severnogo morskogo puti do 2035 goda".

[36]Sun, "The Northern Sea Route: The Myth of Sino-Russian Cooperation," 15.

[37]Jakobson and Peng, "China"s Arctic aspirations", 10.

navigation partially addresses this task by avoiding the 'Strait of Malacca Dilemma' and piracy in the waters of Somalia as well as the overall security situation in the Indian Ocean.[38] This contributes to energy and maritime security of the state. Subsequently, Arctic shipping will give the desired impetus for development of Northeast China, which ports will accommodate vessels from the Arctic voyages, (for many decades this region remains a burdening task). However, these ambitions are in the mid-term future, due to a technological gap in China's fleet and navigation support in challenging Arctic waters.

Before discussing the security weak point, it worth emphasising that, China's strategic focus is in the Asia Pacific, and not in the Arctic.[39] However, navigation in the High North relates to challenges stemming from the PRC's overall geopolitical competition with the United States and its allies. The lingering issues for China include the US nuclear ballistic missile submarine force in proximity to Chinese territory coupled with an absence of a ballistic missile early warning system.[40] In addition, Arctic shipping poses a maze of maritime challenges. The alternative route includes the bottleneck of the Bering Strait near the American and Russian coastlines, and faces the problem of limitations of the First and the Second Island Chains.[41] These strategic problems explain the need for China to have reliable relations with either the United States or Russia. The natural choice for Beijing currently is to cooperate with Russia and, as far as it is possible, to maintain constructive relations with the US. In principle, such a scenario may allow overcoming the obstacles of the Island Chains in the north via using the Russian coastline and its Far East ports for goods delivery. To protect its own national interests in the Arctic, especially those related to shipping, China assumed the following policy stance: to participate in rescue and military operations affecting Chinese national interests and to provide its capital, market, knowledge, technology, and experience for 'promoting peace and security in the Arctic'.[42] Yet, in practical terms, most analysts agree that the PRC lacks technologies to conduct military activities in the High North and question the cost-benefit equation of any China's attempt to actively deploy military assets to the far north.[43]

The third weak point stems from China's global political ambitions consistent with that of a rising great power. Alongside Russia, China supports the idea of multipolarity in the international system and aspires to become one of the world's leading states despite US opposition. This sets up two challenges for the Chinese leadership. First, the need to satisfy the country's economic needs, which is possible only by expanding the global presence of the PRC in the world. Secondly, to take a worthy place among the leading powers, which means the need to influence international rules, currently adapted to the US-led global order. A comprehensive decision by the PRC leadership crystallised in the Belt and Road Initiative, which since 2017 has included the Arctic.[44] It should be

[38]This will increase the trade potential of China by 10.95–20%.
Li, and Hu. "Beijí hangdao "kaitong yu zhongguo ji qi shou yingxiang quyu de maoyi zengzhang qianlì fenxi, 429, 437; Lanteigne, "China"s maritime security and the "Malacca Dilemma"", 143.
[39]Burilkov and Geise. "Maritime Strategies of Rising Powers: developments in China and Russia," 1046–1047.
[40]Zhang and Huang. "Zhongguo Beiji Quanyi De Weihu Lujing Yu Celue Xuanze," 75–77.
[41]Cole. "The PLA Navy and "Active Defense", 129.
[42]The State Council of the People's Republic of China. Ibid.; Xinhuanet. "Shouquan fabu: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojia anquan fa."
[43]Olesen and Sørensen. "New DIIS report on Nordic views of great power politics in the Arctic. What can Denmark learn?", 13.
[44]Xinhua News Agency. "Full Text: Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative."

emphasised that it is shipping and not resource extraction, which has become the basis of the Chinese version of Arctic development. The ISR allowed China to declare itself as a 'responsible power', which offers inclusive cooperation for the benefit of the global commons in the Arctic, as well as to claim its legal rights in the region, especially those related to freedom of navigation, joint economic and scientific development. Seeking to consolidate its status as an important Arctic actor, the PRC assumed a title of a 'near-Arctic state' that has a right to sit at the bargaining table. Thus, the ISR is a matter of China's status in the Arctic, with an proviso that it is not about sovereignty, but about being accepted and treated as a legitimate major regional actor.

