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Partnership on the Ice? Power Politics and Economic Engagement in Sino-Russian Arctic Diplomacy

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to clarify the myth and reality of the Sino-Russian alliance in the Arctic region. The authors argue that such interactions have to be put in the general framework of grand strategies of the two countries. We argue that structural factors, especially the new containment strategies adopted by the United States, help promote a closer partnership between China and Russia. However, it is the domestic context, such as historical memories and mutual distrust, that limit the scope and directions of Sino-Russia relationship. Economic benefits of collective development serve as a catalyst for cooperation. However, historical legacies and a lack of mutual trust constrain the formation of a formal alliance between China and Russia. A formal alliance between the two countries appears to be unrealistic. The Chinese may adopt multi-lateral diplomacy to strengthen ties with Nordic countries and undertake joint efforts of collective development in the Arctic region. The Russian side will also consolidate international cooperation on Arctic development.

Keyword: Arctic Diplomacy, Chinese Foreign Policy, Sino-Russian Relations, Northern Sea Route.

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冰雪奇盟？
中俄關係與北極外交之政治經濟分析

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摘　要

本文之目的，在於釐清中俄雙方有關北極政策的迷思與現實。作者認為，中俄有關北極事務的互動，必須放在兩國關係大戰略的架構及內政演變中檢視。國際結構改變促使了中俄聯盟出現的機遇，但內政發展制約了實質聯盟的強化。經濟利益與共同開發是兩國互動的觸媒。然而，歷史的恩怨以及互信的缺乏，制約了兩國在北極事務上發展出進一步的緊密關係。兩國正式的聯盟關係，似乎是一個不切實際的構想。中方會與北歐國家發展多邊關係，共同開發北極。俄方同樣也企圖將北極開發國際化。中國作為一個北極事務的新手，如何在發展多邊關係的同時，也與俄羅斯良性互動，是學術界及政策界共同關切的議題。

關鍵詞：北極外交、北方航道、中俄關係、中國外交政策

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1. Introduction

The re-emergence of Sino-Russia ties recently has attracted global attention. Chinese and Russian troops began joint maneuvers on July 11, 2018. The five days of drills in the Russian Far East, near the Chinese border, were also meant to demonstrate the extent to which the two sides are moving beyond symbolic displays of force to coordinate weapons systems and command structures. Washington says the two countries have developed capabilities that could test US military dominance in times of crisis. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which warily watched Russian military exercises along its European border in 2017, said the exercises with China follow a pattern of more assertive Russian behavior of flaunting its multi-billion dollar military modernization (Grove & Page, 2018: *The Wall Street Journal*).

In June 20, 2020, the temperature reached a record high of 38 degree Celsius in the Russian Arctic town of Verkhoyansk. The partial melting of ice in the Arctic region and the realization of the Northern Sea Route along the Russian coast reminds us of the status of R has become increasingly uncertain since the vessel suffered an engine failure and engine room flooding early in 2018 (Humpert, 2018: *Arctic Today*). lastussia as the dominant power in the region. Following its successful application to become a formal observer in the Arctic Council in 2013, China finally released its Arctic White Paper in January 2018. As a "near Arctic state," China has expressed its intention to take part in Arctic affairs and cooperate with Russia. Arctic affairs have thus become a platform for China and Russia for further engagement and interaction. Observers indicate that the possibility of a Sino-Russia alliance may dominate the Arctic region and threaten the security of the Western world.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the myth and reality of such an alliance in the Arctic region. The authors argue that such interactions have to be put in the general framework of grand strategies of the two countries. Economic benefits of collective development serve as a catalyst for cooperation. However, historical legacies and lack of mutual trust constrain the formation of a formal alliance between China and Russia. This paper will first elaborate the analytical framework, followed by the synthetic analysis of dynamics and dilemma of the bilateral relationship. The third and fourth sections will discuss the historical trajectory of Russian policies in the Arctic

region, and an analysis of current Chinese policies as a new player in Arctic affairs respectively. The fifth section will delve into the interaction of power politics and dynamics of economic engagement between China and Russia in the Arctic region.

2. The Analytical Framework for a Unique Relationship

The Sino-Russia relationship in general, and Arctic policies in particular, can be analyzed from two main theoretical traditions of international relations: structural realism and neoclassical realism. Structural realists argue that international anarchy forces states to choose foreign policy actions. Under structural constraints, the state responds to the anarchy of the international system according to the relative distribution of power. States need to develop strategies for survival according to various types of "polarization" in the system. The system thus dictates the behavior of the state. Furthermore, states learn from other states in the system to adopt defensive or offensive policies. Domestic politics does not matter in the structural tradition of international relations.

From the structural realist perspective, the change in power distribution will have major impacts on state behaviors. The assertive and unilateral policies adopted by the Trump administration have created external shocks to the international system. Policies of containment and the rise of a Cold-War mentality in the US have helped promote the emergence of a pseudo-Sino-Russia alliance to resist American aggression. After the Ukraine crisis and the resulting Western sanctions led by the US, the Russian government perceives the need to cement closer energy ties with Asian countries, especially China, as part of a broader rebalancing of Russia's foreign policy away from excessive dependence on ties to the West (Connolly, 2018: 104).

In terms of Arctic affairs, the US labels China as an ambitious new player that may bring systemic changes if a Sino-Russia alliance emerges. In a Congressional report on Arctic policies, the US government confirms that it regards China's new presence as a key aspect of general US–China relations. US policy makers are thinking about imposing a punitive cost, such as suspending China's observer's status on the Arctic Council, for China's unwanted actions in other places such as the South China Sea. Furthermore, the US Department of Defense states that China's expanding Arctic engagement has created new opportunities for engagement between China and Russia. The US is also aware of the fact that in April 2019, China and Russia established the

Sino-Russian Arctic Research Center. In 2020, China and Russia launched a new plan to use this center to conduct a joint expedition to the Arctic to research optimal routes of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the effects of climate change. The People's Republic of China (PRC) will cover 75 percent of the expedition's expenses (O'Rourke et al., 2020: Congressional Research Service, pp. 27-30).

Furthermore, the US adopts unilateral approaches, as it does elsewhere, in dealing with multilateral platforms in Arctic affairs. Such actions pose major challenges to the international as well as regional distribution of power. At the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland in 2019, US Secretary of State Pompeo delivered a speech in an aggressive tone and advanced the notion that the Arctic is not as a place for peaceful cooperation but strategic competition. As Timo Koivurova, former advisor to the Finnish Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, argues, the US openly challenges Russia and wants to achieve its goal of fighting a global war with China in the Arctic as well. The US perceives China as a dubious actor in the Arctic. Pompeo and the Trump administration argue that China is already a military threat in the Arctic and will only become more of one in the future. According to Pompeo, Russia also poses a threat, given that it has militarized its Arctic regions and has enacted an illegal decree to impede navigation along the Northern Sea Route (Koivurova, 2019: *High North News*).

