

## ARCTIC HORIZONS: COOPERATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA IN A CHANGING POLAR AND GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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**Abstract.** Recently, the Arctic has become a focal point of geopolitical activity, driven by changes in the environment, resource exploration, and strategic interests. In the Arctic region, competition and rivalry, both military and economic, are intertwined with the pursuit of peaceful and mutually beneficial cooperation. This cooperation spans multiple areas, including economy, politics, security, technological advancements and environmental protection. The focus of this article is to examine how international actors interact in the Arctic, especially in the context of the tensions between the United States and Russia, as well as the growing competition between the United States and China. This study emphasizes the growing partnership between Russia and China and its crucial role as a central axis of cooperation in the region. As Russia views the Arctic as a strategic resource base, both from an economic and security point of view, and as China takes a keen interest in Arctic affairs due to its global status and economic imperatives, the importance of partnership between the two countries is increasing.

The main points of this study are devoted to defining the strategic interests of Russia and China in the Arctic, their joint efforts in energy and infrastructure projects, and the consequences of their cooperation for the management of the Arctic and international relations. The study also examines the approaches of Russia and China to Arctic governance.

**Keywords:** Russia, China, Arctic strategy, sea route, Ice silk road, geopolitics, cooperation, natural resources

### Basic provisions

The article examines the strategic imperatives for cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China in the Arctic region. Global warming and the diminishing ice cover of the Arctic Ocean present significant opportunities for the exploitation of the Northern Sea Route. This route substantially reduces the time and distance for sea freight between Europe and East Asia, while also enhancing access to Arctic natural resource development. Amidst global geopolitical instability, the partnership between China and Russia is assuming increasing importance for Arctic development. In this context, joint energy and infrastructure projects are pivotal.

### Introduction

Global attention has been given to the Arctic region due to its rapidly evolving environmental conditions, increased resource accessibility, and growing geopolitical significance. As the melting of polar ice continues at an unprecedented rate, the Arctic has become more than just a symbol of climate change but also serves as an arena for geopolitical maneuvering and strategic rivalry. The ongoing climate change phenomenon is facilitating the opening of the previously ice-bound Arctic to maritime navigation and, in the foreseeable future, to the exploitation of natural resources. In terms of access to resources, the Arctic is believed to contain vast untapped energy resources, including oil, gas and minerals. The US Geological Survey estimates that the Arctic has around 10% (90 billion barrels) of the undiscovered world resources of oil and 30% of the unexplored natural gas [1]. Numerous Arctic and non-Arctic nations ascribe considerable importance to the region's geopolitical positioning and consistently formulate their own Arctic policy frameworks. The interaction between international stakeholders in the High North is unfolding against a backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions and an unpredictability of the international situation. Amidst this evolving landscape, the collaboration between Russia and China in the Arctic has emerged as a pivotal axis of cooperation, altering the dynamics of Arctic governance and international relations.

### **Description of materials and methods**

Growing attention to the Arctic region in general, and bilateral cooperation between Russia and China in particular, has triggered studies covering a wide range of topics such as climate change, trade and economic cooperation, energy cooperation, investment, infrastructure projects and research.

For example, the article by Trenin D. entitled «Russia and China in the Arctic: cooperation, competition and consequences for Eurasian security» details the bilateral cooperation of Russia and China in the Arctic, especially aspects such as their national interests in the region, legal positions, strategic differences, Joint projects such as «Yamal LNG» and «Arctic LNG», as well as prospects for bilateral cooperation between Russia and China [2].

In the article «Sino-Russian transregional gas cooperation: key issues» Steblyanskaya A., Wang Z., Razmanova S., and Iskritskaya N. explore the topic of joint gas field development and LNG supply from Russia to China [3].

Lei S. in her article «Development And Prospects Of Sino-Russian Joint Construction «Ice Silk Road» notes that cooperation between China and Russia to promote the construction of the «Ice Silk Road» has sufficient development potential and can attract other interested countries in the future. [4].

