

Bears and Dragons in the North: An Analysis of Sino-Russian Economic Relations in the Arctic

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Abstract

The Arctic is rich with natural resources, such as natural gas, oil, and critical minerals, which have become increasingly more accessible due to climate change. Along with geopolitical tensions, many countries have included or are considering including the Circumpolar North in their strategy. As an Arctic state, Russia's proximity to the region allows for easier access to these resources; however, Western sanctions and financial constraints have made it difficult to develop means of extracting these resources. This has caused Russia to turn to China, a self-declared "Near Arctic" state, which has been providing financial and technological support for these projects. In return, China seeks to gain energy supplies and expand its geopolitical influence through the Polar Silk Road, the Northern component of its Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords:

Arctic, China, Russia, Economic Cooperation, Sino-Russian Cooperation

Introduction

As Arctic sea ice melts at an accelerated rate, many countries have included the Circumpolar North in their strategic thinking, emphasizing the region's importance. Since outlining its Arctic policies in a 2018 white paper, China has increased its presence in the Arctic in search of new economic opportunities and resource extraction (Puranen & Kopra, 2023, p. 240). This has raised concerns in many Western countries, particularly those within the Arctic Council. Like the West, Russia initially opposed China's increased presence in the Arctic and its self-description as a "Near Arctic State." However, despite Russia's reservations about China, scholars like Lincoln Flake believe that co-operation between the two countries will occur and prevail (Flake, 2013, p. 681). Following Western sanctions after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, co-operation between China and Russia increased, further strengthening their partnership. However, scholars like Jørgen Staun and Camilla T. Sørensen believe such co-operation represents a blunder on Russia's part (Staun & Sørensen, 2023, p. 24).

This paper aims to examine this relationship by asking, how does China's growing presence and interest in the Arctic threaten Russia? The paper will initially unpack what the literature says about the relationship. Following the literature review, an analysis of the relationship's economic element will be conducted. In so doing, the paper aims to understand the relationship and why it exists. Analyzing the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic, and especially its economic dimensions, is also important since doing so provides insights into where co-operation between the two countries, which is ongoing and highly susceptible to change, is heading. While examining the relationship, the paper will offer a discussion of how co-operation with China may pose challenges and security risks to Russia.

Literature Review

With rising geopolitical tensions between the West and the East, the Arctic has become an increasingly important arena for the Sino-Russian partnership. Many Western sources agree that co-operation between Russia and China in the Arctic threatens US hegemony and the liberal international order (MacDonald, 2021, p. 195). As revisionist states, China and Russia are dissatisfied with the current rules-based order. Russia views it as disadvantageous to its interests, and thus a direct threat to its security (Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 8). In a 2023 foreign policy concept approved by the Russian president, the country expressed its desire to overturn the current international order and create a “more equitable multipolar world order” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, para. 5, 2023). Similarly, China also hopes to establish a multipolar system. However, China’s economy, unlike Russia’s, has benefited from the current order as it promotes free market capitalism and trade (Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 8). Rather than dismantling the system that has helped it greatly, China’s vision of a multipolar world is one where it plays a more influential role in global governance (Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 8). Despite not wanting to dismantle the system, China is still considered a threat by countries like the United States. In its summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the US Department of Defense stated that China and Russia’s preferred multipolar order is “one that is consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions” (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 2).

Although the literature agrees that Sino-Russian co-operation in the Arctic threatens the West, there is no consensus on whether Russia stands to gain from its burgeoning partnership with China. Some scholars argue that China and Russia benefit from the partnership as it produces “win-win” outcomes, a core principle within China’s 2018 white paper (Lajeunesse et

al., 2023, p. 97; State Council, 2018). The most successful partnership that produced “win-win” outcomes is the Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas, or Yamal LNG, project. Russia is one of the top oil-producing countries, surpassing the United States and Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Pincus, 2020, p. 48). Much of Russia’s oil is extracted from the Yamal region and the Russian Arctic (Pincus, 2020, p. 48). Even though Russia has easy access to fossil fuel resources, Western sanctions have crippled the country’s economy, leading to a lack of funding for the Yamal LNG project (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 339). As a country that wants to position itself as a reliable partner in the region, China’s role in Yamal LNG is to provide economic investments and resources. Since 2013, it has therefore invested billions of dollars into the project, with the result that it now owns roughly 30 per cent of shares in the project (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 84). China benefits from the project since it helps it combat energy insecurity (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 2). As of 2022, natural gas exports to China have increased by 35 per cent (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 2). Following this successful co-operation on the Yamal LNG, both countries have partnered in another liquefied natural gas project called Arctic 2 LNG (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 1). Besides those focused on the extraction of liquefied natural gas, there have also been partnerships and projects aimed at extracting critical minerals and conducting scientific research (Dalziel, 2024, p. 23).