In addition to focusing on the external, system-level variables, an alternative explanation of Sino-Russia interaction in Arctic diplomacy is the neoclassical tradition of realism. Neoclassical realism, in contrast to structuralism, focuses on domestic factors as independent and intervening variables of foreign policy. These domestic factors include perceptions of leaders, strategic culture, the nature of domestic coalition, and domestic institutions. Instead of direct responses from the system pressures, neoclassical realists explore the "delay" and "time lag" of the adaptation to the power shift. They argue that domestic factors cause a delay rather than continuous adaptation and adjustments. In other words, neoclassical realists pay more attention to "qualitative" instead of "quantitative" changes of state power, and treat the power as an instrument to enhance domestic capacities rather than an end in the international system. Factors such as historical memory, mutual perceptions, and domestic development play key roles in state behaviors in response to changes in the international system (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009; Meibauer, 2020; Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016).

As Alexander Korolev and Vladimir Portyakov argue, both structural and domestic factors determine the current Sino-Russia relationship. Both China and Russia are great powers with structural positions within the international system. The strengthening of the systemic variable in the form of more pressure from the United States may suppress the domestic "filters" and accelerate the rapprochement between China and Russia. However, both Russia and China have complex borders and immediate geopolitical environments that impede the deepening of cooperation (Korolev & Portyakov, 2018: 416).

In this article, we incorporate the "system-level" analysis and argue that the US pressure does push China and Russia closer in the context of strategic partnership. As to the domestic factors, following the neoclassical theorists' postulations, we go further beyond the geopolitical concerns and argue that "domestic development" plays an important role in the future prospects of the Sino-Russia relationship in Arctic affairs. The bilateral relationship in general reflects the systemic impetus and constraints on deepening the current interaction into a real military alliance. We argue that domestic politics, as introduced by neoclassical realists, matter in promoting regional developments in the Arctic region.

In order to streamline Arctic diplomacy of the two major powers, we first elaborate on the dynamics and constraints of the Sino-Russia bilateral relationship in the context of power distribution, grand strategies, and mutual perceptions in the following section.

3. Mutual Interests and Perceptions of Sino-Russia Relationship

The structural realist aspect can help explain the closer relationship between China and Russia in recent years. A report by a Chinese think tank postulates that the strategic convergence between Russia and China has laid the foundation of cooperation between the two countries. For instance, both China and Russia are "latecomers" in the post-Cold War international system. Latecomers suffer from unfair treatment like strategic suppression and containment by existing hegemonic powers. Russia's national goal of "building a strong Russia" and China's attempt at "great national rejuvenation" would benefit from a peaceful and stable external environment. Furthermore, both Russia and China support policies of multilateralism and appreciate diverse forms of democracy in the international community. Therefore, similarities in

strategic situation and ideas push these two countries to form a more comprehensive strategic partnership (Han, 2018: *China Institute of International Studies*).

By contrast, Western critics place emphasis on the ambitions of a Sino-Russian partnership to re-orient the word toward their orbit. American analysts raise concerns about the Sino-Russian alliance on geopolitics. As China expands its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Arctic and Latin America, Russia will likely learn from and acquiesce to China in Latin America due to the advantages of the Nicaragua Canal and what Beijing is undertaking economically and politically in the region. But China will learn from Russia in the Arctic and gain the ability to exploit hydrocarbons and other natural resources with glaciers now melting at a rapid pace. With Russia's ability in the Arctic and China's need for resources and the finances to sustain expensive infrastructure, this titanic project of linking both routes will be offered as an alternative to the United States-led post-World War II order. Lessons learned in the Arctic can be applied to Nicaragua because there is a peaceful aspect to developing the maritime portion of BRI through the Arctic by "diversifying trade routes involving neighboring states in port projects and scientific research." (Royal, 2017: *The National Interest*).

However, as the neoclassical realists argue, negative domestic perceptions and lack of mutual trust help explain the mutual suspicion under the uncertain international structure. Historical memory and uncertainties in the international system force China to adopt a more prudent policy on a Sino-Russia alliance. The Chinese side perceives the complexity of bureaucratic politics on the Russian side. The fluctuations of energy prices on the international market make the cost-benefit analyses more uncertain. The Chinese also worry about the impact of US sanctions on the procurement of core technologies in the Arctic region. In the long term, the uncertainties surrounding the bilateral relationship still cast shadows on the future of Arctic cooperation (Qian, 2018: 205-207).

The roots of such Chinese prudence and hesitation could be traced back to a basic assessment of Russia's grand strategy in the post-Cold War era. As stated in the previous section, Russia's Artic policy in general, and its strategies for the Russo-Chinese relationship in particular, are a reflection of its strategic calculations. According to Pavel Devyatkin, Russia's actual strategy is far more nuanced than the dichotomy of confrontation and cooperation. From the realist aspect, a "revisionist

state" like Russia considers the Arctic as compensation for its loss of historical hegemony in Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia perceives the Arctic as a zone of vulnerability and insecurity in the sense that Russia's vast geography influences policymakers to be concerned about invasions from other circumpolar nations.

Chinese experts also warn of the dangers of a formal Sino-Russo military alliance. Wang Haiyun, a former Chinese diplomat in Moscow, argues that in contrast to America's struggle to sustain its hegemonic dominance, the Chinese goal is to accommodate to a balanced and stable international system. Such a friendly international environment will provide the necessary conditions for China to devote itself to domestic reforms. In order to hedge against American hegemony, the Sino-Russo relationship becomes a cornerstone for international stability. On the other hand, Wang also indicates that the nature of Russian foreign policy, such as a major power mindset and territorial expansionism, may cast doubt on an emerging alliance between the two countries. Mutual suspicion and lack of trust between China and Russia have their historical roots. A formal military alliance will stimulate strong reactions from the US and its Western allies. Such an alliance may also erode the foundation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and raise the suspicions of developing countries. According to Wang, the best option for China and Russia is to build a "special military partnership" under the general framework of a comprehensive strategic partnership. Such a partnership will be characterized by close military connections without having to shoulder the responsibilities of a formal military alliance (H.-Y. Wang, 2018: *Zhengzhou Wuliu Yunshu Jiagejiaoliuzu*).