All the above issues have motivated China to develop its capabilities to navigate the Arctic. By 2020, China had developed greater knowledge on Arctic shipping and conducted both research and commercial voyages, mostly through the efforts of the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA) and COSCO, the flagship firm of Chinese polar commercial shipping. Two diesel-electric icebreakers, the refurbished former Soviet vessel *Snow Dragon*, and the domestically constructed *Snow Dragon 2*, coupled with the announced construction of nuclear icebreaker, constitute the Chinese Polar research fleet. That is the current limit of China's icebreaker experience, since a debated use of non-polar ice-class vessels in the Gulf of Bohai is not feasible for the Arctic.[45] In its turn, COSCO made a number of commercial voyages and, in 2019, it announced shipments with a deadweight tonnage of 28,000–36,000 via the North-East Passage from mid-July to early September.[46] However, Chinese Polar shipping is still in its infancy, with the lack of own ice-class commercial vessels and specialised ports, and have to come a long way to an independent operation.

To conclude, from a socio-economic perspective, the NSR's development and the ISR's implementation are constantly evolving initiatives. Both projects evolved to establish the link between European and Asian markets, and both meet the national need for Arctic shipping to boost the economic development of related regions.[47] For Moscow, China is one of the most promising partners in the field of Arctic shipping, (along with South Korea and Japan). For Beijing, cooperation with Russia on the NSR is the most feasible Arctic policy, as this channel is far better developed compared to other Arctic routes (even though China is also interested to use them when circumstances permit).[48] However, being linked to national development plans, the NSR and ISR serve the interests of Russia and China independently. This fact explains the tenacious striving of the two states to maintain policy independence by any means available, including in personnel training and in preference of the national languages for maps and navigation guidelines.[49]

These security perspectives in turn presents vivid discrepancies in the interests of the two states. The Russian Arctic coast, (including the NSR), is an area of strategic importance for Moscow, as well as an area where Russia has a strategic advantage over China. Here, the incidence in the security sphere with China's participation may upset

[45]zhidao.baidu.com "Zhongguo you ji sou pobingchuan."
[46]Such shipments include general cargo, oversized and overweight equipment, machinery, bulk cargo, containers, etc. cross-ocean.com. "Breakbulk Marketing and Sales Guidebook".
[47]The Russian Government. "Utverzhdon plan razvitiya infrastruktury Severnogo morskogo puti do 2035 goda."
[48]kremlin.ru. "Zasedaniye kruglogo stola foruma "Odin poyas, odin put'".
[49]*Cai, M. "COSCO. Arctic Circle".*

the regional power balance.[50] Due to this fact, Russia is not interested in the 'maximizing of power' vis-á-vis China in the Arctic. Caveats about China's dual-use technologies in Arctic research, in particular within the field of hydro-acoustic technologies, are not overlooked by Russian decision-makers.[51] This situation sets a strict limit for cooperation with China in Arctic military security and complicates the possibility of collaboration in the civilian field of search and rescue (SAR), maritime security, and related areas. The additional burden stems from the fact that security cooperation depends on maintaining bilateral relations on the border, and in the Asia-Pacific region. In this regard, though the two states no longer have territorial disputes, the sphere of military security remains particularly sensitive and politically charged.[52]

