



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Sino-Russian Relations and Infrastructural Development in the
Arctic from the 1990s to the Present

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 067 805

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Individuelles Masterstudium Globalgeschichte

Betreut von | Supervisor:

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the evolving dynamics of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, a region of growing geopolitical and economic importance. Over the past two decades, China has transformed from a peripheral player to a pivotal actor in Arctic affairs, driven by interests in natural resources, transport logistics, and scientific research. Russia, with its extensive Arctic resources, has strategically aligned with China, particularly after 2014, to enhance its regional influence and support its eastward pivot. Central to this partnership is the development of the Northern Sea Route and the energy sector, which have become crucial in integrating the Arctic into China's global trade network. This study explores the progression of this cooperation, emphasizing key milestones such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Polar Silk Route, and assesses the impact of global geopolitical shifts, particularly those following February 2022. By analysing the history of cooperation and media perspectives, the thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the strategic, environmental, and geopolitical implications of Sino-Russian collaboration in the Arctic and its perceptions. The research ultimately contributes to the broader discourse on global geopolitics and regional sustainability.

Keywords: Arctic; China; Russia; Polar Silk Road; Northern Sea Route; Arctic Sustainability; Energy Cooperation

Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit eruiert die sich wandelnde Dynamik der chinesisch-russischen Zusammenarbeit in der Arktis, einer Region von wachsender geopolitischer und wirtschaftlicher Bedeutung. In den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten hat sich China von einem Rand- zu einem zentralen Akteur in den arktischen Angelegenheiten entwickelt, angetrieben durch Interessen an natürlichen Ressourcen, Transportlogistik und wissenschaftlicher Forschung. In den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten hat sich China von einem marginalen zu einem zentralen Akteur in arktischen Angelegenheiten entwickelt, angetrieben von Interessen an natürlichen Ressourcen, Transportlogistik und wissenschaftlicher Forschung. Russland, das über einen weitreichenden Zugang zur Arktis verfügt, hat sich insbesondere nach 2014 strategisch mit China verbündet, um seinen regionalen Einfluss zu stärken und seine Orientierung nach Osten zu unterstützen. Im Mittelpunkt dieser Partnerschaft stehen die Entwicklung der Nordostpassage und der Energiesektor, die entscheidend dafür sind, die Arktis in Chinas globales Handelsnetzwerk zu integrieren. Die Studie untersucht die Entwicklung dieser Zusammenarbeit, hebt wichtige Meilensteine wie die "Belt and Road Initiative" und die "Polar Silk Route" hervor und bewertet die Auswirkungen globaler geopolitischer Veränderungen, insbesondere nach Februar 2022. Durch die Analyse der Kooperationsgeschichte und der Medienperspektive bietet die Arbeit ein umfassendes Verständnis der strategischen, ökologischen und geopolitischen Implikationen der chinesisch-russischen Kooperation in der Arktis und deren Wahrnehmung. Die Forschung leistet einen wertvollen Beitrag zum breiteren Diskurs über Geopolitik und regionale Nachhaltigkeit.

Stichworte: Arktis; China; Russland; Polare Seidenstraße; Nördlicher Seeweg; Arktische Nachhaltigkeit; Energiekooperation

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List of Abbreviations

ABR - Arctic Bridge Route

ASEAN - Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BRI - Belt and Road Initiative

BRICS - Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa

CAAT - Chinese Arctic Activity Tracker

CNA - Centre for Naval Analyses

CNCEC - China National Chemical Engineering Co., Ltd.

CNOOC - China National Offshore Oil Corporation

CNPC - China National Petroleum Corporation

COSCO - China Ocean Shipping Company

EAEU - Eurasian Economic Union

EU - European Union

FDI - Foreign Direct Investment

IASC - International Arctic Science Committee

IMO - International Maritime Organization

LNG - Liquefied Natural Gas

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NEP - Northeast Passage

NPPs - Nuclear Power Plants

NSR - Northern Sea Route

NWP - Northwest Passage

PRC - People's Republic of China

PRIC - Polar Research Institute of China

SCO - Shanghai Cooperation Organization

SOE - State-Owned Enterprise

TSR - Trans-Siberian Railway

UiT - The Arctic University of Norway

UNCLOS - United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

US - United States

VPN - Virtual Private Network

CHAPTER I

"...the priority of Russian policy in the Arctic is cooperation with the states located in the Arctic region... the PRC's obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council will not change the situation in the Arctic or affect Russia's position in the region",¹ 2013.

Given the circumstances of the last decade, could Russia still maintain such a stance?

1. Introduction

The Arctic, a region of immense geopolitical and economic importance, has seen a dynamic shift in global power plays, particularly between China and Russia. China's Arctic ambitions, initially greeted with scepticism, have evolved significantly over the past decades. Driven by economic interests in natural resources, transport logistics, and scientific research, China has increasingly positioned itself as a key player in Arctic affairs.² Meanwhile, Russia, with its vast Arctic coastline and abundant resources, has welcomed China's involvement as part of its broader strategy to pivot eastward, especially following the geopolitical shifts post-2014.

The narrative of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic unfolds across several pivotal stages. It begins with China's early, tentative steps into the Arctic, followed by a deepening partnership post-2013, marked by China's observer status in the Arctic Council and the landmark Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This period saw the conceptual birth of the Polar Silk Route (PSR), a visionary project aimed at reducing maritime distances and costs through the Northern Sea Route (NSR). These developments were further solidified with the publication

¹Quote by Anton Vasilyev, Russia's Special Envoy for Arctic Cooperation and was a representative of Russia in the Arctic Council, 2013. Tatiana Dmitrieva, "Китайский Фактор Севморпути" ["The 'Chinese Factor' in the Northern Sea Route"], *MorVesti*, January 2, 2014, <https://morvesti.ru/themes/1700/53196/>. Accessed in Russian, May 28, 2024.

² V. P. Zhuravel, "China, Republic of Korea, Japan in the Arctic: Politics, Economy, Security," *Arctic and North*, no. 24 (2016): 113.

of China's Arctic White Paper in 2018, emphasizing sustainable development, environmental protection, and scientific collaboration in the Arctic.³

The Arctic's vast potential has not only brought China and Russia closer but also highlighted the strategic importance of infrastructure development, particularly the NSR. This route, significantly shortening the maritime journey between East Asia and Western Europe, stands as a testament to the ambitious scope of Sino-Russian cooperation. The NSR's development is seen as a linchpin in China's strategy to integrate the Arctic into its global trade network, enhancing its export-driven economy while bolstering Russia's regional influence.⁴

Moreover, the energy sector has been a cornerstone of this bilateral cooperation. From the establishment of the *Russia-China Energy Dialogue* to significant agreements on gas supplies, such as the *Power of Siberia pipeline*, the energy partnership underscores the mutual benefits and strategic interests at play. This energy collaboration also catalyses the broader utilization of the NSR, promoting socio-economic development along its route.⁵

Despite the growing cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic, the partnership is fraught with challenges. While both nations benefit from joint projects and strategic initiatives, significant hurdles remain, including stagnation in Chinese investments, with cautious approach of investors wary of long-term commitments due to geopolitical uncertainties and market risks.

This thesis undertakes a comprehensive examination of the strategic partnership between China and Russia in the Arctic, a region characterized by both its challenges and abundant resources. It specifically focuses on the transformative

³ Alexey M. Fadeev et al., "Energy Cooperation of Russia and China in the Arctic: State and Prospects," *Polar Geography* 47, no. 1 (2024): 16-32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2024.2321143>.

⁴ Arild Moe, Gørild Heggelund, and Kathinka Fürst, "Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Maritime Development: Expectations and Contradictions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 8 (2023): 1360-1362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2212144>.

⁵ Konstantin S. Zaikov, Andrey A. Spiridonov, and Alexey M. Fadeev, "Sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Kitaya v Arktike v Energeticheskoy Sfere: Strategicheskoy Vzgl'yad [Energy Cooperation Between Russia and China in the Arctic: A Strategic Perspective]," *Arktika i Sever*, no. 54 (2024): 22-37, <https://doi.org/10.37482/issn2221-2698.2024.54.22>.

impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Sino-Russian Arctic relations, analysing media perspectives and the evolving geopolitical landscape. By adopting a chronological and analytical approach, the study aims to unravel the complexities of China-Russia cooperation in the Arctic, offering a nuanced understanding of their shared objectives while also critically assessing the broader implications for global geopolitics and regional sustainability.

The following work is organized into an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography. Chapter I introduces the research topic, theoretical framework, and methodology, and reviews relevant literature. Chapter II outlines the historical development of China's Arctic policy and its growing involvement, with a focus on Sino-Russian cooperation up to early 2022. Chapter III examines changes in perceptions of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation from 2022 to 2024 through media reports, analysing key themes and trends, and provides an overview of recent reports and scholarly commentary from researchers. Chapter IV synthesizes the research findings, discusses their implications for Arctic geopolitics, and proposes directions for future research. The thesis concludes with a summary of the main outcomes and their broader significance, followed by a bibliography.

2. Research Design

This section outlines the research design for studying Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation. It begins with the objectives and research questions, followed by the theoretical framework, and a literature review. The section concludes with the methodology, detailing the approach, and data analysis techniques used in the study.

2.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The key research questions of this study are as follows: How has Russia-China Arctic cooperation, and its perception, evolved over the past two decades, particularly since February 2022? How has China contributed to the development of Russian Arctic infrastructure, and how has this role changed

over time? To what extent are sustainability concerns integrated into their cooperation?

This research aims to explore and understand the evolving dynamics of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, focusing on the strategic, environmental, and geopolitical factors that have shaped their partnership over time. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of how their collaboration has developed, the motivations driving their joint initiatives, and the broader implications for global geopolitics and regional sustainability.

This study systematically examines the evolution of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, focusing on key areas to provide a nuanced understanding of their partnership. The research will document the historical trajectory of their collaboration, emphasizing significant milestones and shifts, particularly since February 2022. It will also analyse China's strategic engagement in the Arctic, including its pursuit of recognition as a *near-Arctic state* and its role in the development of Russian Arctic infrastructure.

Further objectives include assessing the integration of sustainability considerations within their cooperation and reflecting on the environmental implications of their joint projects. The study will also investigate the impact of global geopolitical shifts, such as the Ukraine conflict, on their Arctic relations. Additionally, it will evaluate the strategic benefits and risks of their cooperation, with particular attention to the role of the Belt and Road Initiative and the energy sector in shaping their partnership. Through these objectives, the research aims to offer a detailed analysis of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation and its broader significance.

2.2 Theoretical Framework and State of Art

This section introduces the key theories and current research pertinent to the study. It begins with an examination of the relevant theoretical perspectives that underpin the research framework. Subsequently, a review of the existing

literature is conducted to highlight significant findings and identify gaps, thereby establishing the context for the study's contributions to the field.

2.2.1 Relevant Theories

The theoretical framework section serves as the foundation for this thesis, providing the lens through which the cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic is analysed. The primary objective of this section is to introduce and explain the theoretical concepts that underpin the research, demonstrating how they shape and inform the study's focus on strategic alignment and multilateralism.

Multilateralism and Strategic Alignment

Multilateralism, as discussed by Robert Doran, is another crucial concept. In the Arctic, multilateralism refers to the engagement of multiple stakeholders—including Arctic and non-Arctic states, indigenous communities, and international organizations—in cooperative decision-making processes. For Russia and China, multilateralism serves as both a strategy and a framework for advancing their interests within the broader context of Arctic governance.⁶

Doran's concept of strategic multilateralism, which involves a mix of cooperation and competition, is instrumental in explaining how Russia and China navigate their partnership in a region characterized by diverse and often competing interests. Their strategic alignment, particularly post-2022, can be seen as a bilateral form of multilateralism, where they cooperate to strengthen their positions while navigating the complexities of the broader multilateral landscape in the Arctic.⁷

⁶ Charles Doran, "The Two Sides of Multilateral Cooperation," in *International Cooperation: The Extents and Limits of Multilateralism*, ed. I. William Zartman and Saadia Touval (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40-59.

⁷ Ibid.

Status Concerns in Multilateral Cooperation

Building on the work of Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, this thesis also considers the role of status concerns in shaping Russia and China's multilateral cooperation. Their quest for international prestige and recognition as great powers is a driving force behind their Arctic strategy. Larson and Shevchenko argue that states often pursue multilateral cooperation as a means to enhance their global status, which is particularly relevant in the Arctic context.⁸

Here, Russia and China's partnership can be seen not only as a strategic alignment driven by economic and security interests but also as a joint effort to assert their status in a region traditionally dominated by Western powers. This perspective adds a layer of complexity to the analysis, highlighting how non-material factors like status and prestige influence their multilateral strategies.⁹

2.2.2 Literature Review

The Arctic region's strategic significance has attracted extensive research on Sino-Russian cooperation. This literature review surveys key studies covering significant research on historical and strategic contexts, legal governance frameworks, energy collaboration, and geostrategic significance. It examines key challenges and recent developments in light of contemporary geopolitical shifts, providing a comprehensive overview of how these dynamics influence their Arctic engagement.

Historical and Strategic Context

China's engagement with the Arctic has evolved significantly from its early involvement in the 1920s under the Svalbard Treaty to its modern ambitions centred around the PSR and the NSR. Sun (2014) traces this evolution,

⁸Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Concerns and Multilateral Cooperation," in *International Cooperation: The Extents and Limits of Multilateralism*, ed. I. William Zartman and Saadia Touval (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 182–207.