The convergence of Chinese and Russian strategies of development will be the key for laying the foundation of mutual trust. Whether the Russian project of a Eurasian Union could work with the Chinese BRI is the subject of much attention and some doubt. Critics argue that the Russian project will conflict with the Chinese initiative due to the fact that the region of a Eurasian Union has traditionally been in Russia's sphere of influence. Any Chinese penetration will sound the alarm bells of a Yellow Plague. As far as Russia's position is concerned, exploitation of the Arctic is not designed to comply with China's BRI policy (Спор, 2018: *Россия сегодня*). In short, there is a gap between China's interests and Russia's objectives of development.

The more prudent viewpoint in Russia argues that there is no reason to reject

the BRI. The baseline is that BRI can only be a supporting project to, instead of a replacement of, the Eurasian Union. This is the only guarantee of a win-win strategy for Russia's core national interests. By contrast, the Chinese side expresses more optimistic expectations for the integration of the two projects. In addition to the continuous growth of bilateral trade with member states, the Chinese investments on infrastructure projects help to upgrade the industrial levels of the region and facilitate transportation routes such as a China Railway express with Europe. The Chinese side uses the term "Yidai Yimeng" (One Belt, One Union) to describe the integration of the two projects. The Yamal project, as the preceding pages introduce, is also regarded as one of the key joint projects under One Belt, One Union (C. Wang, 2018: *Xinhua News*).

To sum up, given the growing US–China rivalry, the bilateral relationship between China and Russia is under close scrutiny. Domestic factors constrain the deepening of the Sino-Russia relationship into a formal military alliance. Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov clearly indicates that Russia has continued to orient its relationship with China as a "strategic partnership" (стратегическое партнерство) (Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2019: *Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации*). From the Russian perspective, considering the bilateral coordination in key international issues and restricted military cooperation, the current Sino-Russia relationship could be labeled as a "partnership without an alliance" (Партнерство без альянса).

4. Russia's Arctic Policies: Historical Legacies and New Development Dynamics

Given the complex bilateral relationship between Russia and China described in the previous sections, we will next explore Russia's Arctic policies in a historical context to demonstrate Russia's dominant position in the region. Furthermore, this section will explore the importance of domestic factors, especially the development of Arctic coastal areas, as the major impetus to promote Russia–China connections and strengthen Russia's strategic position as a major Arctic power.

Russia's research and exploitation of the Arctic and its territorial claim on the region date back to the days of the Russian Empire. Before the Russian Revolution, Russia's exploration and research of the Arctic proceeded uninterrupted, despite the

outbreak of the First World War. During the Soviet period, in addition to the actual operations, its political and legal claims became more certain.

On November 4, 1924, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs (Комиссар) Chicherin (Г.В.Чичерин) submitted a memorandum of the Soviet government to all governments that recognized the Soviet Union and the governments of the United States, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Argentina, and Brazil. The note reiterated the claim of the Russian Empire in 1916 of the state's sovereignty over the Arctic region (Министерство иностранных дер СССР, 1963: 531-532). In April 1925, the Council of People's Commissars proclaimed again the territorial waters between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and other Arctic nations, including the Novaya Zemlya (Новая земля), the Severnaya Zemlya (Северная земля), and the New Siberian Islands (Новосибирские острова), have long been the territory of the USSR (Савойский, 2012: 53).

The most important political document of this period appeared in 1926. On April 15, 1926, the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union (Президиум Центрального Исполнительного Комитета Союза Советских Социалистических Республик [ЦИК СССР]) issued an order entitled "On Proclaiming Lands and Islands in the Arctic Ocean to be the Territory of the USSR." («Об объявлении территорией Союза ССР земель и островов, расположенных в Северном Ледовитом океане») (Президиум Центрального Исполнительного комитета, 1926: *Электронный фонд*). According to the proclamation of 1926, "the Arctic Ocean, within the range from the north of the Soviet coast to the North Pole, and the island territories from 320°4'35"E to 168°49'30"W form the Soviet territory." (In 1979, the Soviet Union changed its eastern boundary from 168°49'30"W to 168°58'49,4"W.) With this announcement, the Soviet Union confirmed the territorial limit of the Northeast Passage and the exploitation of the island resources, which would become the basis of the future Russian Federation's policy and strategy for the Arctic.

In 1932, the Soviet icebreaker *A. Sibiryakov* (Александр Сибиряков) crossed the canal between the White Sea and the Bering Strait, and Schmidt (Отто Юльевич Шмидт 1891–1956) founded the first station in the North Pole. In 1937, the Soviet Union established the Northern Fleet, which accomplished a flight to the drifting ice station North Pole-1 (Северный плюс-1). It was only in 1952, some 15 years later,

that the Americans started the operation of establishing drifting ice stations in the Arctic (Савойский, 2011: 546). From 1954 to 1991, all the mobile stations the Soviet Union built in the Arctic region were changed into permanent camps.

With the rise of bilateral confrontation during the Cold War, the international community started establishing international laws that imposed shared norms for the Arctic region. Among these were the "Convention on the Continental Shelf" (Конвенция о континентальном шельфе) and the "Convention on the High Seas" (Конвенция об открытом море) concluded in Geneva on April 29, 1958, as well as the "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNLOS)" of 1982 (Конвенция ООН по морскому праву от 10 декабря 1982).

However, the two conventions of 1958 did not settle the divergence in the use of marine resources among different countries, as countries along the Arctic Ocean as well as others were interested in exploiting the region's resources. As a result of this background, the issue of sovereignty of the Arctic region and Arctic Ocean became complicated, and by 1980, ideas on the internationalization of the Arctic region in light of the conventions on the Antarctic region arose gradually.

In response to the ideas mentioned above, the Soviet Union proposed joint cooperation initiatives. In 1987, the Soviet Union promoted the Murmansk Initiative (Мурманские инициативы), in which key issues regarding the Arctic region and the principal direction of negotiations between interested countries on key issues were put forward. These issues included the establishment of nuclear-free zones in northern Europe, the reduction of military activities in the northern European maritime territory, the joint exploitation of Arctic resources by peaceful cooperation, international cooperation in Arctic research, the cooperation on regional ecological protection among Arctic countries, and the opening of Arctic routes to international maritime transportation (Ковалев, 2009).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's policy toward the Arctic region basically continued that of its predecessor, but with the political, economic, and social transformation of the Russian Federation, as well as the changes in the international situation, the Russian Federation's Arctic policy had a different intensity. Before 2000, specifically prior to Vladimir Putin becoming president, Russia's position seemed to be in favor of international cooperation. Russia formally ratified the 1982 United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1997 and started a new phase of Arctic policies. Russia and Norway even took part in the Pamor-1994 joint military exercises in the latter's north maritime region during this time. (The exercises were suspended and then resumed again until 2010, but were interrupted for a second time in 2011).

