

SUGGESTED READINGS

Sino-Russian Arctic Cooperation

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The internet is filled with perspectives and opinions. These lists, compiled by academic subject matter experts, are intended to help direct policy makers, practitioners, and academics to credible, open-access sources, available online, free of charge, that reflect leading-edge research and thinking. The compilers of each list have been asked to select readings that are accessibly written (i.e. they are not filled with excessive jargon), offer a diversity of viewpoints, and encourage critical thinking and debate.

Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation has been portrayed with great concern since the mid-2010s when observers began to note that these countries were beginning to work closely together on matters of infrastructure development along the Northern Sea Route and resource extraction projects in the Russian Arctic. These readings provide insight into how these concerns have played out, whether such a partnership actually exists, the dangers that it might present for the Western Allies, and structural constraints on the Sino-Russian Arctic relationship.

Olga Alexeeva and Frederic Lasserre. “[An Analysis on Sino Russian Cooperation in the Arctic in the BRI Era](#),” *Advances in Polar Science* (2018).

Over the preceding decade, these Canadian experts observe, Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic has emerged as a major topic of Russia-China negotiations on how to expand their comprehensive strategic partnership. China considers the Arctic region important for its economic interests and desires to be included in the development of the region and its economic potential. For Russia, the Arctic is a strategic resource base that will assure the country’s status as a major worldwide energy supplier. Despite many joint statements on deepening of the Sino-Russian cooperation in the development of the Arctic energy resources, the concrete results of these ambitious plans are few. Some joint projects were dropped, as China and Russia could not agree on the conditions of the deal, others are progressing very slowly and have an uncertain future. In 2017, China has expanded its “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) to the Arctic thus elevating the Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic to a higher level. How did the relationship between Russia and China evolve in the Arctic and how do Russia and China view and respond to the new Arctic dimension of the BRI? What factors limit the strategic rapprochement between China and Russia in the Arctic?

Elizabeth Buchanan. [“Russia and China in the Arctic: assumptions and realities.”](#) *The Strategist*. 2020.

In this edited summary of the author’s evidence to the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Congressional Energy and National Security Caucus, Buchanan argues that three assumptions about Russia and China in the Arctic are wrong. First, she suggests that although many argue that increasing commercial engagement between Russia and China will lead to a Sino-Russian alliance in the region, the reality is that Russia and China face centuries old mutual mistrust and territorial tensions. Second, she argues that many assume that Russia has an expansionist agenda in the Arctic which she counters by suggesting that Russia does not need to expand given its vast Arctic territory. Third and finally, she argues that third misconception is that Russia is reliant on Chinese capital. However, in reality, there is a balance that Russia is playing in regards to Chinese investment and risk.

Jeremy Greenwood and Shuxian Luo, [“Could the Arctic be a wedge between Russia and China?”](#) *War on the Rocks*. 2022

The reality of China’s Arctic policy in a post 2022 world present China with a set of challenges. It cannot continue with a business as usual approach given Russia’s ostracization from the other Arctic states and sanctions. Beijing may seek to walk a fine line between Russia and the West, but in doing so, it can only be a relationship akin to a marriage of convenience rather than a real partnership with Russia in the Arctic. The western Arctic states should use this Chinese urge for cooperating with not only Russia in the Arctic as a strategy to break up the Sino-Russian Arctic partnership, even if doing so completely is unlikely. One strategy could be reducing China and Europe’s energy dependence on Russia.

Adam Lajeunesse, P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Sergey Sukhankin, and Troy J. Bouffard, [“Friction Points in the Sino-Russian Arctic Partnership,”](#) *Joint Force Quarterly* (October 2023).

Despite a seemingly close partnership, Sino-Russian relations in the north are not quite the friendly terrain of two like-minded states advancing a “friendship” with “no limits,” as described by Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in February 2023. Arctic cooperation for the two authoritarian states remains a highly transactional partnership, underpinned by deep and abiding suspicion. China’s presence and activities in the Arctic have long concerned Russian leadership, and while the outward face of that partnership remains positive, the smiles and handshakes rest on an unstable foundation, riven by friction. This article provides an overview of Sino-Russian friction and points of vulnerability in their Arctic relationship. Downplayed by the Russian and Chinese governments and Arctic actors in those countries, each of these real or possible disputes has the potential to degrade the growing Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the region. The authors highlight three main areas of friction—navigation, resource exploitation, and infrastructure—that they see as exploitable gaps in the relationship. Western

observers and commentators should not be neutral in observing this relationship, but should illuminate divisive issues that Beijing and Moscow have so assiduously sought to sidestep. In so doing, the like-minded Arctic states will be better positioned to address Russia and China as distinct regional challenges rather than a unified front.

Marc Lanteigne, “[A China-Russia Arctic Alliance? Not So Fast,](#)” *The Diplomat*. 21 February 2024.

Although points of collaboration between Russia and China seem to be on the rise, including Beijing’s declination to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the development of the Polar Silk Road, the evidence shows that Beijing is ambivalent towards Sino-Russia cooperation in the Arctic. Rather than a full partnership, Beijing has selectively engaged Russia in the Arctic such as increased science diplomacy and purchasing Russian oil and gas. Further, Chinese firms have been hesitant to use Northern Sea Route given concerns around Western sanctions. While Russia and China have worked together in the Arctic such as joint military operations off the coast of Alaska in August 2023 and recently signed a bilateral coast guard agreement, there are still strong indications that the Russian government does not trust China’s long term plans for the region.