In 2017, an agreement was made to incorporate Russia’s Northern Sea Route into the Maritime Silk Road portion of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI (Shibata et al., 2019, p. 198). This resulted in the Polar Silk Road, a significant step toward strengthening Sino-Russian co-operation in the region. Proposed in 2013, China’s BRI aims to connect the Eurasian continent with Africa and stimulate economic development via trade, financial support, and foreign investment (Huang, 2016, p. 314). Developing the Polar Silk Road is essential for China as it significantly decreases the time it takes to ship exports to Europe and allows it to avoid

hazards such as piracy (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 341). China's white paper explains that the country wishes to encourage Arctic states to participate in building the Polar Silk Road, which would foster trade among Arctic countries (State Council, 2018). Working with China would allow Russia to expand and develop infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route. Russia's vision for the Northern Sea Route is to turn it into a competitive trade artery with easy access for all states (Dalziel, 2024, p. 23). Opening up the Northern Sea Route will increase economic development in Russia and allow the country to shed its image as a revisionist power seeking control over the Arctic and to present itself as a more co-operative global partner (Shibata et al., 2019, pp. 196–7). Completing the development of the Northern Sea Route in the Russian Arctic also builds national pride, further cementing Russia's importance and role as an international partner (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 340).

By contrast, other scholars argue that co-operation between China and Russia is disadvantageous for Russia as China's gains have been greater than Russia's, which the latter could interpret as a threat. This reflects the realist assumption that the international system is competitive and privileges the idea of "relative gains." As a state that views anarchy in the Hobbesian sense, it can be assumed that Russia also believes that international competition is a "zero-sum" game. Even though both countries benefit from the Yamal LNG, "zero-sum" consideration prevails within the partnership. Besides gaining resources from trade, China also gains knowledge of how the critical energy sector operates (Pincus, 2020, p. 49). Under realism, partnerships are temporary and only exist when they benefit a state's interests. When China gains sufficient knowledge and participates in the critical energy sector itself, its reliance on trade with Russia will decrease. China will be less incentivized to invest in Russian projects. With Western sanctions and fewer funds for its projects, Russia's economy will be negatively impacted, thus

threatening Russia's wish of becoming the great power it perceives itself to be (Staun & Sørensen, 2023, p. 32).

Another argument for why Sino-Russian Arctic co-operation is a threat to Russia is that it would challenge that country's role in the Arctic and, ultimately, on the international stage. Were China to be included in the Arctic Council, governance in the region would appear to shift away from Russia's interest. Russia takes pride in its proximity to the Arctic, allowing it to become involved in decision-making processes within the region. As a result, Russia is very protective of its identity as an Arctic state (Pincus, 2020, p. 50). It can be said that Russia wishes to "nationalize" the Arctic and to maintain its authority over the region (MacDonald, 2021, p. 200). Since the inception of the Arctic Council in 1996, Russia has taken an extremely conservative approach to regional governance and the question of including non-Arctic states in the organization (Passeri & Fiori, 2019, p. 457). This was most obvious when Russia obstructed China's application to become an Arctic Council observer for seven years, only relenting due to pressure from the Nordic countries (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 98). Since then, Russia has feared that including China would open the Arctic to other non-Arctic states (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 76). And indeed, other Asian countries like Japan, India, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea have joined the Arctic Council as observers. With the inclusion of non-Arctic states, Russia, along with other Arctic states, advocated for making the Arctic Five—comprised of Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, and Norway—as a more exclusive and smaller regional organization, the main governing body in the Arctic (Kobzeva, 2019, p. 103; Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 26).