It must be pointed out that, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia's economic and social stagnation has resulted in a continued decline in population and industrial regression in the Russian Arctic region. In the past 20 years, population in the Russian Arctic region has declined by 3 million, especially among professionals with specialized skills and young people (Матвеев, 2011).

Since Mr. Putin started to serve as president in 2000, apparent aggressiveness started to appear in Russia's Arctic policies. In 2001, Russia first submitted a statement to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf of the United Nations about the extension of its continental shelf toward the Arctic region. Russia argues that the Lomonosov Ridge and the Mendeleev Ridge (подводные хребты Ломоносова и Менделеева), which cross under the Arctic Ocean, are extensions of the Siberian landmass. The proposition was shelved later that same year, but it was raised again on February 9, 2016. According to this claim, the continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean possessed by Russia will increase by 1.2 million square kilometers, from its original surface area of 4.1 million square kilometers (TACC, 2017: *TACC*).

In 2014, Moscow proclaimed "The Development Strategy of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation up to 2020" (Государственная программа Российской Федерации «Социально-экономическое развитие Арктической зоны Российской Федерациии на период до 2020 года») was proclaimed (Правительство Российсской Федерации, 2014: *Правительство России*). In 2017, it was announced that this plan had been extended to 2025 (Правительство Российсской Федерации, 2017: *Правительство России*). According to the contents of this program, the ultimate objectives of Russia's exploitation of the Arctic regions are to:

(1) Improve and guarantee the quality of life of the Arctic residents;

(2) Create conditions for the development of the Northeast Passage to make it a national transportation route for Russia in the Arctic region and ensure the atmospheric meteorological system for transportation by ocean;

(3) Develop science and technology and make effective use of the continental resources in the Arctic and Russian regions;

(4) Improve the management efficiency of the government in socio-economic development of the Arctic region.

According to the analysis of Russian scientist P. Savas'kov (П. Саваськов) on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, there is no need to divide the waters of the Arctic Ocean in accordance with the sector theory (секторальный принцип) put forward by Canada (Саваськов, 2011: 33). Although other scholars, such as A. Kovalev (А. Ковалев), argued that the sector theory might work as well (Ковалев, 2009). However, the mainstream opinion has been that "On Proclaiming Lands and Islands in the Arctic Ocean to be the Territory of the USSR," announced by the Soviet Union in 1926, should be considered as the fundamental principal (Александров, 2012: 144). To put it simply, Russia thinks that the North Pole belongs to it and it alone.

It can be understood from the above information that, apart from being passive during the presidency of B. Yeltsin, Russia's claim over the sovereignty of the Arctic regions has had a basis for argument in terms of historical context, political behavior, domestic law, and the legal basis of international law. In other words, Russia's interpretation of the law—"Russia should have the fullest extent of rights"—is its current position on the issue.

In addition to legal doctrines, the maintenance of rights requires practical means. As far as Russia is concerned, this can be achieved by military defense on the one hand, and by active exploitation on the other. Russia's military reinforcement in the Arctic region has been in place since 2013, when it decided to rebuild its previously abandoned military base on the New Siberian Islands, where 250 staff, electronic communications equipment, and a Pantsir-S1 missile system (Панцирь-с) were to be deployed. In addition, the Arctic Shamrock military base was built on the Franz Josef Land (Земля Франца Иосифа) and the Alexandra Land (остров Земля Александры) in the far North, which could house up to 150 personnel for more than 18 months at a time. By 2016, this base already included a 2,500-meter-long airport runway and a coastal defense missile system (Бастион) had been set up. In the next 10 years, Russia will add a total of 15 similar bases in the Arctic region (Домбровский, 2018: *Россия сегодня*).

In addition, the Northern Joint Strategic Command was established on December 1, 2014 to strengthen the combat capabilities of the Russian Northern Fleet, which has 38 overwater vessels and 42 submarine vessels. The 61st Naval Infantry Brigade was also disposed to them. In addition, the 80th Independent Motor Rifle Brigade (assembled in 2015) was deployed in Alakurtti (поселок Алакурти) in Murmansk Oblast (Мурманская область), and the 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade was also garrisoned in Pechenga (Печенга). Both brigades belong to the 14th legion. The Northern Joint Strategic Command is equipped with globalnaya navigatsionnaya sputnikovaya sistema (GLONASS), a Russian self-developed global navigation system.

The 29th Independent Division under the direct command of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation stationed in the town of Gadzhiyevo in Murmansk Oblast was originally the 29th Independent Brigade established in 1979. Its main mission is to test and verify the submarine nuclear reactors, weapons system loaded on vessels, and other strategic programs. It was expanded to a division in 2018, the nuclear reactors were modernized and upgraded, and it was expected to set up two submarines that could carry out special missions between 2018 and 2019: the *Moscow* (Подмосковье) and the *Belgorod* (Белгород) (Сурков, Рамм, & Дмитриев, 2018: *Известия*). The development of the latter is more important than the military defense.

As mentioned earlier, the Socio-Economic Development Plan for the Arctic region was extended to 2025. The goal is to strengthen the responsibilities of the federal subjects of Russia along the Arctic region. The fifth sub-plan of this development strategy is to "Balance socio-economic development and ensure national security through the establishment of Arctic Support Zones and the guarantee of its operation" («Сбалансированное социально-экономическое развитие и обеспечение национальной безопасности. Формирование опорных зон развития Арктики и обеспечение их функционирования). The concept of Support Zones was put forward in this sub-plan.

Russia divided its territory along the Arctic Ocean into eight Support Zones to support the exploitation of the Arctic region as shown in Figure 1.

The Support Zones were not created based on a general economic division of

Figure 1. Arctic Support Zones of Russia

Source: Орлов (2018: *Regnum*).

the area; they are considered as the basis for inter-regional economic development. Only improvements to the socio-economic development in the Arctic region are likely to attract a permanent population and the migration of competent people, leading to owning the Arctic area and then dominating Arctic issues in the real sense.

According to the reports of the Ministry of Economic Development of the Federation of Russia (Министерство экономического развития Российской Федерации), the eight Support Zones from west to east are as follows:

4.1 Kola (Кольская опорная зона)

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: Ideal geographical location, a non-moving port all year-round, recoverable mineral resources, transportation, energy industry, and science and education infrastructure related to mineral resource exploitation.

4.2 Arkhangelsk

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: Excellent geographical location, with built-in railway transport system and non-moving port (dependent on icebreakers from November to March).