In the article «The Russian Vector of Japan's Policy in the Arctic» Streltsov D.V. considers the Russian vector of Japanese policy in the Arctic. He notes that the main areas in which Tokyo is interested in cooperation with Russia in the Arctic are energy, transport and security [5].

The article «Belkomur» And The Role Of China» by Mu A. explores the participation and interest of Chinese companies to work on infrastructure projects in Russia, including the «Belkomur» project [6].

Guo J., Guo S., Lv J. in their article « Potential spatial effects of opening Arctic shipping routes on the shipping network of ports between China and Europe» note that the accelerated sea ice melt and the trial operation of container liners in the Arctic have accelerated the opening of Arctic maritime routes, At the same time, it provides a real opportunity for regular operation of the Arctic route [7].

The methodological basis of the presented article consists of abstract logic, elements of network analysis, the method of systems approach, as well as a set of classical approaches to the consideration of international relations. An interdisciplinary approach was also taken to integrate ideas from various fields such as international relations, geopolitics, environmental studies, economics and security studies.

This interdisciplinary perspective allowed for a comprehensive analysis of various aspects of Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic, taking into account both domestic and international factors that determine their interaction.

The document analysis method was used to study «China's Arctic Policy (2018)» published by «The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China» [8] which helped to define the priority directions of the Arctic policy of the PRC in the Arctic region, their principles and objectives.

These methods allowed the authors to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic region and highlight key aspects and prospects of this partnership.

## **Results**

The leadership of Russia perceives the Arctic zone within the Russian Federation as a crucial strategic reservoir of resources. This region is important for the economy of the nation, despite its sparse population of only 2.5 million inhabitants, as it contributes between 12 to 15% of the country's GDP. It is noteworthy that it produces 80% of the country's gas and extracts valuable resources such as diamonds, nickel and rare earth metals. Moreover, the Arctic accounts for a substantial portion of Russia's exports, amounting to one-quarter of the nation's total, and yields approximately one-third of its fish catch. This underscores the region's immense economic importance to Russia. Alongside these economic interests, Russia also maintains vital security concerns in the Arctic. Nuclear deterrence serves as a cornerstone of the nation's security strategy, with the Northern Fleet playing a pivotal role as one of the principal components of this deterrence strategy.

China, despite being geographically distant from the Arctic, plays a significant role in Arctic affairs, driven by its unique set of interests. These interests are fundamentally shaped by China's standing as one of the 21st century's preeminent global powers, enjoying permanent membership on the UN Security Council and shouldering global responsibilities. Although China signed the Spitsbergen Treaty

in 1925, its active involvement in Arctic matters did not emerge until later than its involvement in Antarctica. It was only in the late 1990s that China initiated Arctic expeditions, with a marked increase in political activity from Beijing occurring since the mid-2000s. This surge in activity coincided with China's rapid ascension on the global stage. A pivotal moment came in 2013 with Chinese President Xi Jinping's proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed primarily at enhancing connectivity across Eurasian nations. A noteworthy project within this initiative is the «Ice Silk Road», which seeks to establish Arctic routes connecting China with Europe [2].

## **Discussion**

Today, China officially identifies itself as a state positioned in proximity to the Arctic, recognized as a «near-Arctic State». The formulation of the China's Arctic strategy occurred in 2018 [8]. Beijing's point is rooted in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, while affirming the Arctic's status as common heritage for humanity. In pursuit of greater maritime presence, China is engaged in an ambitious shipbuilding program. China has also made significant progress in the acquisition and construction of icebreakers to expand its capabilities for working in the icy waters of the Arctic. The White Book of China 2018 and the initiative «Polar Silk Road» are aimed at developing the icebreaking fleet of the country. By 2025, China plans to build the first super-powered icebreaker. They are necessary to ensure the safety of navigation and maintain shipping lanes in areas covered by ice.

Currently in operation in China are two icebreakers of medium size: «Xue Long 1» and «Xue Long 2». These vessels will allow China to maintain navigation in the Arctic, providing reliable and uninterrupted access to the region year-round [9].

Similar to the United States, China advocates for the principle of freedom of navigation, extending to the Arctic, where the route to Europe is notably shorter than via the Strait of Suez. Despite China's interests in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait, some points of Beijing's Arctic strategy as an attempt to enhance the role of non-regional actors in shaping Arctic policies.