However, still, there are arguments in favour of cooperation. The first is the shared interest in technological development of the Arctic Ocean, which explains the intention of the two states to join the international trans-Arctic cabling scheme. In addition, the bilateral cooperation in remote sensing between GLONASS and BeiDou among other areas, will improve the navigation situation in the Arctic.[53] The second factor is a confrontation with the United States, which is prompting a rapprochement between China and Russia in the security sphere and creating the basis for closer cooperation in the Arctic, a point that the US has become increasingly critical of. Countering the US, both states hold regular joint naval exercises, '*Joint Sea*', (yet none of them took place in the Arctic).[54] The additional motivation regarding the inclusion of the Arctic in Sino-Russian cooperation is the maximising of Russian military power in the Arctic does not completely disregard Chinese interests. If the confrontational situation with the US continues, China will more closely depend on Russia to maintain the security of its Arctic shipping. For this reason, the NSR's development, and the recently announced cooperation with Russia in the creation of a ballistic missile early warning system, will provide a more favourable geopolitical environment for Beijing.[55] However, for Russia and China, the best possible way to cooperate more closely in Arctic security likely rests in the sphere of maritime security related to economic activities, as opposed to military cooperation.

At first glance, from a political perspective there appears to be a favourable environment for bilateral cooperation. This corresponds to an idea of enhancing both states' positions in the international system, which China and Russia perceive as a multipolar one.[56] In this regard, the NSR's development, and the ISR, which expand the connectivity of the world,

[50]Waltz, "Realist thought and neorealist theory," 36.
[51]Koh. "China"s strategic interest in the Arctic goes beyond economics."
[52]Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Dopolnitel'noye soglasheniye mezhdu Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respublikoy o rossiysko-kitayskoy gosudarstvennoy granitse na yeye vostochnoy chasti"; Burilkov and Geise. "Maritime Strategies of Rising Powers: developments in China and Russia," 1046.
[53]Xinhuanet. "Woguo jiang dui beiji dongbei hangdao jinxing duanbo tongxin baozhang ceshi"; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Soglasheniye mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Pravitel'stvom Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki o sotrudnichestve v oblasti primeneniya global'nykh navigatsionnykh sputnikovykh sistem GLONASS i Beidou v mirnykh tselyakh".
[54]The Guardian. "Joint Russian and Chinese air patrol heightens tension in Korean peninsula."
[55]Pan and Lu. "Beiji Diqu De Zhanlue Jiazhi Yu Zhongguo Guojia Liyi Yanjiu," 118, 122; kremlin.ru. "Zasedaniye diskussionnogo kluba "Valday". Vladimir Putin vystupil na itogovoy plenarnoy sessii XVI zasedaniya Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba "Valday"
[56]Lagutina and Leksyutina. "BRICS countries' strategies in the Arctic and the prospects for consolidated BRICS agenda in the Arctic." 46–47.

both serve the idea of multipolarity. For these reasons, the topic of Arctic shipping is practical for developing political rhetoric both internationally and domestically.

At the same time, it would be a simplification to see only the positive side of the story, since there is a strong contradiction, which splits over the mutually beneficial agenda. The first is China's idea of the expanding the rights of non-Arctic states in the Arctic with the leading role of China as a 'responsible power'. This idea is crucial for the PRC and it sharply contradicts Russian political vision regarding Arctic development. The mitigating this discrepancy is a working task in the framework of bilateral partnership. For this reason, it is difficult to agree with some experts who believe that it was the Russian side that invited China to build the Ice Silk Road.[57] Such logic leads to the idea of Russia's major interest in Chinese investments on the backdrop of low interest of the PRC towards the Arctic routes. However, as was previously discussed, both states' interest is not fixed on bilateral cooperation and has a strong impetus for maintaining independence. In this regard, any comments from Russian politicians in the media, aside from analysing China's low-key rhetoric on the Arctic, are insufficient arguments.

Second, it worth mentioning that the value of Arctic shipping for the domestic politics of the two states differs drastically. For Beijing, it remains a low-risk area simply because of the poor awareness of Arctic issues among Chinese citizens in spite of the initiated educating activities.[58] While, on the contrary, for Russia, the NSR's development is a sensitive topic in terms of its success or failure, and any political decisions are far-reaching, including if it comes to closer cooperation with Beijing. It is hard to imagine the jubilation among Russian citizens towards the dominance of China's business in Russian territories given Russian sensitivities to Chinese economic activities in the RFE. Besides, such a scenario brings the possibility that particular regions of the RF will come under the sway of Chinese investments. These issues have also prompted Russian authorities to seek ways to diversify cooperation with Asian players.