⁹Ibid.

emphasizing China's growing strategic interest in the Arctic driven by climate change and economic opportunities. China's scientific expeditions since 1999, coupled with its self-identification as a *near-Arctic state*, underline its ambitions in Arctic resource exploration and shipping routes. The study highlights the mixed reactions from Arctic countries regarding China's influence and sovereignty claims, stressing the need for a coherent Arctic policy and responsible corporate practices by Chinese enterprises.¹⁰

Sino-Russian Cooperation and Challenges

Zhuravel (2016) provides a geopolitical perspective on how China, along with South Korea and Japan, advocate for the Arctic as the "common heritage of humanity." These nations argue for the internationalization of the NSR, seeking to ensure their presence in the Arctic through various activities, including scientific expeditions and resource exploration. This stance challenges Russia's efforts to maintain the NSR as a national resource and transport artery, highlighting the delicate balance Russia must strike between cooperation and competition with these Asian powers.¹¹

Zagorsky (2016) offers a nuanced view, arguing that while there are differences between Russia and China on Arctic issues, these are not insurmountable. He suggests that the specific nature of these disagreements can be resolved through rational dialogue, emphasizing that non-Arctic states also have legitimate interests and rights in the region. Zagorsky posits that many of the perceived conflicts are more about the articulation of Arctic states' unique rights rather than deep-rooted contradictions, advocating for increased discussions between China and Russia to smooth over these differences.¹²

¹⁰ Kai Sun, "Beyond the Dragon and the Panda: Understanding China's Engagement in the Arctic," *Asia Policy* no. 18 (2014): 46-51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24905275>.

¹¹ V. P. Zhuravel, "China, Republic of Korea, Japan in the Arctic: Politics, Economy, Security," *Arctic and North* no. 24 (2016): 112-144.

¹² Alexander V. Zagorsky, "Russia and China in the Arctic: Real or Alleged Disagreements?" *World Economy and International Relations* 60, no. 2 (2016): 63-71.

Alexeeva, Lasserre (2018), and Lim (2018) provide insights into how the Arctic fits into BRI and PSR. Alexeeva and Lasserre note that while Russia sees the Arctic as a crucial resource base and China as a potential investor, their collaboration has been constrained by strategic mistrust and limited tangible outcomes.¹³ Lim's analysis complements this by examining China's Arctic ambitions, particularly its investments in infrastructure like the Yamal LNG project. Despite these investments, cooperation is hampered by complexities in Arctic governance and diverging strategic priorities.¹⁴

Moe, Heggelund, and Fürst (2023) further explore this partnership through Russian and Chinese scholarly perspectives. Their study reveals a shift from initial optimism to a more cautious stance, with Russian scepticism about China's long-term intentions and Chinese criticism of Russia's stringent conditions. Despite economic incentives for collaboration, fundamental differences in governance norms and strategic objectives persist, limiting the realization of joint projects.¹⁵

Legal and Governance Frameworks

Liu and Solski (2022) provide a comparative analysis of China's and Russia's regulatory approaches to maritime navigation under the UNCLOS framework. They reveal similarities in both nations' efforts to maximize their authority over coastal waters while managing foreign military and commercial activities. The study underscores China's cautious approach to maritime jurisdiction, which contrasts with its broader global ambitions. This nuanced stance suggests that

¹³ Olga Alexeeva and Frédéric Lasserre, "An Analysis on Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic in the BRI Era," *Advances in Polar Science* 29, no. 4 (2018): 269-282.

¹⁴ Kong Soon Lim, "China's Arctic Policy and the Polar Silk Road Vision," in *Arctic Yearbook 2018*, ed. Lars Heinen and Heather Exner-Pirot (Akureyri: Northern Research Forum, 2018), 420-432.

¹⁵ Arild Moe, Gørild Heggelund, and Kathinka Fürst, "Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Maritime Development: Expectations and Contradictions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 8 (2023): 1360-1383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2212144>.

China aims to assert its Arctic presence while avoiding direct confrontation with Russia or disrupting existing international frameworks.¹⁶

Energy Sector Collaboration and Geostrategic Significance

The energy sector has emerged as a cornerstone of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, particularly in the context of post-2022 geopolitical shifts. Zaikov, Spiridonov, and Fadeev (2024) highlight the strategic importance of energy projects like Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2, which symbolize the deepening ties between Russia and China. These projects, located in the harsh climatic conditions of the Arctic, not only demonstrate the technological capabilities of both nations but also underscore the geostrategic significance of their collaboration. The energy partnership has complex-forming and multiplicative effects, driving technological innovation, infrastructure development along the NSR, and the construction of a high-tech fleet for LNG transportation. Despite legal disagreements over economic activities in the Arctic, the current macroeconomic situation and sectoral restrictions on Russia have made cooperation with China increasingly vital. China's financial resources and engineering expertise make it a reliable partner for Russia, ensuring a stable market for Russian energy resources and contributing to the broader strategic objectives of both nations.¹⁷

Recent Developments and Strategic Implications

Recent studies reflect the evolving dynamics of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation in light of geopolitical changes. Yang and Guo (2022) highlight the impact of Russia's strained relations with the West and its chairmanship of the Arctic Council on Sino-Russian collaboration. Their analysis underscores the need for sustainable development and scientific research, pointing out the ongoing

¹⁶ Nengye Liu and Jason J. Solski, "The Polar Silk Road and the Future Governance of the Northern Sea Route," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 35, no. 4 (2022): 853-866. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156522000516>.

¹⁷ Alexey M. Fadeev, Andrey A. Spiridonov, Nikolay A. Kondratov, Konstantin S. Zaikov, Mikhail Y. Kuprikov, and Nikita M. Kuprikov, "Energy Cooperation of Russia and China in the Arctic: State and Prospects," *Polar Geography* 47, no. 1 (2024): 16-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2024.2321143>.

scepticism in Russia regarding China's commitment to environmental issues. The study suggests that while Sino-Russian cooperation could progress more, it faces challenges due to differing priorities and political motivations.¹⁸

Yu Cao (2022) emphasizes the strategic importance of the Polar Silk Road and its role in enhancing Arctic shipping routes. Despite significant investments in projects like Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2, cooperation faces hurdles from Western sanctions and potential NATO expansion. The paper highlights the broader implications of the PSR for Arctic and global dynamics, indicating a shift in priorities towards the Arctic.¹⁹

Jørgen Staun and Camilla T. N. Sørensen (2023) explore the strategic limitations of Sino-Russian cooperation, particularly post-2022. They argue that differing strategic cultures between Russia and China create inherent conflicts, with Russia's desire to maintain Arctic dominance clashing with China's global ambitions. The authors suggest that U.S. actions and policies will significantly impact the dynamics between Russia and China, potentially undermining their cooperation and affecting Arctic stability.²⁰

Huntington (2023) discusses the increasing shipping traffic in the Arctic, focusing on the roles of Russia and China in managing the NSR. The study highlights Russia's investments in the NSR's infrastructure and management while noting China's growing interest through its PSR initiative. The paper calls for improved international coordination and governance to address the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of rising Arctic traffic.²¹

¹⁸ Nan Yang and Peiqing Guo, "Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Current Situation, New Directions and Challenges," *Economic and Social Changes: Facts, Trends, Forecast* 15, no. 3 (2022): 259–273. <https://doi.org/10.15838/esc.2022.3.81.14>.

¹⁹ Yu Cao, "Implications for Sino-Russian Cooperation on the Polar Silk Road," *Arctic Yearbook* (2022): 1-15.

²⁰ Jørgen Staun and Camilla T. N. Sørensen, "Incompatible Strategic Cultures Limit Russian-Chinese Strategic Cooperation in the Arctic," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 6, no. 1 (2023): 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.178>.

²¹ Henry P. Huntington, Julia Olsen, Eduard Zdor, Andrey Zagorskiy, Hyoung Chul Shin, Olga Romanenko, Bjørn Kaltenborn, Jackie Dawson, Jeremy Davies, and Erin Abou-Abbsi, "Effects of Arctic Commercial Shipping on Environments and Communities: Context, Governance,

2.3 Methodology

This section outlines the methodology for analysing Russia-China Arctic cooperation. Initially, a review of primary and secondary literature was conducted to understand the cooperation up until February 2022. Post-February 2022, a media analysis became central due to the recency of events, limited published literature, and the necessity to track ongoing developments through media sources. This approach aims to capture shifts in media portrayal of Russia-China Arctic cooperation. Methods used include thematic and mixed-method analyses, supplemented by a timeline of the development.

2.3.1 Overview of China-Russia Arctic Cooperation

As part of this research, an overview of the cooperation timeline is presented. The intention is to summarize the preconditions and subsequent developments, focusing on both historical and recent aspects. The secondary literature review encompasses scholarly articles, books, and reports to provide both historical and contemporary insights. Additionally, policy and strategy documents from both countries are analysed to reveal official narratives and strategic objectives, while official statements and speeches offer insight into government priorities and rhetoric.

2.3.2 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis method is well-suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, allowing for a detailed, and complex account of the data set. This approach is particularly important for exploring nuanced perspectives and interpretations of the media coverage.²²

Priorities," *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment* 118 (2023).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trd.2023.103731>.

²²Lorelli S. Nowell, Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules, "Thematic Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1-4.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.

Media selection

In selecting media sources for this research, independent outlets not affiliated with either Russia or China were deliberately chosen to provide a more impartial and critical perspective on the cooperation between these two nations in the Arctic. This choice is based on the recognition that Russian media are predominantly state-owned or heavily censored, often presenting limited, government-approved viewpoints. Similarly, Chinese media are subject to severe censorship and are largely state-controlled, making it difficult to find unbiased reporting. To ensure a relatively impartial overview, three independent media outlets were selected: *Arctic Today*, *The Barents Observer*, and *High North News*. These outlets are recognized for their commitment to journalistic independence and freedom of speech, offering comprehensive coverage of Arctic affairs without undue corporate or political influence.

Arctic Today

Arctic Today is an independent news site headquartered in Alaska, the United States, with correspondents and contributors based in Europe and Canada. Its coverage focuses on the circumpolar north, providing international news and community perspectives relevant to the Arctic region. It was established to deliver comprehensive reporting on the Arctic, leveraging on-the-ground insights from the circumpolar north. The platform collaborates with media organizations in Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada; Bodø, Norway; and Kirkenes, Norway. Additionally, it publishes syndicated content from Reuters, ensuring a broad range of perspectives and high-quality reporting.²³

Arctic Today is a non-profit entity funded by various sources that support its mission for transparent and detailed reporting on Arctic business and innovation. This funding model allows it to maintain independence from corporate or political influences. Arctic Today is noted for its focus on the rapid changes and opportunities within the Arctic region, particularly in sectors such as ecotourism,

²³ "Arctic Today," *Muck Rack*, <https://muckrack.com/media-outlet/arctictoday>, accessed August 1, 2024.

seabed mining, and sustainable steel production. Through its subsidiary, the Arctic Business Journal, Arctic Today emphasizes the importance of innovation and the need for unique political and business partnerships to navigate the region's transformation.²⁴

The Barents Observer

The Barents Observer (formally The Independent Barents Observer) is a journalist-owned Norwegian online newspaper that reports on the Barents Region and northern Russia. Based in Kirkenes, it publishes in English, Russian, and Chinese. The newspaper emphasizes cross-border journalism, covering topics like climate change, energy, industry, shipping, civil society, politics, ecology, security, and indigenous issues. The publication is known for its dedication to freedom of speech and democracy, counteracting authoritarianism and propaganda.²⁵

The Barents Observer operates as a non-profit and receives financial support from various sources, including the European Endowment for Democracy, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Norwegian government, the Fritt Ord foundation, private companies, and individuals.²⁶ Despite efforts by Russian authorities to block the site, the newspaper remains accessible in Russia through VPNs and certain mobile browsers. This blockage followed a controversy over an article about Dan Eriksson, a homosexual Sámi man, which Russian media authorities deemed a violation of their laws.²⁷

Founded by Atle Staalesen in 2002, the Barents Observer initially worked under the Norwegian Barents Secretariat but became independent in 2015 to maintain its editorial freedom. The platform collaborates with media networks like Eye

²⁴ "About Us," *Arctic Today*, <https://www.arctictoday.com/about-us/>, accessed August 1, 2024.

²⁵ *The Barents Observer*, "An Arctic Value for Freedom of Speech and Support for Democracy," April 5, 2017, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/about-us>, accessed August 1, 2024.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Atle Staalesen, "The Barents Observer Is Now Blocked in Russia," *The Barents Observer*, February 19, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/civil-society-and-media/2019/02/barents-observer-now-blocked-russia>, accessed August 1, 2024.

on the Arctic and Arctic Today and supports Russian exile journalists through grants and partnerships with organizations such as UiT - Norway's Arctic University.²⁸

High North News

High North News is an independent online newspaper published by the High North Center at Nord University in Bodø, Norway. Established in 2014, it follows the Norwegian Press Code of Ethics and the principles outlined in the Norwegian Rights and Duties of the Editor. High North News publishes in both English and Norwegian, focusing on news, analysis, and debate about politics and business in the High North.²⁹

The publication has expanded its scope beyond Norway, employing correspondents in seven countries, including Canada, the US, and several European nations. Its coverage includes EU Arctic policy, Russian affairs, Svalbard, energy, fisheries, indigenous populations, and more. The team comprises five journalists in Norway and ten international correspondents, each selected for their expertise in significant political and economic issues in the High North.³⁰

High North News collaborates with international media partners such as Alaska Dispatch, Arctic Deeply, and Arctic Journal. These partnerships help extend its reach and influence, ensuring that its news, analysis, and editorials impact a global audience. Funded by the European Endowment for Democracy, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Norwegian government, private companies,

²⁸ *The Barents Observer*, "An Arctic Value for Freedom of Speech and Support for Democracy," April 5, 2017, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/about-us>, accessed August 1, 2024.

