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The (Potential) Sino-Russian Maritime Partnership: Impacts on the Arctic Region?

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Summary

Russia and China are strengthening their military cooperation, which is gradually extending into the maritime domain, demonstrated by the growing number of joint naval exercises held by the two parties. If a naval-military partnership is accomplished, the Sino-Russian partnership could expand in geographic scope, technological and operational sophistication, and overall comprehensiveness. This brief discusses the prospect of a Sino-Russian naval-military partnership and, if it materializes, the implications of this development on the Arctic region and strategic stability therein.

Issue

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, Chinese academic circles are now entertaining the desirability or necessity of strengthening their country's partnership with Russia and bringing these ties, currently defined as "cooperative partnership," to a level of genuine "strategic partnership." The creator of this idea, Professor [Zhao Huasheng](#) of the Institute of International Studies (Fudan University), insists that such an unprecedented height of bilateral ties

between the two great powers could only be attained through a true "maritime strategic partnership." Reflecting on this transformation, he highlighted three crucial points.

First, in the twenty-first century — "the ocean century" — only actors with a strong and uninterrupted presence in the Indian, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans can define global, political, and economic agendas.

Second, even though both China and Russia are actively pursuing their strategic goals in the aforementioned regions, their interests are not going to clash. Their strategic interests lie in different areas: China is primarily concerned with developments in the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, while Russia's strategic interests are in the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans.

Third, given that the Arctic region is "becoming a new hotspot of international politics, security and energy exploitation," and the Russian military-political leadership frequently defines it as "[the zone of growing conflict potential](#)," it could become the backbone of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Zhao also alluded to another noteworthy detail: while China does not pose any threat to Russia in the Arctic, either militarily or in terms of territorial

claims, Beijing is seriously determined to increase its role and presence in this strategic macro-region.

Although unrealistic a decade ago, these ideas no longer seem as far-fetched. Based on the dynamic of bilateral ties, Russia's strategic [eastward re-orientation](#), expanding areas of cooperation, and growing tensions with third (so-called "collective west") parties, Sino-Russian cooperation could potentially spread into new spheres and domains, including the naval-military.

Background

A partnership between Moscow and Beijing in the naval-military realm is not an unheard-of phenomenon. During the heyday in bilateral ties between the USSR and Maoist China in the 1950s – sometimes called the "[Golden Era](#)" of Sino-Soviet relations – the level of cooperation in this realm was high. Later, following the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and after the collapse of the USSR, the paths of these two powers did not cross in this domain. This lasted until 2005, when fleets of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia held joint maneuvers in the Yellow Sea, becoming an integral part of the "[Peace Mission-2005](#)" training held under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Joint naval training started to acquire a systemic form in 2012, when "[Joint Sea](#)" (*Morskoye Wzaimodejstviye*) exercises began on a regular basis. Since that time, joint naval training has taken place in the Yellow Sea (Qingdao), the Sea of Japan (Vladivostok), the East China Sea (near Shanghai), the Mediterranean Sea, the South China Sea, and the Okhotsk Sea. A symbolic exercise took place in July 2017 when naval exercises were carried out in [the Baltic Sea](#) – an area traditionally viewed by Russia as a zone of vital interest in its security architecture. An event with a profound impact on Western audiences were naval [exercises](#)

held by China, Russia, and the Republic of South Africa that took place near Cape Town in 2019, which Western observers assumed were aimed at practicing ways of taking strategic trade routes under their control.

A combination of intensity and regularity, alongside the growing complexity of exercises, led some [Chinese experts and observers](#) to anticipate that, in the future, Russia and China would hold joint naval trainings in the "world's northernmost area – the Arctic Ocean." As yet, this scenario has not materialized – Russia has not sent any signal to Beijing about its willingness to go ahead and carry out exercises of this type, and Moscow has made it abundantly clear that it plans to furthermore increase its military posture in the region. In addition to de-facto [denying](#) free passage through its Northern Sea Route (NSR) in 2018, Russia is now seriously considering creating a new division, the "[Arctic Fleet](#)," to ensure the safety of the NSR and Russia's Arctic coast. Thus, Russia's dramatic increase in both its qualitative and quantitative (para)military presence in the Arctic intends to send a powerful signal to all parties involved in Arctic affairs (or aspiring to join) that Russia's interests in the macro-region are strong and it will maintain a position of regional dominance.

It is also salient to reinforce how Chinese and Russian views on freedom of movement via the Arctic are different. Moscow views the macro-region as the primary preserve of the Arctic countries whereas China, which considers itself to be a "near Arctic state," argues for free transit passage. While this difference in opinion on the status of some Arctic waters does not exclude or rule out the prospect of Sino-Russian naval cooperation in the Arctic, it does raise concerns in Moscow about China's Arctic-related plans. Moreover, Russia would feel more comfortable in

engaging with China in the Arctic if Beijing was not developing its naval capabilities with terrifying speed and sophistication. As [Richard Weitz](#) (Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Political-Military Analysis, Hudson Institute) argues, “the PRC already produces more advanced unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and [information technology] systems than the Russian industry and has surpassed Russia in its shipbuilding capacity. Just as Russia has at times purchased Western technology to fill gaps in indigenous production, so in the future it might turn to more Chinese sources to compensate for shortfalls in domestic technologies.”

Accordingly, Russia is likely to pursue a cautious approach when engaging in naval cooperation with China in the Arctic. If Moscow opts for strengthening this kind of partnership, however, it could stem from Russia’s further isolation by the West, such as the introduction of new and harsher economic sanctions. Otherwise, Western analysts should assume that Moscow understands the risks associated with establishing a full-fledged naval partnership with China and extending this to the Arctic region.

Suggestions

For Canada, which is one of the two key Arctic players, expanding military-technical cooperation between China and Russia in this macro-region appears to be a daunting prospect. However, there are no overt signs of this happening under normal circumstances. In addition to maintaining strong cooperative ties with its strategic partners in the Arctic (primarily the United States), Canada should also pursue two lines. First, it should reinvigorate dialogue with Russia in Arctic-related affairs, making special emphasis on sustainability and environmental protection – areas in which Moscow is critically interested. Second, Canada should stand

firm for its values and make this abundantly clear to other parties, including Russia. Concurrently, Canada should try to avoid further escalation that would force it to introduce more anti-Russian sanctions and push that country more fully into the arms of the Chinese – and this suggestion pertains to the Western alliance in general.