Mitigating legal discrepancies

One of the best examples of how this partnership affects Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic is the mitigation of legal discrepancies regarding navigating the NSR. The key reciprocal claims include the interpretation of international regulations, (primarily, Article 234 of UNCLOS, and the idea of the right of innocent passage), and Russian national rules (such as the expensive and obligatory icebreaker and piloting services on the NSR).[59] The approaches, (i.e. national interests), of China and Russia are different at such a degree that seem insoluble contradictions. Namely, for China, the upholding of the 'legal rights' of non-Arctic states is a matter of principle and an important task. It is no less fundamental for Russia that perceives this as a challenge to its own sovereignty. Thus, even amid the friendly mutual rhetoric, Russian officials have expressed solidarity with US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo who in 2019 described the self-proclaimed status of China as a 'near-Arctic state' as illegitimate.[60]

[57]interfax. "Severnyy morskoy put' dolzhen stat' vsesezonnym, schitayet Rogozin"; Sun, "The Northern Sea Route: The Myth of Sino-Russian Cooperation," 3.
[58]CCTV. "Beiji! Beiji!"
[59]Liao, Q. "Beiji Dalujia Falu Zhidu Yanjiu," 63–65.
[60]TASS. "Russia has no intention of delegating responsibility for Arctic to other countries – envoy"; Komissina, "Arkticheskiy Vektor Vneshney Politiki Kitaya" 54, 71–73.

However, this cooperation has evolved with no visible incidents on legal matters and leads to concessions in key projects.[61] Russia and China have come to a pragmatic thesis of 'no core discrepancies'. They neglect contradictions and emphasise that China hopes for exercising its rights in the Arctic without encroaching on the sovereignty of any state.[62] Due to the recognition and joint elaboration of mandatory international documents on maritime law and, above all, UNCLOS, the 2017 Polar Code, and the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, the two states affirm the possibilities for long-term practical solutions and compromise, with the stipulation that such activities do not affect the status of either state.[63]

One can assume that Beijing could be more active in the promotion of the idea of 'innocent passage' in the Arctic. However, China has no significant Arctic fleet that worth risking a conflict with its key regional partner. Aside from undermining trust with Russia and damaging the bilateral partnership, a revisionist stance would complicate Chinese relations with Canada, which assumes the same interpretation as the RF in the case of the Northwest Passage in the Canadian Arctic. In addition, such a policy position may provoke activities in the South China Sea against the PRC, which claims for the large part of that waterway.[64] Finally, since in the Arctic, Russia has an advantage over China, it is the PRC expected to be the flexible element in the relationship, one which adapts to the rules of the game.

From a defensive realist perspective, the trend towards Sino-Russian compromise demonstrates that, by way of the partnership format, both states confirmed their status quo in the region. Namely, China did it *de jure* via the recognition of the international legal regulations and the legitimacy of Russian national rules *per se*, additionally supported by the 2019 Joint Statement. In turn, Russia, which treats China as an important partner in key Arctic projects, *de facto* granted to China if not the status of a major Arctic stakeholder, but at least the status of a legitimate actor in the Arctic affairs. This fact complements the scope of mutually recognised principals, which are necessary for the coordination of foreign politics. In addition, this strengthened the image of Russia as a reliable and advanced Arctic state, one that is open to international cooperation with non-regional actors.