²⁹ Arne O. Holm, "High North News Takes a Step into the Wider World," *High North News*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/nb/high-north-news-takes-step-wider-world>, accessed August 1, 2024.

³⁰ Ibid.

and individuals, High North News remains committed to independent journalism and fostering international cooperation in the Arctic.³¹

2.3.3 Selection Criteria

The data for this study were collected from three independent media sources and organized by the month and year of publication. The time scope for the articles was narrowed down to those published after February 2022, following the onset of the war, through 2023, and up until April 2024. This period was selected to capture the most recent and relevant developments in the Arctic cooperation between Russia and China.

The study covers 31 articles with 10 articles from 2022, 17 from 2023, and 4 from 2024. Articles were selected based on specific criteria:

1. **Relevance to the Topic:** Only articles that focused explicitly on Russia-China Arctic cooperation were included. Articles that merely mentioned the cooperation in passing were excluded.
2. **Original Content:** Only articles originally produced by the selected media sources were included. Articles that were merely reported or referred from other major media outlets were excluded to ensure the originality and authenticity of the perspectives analysed.

2.3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted using thematic analysis, following the six-phase guide outlined by Braun and Clarke:

1. **Generating Initial Codes.** The first step involved becoming thoroughly familiar with the data. This included reading and re-reading the articles to immerse in the content fully. Initial impressions and ideas were noted, which formed the foundation for the subsequent coding process.

³¹ Ibid.

2. **Generating Initial Codes.** In the phase, the articles were coded using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. This tool facilitated a detailed and systematic coding process, allowing for the identification of meaningful data segments. Each article was scrutinized, and relevant data extracts were coded according to their significance to the research question.
3. **Searching for Themes.** Following the coding, the next step was to collate codes into potential themes. This involved organizing codes into broader patterns that captured the essence of the data. Initial themes were identified based on recurring patterns and significant issues related to Russia-China Arctic cooperation.
4. **Reviewing Theme.** The initial themes were then reviewed to ensure they formed coherent patterns and accurately reflected the data set. This involved checking the validity of each theme against the coded data extracts and the entire data set. Themes were refined to ensure they were specific enough to be distinct yet broad enough to encapsulate key ideas.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes.** In this phase, each theme was defined and named, capturing the essence and significance of the data it represented. Detailed analysis of each theme was conducted, identifying the aspect each theme informed about Russia-China Arctic cooperation. Theme names were crafted to be descriptive and informative.
6. **Producing the Report.** The final phase involved writing up the thematic analysis. The report provided a concise, coherent, and compelling account of the data, integrating direct quotes from the articles to illustrate key points and support the themes. This phase moved beyond mere description to interpretation, linking the findings to existing literature and theoretical frameworks.³²

³² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2022), 36-39.

2.3.5 Data Organization

For convenience and better visualization, the themed data were organized into a table, facilitating a logical arrangement of key extracts, making it easier to perceive and analyse the themes. The quantitative analysis table was also structured to present the data in a clear and manageable format.

2.3.6 Mixed Methods Analysis

In addition to the qualitative thematic analysis, a quantitative analysis was conducted to examine the frequency of themes and their distribution over the selected time period, providing a comprehensive understanding of the media coverage on Russia-China Arctic cooperation. The mixed methods design used is the Explanatory Sequential Design, characterized by initial quantitative data collection and analysis followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to explain the quantitative results.³³

In this study, the quantitative phase involved coding articles using MAXQDA to identify and record the presence of specific themes. The frequency of each theme was then analysed to determine their prevalence across the dataset, forming the basis for the subsequent qualitative analysis. The integration of these phases is crucial, with specific quantitative results guiding the qualitative exploration of themes that require deeper understanding.³⁴

To trace the occurrence of themes over time, the data was segmented by year. This temporal analysis highlighted trends and shifts in media focus, providing a chronological perspective on the media discourse. The final integration of qualitative and quantitative findings offered a nuanced understanding of the themes, their prevalence, and their evolution, resulting in a robust and detailed analysis of the research problem.

³³ John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017), 77–84.

³⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER II

3. From Svalbard Treaty to White Paper

This chapter traces the evolution of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, beginning with the development of China's Arctic policy from the early 20th century to 2022, and focusing on its growing involvement in the region. Drawing from policy papers, interviews, official strategies, news reports, and scholarly works, the chapter examines key milestones, starting with China's initial interest in the Arctic following the Svalbard Treaty and culminating in its deepening cooperation with Russia. The timeline covers China's emergence as an Arctic stakeholder, its transition from a moderate polar power to a major investor, the evolving dynamics of Sino-Russian relations, the strategic shift marked by the 2018 White Paper, and the flourishing cooperation with Russia up until February 2022.

3.1 China's Arctic Dawn

In January 2018, China's State Council Information Office proposed the Polar Silk Road in its Arctic White Paper. The proposal emphasized that the melting Arctic ice due to climate change had created new opportunities for resource development and route usage. It described China as an active participant in Arctic affairs, advocating for the BRI and PSR to promote cooperation and sustainable development in the region.³⁵

The white paper noted that China's involvement in Arctic affairs began in 1925 with the signing of the Spitsbergen Treaty and had since expanded to include scientific expeditions, polar research stations, and participation in multinational Arctic organizations. The Spitsbergen Treaty, also known as the Svalbard Treaty, was signed in 1920 and came into force in 1925. It established international

³⁵ H. Holz et al., *Exploring the Relationship Between China's Investment in the Arctic and Its National Strategy* (Report, Center for Naval Analyses, 2022): 40, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2022/01/exploring-the-relationship-between-chinas-investment-in-the-arctic-and-its-national-strategy>.

recognition of Norwegian sovereignty over the Svalbard Archipelago, while granting signatory nations equal rights to engage in commercial activities on the islands, including mining and fishing. China became a signatory to this treaty in 1925, marking the beginning of its formal involvement in Arctic affairs. This treaty allowed China to participate in various economic activities in the Svalbard region, laying the groundwork for its later scientific and economic interests in the Arctic.³⁶

China, as a country undergoing internal upheavals and foreign invasions, had not been able to assert its rights and interests in remote regions such as the Svalbard archipelago, effectively forgetting the Svalbard Treaty for more than 65 years. In 1991, after a decade of economic reform and openness to the West, Chinese scholars began travelling to the West to conduct research. That year, Professor Dengyi Gao of the Chinese Academy of Sciences visited the Arctic for the first time at the invitation of a Norwegian professor from the University of Bergen. During this visit, Professor Gao discovered the Svalbard Treaty and realised that China was a party to it.³⁷

This discovery led to increased awareness in the Chinese media of China's status under the treaty, which then served as the legal basis for discussions with Norway on the establishment of an Arctic research station. Then, China started to actively pursue a series of scientific, economic, and political initiatives to secure its strategic interests in the Arctic, with its first expedition to the Arctic in 1995 and the first maritime expedition to the North Pole in 1999 with the "Xue Long" ("Snow Dragon"), which was the only scientific icebreaker of China.³⁸

In October 1995, China applied to join the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) and was accepted in 1996. Subsequently, China built a temporary research station in Longyearbyen between 2001 and 2003, and in

³⁶ Nengye Liu, "China and One Hundred Years of the Svalbard Treaty: Past, Present and Future," *Marine Policy* 124 (2021): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104354>.

³⁷ Ibid., 1-3.

³⁸ V. P. Zhuravel, "China, Republic of Korea, Japan in the Arctic: Politics, Economy, Security," *Arctic and North* 24 (2016): 113-114.

2004 established the permanent Arctic research station Yellow River in Ny Alesund, Svalbard.³⁹

3.2 From Moderate Polar Power to Major Investor

Annually, PCR invested around \$63 million in polar research, comparable to South Korea's expenditures and surpassing those of the United States.⁴⁰ The abovementioned China's annual polar operations budget was significant but still limited country's status as only a moderate polar power in the past. However, it grew progressively due to China's increasing economy power, and between 2005 and 2017, contributed with over \$1.4 trillion invested by in the economies of Arctic nations. Of this total, \$89.2 billion was allocated to infrastructure, assets, cooperative agreements, financing agreements, and other projects situated within the 60 degrees north boundary.⁴¹

Understanding Russia's unique and pivotal position in receiving Chinese investments underscores the need for a closer examination of the implications and dynamics of China's economic activity and Sino-Russian economic relations in the Arctic region. Based on a 2022 report by the Centre for Naval Analyses (CNA), the key measures and channels of China's Arctic economic footprint are summarized.

Russia controls approximately 53% of the Arctic Ocean's coastline and relies on its Arctic regions for around 90% of its natural gas and 10% of its oil production, which together contribute more than 50% to the federal budget. Russia and China's interests align in resource extraction and developing the Northern Sea Route, bolstered by mutual scepticism towards Western financial institutions and US-led sanctions. From 2008 to 2019, Chinese firms conducted over \$81 billion in business across at least 114 transactions in the Russian Arctic, with a notable

³⁹ Nengye Liu, "China and One Hundred Years of the Svalbard Treaty: Past, Present and Future," *Marine Policy* 124 (2021): 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104354>.

⁴⁰ V. P. Zhuravel, "China, Republic of Korea, Japan in the Arctic: Politics, Economy, Security," *Arctic and North* 24 (2016): 113-114.

⁴¹ Mark E. Rosen and Cara B. Thuringer, *Unconstrained Foreign Direct Investment: An Emerging Challenge to Arctic Security* (Report), (Center for Naval Analyses, 2017): 54. <https://www.cna.org/reports/2017/unconstrained-fdi-arctic-security>.

spike of 47 transactions in 2019. This economic activity is dominated by state-owned enterprises, underscoring the strategic importance of the Russia-China partnership for Russia's economy amidst Western sanctions.⁴²

China is a major global player in energy projects, ranking fourth in energy sector FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) from 2010 to 2016, with its policy banks funding approximately \$196.7 billion overseas between 2007 and 2016. In the Arctic, China's activities are heavily focused on the energy sector, driven by its Arctic Policy, which emphasizes the strategic importance of Arctic resources and sea routes for China's energy strategy and economic development. From 2008 to 2019, Chinese firms were particularly active in the energy sector, with a significant spike in 2019 when they engaged in at least seven projects. Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global oil prices, China is expected to continue investing significantly in Arctic energy projects, potentially up to \$50 billion. Most of China's Arctic energy projects are in Russia, notably the Yamal LNG project, where China invested billions. China is also involved in energy projects in Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Iceland, and Norway, with major Chinese SOEs like CNOOC, CNPC, and Sinopec playing key roles.⁴³

Chinese firms have been involved in numerous large-scale infrastructure projects in the Arctic, including construction, transportation, telecommunications, and port and undersea cable development. From 2017 to 2019, there was a significant increase in PRC infrastructure activity, although 2020 saw a decline. Despite some projects facing political resistance, the overall trend shows increasing Chinese involvement in Arctic infrastructure. Notably, the Berelast Logistics Centre near Moscow, built jointly by a Russian company and Yingkou Port of Liaoning Port Group at a cost of \$238 million, exemplifies China's strategic investments in Arctic-related infrastructure. With a \$1 trillion funding gap projected for Arctic infrastructure over 15 years, China's capacity

⁴² Rachael Wolfson et al., *Arctic Prospecting: Measuring China's Arctic Economic Footprint* (Report), (Center for Naval Analyses, 2024): 39-40, <https://www.cna.org/reports/arctic-prospecting-measuring-chinas-arctic-economic-footprint>.