Deepening involvement in Arctic affairs primarily hinges on China's efforts to enhance cooperation with Russia. The official dialogue between Moscow and Beijing on Arctic matters commenced in 2013, following a similar dialogue between China and the United States. Despite notable disparities between the Arctic strategies of China and Russia, both states minimize these distinctions, opting to steer clear of practical confrontations. Instead, they increasingly engage in Arctic interactions driven by shared pragmatic interests. A significant milestone occurred on January 26, 2018, when China's State Council Information Office issued «China's Arctic Policy», marking the country's inaugural official articulation of its Arctic stance. The white paper explicitly articulates China's aspiration to collaborate with all relevant stakeholders in establishing a «Polar Silk Road» through the development of Arctic sea routes [8].

***Drivers of Cooperation.*** The cooling of relations between Russia and the West have significantly limited the prospects for cooperation with Western companies in the development of the Arctic. This trend is likely to continue. Against this backdrop, Moscow is compelled to explore alternative partnerships with entities possessing advanced technologies, primarily located in Asia. JOGMEG and Mitsui, two Japanese companies, became partners in the Arctic LNG project that was initiated by Russian company NOVATEK in 2019 [5]. India's potential to engage in Arctic resource extraction was indicated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's remarks in 2020.

Currently, China acts as Russia's main economic and technological ally. As a result of the rift with the West, Russia began to lessen restrictions on Chinese participation in Russian energy projects that had existed until 2014. The Arctic region harbors significant untapped reserves of oil, natural gas, minerals, and other valuable resources, attracting interest from both Russia and China to address their energy and economic requirements.

The Arctic's abundant oil and gas reserves align with Russia's goals of revitalizing national economic development, increasing geopolitical influence and improving the international landscape. For China, the Arctic represents an opportunity to diversify its energy sources amidst growing domestic socio-economic reliance on imports. Additionally, cooperation with Russia in energy has historically been integral to the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. As Arctic energy development prospects expand, deeper cooperation with Russia in Arctic endeavors and energy sectors will advance China's energy diversification strategy, fortify resilience against energy-related risks, and ensure energy security throughout the development trajectory.

Sino-Russian cooperation in the development of Arctic resources is exemplified by the 'Yamal LNG' project. This project is the largest investment made by China in Russia since the launch of the «One Belt One Road» initiative. Novatek (50.1%), Total (20%), CNPC (20%), and the Silk Road Fund (9.9%) are all shareholders in the project. [3]. Under the long-term agreement between China and Russia, upon the completion of all three production lines of the Yamal LNG project, China is expected to receive 4 million tons of LNG every year through the Northern Sea Route.

The project's completion holds significant implications for Russia, ensuring energy security and facilitating the expansion of energy exports to the Asia-Pacific region. By 2035, Russia intends to boost LNG's share of the global market from 4-5% to 15-20% [4]. Moreover, the Yamal LNG project catalyzed the development and modernization of transport infrastructure in the Arctic, including the construction of ports, airports, and railways, creating tens of thousands of job opportunities. Chinese companies have invested in the construction and modernization of port facilities in Russia's Arctic regions, such as the port of Sabetta on the Yamal peninsula, as well as other ports in Tiksi, Murmansk, Ulen and Arkhangelsk cities [10].

Furthermore, Chinese firms secured contracts for the modernization of the Arkhangelsk seaport and the construction of the White Sea - Komi - Ural (Belkomur) railway [6]. The advancement of the Northern Sea Route offers prospects for the growth of ports in Northeast China, as well as the provinces of Dalian and Qingdao.

However, it is essential to recognize that the Arctic's unique natural-geographical conditions, coupled with the region's increasing significance in environmental protection, contribute to the high capital intensity of Arctic development. Achieving sustainable development in the Arctic necessitates comprehensive approaches encompassing scientific, economic, legal, and social policies, areas where China and Russia complement each other.