Conclusion

In line with the initial hypothesis, this research shows the Sino-Russian partnership as creating an environment which stresses mutual balance and independence. As a part of this process has been cooperation in Arctic shipping. Specifically, in the socio-economic field, these policies feature the balancing of two independent and competitive project initiatives within the Ice Silk Road and Northern Sea Route development. Both of these are in their infancy and most of the accomplished projects are perceived as specific

[61] Silk Road Fund. "The Belt and Road Initiative: Launching a New Paradigm for International Investment and Financial Cooperation – An Interview with Jin Qi, Chairman of the Silk Road Fund."
[62] Zagorskiy, "Rossiya i Kitay v Arktike: raznoglasiya real'nyye ili mnimyye?" 68; Zhao, L. "Lun Eluosi Beifang Hangdao Zhili Lujing Ji Qianjing Pinggu," 27, 28.
[63] Konyshev, V., and M. Kobzeva. "Shpitsbergen V Arkticheskoy Politike Kitaya," 51–53; Moe and Stokke. "Asian Countries and Arctic Shipping: Policies, Interests and Footprints on Governance," 42; PRO-ARCTIC. "Posol Rossii v KNR schitayet interes Kitaya k Arktike vpolne yestestvennym".
[64] Todorov, A. "Kuda vedet Severnyy morskoy put"?

achievements and not everyday occurrences. Therefore, the current collaboration network focuses on laying groundwork, i.e. infrastructure development.

The long-term basis for cooperation in the region are the potential benefits via a complementarity of resources and capital. However, it is critical for both countries to remain as independent as possible in the area of Arctic shipping. Russia's national interest is to make the NSR a transport corridor from Europe to Asia, which the RF can profit from. To cooperate in Arctic shipping with China, Russia needs good reasons, such as projects significantly contributing to the development of resources and the state's revenue. For China, a key incentive for participation in Arctic shipping is the new way of trading with European countries. The PRC also does not seek to restrict itself in cooperating with the Russian Federation so as not to become dependent on bilateral obligations or invest in information support or infrastructure completely managed by Moscow.

The security field, however, demonstrates a clear difference in national interests. This determines the policy distance between the states in this field, and narrows the possible cooperation options to technological exchange in related spheres. The peculiar fact here is that the maximisation of China's power in Arctic shipping is against Russian interests, while the maximisation of Russian power in its Arctic territory does not necessarily contradict Chinese interests. This creates the dubious ground for strengthening security ties between the two states in the Arctic.

The pivotal factor that may affect such cooperation is the radicalisation of the US position against the two states, including in the Arctic, amid the lack of efficient dialogue with Washington. The idea of sanctions against Russia and China in the Arctic, set forth, for example, in a Report of the Congressional Research Service of 2019, would exacerbate the confrontation and trigger the transformation of the Arctic from a zone of economic competition into a zone of active geopolitical struggle.[65] Subsequently, instead of an 'Asian club' with a China leadership in the Arctic, circumstances may bring to life the 'NSR club': the Russia leadership cooperation in the framework of conjunction between the EAEU and BRI, and possibly including other related blocs such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), or the BRICS.

In the political field, cooperation serves national image-building of both Russia and China and enforces shared values towards the need for multipolarity. Via the key initiatives of the Northern Sea Route development and the Ice Silk Road, both Russia and China see the way of strengthening the connectivity of global markets. In this regard, a thaw in Russian relations with European, and especially Nordic, countries will balance cooperation in the area. In turn, European countries' remoteness from cooperation with Russia and China will complicate the implementation of national tasks and negatively affect the development of the Global Arctic as a zone of peaceful international cooperation.

At the same time, the political field illustrates a clear difference between the two 'statuses' in the Arctic, namely the Russian status quo of an Arctic sovereign state, and the Chinese status of a legitimate major Arctic actor. In this regard, Moscow, who has an advantageous position, has set forth the obligatory rules, including constant professions of respect to

[65]Federation of American scientists. "Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress. Report. Congressional Research Service."

Russian sovereignty as well as compliance with laws and agreements. This forms a solid basis for interaction, and helps both states to adapt to the evolving Arctic legal environment. With that, Russian and Chinese agreements on legal issues and mechanisms for cooperation on the NSR provide a precedent for a potentially more inclusive future of the Arctic.

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