⁴³ Ibid., 45-46.

to finance and develop large-scale projects positions it as a crucial player in the region.⁴⁴

The Arctic holds substantial reserves of valuable minerals such as iron ore, copper, nickel, zinc, phosphates, diamonds, and rare earth minerals. China, which dominates the global supply of rare earth minerals, has shown considerable interest in Arctic mining projects, particularly in Canada and Russia. Chinese SOEs, including Zijin Mining Group, Jiangxi Copper Company, and CITIC Group Corporation, have been heavily involved, financing around 65% of mining transactions. Notable projects include China's Bluestar purchasing Elkem, a Norwegian heavy industry company, for \$2.1 billion. In Greenland, Chinese firms are actively engaged in extracting rare earth minerals, underscoring China's strategic interest in the region's mineral wealth.⁴⁵

Melting icecaps in the Arctic are opening new shipping routes, reducing travel time between China and Europe. China aims to integrate these routes into its Belt and Road Initiative, developing shipping lanes in the Arctic. Over the past decade, Chinese firms have expanded their shipping interests, involving port construction, shipyards, ships, and LNG tankers. Significant projects include the Zarubino Port in Russia's Primorsky Krai and a deep-water port in Arkhangelsk, funded partially by Chinese backers. PRC SOEs, particularly COSCO and China State Construction Engineering Corporation, are driving these investments. COSCO, a leading global shipping company, emphasizes the importance of the Arctic in its development strategy, focusing on the Polar Silk Road and international trade between the North Atlantic and Far East.⁴⁶

Across all Arctic countries, instances of Chinese FDI are limited, both in absolute terms and relative to local economies. Identified investments are often in industries that concern US and Arctic nation policymakers, such as energy, mining, and critical infrastructure. Between 2011 and 2020, CNA's CAAT recorded 28 instances of Chinese FDI in the Arctic, including equity investments,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 49.

mergers and acquisitions, and subsidiary formations. Overall, Chinese FDI in the Arctic does not show a clear increasing trend. While there was an all-time peak in 2019, a sharp decline in 2020 complicates the assessment of long-term trends, possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the oil market. In most Arctic countries, Chinese investments remain static with few transactions annually and low monetary values. For instance, since the early 2010s, Chinese investment in the Canadian Arctic has been almost non-existent.⁴⁷

In contrast to other Arctic nations, the Russian Arctic has seen more significant Chinese investment activity. Key projects include the Yamal LNG project, where Chinese entities like the CNPC and the China Silk Road Fund hold a 29.9% stake, and the Yamal 2 project, involving floating LNG liquefaction plants with Chinese firms holding a 20% stake. Other notable investments include the joint development of the Russkoye and Yurubcheno-Tokhonskoye fields with Rosneft, where Sinopec Group has an option to acquire a 49% stake, and the \$5 billion Payakha oil field project led by the China National Chemical Engineering Group (CNCEC). Additionally, there are joint ventures in logistics, manufacturing, and telecommunications between Chinese firms and Russian partners. Despite Western sanctions since 2014, Russian firms have avoided relying exclusively on Chinese investors, diversifying their partnerships with other international players. Several initiatives have been announced to pool funds for strategic investments in Russia's central region and the Russian Far East, though these funds have yet to significantly impact the Arctic.⁴⁸

3.3 China Meets Russia in the Arctic: Evolving Dynamics and Mutual Suspicion

In March, 2010, Chinese Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo made a statement asserting that the Arctic belongs to all people worldwide, implying China's claim to the North Pole. His statement positioned China as a challenger in Arctic affairs, contesting the claims of the five Arctic littoral states. It not only asserted China's claims in

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9-11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18-21.

the region, but also argued for a significant role in Arctic development, citing the country's large population as the basis for its importance.⁴⁹

At that time, official Chinese statements on the Arctic were limited, though a substantive discussion existed among Chinese scholars. These scholars highlighted the potential benefits of Arctic shipping, focusing optimistically on reduced travel times while overlooking ice-related challenges. Political and regulatory issues were scarcely addressed, with assumptions about mutual interests between Russia and China. Some Russian observers saw these academic discussions as exploratory moves by Chinese policymakers, though there were misinterpretations, such as the belief that China aimed to transport a significant portion of its exports via the Northern Sea Route by 2020. Russian scholars, however, emphasized the geopolitical implications, suggesting that China's growing influence in the Arctic might challenge established norms, particularly regarding resource rights and shipping under UNCLOS. While recognizing the potential benefits of Chinese investments and technology, Russian analysts warned against over-reliance on Chinese cooperation. Despite positive prospects for collaboration, obstacles remained, as evidenced by Russia's 2013 refusal of a Chinese proposal for Arctic research cooperation due to security concerns.⁵⁰

In the meantime, depending on new infrastructure such as bases, aircraft, and icebreakers, showed China's rapid polar expansion as part of its outstanding maritime interests and reflected Beijing's desire to be a maritime and polar great power, with a voice in shaping any future governance norms.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Gordon G. Chang, "China's Arctic Play: An Admiral Stakes a Territorial Claim—And It Looks Like There's More to Come," *The Diplomat*, March 9, 2010, <https://thediplomat.com/2010/03/chinas-arctic-play/>. Accessed May 24, 2024.

⁵⁰ Arild Moe, Gørild Heggelund, and Kathinka Fürst, "Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Maritime Development: Expectations and Contradictions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 8 (2023): 1364–1365, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2212144>.

⁵¹ Anne-Marie Brady, "China Playing a Long Game in Polar Governance," *Wilson Center*, January 22, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/china-playing-long-game-polar-governance>. Accessed May 26, 2024.

In August 2013, the *Xue Long* became the first Chinese vessel to traverse the Northern Sea Route, significantly encouraging Chinese shipping companies.⁵² Further plans included increasing the number of scientists involved in polar research. Several research institutes in China are dedicated to Arctic studies, including the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) in Shanghai, which merged with leading institutes in Northern Europe in 2013 to form the Sino-Northern European Centre for Arctic Research. Other institutions involved in Arctic research include the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oceanology in Qingdao and various universities across the country.⁵³

3.4 2013: Russian Pivot to the *Near-Arctic State*

Meanwhile, mentions of China in the context of Russian-Chinese relations in the Arctic were rather infrequent in Russian media and academic circles. It was only in 2013 that this topic received widespread discussion and coverage. This shift coincided with the emergence of the so-called *pivot to the East* as a new priority in Russian both foreign and domestic policy.⁵⁴ In his address to the Federal Assembly in February 2013, President Vladimir Putin identified the development of the Russian Far East as a national priority for the 21st century. This led to the adoption of a new state program for the socio-economic development of the Far East and the Baikal region, approved by the Russian government in April 2014.⁵⁵

⁵² Atle Staalesen, "First Container Ship on Northern Sea Route," *Barents Observer*, August 21, 2013, <https://barentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2013/08/first-container-ship-northern-sea-route-21-08>. Accessed May 26, 2024.

⁵³ V. P. Zhuravel, "China, Republic of Korea, Japan in the Arctic: Politics, Economy, Security," *Arctic and North* 24 (2016): 114.

⁵⁴ Yevgeny Kulintsev, "ШОС во внешнеполитической стратегии России [SCO in Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy]," *Russian Council*, October 2, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/shos-vo-vneshnepoliticheskoy-strategii-rossii/>. Accessed May 26, 2024.

⁵⁵ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation [Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации], approved by President V.V. Putin, February 12, 2013, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/6D84DDEDEDBF7DA644257B160051BF7F. Accessed May 30, 2024.

Pivot to the East was driven not only by the need to capitalize on the rapid economic growth of the Asia-Pacific region, as frequently emphasized by President Vladimir Putin, but also by the search for new allies, particularly strengthening strategic partnerships with China. This shift was further motivated by the post-Ukraine crisis in Russia's relations with the West, increasing interest in policies towards Eastern neighbours and the Russian Far East.⁵⁶

In May 2013, China, along with four other Asian countries and Italy, was granted observer status to the Arctic Council. This decision was positively received by Chinese media outlets, with the People's Daily expressing China's commitment to cooperate with the Arctic Council and Arctic countries, particularly in responding to climate change and protecting the Arctic environment. China's journey to observer status began in 2006 when it was first invited to attend Arctic Council meetings as an ad hoc observer, later applying for full observer status in 2007. The acceptance of China as an observer reflected its longstanding engagement in Arctic affairs.⁵⁷

Russia's position on China's bid for permanent observer status in the Arctic Council, which China had applied since 2007, remained cold.⁵⁸ Even in early 2013, the Russian Ambassador for Arctic Affairs did not show unconditional enthusiasm on China's observer status, noting the following:

Russia may weaken its position on the NSR under the influence of the 'Chinese factor' and the adjustment of its own plans... China is showing more and more interest in the development of the NSR, allocating funds and adopting programs... As China takes concrete actions, the situation at the NSR will change, and Russia should be wary... Russia is interested in utilizing the "China factor" in the development of the Arctic and the NSR,

⁵⁶ Mikhail G. Nosov, "Povorot na Vostok: Itogi Pyati Let" ["Turn to the East: Results of Five Years"], *Nauchno-analiticheskij Vestnik Instituta Evropy RAN* (2) (2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.15211/vestnikieran22019612>. Page 6.

⁵⁷ Kevin Sun, "Beyond the Dragon and the Panda: Understanding China's Engagement in the Arctic," *Asia Policy* 18 (2014): 46–47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24905275>.

⁵⁸ Arild Moe, Gørild Heggelund, and Kathinka Fürst, "Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Maritime Development: Expectations and Contradictions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 8 (2023): 1365, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2212144>.

cooperation is stable, and no surprises are expected. Russia's economic interest is related to the Chinese market for Russian hydrocarbons and the development of transit along the NSR, which benefits Europe and East Asia... The priority of Russian policy in the Arctic is cooperation with the Arctic states, which should set the basic rules while respecting international law.⁵⁹

3.5 Post-2014: Building Trust Amidst New Circumstances

Despite initial scepticism seen within Russian official statements following China's admission as a permanent observer to the Arctic Council, the event marked a significant milestone in Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. From this point onwards, Chinese scholars began addressing governance issues in the Arctic with enthusiasm about Russian policies, noting Russia's proactive stance in formulating its Arctic strategy and asserting military presence. They observed various military operations in the region, including increasing the range of activities of the Northern Fleet, resuming aircraft patrols, and conducting joint military exercises. An opposite perspective from scholars emphasized the importance of cooperation based on national interests, highlighting areas such as environmental protection, resource development, waterway utilization, and military security. They suggested that China's Arctic interests should align with Russia's without infringing on its dominance, advocating for participation in environmental cooperation as a foundation, followed by resource development and seeking opportunities in sea route development and military security.⁶⁰

These views also reflect the point of view widespread in Russia at that time. At the first stage of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, Russian analysts believed that international interest and competition for participation in the Arctic

⁵⁹Tatiana Dmitrieva, "Китайский Фактор Севморпути" ["The 'Chinese Factor' in the Northern Sea Route"], *MorVesti*, January 2, 2014, <https://morvesti.ru/themes/1700/53196/>. Accessed May 28, 2024.

⁶⁰ Arild Moe, Gørild Heggelund, and Kathinka Fürst, "Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Maritime Development: Expectations and Contradictions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 8 (2023): 1366, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2212144>.

gave Russia negotiating power. However, conditions changed after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, when it became clear that sanctions and isolation of Russia from cooperation with Western countries would be long-lasting. At the time, there was widespread optimism in Russia about the potential benefits of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. The Russian International Affairs Council report outlines various possibilities, including financial support for infrastructure modernization and joint development of resource extraction technologies. There have even been proposals for a strategic agreement in which Russia would provide lucrative contracts in exchange for China's support in international affairs. However, the report also cautions against potential problems, such as China's possible claim of neutral water status for the Northern Sea Route.⁶¹

After Russia's actions in Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions, Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic intensified. This marked a significant shift in Russia's foreign policy, transforming the *pivot to the East* from a mere vector into a complete redirection. Faced with increasing isolation from its Western partners, Russia was forced to reassess its relations with China, casting aside suspicion and scepticism.

It was still the issue of Arctic cooperation, which had remained particularly contentious, highlighting Russia's deep-seated mistrust towards China, despite an already developed network of collaboration in energy and other sectors. Sino-Russian cooperation dates back to 1997, when President Yeltsin and President Jiang Zemin signed a joint declaration for a strategic partnership. This relationship was further bolstered by BRI in 2013 and the emphasis on a broad cross-border partnership involving the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), ASEAN, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) during the 2016 Russia-ASEAN Business Forum.⁶² The Arctic, which is strategically important for resource extraction and sea routes, became a stage of increased cooperation.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Yu Cao, "Implications for Sino-Russian Cooperation on the Polar Silk Road," *Arctic Yearbook* (2022): 6-7.

This shift led to a paradigm shift in Sino-Russian relations: the Arctic became a vital arena for their joint activities.

3.6 2018 China's White Paper

While Russia's longstanding commitment to developing the Arctic region and issuing related policy papers was expected as an Arctic coastal state, China's publication of its own official Arctic policy white paper marked a crucial milestone. The 2018 white paper contributed significantly to solidify China's self-proclaimed status as a *near-Arctic state* with legitimate interests, both domestically and on the international stage.

The 2018 China's White Paper outlines Beijing's key Arctic objectives of "protecting, developing and participating in the governance" of the Arctic region.⁶³ A core tactic involves cementing a prominent role in regional affairs through participation in international agreements, thereby justifying China's presence as a self-proclaimed *near-Arctic state* and *important stakeholder*, despite not being an Arctic coastal nation.^{64 65}

Internally, China's White Paper aims to coordinate policy across the numerous Chinese ministries and agencies handling various Arctic matters, estimated at around 17 different bodies.⁶⁶ It roots China's interests by highlighting its historical involvement dating back to the 1925 Spitsbergen Treaty, as well as its

⁶³ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (First edition) (2018), https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm. Accessed June 1, 2024.

⁶⁴ Marco Biagioni, "China's Push-in Strategy in the Arctic and Its Impact on Regional Governance," IAI Commentaries 23 | 41 (September 2023): 3, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/chinas-push-strategy-arctic-and-its-impact-regional-governance>. Accessed June 5, 2024.

⁶⁵ Kong Soon Lim, "China's Arctic Policy and the Polar Silk Road Vision," in *Arctic Yearbook 2018*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot (Akureyri: Northern Research Forum, 2018): 5.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.

recent Arctic scientific expeditions "to promote scientific expedition and research" studying climate change impacts affecting China.⁶⁷

The policy document lays out four main goals: deepening Arctic understanding, environmental protection, responsible development, and engagement in governance mechanisms.⁶⁸ It establishes guiding tenets of "respect, cooperation, win-win result and sustainability". Specific policies focus on research, "protecting the Arctic environment and addressing climate change", prudent resource utilization, "improving and complementing the existing Arctic governance regime",⁶⁹ and maintaining regional peace and stability – underscoring adherence to international frameworks like UNCLOS.⁷⁰

While avoiding the term "global commons," China's White Paper delineates areas under Arctic states' sovereignty from international waters like the central Arctic Ocean, asserting China's lawful rights and role in the latter, partly justified by its massive population.⁷¹ This aligns with previous rhetoric on respecting "the legitimate rights and interests of non-Arctic States" under international law.⁷²

3.7 Joint Developments and Cooperation up to 2022

Building on their longstanding relationship, the 2017 PSR initiative provided more opportunities for Sino-Russian cooperation in developing the NSR. China

⁶⁷ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (First edition) (2018), https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm. Accessed June 1, 2024.