China's current objective in the region is to maximize its influence so that it can take part in Arctic governance (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). Within the current framework, China has very little power in the Arctic Council as it is an observer state. One way China has been trying

to shift the status quo is by advocating for the inclusion of non-Arctic states in the conversation (Kobzeva, 2019, p. 97). China's argument for why non-Arctic states should become more involved in the Arctic relates to climate change. Since climate change poses an existential threat to every state, China believes that including non-Arctic states in the council would allow for a broader understanding of the results of climate change (Staun & Sørensen, 2023, p. 32). When talking about how it will engage in Arctic affairs, China explicitly mentions that it aims to achieve "win-win" co-operation between Arctic and non-Arctic states, and that all states, Arctic or not, should respect each other's Arctic affairs (State Council, 2018). China's desire to increase Arctic accessibility is diametrically opposed to Russia's own interests in the Arctic. If Russia wants to "nationalize" the region, China wishes to "internationalize" it (MacDonald, 2021, p. 200). Russia wishes to maintain its status as a great polar power; however, China's desire to change the status quo may pose challenges to Russian Arctic sovereignty and jurisdiction, thus threatening Russia. Due to China's advocacy for the expansion of Arctic accessibility, non-Arctic states may ally closely with it, which Russia may see as a threat to its identity as a great polar power.

The literature consists of many policy analyses of various elements of the Sino-Russian relationship in the Far North. One observation worth addressing here is that one's judgment of whether the relationship is balanced depends on the particular element being analyzed. Those who view the relationship as positive for both countries looked at its economic, scientific, or military aspects and argue that both countries benefit from co-operation in these fields. Those who primarily focus on the political aspects of the relationship tend to view it as uneven, emphasizing ideas of sovereignty and Russia's position in both the Arctic and the international system.

Another factor that influences how scholars view the relationship is where they are from. Scholars from the West often analyze the relationship from Moscow's perspective and seek to understand how and why Russia aims to co-operate with China (Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018, p. 270). This has resulted in some Western scholars arguing that co-operation between the two will not succeed as Russia's interests and plans for the region are different from those of China (Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018, p. 270). By contrast, some Chinese and Russian scholars argue that the two countries' relationship in the North benefits both (e.g., Kobzeva, 2020, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Currently, there seems to be somewhat of a consensus in the literature that the relationship is uneven and a threat to Russia. However, co-operation between the two countries continues to persist, which goes against what most of the literature says about the relationship. Since Sino-Russian co-operation in the Arctic is still a recent phenomenon, the relationship is sensitive to change, especially following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and thus it is difficult to determine a winner in the debate over the benefits to be derived from Russian-Chinese co-operation. Besides further research, more time must pass to determine the direction of the relationship.

Economic Element

Before it released its Arctic policy in 2018, China had already co-operated with Russia in many projects that promote economic development, such as the Yamal and Arctic 2 LNG projects. Since then, Sino-Russian co-operation in the Arctic has been economically driven, focusing on resource extraction and shipping, and has largely benefited the two countries (MacDonald, 2021, p. 103). The literature provides several different explanations as to why this partnership exists. As aspiring great powers, both in the region and internationally, China and Russia have similar

interests in wanting to exploit Arctic resources. More importantly, co-operation between the two is a means of decreasing economic dependence on the West, and thus could be seen as a way to balance power in the region.

In 2009, both countries talked about how the Arctic is a “strategic resource base,” as it houses 13 per cent of the globe’s uncovered petroleum supplies, of which 30 per cent is natural gas (Lanteigne, 2015, p. 151). The Arctic is also home to large deposits of critical minerals. With its proximity to the Arctic and a coastline that stretches over 24,000 kilometres, many of these resources are found offshore in areas like Murmansk and the Yamal Peninsula. Russia’s economy is heavily dependent on exporting oil and natural gas as they make up 20 to 24 per cent, respectively, of Russia’s GDP, which explains the country’s need to develop infrastructure and tools to extract these resources (Rautava, 2004, p. 316). As mentioned, Western sanctions have hindered Russia’s ability to build advanced extraction tools. These sanctions have also limited Russia’s access to Western markets, especially in Europe, where Russian oil imports have dropped by 30 per cent (Yadav, 2022).

China has become a crucial partner for Russia as it has been the main provider of investment, with firms such as the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation, or CNPC, funding both the Yamal and Arctic 2 LNG projects (Kapoor, 2024, p. 37). China’s investment in Russian projects benefits China by addressing the state’s energy insecurity. Due to the scarcity of oil and gas deposits in the country, China’s energy insecurity is mainly caused by its overreliance on Middle Eastern oil (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 3). Investing in Russian projects allows China to diversify its natural gas and oil supplies, securing long-term agreements and access to these resources. Besides increasing its energy supply, China’s investments also allow for the construction of channels that expand trade and maritime transportation in the Arctic.