The melting of Arctic sea ice is creating new shipping routes, offering more efficient transit options between Asia and Europe. China, being a major trading nation, sees the Arctic as a strategic opportunity to enhance its maritime connections and trade routes.

The cooperation between Russia and China in Arctic affairs, along with the clearer definition and implementation of China's Arctic policy, has gradually led to the application of the «One Belt, One Road» concept in the region. Both countries have begun to reach a consensus on the Ice Silk Road concept, which aims to utilize Arctic waterways to link China and Europe. Current planning for the Ice Silk Road is primarily focused on the Russian Northern Sea Route, while the Northwest Passage and Central Passage offer only potential connections rather than actual ones. The Ice Silk Road could significantly reduce navigation and transportation times between China and Europe through Arctic Ocean passages, with abundance of energy and mineral resources along the route contributing to the development of the Arctic Ocean coast.

Once operational, the Arctic Ocean routes are expected to save nearly a half in navigation time and transportation costs, opening up new passages for China, Russia, the Far East, and European countries. This could stimulate infrastructure construction along the route and boost trade among associated nations. For instance, during the Yamal LNG construction, over 60% of Chinese modules and components were transported through the Bering Strait and Northeast Passage of the Arctic. This significantly reduced transportation time compared to the Suez Canal route (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Northern Sea Route [11]

In the long term, this could reshape China's port trade structure. In recent years, vessels from the Cosco Shipping Group have completed more than 22 voyages along the Arctic sea route [7]. Russia and China's transport departments are drafting a memorandum for joint exploration and development of Arctic territories, aiming to enhance the political and legal basis for cooperation in Arctic development. The creating of Maritime Arctic Transport LLC, involving Novatek, Cosco Shipping, Sovcomflot, and the Silk Road Fund, signifies a long-term partnership for year-round logistics schemes from the Russian Arctic to the Asia-Pacific region, as well as cargo transportation between Asia and Western Europe along Arctic waterways. Additionally, Chinese companies are actively participating in polar infrastructure construction as part of the Yamal LNG project.

## Conclusion

The Arctic region is the focus of global attention. Rapid changes in the environment, increased access to resources and growing geopolitical significance are contributing factors. As polar ice caps retreat at an unprecedented rate, the Arctic is transforming from a symbol of climate change into a theater of strategic competition and geopolitical maneuvering. This study highlights the strategic imperatives driving Russian and Chinese engagement in the Arctic. Russia considers the region a vital strategic resource base and is investing heavily in economic development and security interests, using its Arctic assets to boost national economic growth and geopolitical influence. Meanwhile, China's global status and economic imperatives are leading them to develop ambitious projects like the Ice Silk Road to improve maritime connectivity and trade routes. And the geopolitical instability in the Middle East further increases the importance of the Northern Sea Route as an alternative trade route between Europe and Asia.

The growing partnership between Russia and China in the Arctic marks an important axis of cooperation. Despite different strategic priorities and approaches, Moscow and Beijing are guided by their interests through pragmatic cooperation, primarily focused on economic endeavors such as energy and infrastructure projects. Particular attention is paid to key projects such as the Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG projects, which illustrate the depth of Sino-Russian cooperation and their transformative impact on Arctic development and global trade routes. In the future, Russia plans to implement a number of large-scale infrastructure development projects in the Arctic region, including the construction of an 850-kilometer White Sea - Komi - Ural railway, the Northern Latitude Railway, the Murmansk transport hub, the Arkhangelsk deep-water port, etc.

Looking ahead, we can more confidently predict that Russia and China will continue to engage in economic cooperation in the Arctic, with mutual interests in resource exploration and infrastructure development. Despite the fact that the Arctic is still a battlefield of strategic rivalry, the interaction between Russia and China is primarily economic in nature.

Global warming has presented significant opportunities and challenges for the development of human society. The global nations must cooperate to seize opportunities, overcome challenges, and contribute to the creation of a harmonious and healthy community of a shared destiny.