⁶⁸ Kong Soon Lim, "China's Arctic Policy and the Polar Silk Road Vision," in *Arctic Yearbook 2018*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot (Akureyri: Northern Research Forum, 2018): 6.

⁶⁹ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (First edition) (2018), https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm. Accessed June 1, 2024.

⁷⁰ Kong Soon Lim, "China's Arctic Policy and the Polar Silk Road Vision," in *Arctic Yearbook 2018*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot (Akureyri: Northern Research Forum, 2018): 6-7.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (First edition) (2018), https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm. Accessed June 1, 2024.

became a key partner in Russia's LNG production projects, including the Yamal LNG, the Arctic LNG, and the Payakha oilfield project. These projects were critical for Russia's economic development, especially with rising competition from energy producers in the Middle East and North America. Additionally, China became the largest importer of Russian crude oil.⁷³

In the infrastructure sector, projects like the Belkomur railway link enhanced the accessibility of the Siberia region and connect Russia's land and marine transportation systems.⁷⁴ This collaboration extended to the development of ports and logistics, making the NSR a viable "Transcontinental Eurasian Sea Transport Corridor." Both countries benefited from projects such as the Zarubino port, which improved infrastructure and facilitated smoother navigation through the harsh conditions of the Arctic.⁷⁵

Russia initially viewed Arctic shipping as a domestic issue, using the NSR primarily as a national transport route. However, amendments to the Merchant Shipping Code in 2017 granted exclusive rights to Russian-flagged vessels for shipping oil, gas, and coal produced in Russia.⁷⁶ In 2020, Putin's approval of the Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic 2035 further cemented the NSR's role as a "globally competitive national transport corridor."⁷⁷

Since the first Chinese vessel Xuelong's navigation of the NSR, Chinese shipping companies, particularly COSCO, showed increasing interest in Arctic routes. China significantly contributed to developing navigation technologies, informational logistics, port infrastructure, and financing along the NSR,

⁷³ Yu Cao, "Implications for Sino-Russian Cooperation on the Polar Silk Road," *Arctic Yearbook* (2022): 7.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Yu Li, "The Greater Eurasian Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative: Can the Two Be Linked?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2018): 94–99.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.07.004>.

⁷⁶ Amendments to Merchant Shipping Code of Russia, December 29, 2017, The Kremlin, <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/execution/56546>, accessed August 2024.

⁷⁷ R. Biedermann, "Exploring Sino-Russian-Nordics Triangular Relations: Complex Balancing," 8.

becoming "an investor, supplier, and consumer of Arctic shipping".⁷⁸ This cooperation made navigating the NSR more feasible and beneficial for China, linking European and Asian markets and increasing trade opportunities and natural resource supplies.

Beyond the PSR initiative, China and Russia collaborated on constructing pipelines, railroads, shipping routes, cross-border bridges, and subsea cables under the broader BRI in the Arctic region. Notable projects include the China-Russia East-Route Natural Gas pipeline, which provided stable supplies to China and helps Russia secure its energy sector. The Primorye-1 and Primorye-2 international transport corridors enhance trade and investment between the two nations.⁷⁹

The Blagoveshchensk-Heihe Bridge (completed in 2019) and the Nizhneleninskoe-Tongjiang Railway Bridge (completed in 2022) facilitated travel and commerce between Russia and China. In 2021, with China's technological support, Russia began constructing the Polar Express Arctic subsea cable, valued at \$889 million. These projects demonstrate a close economic relationship between China's northeast and Russia's Far East, stimulating trade and solidifying the region as a key node in the Northeast Asian logistics network.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Maria Kobzeva, "New Arctic Seaways and the Role of China in Regime Formation," in *Global Arctic*, ed. Springer (Cham, 2022): 315–330, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81253-9_16.

⁷⁹ Russia Briefing, May 15, 2017, "Russia, China Agree on Primorye-1 Corridor; Opens Up Heilongjiang To Asia-Pacific Markets," <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russia-china-agree-primorye-1-corridor-opens-heilongjiang-asia-pacific-markets.html/>, accessed July 1, 2024.

⁸⁰ Yu Cao, "Implications for Sino-Russian Cooperation on the Polar Silk Road," *Arctic Yearbook*, 2022: 8.

CHAPTER III

4. Post-2022 through the Prism of Researchers and Media

To analyse the post-2022 period, this study draws upon 3 online media outlets as primary sources. The rationale behind this selection lies in the limited availability of independent analytical responses, particularly from official Russian and Chinese perspectives, at this stage. These media sources serve as a valuable foundation for tracking key developments, such as significant milestones, official statements, and policy announcements from both countries. Therefore, recent reports and scholarly commentary from experts in the field are incorporated to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the broader geopolitical context.

The chapter begins by offering an overview of critical perspectives from researchers in the area. Following this, it presents a detailed examination of media representations of China-Russia cooperation in the Arctic from 2022 onwards. The chapter identifies and analyses key themes emerging from media coverage, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights into the evolution of perceptions surrounding this geopolitical alliance. The analysis is organized on a year-by-year basis for 2022, 2023, and 2024, with particular attention to shifts in media coverage and its broader implications. The chapter concludes by synthesizing these findings, offering a comprehensive overview of the evolving nature of China-Russia Arctic cooperation and its perception within the media landscape.

4.1 Alignment, not Alliance: Critical Perspectives of Researchers

According to Wishnick, a Senior Research Scientist in the China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division at CNA, the relationship between Russia and China can be described as an alignment driven by mutual interests rather than a formal alliance. This partnership, while characterized by growing cooperation in military, aerospace, international forums, and trade, lacks the legal commitments of a formal military pact. Shared interests, particularly their

animosity towards the U.S. and the need for regime security as authoritarian states, form the foundation of their alignment.⁸¹

As discussed further by Wishnick and Mitter, a key challenge in the Arctic cooperation is Russia's resistance to China's growing influence. Russia considers itself the primary authority in the Arctic and views China's self-declared "Near-Arctic State" status as an encroachment on its domain. While Russia is dependent on Chinese technology for Arctic exploration, this dependency complicates its ability to fully counterbalance Chinese ambitions. The relationship is further strained by Russia's concern that it might become overly reliant on China for its Arctic projects and energy resources.⁸²

The researchers also discuss the role of personal relationships, particularly between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. While Mitter and Wishnick acknowledged the significance of their personal rapport, they argued that the strategic alignment between the two countries would likely persist regardless of the leaders' individual relationships. In terms of military cooperation, the joint exercises and visits between Russia and China are seen as largely symbolic, serving more as gestures of unity rather than indications of deeper military integration.⁸³

Wishnick's analysis of the May 2024 Xi-Putin meeting highlights that while China and Russia are deepening their partnership, significant divergences persist, even within their joint statements. Despite showing agreement on many issues, there are notable differences in their perspectives. For instance, Russia's reference to Arctic cooperation focuses on its coastal waterway, whereas China emphasizes the Polar Silk Road that transits the northern sea route and goes to the European Arctic, reflecting its broader Arctic shipping ambitions. This

⁸¹ Conor Cunningham, "Mitter, Wishnick: Alignment, Not Alliance for Russia-China Relationship," *Russia Matters*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/mitter-wishnick-alignment-not-alliance-russia-china-relationship>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

contrast indicates that, despite their close ties, China and Russia do not entirely align on their strategic interests and terminologies.⁸⁴

Looking ahead, both experts suggested that while the current cooperation is marked by certain limitations, there is potential for deeper collaboration, particularly in areas like military technology and regional security dialogues. However, significant challenges remain, including the strategic implications of China's increasing investment in the Arctic and the broader geopolitical impact of their alignment.⁸⁵

Zhao Long, an expert on Arctic policies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, also describes the cooperation between Russia and China as complex. While China publicly supports Russia and has provided diplomatic backing amid the Ukraine conflict, it also maintains a cautious stance to avoid appearing overly aligned against Western interests. China's past invitation to participate in developing new icebreaker technology—a technology closely related to nuclear-powered aircraft carriers—was retracted, illustrating the delicate nature of their partnership. While China is vocal against Western sanctions, it remains cautious in its Arctic dealings with Russia to avoid breaching sanctions.⁸⁶

Russia seeks China's financial and geopolitical support but desires to retain control over the Arctic, which it views as its domain. In contrast, China aims to internationalize the Arctic to assert itself as a leading global power in resource

⁸⁴ Bonny Lin, "Recent Developments in Sino-Russian Relations: A Conversation with Dr. Elizabeth Wishnick," *ChinaPower*, podcast, August 28, 2024, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/chinapower/recent-developments-sino-russian-relations-conversation-dr-elizabeth-wishnick>. Accessed August 31, 2024.

⁸⁵ Conor Cunningham, "Mitter, Wishnick: Alignment, Not Alliance for Russia-China Relationship," *Russia Matters*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/mitter-wishnick-alignment-not-alliance-russia-china-relationship>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

⁸⁶ Richard Spencer, "China and Russia Plot Course for 'Ice Silk Road' in the Arctic," *The Times*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/asia/article/china-and-russia-plot-course-for-ice-silk-road-in-the-arctic-rjbrclfk0>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

allocation. This divergence in strategic interests suggests that Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation will likely remain beneficial but could face challenges.⁸⁷

Despite Russia's ambitious goal of increasing traffic from 80 vessels last year to 127 million tonnes by 2035, the route is currently far less utilized than the Suez Canal, which saw 26,000 vessels pass through. Success in this endeavour relies on attracting Chinese cargo vessels and tankers, given China's status as the world's largest trading nation.⁸⁸

Analysing more general implications, German Institute for International and Security Affairs has published a paper concluding that Chinese investments in Russia have remained limited. Although trade between Russia and China reached a record-breaking turnover of \$241 billion in 2023, driven largely by Western sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, Chinese investment in Russia has stagnated. No large-scale Chinese investment projects have been initiated since the invasion, likely due to perceived risks associated with long-term commitments in Russia.⁸⁹

China's investments in Russia have historically been concentrated in the energy sector, but even this has seen a decline. Prior to 2022, Chinese foreign direct investment in Russia was modest, and the situation has worsened since the invasion. The number of new projects has dropped significantly, and the investment environment is further complicated by sanctions risks, opaque business practices, and local market barriers. Chinese companies are increasingly wary of secondary sanctions and prefer short-term, export-based strategies over long-term investments in Russia.⁹⁰

Buchanan's analysis reveals that despite growing engagement between Russia and China in the Arctic, their cooperation faces significant challenges due to

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Janis Kluge, *Russia-China Economic Relations: Moscow's Road to Economic Dependence*, SWP Research Paper 6 (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, May 2024), 10–18, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2024RP06>.

⁹⁰Ibid.

differing goals and interests. China is focused on tapping into Arctic resources and enhancing its transportation routes, such as the Northern Sea Route, which offers a shorter shipping path between Asia and Europe. Additionally, China aims to diversify its energy imports and bolster its global presence. Conversely, Russia's priorities are centered around economic security and maintaining control over the NSR, which it regulates tightly. This control includes enforcing stringent rules for foreign vessels and requiring Russian icebreakers for navigation.⁹¹

The partnership between Russia and China is limited to the Russian Arctic Zone and does not extend significantly beyond it. China's Arctic strategy involves engaging with other Arctic states, reflecting a broader aim of increasing its global influence and accessing resources across the Arctic. This strategy indicates that China is not solely dependent on its relationship with Russia for Arctic affairs.⁹²

Tensions also arise from Russia's security-focused approach, which includes safeguarding its Arctic frontier and managing foreign interests, including those from China. This approach can lead to a 'siege mentality' and may strain relations if Sino-Russian ties deteriorate. Additionally, the Arctic continental shelf debate introduces another layer of complexity, as overlapping claims by Russia, Canada, and Denmark could affect China's access to resources and further strain the partnership.⁹³

Buchanan suggests that the relationship between Russia and China in the Arctic is not a formal alliance but a pragmatic arrangement driven by mutual benefits. The dynamic nature of their engagement means that their cooperation is subject to change, influenced by shifting interests and geopolitical pressures. Stakeholders should be cautious in assuming a stable or unified Sino-Russian

⁹¹ Elizabeth Buchanan, "Why Russia and China Won't Go the Distance in the High North," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, May 8, 2024, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-russia-and-china-wont-go-distance-high-north>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

Arctic strategy, as underlying tensions and competing objectives could alter their collaboration.⁹⁴

4.2 Themes

In the thematic analysis, several key themes that structure the exploration of this complex geopolitical and economic relationship were identified. These themes are defined based on approaching the articles selection through a set of focused questions that examine the multifaceted dimensions of the cooperation, ranging from infrastructure development to environmental implications.

Key Projects and Initiatives & Infrastructure

These themes encompass the central projects and initiatives that have emerged as critical to Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. They focus on identifying and analysing the pivotal projects, such as those related to research, infrastructure, and energy, that are driving the partnership forward. The analysis under these themes explores the milestones achieved in these projects, their evolution in terms of scope, funding, and the involvement of international partnerships. Additionally, these themes address the strategic objectives behind these projects, displaying how both China and Russia aim to leverage these initiatives for mutual benefit and broader geopolitical influence.