4.3 Nenets

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: Amderma (Амдерма) of the Northern canal, an important transport relay station, and mineral exploitation.

4.4 Vorkuta

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: Location of Pechora coal basin (Печорский угольный бассейн) and Timan-Pechora Basin (Тимано-Печорская нефтегазоносная провинция), which contain oil and gas fields. Furthermore, the city of Vorkuta of the Komi Republic is located within this zone.

4.5 Yamal-Nenets

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: The region is the largest supplier of petrochemical resources in Russia and Europe, so the region is the most stable transport export area along the Northeast Passage.

4.6 Taimyr-Turukhan

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: Located in the Krasnoyarsk Krai (Красноярский край), this Krai has long been known for its mineral resources; the well-known Norilsk industrial zone (Норильский промышленный район), the largest smelter in the Arctic area, is located in this zone.

4.7 North Yakutia

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: Tiksi (Тикси) is an important hub port for the Northeast Passage and the Sakha Republic (Республика Якутия-Саха), where the region is located, is Russia's largest producer of diamonds, gold, tin, and antimony.

4.8 Chukotka

Advantages self-assessed by Russia: With the establishment of aviation infrastructure developed in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug (Чукотский аовтономный район), the area can be transformed into an important relay station along the east route of the Northeast Passage.

According to reports of the Ministry of Economic Development of the Federation of Russia dated October 13, 2016 (О подходах к социально-экономическому развитию Арктической зоны Российской Федерации) (Минэкономразвития Росии, 2016: *РСМД*), the eight Support Zones are expected to promote 152 plans worth an estimated total of 5 trillion rubles (63.5 billion US Dollars). These plans cover 12 projects, including mineral mining processing (accounting for 34% of the total scale), diamond mining processing (more than 14%), geological prospecting (7%), shelf area development (7%), transportation (16%), industry (5%), energy (5%), fisheries and agriculture (5%), environmental protection (2%), telecommunications (1.5%), tourism (< 1%), and social security (< 1%).

According to the project, 10% of the budget for the project is financed by the government (divided into input from the federal government and input from associated main bodies of the federal government), and 80% of the budget is financed by non-government bodies. However, by analyzing these so-called non-governmental sectors, including the Roscosmos State Corporation for Space Activities (ГК«Роскосмос»), the Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation (ГК«Росатом»), Russian Railways («РЖД»), Norilsk, a Russian nickel and palladium mining and smelting company («Норильский никель»), Alrosa, a Russian group of diamond mining companies («Алроса»), Gazprom, a Russian natural-gas company («Газпром»), PJSC Rosneft Oil Company («Роснефть»), and Novatek («Новатэк»), it can be seen that they are all state-owned companies of the Russian Federation and get their investment capital from the main bodies of the federal government.

In fact, the investment of these funds could be viewed as 100% capital input of the Russian government. Therefore, in terms of the scale and contents of the project, whether the Russian Federation has the financial capacity to afford all the expenses remains an interesting question for discussion. In addition, despite the large number of projects, mining, and diamond production account for 48% of the total number, which, if combined with the 16% making up transportation, account for a grand total of 64%. Judging by the plan of the Russian government, the development of its Arctic region does not preclude the exploration for natural resources in the region. To put it simply, the Russian government has so far continued to pin its hopes for the future economic structure on the framework of original materials and the energy trade.

As stated previously, the exploration of Russia's Arctic coastal and far eastern areas has been a focal point of Putin's grand strategy to deepen development to the east. However, Russia is now facing institutional and structural constraints in pushing forward with such ambitious plans. Regardless of the rosy pictures of the blueprints, substantial projects on the supporting development zones are still stagnant. After the initial enthusiasm in the early stages, new projects since 2017 have been delayed, if not canceled outright. The main reasons behind the delayed development are rooted in the inefficiency of Russia's central bureaucracy. For instance, major revisions of legal and institutional frameworks are pending in the Ministry of Economic Development. These institutional infrastructures include the tax code (Налоговый кодекс), Underground Resources Law (Закон «О недрах»), and around thirty regulations for revision and amendment. Without direct intervention from the central level, the localities lack economic incentives and institutional momentum to implement new projects. In other words, the widening of the gap between policy planning and implementation has become a major obstacle for the substantial development of the seven development zones along the Arctic coastal areas (Дмитриева & Бурый, 2019: 56).

Russia's growing interests in the Arctic region reflect the gradual depletion of the traditional land-based mineral resources. The Russian Ministry of Natural Resources announced in 1999 that Russia's Arctic shelf was estimated to contain 88 billion tons of conventional energy, 80% of which would come from natural gas (Гусейнов, 2012: 49-50), if calculated according to the territorial boundaries of the Arctic shelf in 1926. Later reports suggested that the Russia-owned Arctic region should have 140 billion tons of fossil fuels, 87% of which would be natural gas (Телегина, 2011). Other reports indicate that there are 15 billion tons of oil reserves in the Russian Arctic, which amount to about 74 billion barrels (Александров, 2012: 133). In addition to the improvement of domestically produced drilling equipment, an increase in imports from China and South Korea is necessary (Connolly, 2018: 97). The Russian government envisages that the new "frontier" deposits will account for a growing share of Russian oil production over the next two decades. According to the official Energy Strategy, offshore Arctic production should account for at least 20 percent of Russian oil production by 2030 (Connolly, 2018: 86).

It is a normal idea to raise economic capacity through resource exploitation and to attract technicians and others to move to the Arctic coastal region in an attempt

to bolster the population. The ongoing population loss in the Arctic regions and the Russian Far East is an important factor contributing to the imbalance of regional development in Russia and the regression of the country's overall strength. It is also a logical idea to achieve economic migration through resource exploitation. However, whether the conception of the Soviet era could continue to be viewed from the experience of the Soviet Union remains a question. After the attempts to strengthen Russia since 2000, it has utilized the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East region as an instrument to gain momentum for national rejuvenation and prosperity. From this perspective, developing the Russian Arctic region will have strategic, economic, as well as cultural functions for the country's national development.

Moreover, compared to the sluggish economic development in the Arctic coastal areas, Russia has adopted more aggressive military policies in the Arctic-supporting regions. Western observers argue that militarization of the Russian Arctic would have a more offensive contour with respect to NATO and its partners. One British think tank concludes that the golden era of low tension is slowly coming to an end. It is time to puncture the myth of Arctic exceptionalism and recognize that the region can no longer be insulated from the broader military security context (Boulègue, 2019: 35).