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## **АРКТИКАЛЫҚ КӨКЖИЕКТЕР: ӨЗГЕРМЕЛІ ПОЛЯРЛЫҚ ЖӘНЕ ГЕОСАЯСИ ЛАНДШАФТЫНДАҒЫ РЕСЕЙ МЕН ҚЫТАЙ АРАСЫНДАҒЫ ҰНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚ**

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**Аңдатпа.** Соңғы кездері Арктика қоршаған ортаның өзгеруі, ресурстарды барлау және стратегиялық мүдделерге байланысты геосаяси белсенділіктің орталығына айналды. Арктикалық аймақта әскери және экономикалық бәсекелестікпен қарсыластық бейбіт және өзара тиімді ынтымақтастықты іздеумен астасып жатыр. Бұл ынтымақтастық экономика, саясат, қауіпсіздік, технологиялық жетістіктер және қоршаған ортаны қорғау сияқты көптеген салаларды қамтиды. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты халықаралық субъектілердің Арктикадағы өзара әрекеттесуін, әсіресе Америка Құрама Штаттары мен Ресей арасындағы шиеленіс контекстінде, сондай-ақ АҚШ пен Қытай арасындағы бәсекелестіктің күшеюін зерттеу болып табылады. Бұл зерттеу Ресей мен Қытай арасындағы серіктестіктің артып келе жатқанын және оның аймақтағы ынтымақтастықтың орталық осі ретіндегі маңызды рөлін көрсетеді. Ресей Арктиканы экономикалық және қауіпсіздік тұрғысынан стратегиялық ресурс базасы ретінде қарастыратындықтан және Қытай өзінің жаһандық мәртебесі мен экономикалық императивтеріне байланысты Арктика істеріне үлкен қызығушылық танытып отырғандықтан, екі ел арасындағы серіктестіктің маңыздылығы артып келеді.

Бұл зерттеудің негізгі ережелері Ресей мен Қытайдың Арктикадағы стратегиялық мүдделерін, олардың энергетикалық және инфрақұрылымдық жобалардағы бірлескен күш-жігерін, сондай-ақ олардың Арктиканы басқару және халықаралық қатынастар үшін ынтымақтастығы салдарын анықтауға арналған. Зерттеу сонымен қатар Арктиканы басқарудағы ресейлік және қытайлық көзқарастарды қарастырады.

**Тірек сөздер:** Ресей, Қытай, Арктикалық стратегия, теңіз жолы, Мұзды жібек жолы, геосаясат, ынтымақтастық, табиғи ресурстар

## **АРКТИЧЕСКИЕ ГОРИЗОНТЫ: СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО МЕЖДУ РОССИЕЙ И КИТАЕМ В МЕНЯЮЩЕМСЯ ПОЛЯРНОМ И ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ЛАНДШАФТЕ**

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**Аннотация.** В последнее время Арктика становится центром геополитической активности, обусловленной изменениями окружающей среды, разведкой ресурсов и стратегическими интересами. В арктическом регионе конкуренция и соперничество, как военные, так и экономические, переплетаются с поиском мирного и взаимовыгодного сотрудничества. Это сотрудничество охватывает множество областей, включая экономику, политику, безопасность, технологические достижения и защиту окружающей среды. В центре внимания этой статьи — изучение того, как международные субъекты взаимодействуют в Арктике, особенно в контексте напряженности между Соединенными Штатами и Россией, а также растущей конкуренции между Соединенными Штатами и Китаем. В этом исследовании подчеркивается растущее партнерство между Россией и Китаем и его решающая роль как центральной оси сотрудничества в регионе. Поскольку Россия рассматривает Арктику как стратегическую ресурсную базу, как с точки зрения экономики, так и безопасности, а Китай проявляет живой интерес к арктическим делам из-за своего глобального статуса и экономических императивов, важность партнерства между двумя странами возрастает.

Основные положения данного исследования посвящены определению стратегических интересов России и Китая в Арктике, их совместным усилиям в энергетических и инфраструктурных проектах, а также последствиям их сотрудничества для управления Арктикой и международных отношений. В исследовании также рассматриваются подходы России и Китая к управлению Арктикой.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия, Китай, Арктическая стратегия, морской путь, Ледяной шелковый путь, геополитика, сотрудничество, природные ресурсы

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