Roles

This theme examines the evolving roles of China and Russia within their cooperative efforts in the Arctic. It scrutinizes how China's role has developed since 2022, particularly in terms of its strategic contributions and influence within the partnership. Conversely, it also explores how Russia's objectives and contributions have shifted over time. This theme delves into the specific contributions made by China, such as technology transfer, investment, and expertise, highlighting the dynamics of power and responsibility within the cooperation.

⁹⁴Ibid.

Northern Sea Route (NSR)

The theme of the Northern Sea Route focuses on the changing significance and usage of this critical Arctic passage in the context of Sino-Russian cooperation. It examines key developments or improvements made to the NSR and assesses how its role has evolved for both regional and global trade since 2022. The analysis under this theme considers the strategic importance of the NSR for both nations and its implications for global shipping routes.

Economic Implications & Opportunities

These themes explore the economic dimensions of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, identifying the opportunities that arise from this partnership. They assess how both China and Russia benefit economically from their collaboration, including the opening of new markets and trade routes. They also consider the broader economic impacts on local Arctic communities, as well as the overall economic implications for both nations. Furthermore, they examine how this cooperation influences global energy markets, reflecting on the strategic importance of Arctic resources.

Geopolitical Implications: The geopolitical theme investigates the broader geopolitical ramifications of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. It explores how this cooperation has influenced the bilateral relations between China and Russia, as well as the reactions and stances of other Arctic and non-Arctic states. This theme also considers the evolving international perception of Sino-Russian activities in the region, providing insights into the changing dynamics of global power relations.

Challenges

This theme identifies and analyses the various challenges and threats associated with Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. It includes an examination of geopolitical tensions, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine conflict, and how these tensions affect the partnership. The theme also addresses security concerns for both nations within the Arctic region, highlighting the risks and obstacles that may hinder the success of their cooperation.

Environmental Implications

The final theme centres on the environmental consequences of increased Sino-Russian activity in the Arctic. It evaluates the environmental impacts of the projects undertaken by both nations and how these impacts are being addressed by the respective governments and international organizations. This theme also considers the potential long-term environmental consequences of the cooperation, reflecting on the sustainability of such endeavours in a fragile and rapidly changing ecosystem.

4.3 Quantitative Implications

The following table provides an overview of theme prevalence in selected articles across three media sources from 2022 to 2024. The table captures the occurrence of various themes, including key projects, roles, economic and geopolitical implications, challenges, environmental implications, infrastructure, the Northern Sea Route, and opportunities, within the articles reviewed each year. This breakdown highlights the thematic focus and evolution of discourse over the three-year period.

Year	Key Projects	Roles	Economic Implications	Geopolitical Implications	Challenges	Environmental Implications	Infrastructure	NSR	Opportunities
2022 10 articles	8 (80%)	6 (60%)	9 (90%)	7 (70%)	4 (40%)	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	7 (70%)
2023 17 articles	12 (71%)	10 (59%)	14 (82%)	9 (53%)	5 (29%)	3 (18%)	11 (65%)	9 (53%)	11 (65%)
2024 4 articles	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)

Figure 1 A Table Showing a Breakdown of Theme Proportion by Year

As displayed in Table 1, in 2022, the collaboration between China and Russia prominently featured significant projects such as Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG

2, constituting 80% of the articles. The economic benefits of these projects were a major theme, appearing in 90% of the coverage, underscoring the mutual economic advantages and China's substantial investment in the Russian Arctic. Geopolitical implications were also a major focus, discussed in 70% of the articles, highlighting the partnership's role in countering Western sanctions. The media frequently highlighted the roles each country played in these projects (60%), demonstrating a collaborative effort. The strategic importance of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and infrastructure development was notable, mentioned in 50% of the articles. Challenges, including logistical and technological hurdles, were discussed in 40% of the coverage, while environmental concerns were the least frequently mentioned at 20%.

In 2023, the narrative continued to be dominated by economic implications (82%) and key projects (71%), reflecting the deepening interdependence and operational progress. New opportunities arising from the partnership and significant infrastructure developments were highlighted in 65% of the articles. The roles of each country and the NSR remained significant themes, mentioned in 59% and 53% of the coverage respectively, indicating ongoing strategic priorities. Geopolitical discussions decreased slightly to 53%, suggesting a shift towards more practical aspects of cooperation. Challenges and environmental implications, while secondary, were more pronounced than in 2022, appearing in 29% and 18% of the articles respectively.

By 2024, every article addressed the economic implications and key projects of the Sino-Russian partnership, indicating a mature phase of cooperation with a clear focus on outcomes. Opportunities arising from the partnership were universally recognized, featuring in 100% of the coverage. The roles of each country and infrastructure developments remained major themes, each mentioned in 75% of the articles. Geopolitical considerations, though still relevant, were less dominant, appearing in 50% of the coverage. Challenges, particularly logistical and operational hurdles, were noted in 25% of the articles. Interestingly, environmental implications were not a focus in 2024, with no

articles specifically addressing this aspect, suggesting a possible shift away from environmental concerns or a lower media focus on this theme.

4.4 Thematic Implications

This section provides an interpretation of media coverage concerning cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic, analysed separately for each year.

4.4.1 2022: Push for Accelerated Cooperation Amid Western Sanctions

In 2022, Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic reached several significant milestones, reflecting both the strategic depth and the evolving nature of their partnership. One major milestone was the continued development of Arctic energy projects. Chinese state companies, including CNPC and the Silk Road Fund, have secured substantial stakes in major Russian energy ventures such as Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2. These investments underscore China's pivotal role in Arctic energy infrastructure. As noted in one article, *“Chinese state companies from before have ownership stakes in several major energy projects in the Russian Arctic, among them the Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2”*.⁹⁵

Furthermore, the construction of new-generation floating nuclear power plants (NPPs) for the Arctic has marked a significant advancement in bilateral cooperation. Chinese yards have been responsible for building the hulls of these floating NPPs, highlighting their capability in manufacturing and their contribution to Russia's energy infrastructure. *“China's role in constructing the hulls for new floating NPPs demonstrates ongoing bilateral cooperation despite global tensions”*⁹⁶, it is emblematic of the strategic collaboration between the two nations.

⁹⁵ Atle Staalesen, "Isolated Russia Says It Will Invite 'Non-Arctic' States to Develop Its North," *The Barents Observer*, April 18, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2022/04/isolated-russia-says-it-will-invite-non-arctic-states-develop-its-north>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

⁹⁶ Thomas Nilsen, "Construction of Second Arctic Floating Nuclear Power Plant Is Underway," *The Barents Observer*, August 30, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/nuclear->

Another crucial milestone has been the heightened importance of the NSR. The NSR has evolved into a strategic maritime corridor, with Russia investing in icebreakers and infrastructure to enhance its navigability. China's investment in Arctic infrastructure, including support for the NSR, aligns with its Belt and Road Initiative, underscoring its commitment to developing key Arctic shipping routes.⁹⁷

Opportunities and Economic Implications

The cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic has created substantial economic opportunities and implications. One of the most significant outcomes has been the diversification of energy markets.⁹⁸ Following the war in Ukraine and the imposition of Western sanctions, Russia has increasingly turned to Asia as an alternative market for its oil, "The scope of Arctic oil shipments has expanded to include new markets in Asia, particularly China, as Russia seeks alternatives to European markets due to the EU oil ban".⁹⁹ The NSR has become a vital route for transporting Russian oil to Asian markets, particularly China. The shift in energy exports is evidenced by the increased Chinese imports of discounted Russian oil, as reported: "In May and June, China imported more Russian oil at discounted prices, reducing more expensive supplies from Saudi Arabia".¹⁰⁰

The development of Arctic infrastructure has been another key opportunity. Chinese investments in Arctic shipping routes and infrastructure are integral to

safety/2022/08/construction-second-arctic-floating-nuclear-power-plant-started. Accessed August 15, 2024.

⁹⁷ Melody Schreiber, "China Will Not Recognize an Arctic Council Without Russia, Envoy Says," *Arctic Today*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.arctictoday.com/china-will-not-recognize-an-arctic-council-without-russia-envoy-says/>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

⁹⁸ Atle Staalesen, "Isolated Russia Says It Will Invite 'Non-Arctic' States to Develop Its North," *The Barents Observer*, April 18, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2022/04/isolated-russia-says-it-will-invite-non-arctic-states-develop-its-north>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

⁹⁹ Atle Staalesen, "As EU Oil Ban Approaches, a Russian Tanker Tests Arctic Route to China," *The Independent Barents Observer*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.arctictoday.com/as-eu-oil-ban-approaches-a-russian-tanker-tests-arctic-route-to-china/>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Astri Edvardsen, "Russia's Rosneft is Building a Large-Scale Arctic Oil Terminal," *High North News*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russias-rosneft-building-large-scale-arctic-oil-terminal>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at enhancing connectivity and logistics along the NSR. The significance of the NSR as a strategic and economic corridor has grown, with projections suggesting it could significantly boost Russia's GDP, potentially adding *"as much as 35 trillion rubles to Russian GDP."*¹⁰¹

Additionally, the partnership has facilitated infrastructure projects such as the floating NPPs, which could be exported to other Arctic nations or regions facing similar energy challenges. This joint venture highlights the potential for economic growth and technological advancement in Arctic regions.¹⁰²

Threats and Challenges

Despite the promising developments, Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic faces several challenges. Western sanctions have had a profound impact on Russian industrial projects in the Arctic. For instance, the Arctic LNG 2 project, which relies on Chinese construction of industrial modules, has faced disruptions due to the withdrawal of Western partners and technology supply chain issues. One article emphasizes, *"Western sanctions have created serious troubles for Novatek and its Arctic LNG projects"*.¹⁰³ These sanctions have disrupted project timelines and operational efficiency, highlighting the vulnerability of Arctic energy initiatives to geopolitical pressures.

Geopolitical tensions have further complicated the situation. The reluctance of international shipping companies to operate in the Arctic due to geopolitical risks, *"Judging from data from the Russian Northern Sea Route Administration, COSCO has not applied for sailing permission for a single of its vessels"*, as

¹⁰¹ Atle Staalesen, "Russia Turns Towards Asia: Year's First Vessel Heads East on Northern Sea Route," *The Barents Observer*, June 17, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2022/06/russia-turns-towards-asia-years-first-vessel-heads-east-northern-sea>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹⁰² Atle Staalesen, "Russia Turns Towards Asia: Year's First Vessel Heads East on Northern Sea Route," *The Barents Observer*, June 8, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2022/06/russia-turns-towards-asia-years-first-vessel-heads-east-northern-sea>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹⁰³ Atle Staalesen, "China's Biggest Heavy-Lift Carrier Sails into Kola Bay," *The Barents Observer*, November 1, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic-lng/2022/11/chinas-biggest-heavy-lift-carrier-sails-kola-bay>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

illustrated by COSCO's limited applications for sailing permits, reflects the broader impact of these tensions on Sino-Russian cooperation.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, the increased militarization and security concerns associated with Arctic development pose significant challenges. As noted, "Adm. Rob Bauer, chair of NATO's military committee, named Russia and China as potential threats to the Arctic".¹⁰⁵

Environmental concerns also present a challenge. The rapid expansion of Arctic shipping and infrastructure development raises issues regarding ecological impacts and resistance to international environmental protections. As one of the article highlights, "*China has pushed back on forthcoming recommendations from the International Maritime Organization for environmental protections in the region*".¹⁰⁶ These environmental considerations are critical in balancing economic development with Arctic conservation efforts.

4.4.2 2023: Navigating Challenges and Solutions in the Sino-Russian Arctic Alliance

China and Russia's collaboration on Arctic infrastructure has significantly intensified, reflecting mutual interests in exploiting the region's economic potential. Chinese investments in Russian Arctic infrastructure, including the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and port development, are central to this partnership, supported by positive developments, by 2023, "*trade turnover between Murmansk and China had over the previous 4 years increased by 140 percent*".

¹⁰⁷Notably, China has committed to continuous significant investments in port infrastructure in "*shipbuilding in the Kola Peninsula*".¹⁰⁸ This strategic focus on

¹⁰⁴ Atle Staalesen, "Chinese Shippers Shun Russian Arctic Waters," *The Barents Observer*, August 22, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2022/08/chinese-shippers-shun-russian-arctic-waters>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Melody Schreiber, "China Will Not Recognize an Arctic Council Without Russia, Envoy Says," *Arctic Today*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.arctictoday.com/china-will-not-recognize-an-arctic-council-without-russia-envoy-says/>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Atle Staalesen, "Russian Arctic Regions Strengthen Bonds with Beijing," *The Barents Observer*, September 20, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2023/09/russian-arctic-regions-strengthen-bonds-beijing>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

infrastructure development is aimed at enhancing logistical capabilities and supporting increased Arctic shipping traffic.

The articles detail how China's role in Arctic infrastructure has expanded beyond mere investment to include technological and engineering support. For instance, *"European companies withdrew from Russian projects in 2022 leaving only the Chinese company China Communications Construction Company (CCCC)"* involved in dredging operations critical for deepening Arctic shipping lanes, a task made necessary by the withdrawal of Western companies due to sanctions.¹⁰⁹ This involvement underscores China's growing influence in Arctic logistics, driven by both economic incentives and strategic interests.

Energy Projects

Energy cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic is a cornerstone of their bilateral relationship. The development and expansion of major energy projects like Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2 are pivotal to this collaboration. China's substantial investments in these projects—through direct stakes and financing—highlight its significant role in shaping Arctic energy infrastructure, *"China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) owns 20 percent of Novatek's Yamal LNG project and secured a 10 percent stake in the follow-up project Arctic LNG 2".*¹¹⁰ The participation of Chinese firms in constructing LNG facilities, providing *"advanced technology, substantial investment, and expertise in Arctic energy projects,"*¹¹¹ underscores their integral role in advancing Arctic energy projects.