It is true that Russian military expansion is a reality as opposed to a myth. Since September 2020, Russia's Арктика/Arctic, the world's largest nuclear powered ice-breaking boat, has been in operation (SeaNews, 2020: *SeaNews*). On June 5, 2020, Russian President Putin ordered the establishment of the Northern Fleet as an "independent military district," Russia's fifth military district. This district will cover the Republic of Komi, Arkhangelsk Oblast, Murmansk Oblast, and Nenets Autonomous Okrug. These four units match the Support Zones 1 to 4 respectively. In other words, in order to cope with the potential military conflicts in the Arctic region, Russia has reinforced its military capabilities, especially in its European regions, to promote military as well as political responses. (Указ, 2020: *Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации*). Furthermore, in coping with the military actions of NATO, Russian Defense Minister S. Shoigu declared that one additional Air defense Division would be deployed in the Arctic region in February 2020. Furthermore, the newest nuclear power missile cruiser Prince Vladimir and frigate Admiral Kasatonov, along with four other battleships and a submarine, will join Russia's Northern Fleet (РИА Новости , 2020: *РИА Новости*).

The gap between the military build-up and economic under-development in Russia reflects the over-dependence of the Arctic regions on the command and control from the central government. Such local weakness co-exists with ambitious plans of the central government to consolidate military and shipbuilding abilities to project Russia's status as an Arctic major power. Amid the current Covid-19 crisis and unstable environment in the surrounding areas, Russia continues to promote its Arctic policies in an imbalanced fashion.

5. China as a New Player in Arctic Diplomacy

Compared to Russia, China is a newcomer in Arctic affairs. China began to participate in Arctic affairs more actively starting in the mid-2000s. In 2007, China became a temporary observer of the Arctic Council. In May 2013, China, along with South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Italy, became formal observers of this body. The new Chinese initiatives in the Arctic have been generally well received by Nordic countries. However, Canada and Russia have adopted skeptical views towards China's intentions to take part in Arctic affairs.

Multiple factors explain China's interests in the far North. China is not an Arctic country, but the rise of the demand for energy supplies has pushed it to search for stable sources of energy to ensure its security. Given the fact that the traditional energy linkages with some African countries have become controversial, China is seeking out new sources of energy supplies. The potential energy reserves in the Arctic region have therefore attracted China's interest (Leng, 2018).

China started its domestic efforts in rule-making and institutional building on polar affairs in as early as 2007. Since 2009, the Chinese government has promoted law and regulation promulgation at the national level. In 2017, China announced the Administrative Regulations Governing Investigation Activities in the Arctic Region. The Chinese Academy of Sciences recently launched a project to study the "Three Ji" (Three Poles), referring to the North Pole, the Antarctic, and the Qinghai-Xikang-Tibet Plateau (QXTP). As Chinese Minister of Science and Technology Wan Gang indicated, due to the similar climate and geographic characteristics, research on QXTP will help enhance China's understanding of the Arctic region. Chinese experts also suggest expanding the scope of the project from "Three Ji" to "Five Ji," which also include the

deep sea and outer space (Si, 2017: *Tripvivid*). Such efforts on the domestic front are expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

Compared to the Northwestern Route, the Northern Sea Route is expected to be utilized by Chinese cargo vessels more often on a regular basis in the future. The economic benefits are the obvious reason for Chinese shipping companies to explore this new route of transportation. The *Yongsheng* was the first Chinese cargo vessel to traverse this passage in August 2013. The trip from Shanghai to Hamburg via the Northern Passage, which runs along the north coast of Russia from the Bering Strait in the east to the Novaya Zemlya archipelago in the west, is around 6,400 kilometers shorter than the existing route via the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal. The *Hongxing* became the first Chinese cargo vessel to traverse this route in August 2013 (Scott, 2016: *Second Line of Defense*).

On September 5, 2018, the vessel *Tianen* of China's COSCO Shipping Specialized Carriers Co., Ltd. arrived in Rouen, France, via the Northern Sea Route. The *Tianen* set sail on August 4, 2018. This was its first transit from China to northwestern Europe of breakbulk. The *Tianen* arrived in France laden with wind power equipment from Lianyungang, Jiangsu province. It had traveled via the Arctic Northeast Passage, which extends through the Barents Sea, Kara Sea, Laptev Sea, East Siberian Sea and Chukchi Sea (BreakBulk, 2018: *BreakBulk*; X. Li, 2018: *Xinhua News*).

China also endeavors to strengthen its maritime capacities in terms of navigation and research in the Arctic region. China launched the *Xue Long 2* in an elaborate ceremony at the Jiangnan Shipyard in Shanghai on September 10, 2018. The new flagship icebreaker, operated by the civilian Polar Research Institute of China, was developed in cooperation with Finnish ship-building specialists Aker Arctic and laid down at the end of 2016. Designs were finalized by the Chinese Marine Design and Research Institute in Shanghai and the vessel was assembled from 114 individual segments by the China State Shipbuilding Corporation in just over two years. *Xue Long 2* may not be China's newest icebreaker for long, as the country is already working on the next generation of icebreakers capable of breaking through ice up to three meters thick. With two fully operational icebreakers, China now matches the capacity of the United States Coast Guard, which operates a single modern icebreaker, the *USCGC Healy*. The future of the US's sole remaining polar class icebreaker, the

42-year-old *USCGC Polar Star*, slated to be decommissioned by 2023, has become increasingly uncertain since the vessel suffered an engine failure and engine room flooding early in 2018 (Humpert, 2018: *Arctic Today*).

From 1999 to 2020, China has conducted eleven trips to the North Pole for scientific research, the most recent being the mission of the Icebreaker Xuelong II in July 2020 from its home port of Shanghai. At the heart of this Arctic trip are the attempts of the Chinese government to promote the innovation of indigenous equipment suitable for icy conditions. In addition to the current Yellow River Research Station in Norway, China's joint project with Iceland to establish a new research station in the northern part of Iceland has been underway since the end of 2018 (Academy of Ocean of China, 2020: *Academy of Ocean of China*).