Adam MacDonald, “[China-Russian cooperation in the Arctic: A cause for concern for the Western Arctic States?](#)” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* (2021).

Increasing cooperation between China and Russia does not imply the development of an anti-Western pact and a coordinated revisionist strategy pursued by them in the Arctic. MacDonald argues that the Western Arctic States should monitor China-Russian regional cooperation but refrain from adopting strategies premised on the assumption both are, or will become, deeply aligned with each other. Russia and China should be treated as distinct regional challenges requiring specific strategies towards each. Strengthening strategic solidarity between the Western Arctic States is needed to tackle specific challenges posed by these powers, but if American regional strategies are solely about confrontation and exclusion, these will fail to address regional issues and will risk marginalizing the autonomy and interests of smaller states like Canada. Accordingly, Canada must continue to develop its own regional capabilities, become more forward leaning in addressing security and economic matters, and increase collaboration with the other smaller Arctic states to avoid the ongoing structuring of the region from becoming entirely dominated by great powers.

Jørgen Staun and Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen, “[Incompatible Strategic Cultures Limit Russian-Chinese Strategic Cooperation in the Arctic,](#)” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* (2023).

Russia’s full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to concern about the implications for Arctic governance and stability. The Arctic Council has been temporarily suspended and the security tension between Russia and the seven

other Western Arctic states has intensified. A more isolated Russia under Western sanctions leans even more towards the East, where China, especially, figures as an attractive strategic partner. In this article, we set out to examine the prospects for Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic. We introduce a social constructivist perspective highlighting how strategic culture may serve as a lens through which to analyse developments in states' strategies—specifically their ends, ways and means. Applying our culturally applicable ends-ways-means (EWM) model, we show how Russian and Chinese strategic cultures set distinct limits to their strategic cooperation in the Arctic. The two states' identity-driven urge to secure and display their great power position will increasingly collide. It is therefore our prediction that Russia and China will eventually act in ways that will gradually come to undermine their strategic cooperation in the region.

Sergey Sukhankin. “[Russian-Chinese Military Alliance in the Arctic: An \(Im\)Possible Prospect?](#)” and “[Moscow as Beijing’s ‘Useful Partner’ in the Arctic Region,](#)” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (2019)

According to Russian analysts, Chinese Arctic policy is threefold: 1) the internationalization of the Arctic, 2) China as a near-Arctic state, and 3) the Polar Silk Road concept. The author argues that Chinese interest is driven primarily by economic issues such as natural gas extraction and shipping routes. However, it is constrained by concerns by western Arctic states around Chinese Arctic as well as Chinese military limitations in the region. However, As Russia has turned away from the West, it has become a willing partner for China and structural conditions have created strong incentives for Russia to pursue cooperation with China. That being said, some Russian experts have expressed concerns around Chinese influence in the Russian Arctic. In short, while Russia is trying to justify a turn to the East, Beijing is using Russia to become a legitimate stakeholder in the region.

Yang Nan and Guo Peiqing, “[Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Current Situation, New Directions and Challenges,](#)” *Ekonomicheskie i Sotsialnye Peremeny [Economic and Social Changes: Facts, Trends, Forecasts]* (2022).

These experts from the Ocean University of China note that Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2021 to 2023 provided new opportunities for China and Russia to deepen Arctic cooperation, especially on the issue of “sustainable development.” This article outlines the national policies of China and Russia, identifies common interests between the countries, and analyzes new directions (and problems) in cooperation with respect to Russia's Arctic region.

Yun Sun, “[The Northern Sea Route: The Myth of Sino-Russian Cooperation,](#)” *The Stimson Center* (2018)

Despite the rhetorical enthusiasm from the two governments, concrete, substantive joint projects on the Northern Sea Route are lacking, especially in key areas such as infrastructure development. A careful examination of Chinese views on joint development of the Northern Sea Route reveals divergent interests,

conflicting calculations and vastly different cost-benefit analyses. From the Chinese perspective, the joint development of the Northern Sea Route is a Russian proposal to which China reacted primarily out of strategic and political considerations rather than practical economic ones. While China is in principle interested in the Northern Sea Route, the potential and practicality of this alternative transportation route remains tentative and yet to be realized. For China, their diverging interests, especially over what constitutes mutually beneficial compromises, will be the biggest obstacle to future progress. Moscow needs to demonstrate much more sincerity or flexibility in terms of improving China's cost-benefit spreadsheet. In this sense, expectations and assessments of the impact of Sino-Russian cooperation specifically on the Northern Sea Route should be focused on moderate, concrete plans rather than glorified rhetoric.

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

The Polar Silk Road was introduced in 2017 by China to jointly develop Arctic shipping routes with Arctic partners with a particular emphasis on Russia and the Northern Sea Route. The author argues that increasing tension between Russia and the West has led to closer cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic, particularly on the Northern Sea Route. The Polar Silk Road is a financial vehicle through Russia can receive increased Chinese investment for Arctic infrastructure for the broader purpose of resource exploitation while for China, the Polar Silk Road is a mechanism to engage further in the Arctic.

Other Readings:

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Biedermann, Reinhard. "[Exploring Sino-Russian-Nordics triangular relations: complex balancing along the Polar Silk Road](#)." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30, no. 4 (2022): 623-639.

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