¹⁰⁹ Malte Humpert, "Arctic Shipping Requires Large-Scale Dredging: Unknown Impacts on the Environment," *High North News*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-shipping-requires-large-scale-dredging-unknown-impacts-environment>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹¹⁰ Malte Humpert, "Putin and Xi Discuss Further Deepening Arctic Partnership," *High North News*, March 23, 2023, updated March 24, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/putin-and-xi-discuss-further-deepening-arctic-partnership>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹¹¹ Atle Staalesen, "Arctic Energy Agenda: Xi Meets Russian PM Mishustin," *The Barents Observer*, March 21, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2023/03/arctic-energy-agenda-xi-meets-russian-pm-mishustin>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

Northern Sea Route (NSR)

The NSR has become a focal point of Sino-Russian cooperation, with both countries investing in its development and utilization. The expansion of shipping activities through the NSR is highlighted by the initiation of *“scheduled container shipping services between Russia and China across the Arctic.”*¹¹² This development is indicative of the strategic importance placed on enhancing Arctic shipping routes to facilitate trade between Asia and Europe.

China’s active participation is also displayed with the statistics of *“deliveries to and from China, which accounted for more than 95 percent of transit cargo on the route in 2023.”*¹¹³ This reflects the growing reliance on the NSR for energy and cargo shipments, driven by China’s substantial demand for Russian resources.

Opportunities

The development of infrastructure and energy projects opens new markets and trade routes, enhancing economic ties between the two nations. The Arctic’s resource potential, coupled with the strategic importance of the NSR, provides significant economic incentives for both countries.

China’s investments in Arctic infrastructure and energy projects are not only bolstering its economic footprint but also positioning it as a key player in Arctic affairs. The collaboration on large-scale energy projects and the establishment of new shipping routes through the Arctic enhance bilateral relations and offer opportunities for technological innovation and market expansion, making this collaboration not only economically advantageous but

¹¹² Malte Humpert, "Chinese Container Ship Transits Arctic, More Oil Tankers and Massive Bulk Carrier Also En Route," *High North News*, August 21, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/chinese-container-ship-transits-arctic-more-oil-tankers-and-massive-bulk-carrier-also-en-route>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹¹³ Malte Humpert, "China Pushes Northern Sea Route Transit Cargo to New Record," *High North News*, December 18, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-pushes-northern-sea-route-transit-cargo-new-record>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

also strategically significant, with “*both nations gaining enhanced economic influence and energy security in global markets.*”¹¹⁴

Threats

However, this intensified cooperation also poses several threats. The increased use of the NSR and expansion of Arctic energy projects raise environmental concerns, particularly related to “*methane emissions which exceed emissions of carbon dioxide from the final combustion of LNG*”, and the potential impact of dredging operations on marine ecosystems, “*The dredging of more than a hundred square kilometres of ocean floor in the sensitive Arctic ecosystem occurs against the backdrop of limited previous research analysing its impact.*”¹¹⁵ The environmental implications of Arctic shipping, including higher methane emissions and fuel consumption due to ice navigation, highlight the need for sustainable practices and regulatory oversight.

Geopolitical tensions, exacerbated by Russia’s international isolation and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, pose risks to the stability and perception of Sino-Russian cooperation. Russia’s pivot towards China in response to Western sanctions underscores that the “*isolation in international affairs has made Moscow highly dependent on Beijing.*”¹¹⁶ Beijing, potentially impacting the long-term stability of the partnership.

Regional and Global Dynamics

The growing cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic is reshaping regional and global dynamics. The Arctic’s role as a critical energy and trade

¹¹⁴ Atle Staalesen, *Arctic Energy Agenda: Xi Meets Russian PM Mishustin*, The Barents Observer, March 21, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2023/03/arctic-energy-agenda-xi-meets-russian-pm-mishustin>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Malte Humpert, *Arctic shipping requires large-scale dredging: Unknown impacts on the environment*, High North News, March 20, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-shipping-requires-large-scale-dredging-unknown-impacts-environment>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Atle Staalesen, “China Our Strategic Partner, Says Governor of Russian Arctic Region,” The Barents Observer, March 23, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2023/03/china-our-strategic-partner-says-governor-russian-arctic-region>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

route is becoming increasingly central to global strategies. *“Russia’s extensive cooperation with China in the region also manifests itself in Arctic cargo patterns,”*¹¹⁷ indicating the strategic importance of the NSR in global energy and trade markets.

4.4.3 2024: Strategic Maturity

One of the key economic milestones is Russia's ambitious goal to boost its annual production of liquefied natural gas to 100 million tonnes by 2030, aiming to capture 20 percent of the global market. This target underscores the importance of projects like Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2 in Russia’s Arctic strategy. The operational status of Yamal LNG, which began commercial operations in December 2017 and has produced over 100 million tonnes of LNG, demonstrates the substantial progress and economic potential of these ventures. However, the Arctic LNG 2 project faced significant redesign challenges due to the absence of Western technology, necessitating the integration of older Chinese turbines. *“Construction on the project with a nameplate capacity of 19.8 million tonnes began in 2018... the lack of turbines required an extensive redesign to integrate older Chinese turbines”.*¹¹⁸ This adaptation highlights China's critical role as an alternative supplier and partner, filling the gaps left by Western sanctions.

The economic implications of these projects are profound. The dependency on Chinese technology and investments has strengthened bilateral relations, with Russia increasingly relying on China for the continuation of its Arctic projects. This shift is exemplified by the dispatching of Chinese workers to assist with critical components of the Arctic LNG 2 project. *“Chinese workers arrived on site, likely to assist with the installation of up to 20 300kW ceramic turbines,*

¹¹⁷ Malte Humpert, “China Pushes Northern Sea Route Transit Cargo to New Record,” High North News, December 18, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-pushes-northern-sea-route-transit-cargo-new-record>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹¹⁸ Malte Humpert, “Ukraine and the Arctic Wars: Impact on Russia’s Northern Energy Ambitions,” High North News, March 18, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/ukraine-arctic-wars-impact-russias-northern-energy-ambitions>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

CGT30, delivered by Harbin Guanghan Gas Turbine ".¹¹⁹ The arrival of these workers to install critical components highlights the logistical and technological support that China provides to sustain Russia's Arctic ambitions.

Strategic and Geopolitical Dynamics

Russia's strategic outreach to China is part of a broader effort to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions by securing critical investments and alternative trade routes. *"Russia has turned east and south, inviting China to invest in Arctic infrastructure and expanding partnerships with BRICS members"* ¹²⁰. This approach underscores the strategic depth of Sino-Russian cooperation, particularly in leveraging Arctic infrastructure for mutual benefit.

Infrastructure and Technological Integration

The infrastructure and technological integration between China and Russia in the Arctic are advancing rapidly. The Arctic LNG 2 project and Nornickel's initiative to establish a joint venture in China are significant examples of this cooperation. Nornickel's plan to move parts of its copper smelting operations to China is a strategic move to mitigate financial losses due to Western sanctions and leverage China's industrial capacity. *"Potanin says Nornickel plans to establish a joint venture with a Chinese company and move parts of the copper smelting to China"*.¹²¹

The construction timeline and shipping plans via the Northern Sea Route (NSR) emphasize the critical role of infrastructure development and logistical integration with China. The plan to ship two million tons of copper concentrate

¹¹⁹ Malte Humpert, "Russian LNG-2 Construction Yard Welcomes Final Module and Arrival of Hundreds of Chinese Workers," High North News, April 4, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-lng-2-construction-yard-welcomes-final-module-and-arrival-hundreds-chinese-workers>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹²⁰ Atle Staalesen, "Sino-Russian Arctic Alliance," The Barents Observer, February 2024, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/research-partner-contents/2024/02/sino-russian-arctic-alliance>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

¹²¹ Atle Staalesen, "Nornickel Moves Production to China to Circumvent Sanctions," The Barents Observer, April 2024, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2024/04/nornickel-moves-production-china-circumvent-sanctions>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

a year to China along the NSR highlights the importance of leveraging Arctic routes for industrial and commercial purposes. *"The new plant should be constructed by mid-2027 and will get about two million tons of copper concentrate a year. Shipment to China will take place along the Northern Sea Route".*¹²²

Environmental and Social Considerations

While economic and strategic interests dominate the Sino-Russian Arctic agenda, environmental and social considerations are also part of the narrative. Russia emphasizes its role as a responsible Arctic player, highlighting its commitment to environmental and social standards amidst its strategic and economic pursuits. However, the environmental impact of increased industrial and shipping activities in the Arctic remains a concern, particularly in terms of greenhouse gas emissions and ecological disruption.

Challenges and Uncertainties

Despite the promising economic and strategic opportunities, the Sino-Russian Arctic alliance is not without challenges and uncertainties. Divergent economic strategies, historical mistrust, and logistical hurdles pose significant obstacles to the deepening of Arctic cooperation. For instance, Russia's ambitious LNG production goals and the integration of Chinese technology face logistical and operational challenges. *"Efforts for domestic construction at Russia's Zvezda shipyard have shown little progress... Chinese providers may be eager to provide their services, but with full order books and lengthy waiting lists, Novatek would likely look at 2028 or 2029 at the earliest".*¹²³

Additionally, the need to acquire additional Arc7 vessels for logistical support in the Arctic is nearly impossible following U.S. sanctions. *"To overcome future logistical challenges Novatek will need to acquire additional Arc7 vessels; a*

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³Malte Humpert, "Ukraine, Arctic Wars, and the Impact on Russia's Northern Energy Ambitions," High North News, March 2024, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/ukraine-arctic-wars-impact-russias-northern-energy-ambitions>. Accessed August 15, 2024.

near impossibility following US sanctions".¹²⁴ These challenges highlight the complexities and uncertainties that could impact the long-term stability and effectiveness of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic.

4.5 Shift of Perception

The perception of Sino-Russian cooperation has undergone a profound transformation from 2022 to 2024, significantly influenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine and the evolving geopolitical landscape. This change is evident not only in global diplomatic relations but also in the specific context of Arctic cooperation, where the partnership between China and Russia has been increasingly scrutinized and redefined. Initially, the cooperation was viewed through the lens of strategic alignment, particularly as both nations sought to counterbalance Western influence and navigate the complex web of sanctions imposed on Russia. The early stages of the Ukraine conflict saw Sino-Russian cooperation framed as a pragmatic and necessary response to Western pressures, with media portrayals emphasizing the strategic benefits of this partnership. In particular, Arctic projects such as the Yamal LNG and the NSR were highlighted as critical areas where China could step in to fill the void left by Western companies, thereby helping Russia to mitigate the economic impacts of sanctions. This period was characterized by a sense of urgency and strategic necessity, as both nations sought to solidify their partnership in the face of increasing global isolation. Media coverage during this time heavily focused on the economic benefits of these projects, highlighting the mutual advantages and China's substantial investment in the Russian Arctic. The collaborative roles each country played were frequently discussed, underscoring the joint effort in countering Western sanctions. However, environmental concerns were notably underrepresented, reflecting a media focus primarily on the economic and geopolitical implications.

As the conflict in Ukraine dragged on into 2023, the perception of Sino-Russian cooperation began to evolve, reflecting deeper integration and the emergence of

¹²⁴ Ibid.

new challenges. The narrative shifted from a mere strategic alliance to a more complex and interdependent partnership, particularly in the economic and technological domains. Media coverage during this period started to emphasize the critical role of Chinese investments and technology in sustaining and advancing Arctic projects, which had become increasingly dependent on Chinese support due to the absence of Western involvement. This was evident in the focus on operational challenges and the logistical difficulties faced by Arctic LNG projects, where the integration of Chinese technology was seen as both a solution and a source of new complications. Environmental concerns also began to surface more prominently during this time, as the intensified Arctic activities led to growing awareness of the ecological consequences. Issues such as methane emissions from LNG transport began to gain attention, reflecting a shift in media narratives towards a more comprehensive evaluation of the partnership's long-term sustainability. The ongoing strategic importance of the NSR, new opportunities arising from the partnership, and significant infrastructure developments were also increasingly highlighted, indicating a shift towards more practical aspects of cooperation alongside the broader strategic goals.

By 2024, the perception of Sino-Russian cooperation had matured into one that recognized the comprehensive nature of the partnership, encompassing not only economic and technological dimensions but also strategic and logistical concerns. The media began to reflect a more nuanced understanding of the long-term implications of this cooperation, particularly in the Arctic. The strategic and logistical complexities of the partnership continued to be a focal point, with narratives increasingly acknowledging the challenges faced by Russia in maintaining its Arctic ambitions without Western technological support. The dependency on Chinese technology, while crucial, was also portrayed as a double-edged sword, raising questions about the long-term sustainability and strategic balance of the partnership. Economic implications and key projects were universally recognized in the media, indicating a mature phase of cooperation with a clear focus on outcomes. Opportunities arising from the partnership were also widely acknowledged, highlighting the mutual benefits

and the deepening interdependence between the two nations. However, geopolitical considerations became less dominant in the media narrative, and environmental implications were notably absent, suggesting a possible shift away from environmental concerns or a lower media focus on this theme.