With its new status as a formal observer of the Arctic Council, China has received global attention for its official Arctic policy. In 2015, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming, who served as the Chinese representative of the Arctic Circle Assembly, elaborated on six major policy goals of China's Arctic policy:

(1) Promoting scientific research and exploration, recognizing that the Arctic area provides key indicators of global climate change and serves as a crucial experimental place for scientific research;

(2) Balancing environmental protection and market development of the Arctic region, being alert to the ecological fragility while exploring the new sea routes of the Arctic regions;

(3) Respecting the territorial sovereignty of Arctic countries and basic rights of aboriginals in the region, especially their unique ways of life and customs;

(4) Honoring the rights of non-Arctic countries and common interests of international society. Non-Arctic countries have legal rights to use international high seas and enjoy freedom of scientific research, navigation, and development;

(5) Constructing a multi-level framework of governance and cooperation. Non-arctic countries can contribute to both governmental and non-governmental cooperation;

(6) Maintaining the Arctic governance system based on existing international laws. The Chinese government recognizes the important role of the Arctic Council and other international laws in governing Arctic affairs, including the Charter of the

United Nations, UNLOS, and the Svalbard Treaty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2015: *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China*).

Some Western experts, however, have adopted skeptical attitudes toward China's real intentions for participating in Arctic affairs. For instance, Sherri Goodman regards China's new Arctic strategy as being like a spider expanding its web, particularly the reference in the strategy to the Arctic being "under the Belt and Road initiative." Others have likened China's strategy to a maritime Marshall Plan, and the latest evidence is the collaboration China is having with Finland on sub-sea cables to create a sort of "Data Silk Road" (Wilson Center, 2018: *Wilson Center*).

After the release of Arctic White Papers by Japan and South Korea, China finally announced its own Arctic White Paper in January 2018 to clarify its position on the Arctic. The White Paper does not add anything that would be surprising to the international community. Both Chinese officials and experts have already explained the key points in previous years. In addition, the White Paper tries hard to alleviate suspicions of China's ambitions to become a hegemonic power in the Arctic by elaborating upon the following Chinese principles of participation:

(1) Respect: China respects the status quo of sovereignty issues of the Arctic region, and respects the legal rights of non-Arctic countries to participate in Arctic affairs. China confirms its identity as a "Near Arctic Country";

(2) Cooperation: The goal of a "Silk Road on the Ice" is not exclusive bilateral cooperation between China and Russia. China does not have a plan to build a military block. The spirit of a Silk Road on the Ice is openness and multi-lateralism;

(3) Win-win: China is seeking the establishment of common interests based on mutual benefits. Chinese exploration of the Arctic region should not be regarded as actions of pure foreign aid or benevolent support. The Chinese will consider the market values and potential risks of business opportunities in the Arctic region;

(4) Sustainability: China insists on "green" principles based on solid scientific research. China will exercise self-restraint in developing environmentally sensitive areas (Chen & Zhang, 2018a: *Xinhua Finance Agency*).

While expressing the intentions of its proactive actions in Arctic affairs, China also emphasizes self-restraint and institutionalized behaviors based on the existing rules of the Arctic region. This basic policy principle is repeated in official talks and documents in addition to the Arctic White Paper. For example, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou indicates China's basic principle of "no over-doing, no absence" in Arctic affairs. As a non-Arctic country, China will not intervene in the internal affairs of Arctic countries. China will follow international law as the guidelines for its behavior. On the other hand, as a near-Arctic state and major interest stakeholder, China will contribute to the cross-regional and global dimensions of Arctic affairs. Kong argues that the establishment of a "Silk Road on the Ice" will be based on the cooperation between China's Belt and Road Initiatives and Russia's plan for a Eurasian Economic Union (Bo, 2018: *Xinhua Silk Road*). According to Yun Sun, the identity problem is a fundamental obstacle to China's ambitions for the Arctic. China understands that it is not an Arctic state and cannot claim the same rights as the Arctic states. The official Chinese identification as a "near Arctic state" reflects an "unwilling recognition of the constraints to China's activities" (Y. Sun, 2018: *Stimson*).

At the current stage, Chinese initiatives in the Arctic region focus mainly on scientific research. Such an action is a more prudent move to alleviate the suspicions over the potential Chinese threat in the region. Moreover, based on the research activity in the Arctic areas, China can promote scientific independence in icy and extreme conditions. The enhancement of China's scientific research also facilitates navigation capacities on the Northern Sea Route. The Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) has established a collaborative platform for research on the Arctic environment using remote sensing and numerical models. Chinese researchers used remote sensing and model forecast data to help the Chinese merchant ships Tianen and Tianyou safely navigate the Northeast Passage in the summer of 2020. The high spatial and temporal resolution microwave radar sensors with all-day and all-weather monitoring capability can observe near-real-time sea ice conditions for predicting risks. The Arctic navigation security service is an application of remote sensing data and enhanced space information observation ability in ensuring shipping safety (Z.-F. Sun, 2020: *China News*).

6. A Robust but Fragile Sino-Russia Relationship in the Arctic Region

Recent Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic have alarmed the Western

world that such an emerging alliance will threaten the stability of the current international system. In August 2018, excerpts of the report "On thin ice: UK defense in the Arctic" prepared by the Defense Sub-Committee of the House of Commons were published in the UK. This report indicates that Russia has shown itself to be ready to use military force to secure a political advantage. It also states that the Arctic is vulnerable to exploitation by a revisionist state. This report raises the alarm of "a serious threat to Britain from Russia on the Arctic flank" and stresses the need to increase the capabilities of the UK army and increase defense spending. The Russian Embassy responded to the comments by stating that these speculations are yet another attempt to promote the idea of a military build-up in the Arctic under imaginary pretexts. They run counter to the existing international legal framework and completely undermine the huge efforts undertaken in the Arctic Council, where the UK is an observer state. Moscow considers the Arctic to be an area for constructive dialogue and equal, conflict-free cooperation in the interests of all states (Sputnik International, 2018a, 2018b: *Sputnik International*).

There is no doubt that Russia is the single most important country in China's Arctic initiatives. The Chinese side perceives that building a relationship based on mutual trust with its northern neighbor will help stabilize interaction with China's coastal partners. Strengthening the relationship with Russia will also enhance its bargaining chips to counter Western pressures. Furthermore, both Russia and China are facing the pressure of American unilateralism. In order to enhance the institution-based global system in the post-Cold War world, China and Russia need to work together to resist the opposite trend of anti-globalization. Based on this new strategic background of the Sino-Russia relationship, participating in the developmental of Russia's energy resources will help secure China's energy supply in the foreseeable future. Chinese State-owned enterprises (SOEs) can also take the opportunity to co-develop Arctic liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects to upgrade their technological level in energy exploration and ice breaking (Qian, 2018: 205-207).

Moscow's Arctic strategy is primarily concerned with developing the Russian exclusive economic zone and is therefore mostly focused on the economic benefits of Arctic development. Russia's main interests in the Arctic region are by and large strictly limited to energy security and economics. By promoting cooperative work in the Arctic, the Kremlin seeks to achieve the goals of legitimizing its presence and aims in the region, and securing its leadership position by being a driver of cooperation and

integration. At the same time, Russia induces the international community to engage more in the region and prevent China from becoming the only visible leader (Ananyeva, 2019: 95).