As dissatisfied states within the current rules-based order, China and Russia's economic co-operation in the Arctic is a way of challenging Western dominance in global trade. Like Russia, China also faces economic sanctions from the West, for various reasons, including its human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has resulted in a drop in the purchase of Chinese exports. Since 2018, China and the United States have been engaged in a trade war, and this has only escalated during President Trump's second term as he promises to increase tariffs on all foreign exports. Co-operating in the energy sector and developing alternate trade routes would allow China and Russia to reduce their reliance on the United States and its allies (Townsend & Kendall-Taylor, 2021, p. 1). By not relying on the West, China and Russia can demonstrate how successful their projects are, which may influence Arctic and non-Arctic states to side with them.

The economic relationship between Russia and China can be defined as a strategic partnership. According to Martin A. Smith, a strategic partnership is one motivated by a "broader agreement amongst partners about the overall nature of international relations" (2006, p. 112). The fact that they agree about the nature of international relations and potential or actual security threats results in a stable partnership formed via shared goals and mutual concern for one another (Smith, 2006, p. 112). Relations between states in a strategic partnership will endure after formal agreements or co-operation ends (Smith, 2006, p. 112). Defining this relationship as a partnership rather than an alliance is an important distinction as the meaning of the two terms differ. The former entails fewer obligations, allowing for neutrality and even disapproval vis-à-vis partners while maintaining positive behaviour (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 337). The latter, however, requires both parties to sacrifice their interests for their ally, which explains why scholars believe alliances are stronger than partnerships (Kobzeva, 2020, p. 337; Smith, 2006, p. 112). According

to Smith's definition, China and Russia are in a strategic partnership rather than an alliance. Both countries view the West, especially the United States, as the biggest security threat in the Arctic. Since both face sanctions from the West, co-operating in economic and development projects could be a way to balance power in the Arctic. Besides counterbalancing the West, mutual economic dependence would allow them to pursue their national and shared interests in the Arctic and other regions in Asia, such as Central Asia.

There is little evidence that both countries have given up on their interests in order to ally with one another. As outlined in the 2018 white paper, China wishes to promote itself as a reliable partner for economic investments and global prosperity in the region through "win-win" co-operation (Pincus, 2020, p. 44). This includes co-operating with the United States and other NATO countries in the Arctic. This sentiment, however, is not shared by Russia, whose most recent foreign policy statement has been hawkish toward the United States and the Western world more broadly. If both countries wanted to upgrade their relationship from a partnership to an alliance, they would need to change their attitude toward the West and abandon their individual national interests. Increasing Chinese aggression in the region would induce further sanctions and decrease Western trading partners, severely impacting its economy. If Russia was to adopt China's "win-win" belief and was willing to co-operate with the West, it would go against its own national interests, becoming compliant with the rules-based system and abandoning its wishes for a multipolar system.

Challenges

Although economic relations between the two countries have been positive, there are certainly tensions in the partnership, some of which are problematic for Russia. The first problem, and the most minor of them, is that the number of successful projects has decreased. While Yamal LNG

continues to be successful, Dr. Adam Lajeunesse and others point out that the project's success is a rhetorical tool for showcasing Sino-Russian economic success (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). Since 2012, China and Russia have engaged in twenty-two projects, of which only half have been successful (Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018, pp. 274–5). The reality is that there have been many projects, the majority relating to the construction of trade routes, that have seen little to no success. Concerning trade routes along the Northern Sea Route, mutual mistrust over cross-border co-operation in the Sea of Japan has hindered the countries' interactions and projects within the area (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 84). The same can be said about negotiations in the White and Barents Seas. China continues to visit the region to negotiate, sign agreements, and discuss projects; however, little to no action has thus far been taken to actually initiate these projects (Kobzeva, 2021, p. 86).