In summary, from 2022 to 2024, the perception of Sino-Russian cooperation has evolved from a strategic response to Western pressures into a more integrated and complex partnership, with significant implications for global geopolitics, economic integration, and environmental sustainability. The Arctic, as a key area of this cooperation, has been at the centre of this narrative shift, reflecting broader trends in the bilateral relationship. Initially driven by strategic necessity, the partnership has become increasingly defined by economic interdependence and the challenges associated with operational and environmental complexities. This evolution in perception highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Sino-Russian cooperation, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the broader geopolitical realignments it has triggered.

CHAPTER IV:

This chapter integrates findings from the previous chapters to analyse Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic through historical and contemporary lenses. It synthesizes the evolution of China's Arctic policy and its deepening engagement with Russia, alongside media portrayals from 2022 onward. The discussion connects these elements to the theoretical framework, providing a comprehensive analysis of the shifting dynamics and their implications for international relations in the Arctic.

5. Discussion

Since 2022, China's role as a key investor in Russian infrastructure, particularly in the Arctic, has expanded significantly, with a strong focus on the energy and transportation sectors. Chinese companies like the China National Petroleum Corporation and the Silk Road Fund have made substantial investments in major projects, such as Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2, which are pivotal for Russia's LNG production. These investments not only underscore the strengthening of Sino-Russian energy ties but also reflect China's growing involvement in developing next-generation infrastructure, including floating nuclear power plants.

In the meantime, tensions between Russia and China in the Arctic are still prominent, first of all, due to their differing goals. Russia sees itself as the primary authority in the Arctic and is wary of China's influence, viewing China's Near-Arctic State status as an encroachment on its domain. Although Russia depends on Chinese technology for Arctic exploration, it is concerned about becoming overly reliant on China, complicating its strategy to counterbalance Chinese ambitions. China's goals in the Arctic are focused on internationalizing the region, accessing resources, and enhancing shipping routes such as the Polar Silk Road. This divergence is evident in their separate focuses: Russia prioritizes its coastal waterway, while China emphasizes broader Arctic shipping ambitions.

Economic and investment factors further illustrate the complexities of the Sino-Russian relationship. Despite a record-breaking trade turnover between the two countries, Chinese investments in Russia have remained limited and have not seen significant new projects since the Ukraine invasion. The stagnation in Chinese investment is attributed to perceived risks and sanctions, with Chinese companies preferring short-term strategies over long-term commitments. Historically, Chinese investments were concentrated in the energy sector, but even this sector has seen a decline due to factors such as sanctions risks and market barriers.

Looking ahead, the partnership faces challenges due to the differing strategic priorities of Russia and China. Russia aims to maintain control over the Arctic and manage foreign interests, including those from China, while China seeks to enhance its global presence and access Arctic resources. The partnership is pragmatic and driven by mutual benefits but is complicated by these differing goals and geopolitical pressures. The dynamic nature of their engagement suggests that their cooperation could evolve based on shifting interests and external factors.

Reflecting on the developments from the 2010s to the present, several major projects highlight China's deepening commitment to Russian infrastructure. The Yamal LNG project has been a cornerstone of this collaboration, with substantial Chinese investments reinforcing the energy partnership. Another critical initiative is the Polar Silk Road, which aims to transform the Northern Sea Route into a major Eurasian Sea transport corridor, integrated with China's Belt and Road Initiative. This initiative is crucial for enhancing logistics and connectivity in the Arctic, a region where infrastructure development has seen significant progress.

Chinese investments have played a crucial role in advancing infrastructure projects such as the Berelast Logistics Center and Zarubino Port, which are vital for Arctic shipping. From 2008 to 2019, Chinese investments in the energy

sector totalled over \$81 billion, supporting various oil fields and gas pipelines in the Russian Arctic.

In the transportation sector, China has actively supported NSR infrastructure as a key component of its BRI strategy. This support includes substantial investments aimed at enhancing the NSR's capabilities, exemplified by the introduction of scheduled container shipping routes between Russia and China, which are essential for improving trade efficiency.

Collaborative projects like the Belkomur railway and subsea cables, such as the Polar Express, further enhance accessibility in Siberia and the Arctic. Additionally, Chinese shipping companies, including COSCO, are expanding their operations in Arctic routes, which are crucial for linking European and Asian markets.

Beyond energy and transportation, China's involvement extends to the mining sector, with state-owned enterprises like Zijin Mining Group and CITIC Group financing a significant portion of Arctic mining activities, particularly in rare earth minerals. This investment reflects China's broader strategy to secure resources in the Arctic, aligning with its long-term strategic interests.

The Belt and Road Initiative has further solidified economic ties between China and Russia through key projects such as the China-Russia East-Route Natural Gas pipeline, cross-border bridges, and transport corridors like Primorye-1 and Primorye-2. These initiatives enhance trade and infrastructure in the Arctic, underscoring China's strategic investments and its focus on robust partnerships with Russia.

The development of the NSR and an expanded network of collaboration, including plans for BRICS research centres and joint coastal security measures, showcase the multilateral integration of China in the Russian Arctic. For instance, China's recent activities in Murmansk—such as signing a memorandum with the FSB Coast Guard and participating in the 'Arctic Patrol 2023' maritime security exercise—underscore its significant involvement that goes beyond merely trade.

Theoretical Implications

China's strategic ambition to enhance its global governance role and economic influence has increasingly focused on the Arctic, leveraging the dynamics of economic interdependence and globalization. Over recent decades, the deepening of global economic ties and technological advancements has led to a more interconnected world, where states' actions have significant repercussions across borders. Russia's extensive Arctic coastline and strategic location provide China with a valuable corridor to increase its presence and influence in the region. For Russia, China's role as a reliable economic partner is crucial, especially as it faces Western sanctions. For China, a decrease in Russian cooperation could limit its access to critical Arctic resources and diminish its influence in the region. For Russia, losing Chinese investment would exacerbate its economic isolation and hinder its development efforts.

Beyond economic interests, the China-Russia partnership in the Arctic is motivated by a shared desire to enhance their global status and influence. Multilateralism, involving cooperation with various stakeholders, is a key strategy for both nations. In the Arctic, this means not only working with each other but also navigating the interests of other Arctic and non-Arctic states, indigenous communities, and international organizations. By engaging in strategic multilateralism, China and Russia aim to counterbalance Western influence and assert their roles as key players in Arctic governance. This approach allows them to advance their interests while maintaining flexibility in a region with competing claims and complex political dynamics.

Status concerns further drive their collaboration. Both China and Russia seek to project themselves as powerful actors capable of shaping global affairs, particularly in strategically important regions like the Arctic. Their partnership is a means to assert their status, challenge the traditional dominance of Western powers, and ensure their voices are heard in international decision-making processes. By securing long-term projects and investments in the Arctic, they not only enhance their economic positions but also reinforce their standing as

influential global powers. This focus on status and prestige adds an important dimension to their cooperation, highlighting how non-material factors play a significant role in shaping their strategic choices.

Limitations

This research on Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic faces several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the topic is relatively recent and still evolving, which complicates the research process. The cooperation between China and Russia is ongoing, and the geopolitical landscape, particularly with the continued imposition of sanctions, remains fluid. This dynamic nature means that the study captures only a snapshot of a rapidly changing situation, which could quickly evolve in ways not anticipated in the analysis.

Secondly, the research is constrained by the limited availability of material for analysis. Only one full year of data has been thoroughly examined, with 2022 being analysed only partially and 2024 considered only up to mid-year. This limited timeframe reduces the ability to fully assess long-term trends and impacts, particularly in a field where developments can have significant lag effects.

Thirdly, the scope of media sources analysed is relatively narrow. While the study focuses on selected sources, it would have been valuable to compare these with perspectives from Russian and Chinese media. However, such an inclusion is inherently challenging due to the specific nature of these media outlets, which are often influenced by state ownership or strict censorship. This limitation may result in a somewhat skewed understanding of the cooperation, as critical or alternative viewpoints may be underrepresented.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the Arctic cooperation between Russia and China has evolved significantly from early research-based involvement to substantial investments. Initially, China's Arctic engagement was modest, focusing on research and limited investments. As China's economic power grew, its ambitions expanded to include significant projects such as Yamal LNG and Yamal 2, where Chinese entities have considerable stakes. This shift highlights a deeper economic integration, with the Russian Arctic becoming a critical area for Chinese investment due to its strategic resources and extensive coastline.

Early interactions between Russia and China in the Arctic were marked by scepticism, primarily due to cultural differences, mutual distrust, and Russia's alignment with Western interests. The Russian Arctic was seen as a strategic priority for Moscow, and the presence of Chinese entities often faced suspicion. The geopolitical landscape began to change dramatically after 2014, driven by Russia's pivot to the East, Western sanctions following the Crimea crisis, and China's acquisition of observer status in the Arctic Council. These developments prompted a closer partnership, characterized by joint initiatives such as the Polar Silk Road.

The partnership has become even more prominent since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The increased cooperation is evident in major projects and a surge in trade turnover through the Northern Sea Route. Chinese investments and technology transfers have become crucial for Russia, reflecting an urgent reorientation towards China. However, this deepening relationship faces significant challenges. According to analysts, the Russia-China alignment is based on mutual interests rather than a formal alliance, lacking the legal commitments of a formal pact. This alignment, while strategic, is fraught with vulnerabilities.

One key challenge is Russia's resistance to China's growing influence in the Arctic. Russia views its Arctic domain as a core strategic asset and sees China's self-declared "Near-Arctic State" status as encroaching on its territory. This

resistance complicates Russia's ability to fully leverage Chinese investments, as it is wary of becoming overly dependent on China for Arctic projects and energy resources. Additionally, the strategic goals of both countries diverge significantly. Russia focuses on maintaining control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and enforcing strict regulations for foreign vessels, while China aims to internationalize the Arctic, enhance its shipping routes, and access resources.

The relationship is also strained by differing strategic priorities and the complex geopolitical environment. For instance, Russia's emphasis on the NSR contrasts with China's broader Arctic ambitions, such as the Polar Silk Road. This discrepancy reflects underlying tensions and competing objectives. Analysts argue that the strategic partnership between Russia and China is pragmatic and subject to change based on shifting interests and geopolitical pressures.

Moreover, Chinese investments in Russia have faced stagnation, with no large-scale new projects initiated since the Ukraine invasion. The investment environment is complicated by sanctions risks, opaque business practices, and market barriers, leading Chinese companies to favour short-term, export-based strategies over long-term commitments. This cautious approach is illustrated by China's retraction of an invitation for developing new icebreaker technology, which was closely related to advanced naval capabilities.

Since February 2022, media narrative has shifted from initial observations of the strategic realignment to detailed analyses of the expanding Sino-Russian projects and logistical challenges. The alliance has been portrayed as a counterweight to Western influence, emphasizing the deepening interdependence between the two nations.

While there has been extensive media coverage on the growing cooperation, there is a notable lack of media focus on the environmental implications of extensive Arctic development. Both China and Russia have made climate commitments, yet their Arctic activities have been linked to significant environmental risks, such as potential disruptions to Arctic ecosystems and

increased greenhouse gas emissions. The gap in media coverage regarding long-term environmental impacts suggests a need for further research in this area.

As climate action becomes increasingly central to global sustainability efforts, it is crucial to scrutinize the environmental consequences of intensified Arctic cooperation. Future research should focus on several key areas to address this gap: first, investigating the long-term ecological impacts of Arctic resource extraction and infrastructure development; second, evaluating the effectiveness of existing environmental regulations and their enforcement in Arctic projects; and third, exploring the potential for integrating more robust environmental safeguards into Sino-Russian Arctic ventures. Additionally, a longitudinal analysis of media coverage on sustainability issues is warranted to assess whether the discourse evolves over time, reflecting a growing awareness and response to the environmental challenges associated with Arctic development.

To address the limitations of the current timeframe, future studies should aim to extend the analysis period beyond the currently available data. This extended timeframe will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of long-term trends and impacts, particularly in a field where developments may have significant lag effects.

Furthermore, expanding the scope of media sources to include perspectives from Russian and Chinese media could provide a more balanced view. Research should explore how state ownership and censorship influence the portrayal of Arctic cooperation and environmental issues, and seek to incorporate a wider range of viewpoints to avoid a skewed understanding.

Finally, including assessments of various stakeholders' perspectives, such as local Arctic communities, indigenous groups, and environmental NGOs, can offer additional insights into the social and environmental impacts of Arctic development. Understanding these perspectives will help in comprehending the broader implications of Sino-Russian cooperation on the ground and inform more inclusive and effective policy decisions.

Returning to the opening remarks of this thesis and reflecting on the 2013 statement by Russia's Special Envoy for Arctic Cooperation, which asserted that the PRC's acquisition of observer status in the Arctic Council would not alter Russia's Arctic strategy or its regional position, reveals significant shifts in the geopolitical landscape over the past decade. The envoy's assertion was based on the premise that Arctic policy would remain centred on cooperation with Arctic states, thereby minimizing the impact of external actors like China.

However, the last decade has demonstrated a profound transformation in Arctic geopolitics. The evolving Russia-China partnership, driven by strategic necessity and mutual benefits, has substantially altered the dynamics in the region. The substantial increase in Chinese investment in Russian Arctic reveals that Russia has increasingly relied on China as a key partner, not only for economic investment but also for strategic support in the face of Western isolation.

This growing dependence suggests that Russia can no longer maintain the stance that non-Arctic states, particularly China, do not influence its Arctic policy. Given the recent developments, Russia's position has clearly adapted to accommodate China's rising importance. The shift from viewing China as a peripheral player to recognizing it as a central partner reflects a broader realignment of Arctic strategies in response to changing geopolitical realities.

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