Russia's pivot to the East has given China a superior position in many of its economic partnerships, which could result from Russia's overdependence on Chinese investments. This overdependence provides China with leverage over Russia. Evidence shows that China has dictated the terms of engagement for many economic projects between the two countries (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). Russia's war with Ukraine has proven to be disadvantageous for China and its Polar Silk Road in the Far North. Although China supports Russia and blames the Russo-Ukrainian War on the West and NATO expansion, the war jeopardizes Arctic stability, which impacts Chinese trade and shipping in the region (Lajeunesse & Lackenbauer, 2024, p. 125). This has resulted in China becoming more hesitant to invest in trade routes along the Northern Sea Route (Lajeunesse & Lackenbauer, 2024, p. 129). If the war further impacts China's ability to trade in the region, China could provide fewer investments for these projects and adopt a more neutral stance on the conflict.

Another contentious area in the Sino-Russian economic partnership is the Northern Sea Route. Jurisdiction over the route is highly debated between the two states, whose respective stances mirror, in their own ways, Canada's claim to the Northwest Passage. Since the 1960s under the "Structure of the Protection of the State Boundary of the USSR," Russia claims the Northern Sea Route as "historical waters," a body of international water that is to be treated like internal waters due to historic titles (Shibata et al., 2019, p. 191; *United Kingdom v. Norway*, 1951, p. 130). Since Russia considers it internal waters, it claims sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route and has exercised its authority through strict regulations. In 2013, Russia issued its "Rules for Navigation in the Water Area of the Northern Sea Route," stating that usage of the area requires an application process and an icebreaker to accompany the vessel in question (Shibata et al., 2019, p. 193). Russia also argues that under article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, Russia has the right to deny passage to those who do not comply with its strict maritime and environmental regulations, giving it further control over the Northern Sea Route (Flake, 2013, p. 683).

China views, however, the Northern Sea Route as an international waterway, meaning that UNCLOS, rather than Russia, dictates the rules of the region. The different interpretations of the Northern Sea Route have led to many challenges for China in the area of shipping. If China wanted to use the Northern Sea Route to ship goods to Europe, it would require Russian approval, which can be difficult to obtain as Russia has previously denied the Chinese access to the Northern Sea Route. In 2012, Russia blocked vessels from performing scientific research in the region (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 99). Russia also altered its submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2021, after China expressed growing interest in the region (Lajeunesse et al., 2023, p. 102). This creates difficulty for China and other states with

trade-based economies. Similar to how the CNPC and other Chinese natural gas firms contribute large sums of money to Russian LNG projects, China has also heavily invested in building and improving infrastructure in the Northern Sea Route with its implementation of the BRI. Once again, China is given leverage over Russia. It is unlikely that China will decrease funding; however, it could demand concessions, such as greater control of ports or lowering the cost of accessing the route, which would diminish Russian control over the Northern Sea Route.

Conclusion

China and Russia's relationship in the Arctic is meant to balance power as the region consists of Western allies that pose security challenges to the East. One way this relationship manifests is through economic co-operation. As defined earlier, Sino-Russian economic co-operation represents a strategic partnership whereby both countries share the mutual interest of balancing the West via exertions of economic hard power. For Russia, this relationship allows for reduced reliance on Western investment for its Arctic projects and Western markets when selling oil and natural gas. China also benefits from the relationship as it gains new maritime trade routes to Europe and North America and a more reliable way of obtaining resources, such as natural gas and critical minerals.

However, despite the "win-win" results of the Sino-Russian relationship, mutual mistrust and disputes over the Northern Sea Route have posed challenges to the relationship's stability. The Russo-Ukrainian War further adds to the relationship's instability as China has no interest in financing a problematic partner. The many disagreements in the relationship ultimately come down to the two countries' differing perspectives on Arctic governance. As an Arctic state, Russia wishes to maintain the status quo and further establish itself as a great polar power, which explains its mistrust toward China and its claims over the Northern Sea Route. China, however,

poses multiple challenges to Russia's identity as a great polar power by way of its economic leverage and its desire to change the Arctic governance framework, resulting in an insecure Russia.

Sino-Russian economic co-operation in the Arctic will continue to persist, despite the various challenges. Both countries face significant geopolitical threats in the form of Western alliances in the Far North. Russia and China will depend on this relationship to combat the West by increasing their state capacity and influence over Arctic and non-Arctic states. Although the economic element of Sino-Russian relations suggests a positive future for this relationship, analysis of other elements, such as the political and military aspects, is required as this relationship is complex and ever-changing.

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