However, instead of providing additional offensive capabilities or reviving the Soviet-era military might, contemporary Russian military policy in the Arctic is focused on upgrading old units, securing the wide-reaching border, and improving search and rescue services. The "in-between narratives" focus on the idea that Russian Arctic policies are not one-sided. Russia's Arctic strategy has a military component that aims to gain control of the region, but Russian ambitions are not thoroughly hostile. Moreover, opinions within Russia's bureaucracy are not coherent. It is wrong, therefore, to regard the Russian policy-making body as unitary and consistent (Devyatkin, 2018: *The Arctic Institute*).

Without neglecting the importance of Russian influence in the Arctic, the Chinese would prefer to invest their interests in the Arctic region through multilateral instead of bilateral platforms. China's participation in Arctic affairs is connected with new dynamics of multi-member and multi-dimensional changes in the region. Chinese experts argue that the possibility of direct confrontation between Russia and the US is slim given the nature of nuclear deterrence. Furthermore, the current players in Arctic diplomacy are not limited to Arctic countries. New players in Arctic affairs, under the status of observers in the Arctic Council, facilitate the emergence of a new multi-lateral mechanism of cooperation, especially in the areas of energy security, environmental protection and new sea routes. China's "Silk Road on the Ice" project fits in with such multilateralism and endeavors to promote collective development to achieve human security (Z.-F. Li, 2018: *Global Times*).

China's Arctic policies are not isolated actions of energy security and economic development. They are closely linked with Chinese grand strategies such as the Belt and Road initiatives. In terms of Chinese grand strategy, the Northern Sea Route seems to be the natural extension of the existing BRI strategy. The concept of "One Belt, One Road, One Route" (Yidai Yilu Yidao) was introduced after Xi's 2017 talk on the "Silk Road on the Ice." By integrating the three passages from the north to south, the Chinese mainland will occupy the central ground as the core of the framework. Compared to BRI, developing the Northern Sea Route will face only one single major

player—Russia. The Northern Sea Route will also provide a new experiment for China to promote a green and sustainable means of transportation to Europe. In addition to security, energy and environmental advantages, developing this route could also serve as a catalyst for cooperation among northeastern countries and Russia (Hu, Zhang, & Zhang, 2017).

The Russian perception of the Chinese interests in the Arctic region focuses on energy, minerals, and transportation concerns (Горохова, 2018: *Regnum*; Загорский, 2016). As introduced in the previous section, Russia plans to develop support zones along the Arctic coast. Infrastructure construction, especially cargo ports, has become a cornerstone of the "Silk Road on the Ice." According to the suggestions of a Chinese think tank, China and Russia may select at least five major ports along the Russian coast to serve as "Pivot Ports" to consolidate the Northern Sea Route. These five ports will be invested with different functions and policies to serve as logistics centers. The Chinese side still needs Russian technology, especially icebreakers, to facilitate navigation during the frozen season. Development of these port cities along the Northern Sea Route requires the migration of populations and input of large-scale investments. In order to reduce the risk of investment, the Chinese side also suggests the introduction of international capital, especially investments from Japan, Korea and the Nordic countries. Internationalization of the development of the port projects will be a safety valve to alleviate the threat of a monopoly by any single force in the region (Chen & Zhang, 2018b: 39-42).

China's plan to explore the Northern Sea Route is closely connected with the domestic development of the northeastern region. The joint development of Port Zarrubino in Jilin province between China and Russia is one such example. Given the uncertainty surrounding North Korea, the province of Jilin is in need of a new port to serve as an outlet linking Japan, South Korea, and the Northern Sea Route. With a distance of 60 kilometers to the Chinese city of Hunchun and its development zone, the new port project will stimulate Jilin's economy and serve as a base port for the Northern Sea Route through the Arctic region.

In addition to the linkages of Russia's development scheme for Siberia and its Far East with China's plan to revive the Northeast, local plans and border projects such as the Sino-Europe Rail Express Routes from Yingkou in Liaoning province are under

construction. Two major railway links with Russia will also connect Liaoning province with Europe. The Liaomengou railway project starts at the port city of Panjin and travels through Mongolia to Minsk; the Liaomanou railway project begins at the port city of Dalian and stretches through Russian territory to Europe. Dalian is expected to serve as a major port city for northeastern China to utilize the Northern Sea Route to Europe. Integrating port development and railway connections, the Northern Sea Route may serve as a key channel for a new round of reviving the northeastern China project. However, these cooperative projects are mainly top-down, infrastructure-driven, large-scale ventures. The foundation of a bottom-up cooperative mechanism based on market benefits is still weak.

The exploitation of Arctic mineral resources, development of deep-water ports, and the improvement of infrastructure demand large-scale inputs of capital and technological investments. As far as technology is concerned, Russia's development in the polar regions is not a problem. The lack of capital investment, however, is a much more pressing matter. For exploitation and construction programs of such a large scale, foreign capital investment is necessary.

However, since 2014, Russia has been facing international economic sanctions (an additional six months were added in March 2018). This, coupled with the diplomatic tensions with the US, has made attracting foreign capital investment quite difficult. Therefore, Chinese capital has become something of an enforced choice.

The Yamal LNG project is a useful case to explain the momentum of Sino-Russian cooperation. From the Russian perspective, the Yamal LNG project started in 2010, which was before the "Belt and Road Initiative" project got underway. It is expected to produce 165,000,000 tons of liquefied natural gas a year, with an investment amount of $26.9 billion. But due to a lack of funding, the project was not launched until 2016. The allocated investment in the General Plan by the Russian New Technology Group accounted for 50.1%, of which the group raised $12.8 billion and then borrowed 150 billion rubles from the Russian National Wealth Fund (Фонд национального благосостояния-ФНБ/FNB); 6.3 billion euros were borrowed from Sberbank of Russia (Сбербанк/Sberbank) and Gazprombank (Газпромбанк/Gazprombank), 20% from Total S.A. of France, 20% from China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and 9.9% from the Silk Road Fund. As the Silk Road Fund was

actually set up in China, the Chinese side thus accounted for 29.9% of the capital of the Yamal LNG project.

According to the Chinese and Western understanding of this project, the investment of Chinese capital reflects China's demands for energy and Russia's need for capital. On July 19, 2018, the LNG carrier *Vladimir Rusanov* docked at China's Rudong terminal in eastern Jiangsu province with its first shipment from Russia's Yamal LNG project using the Arctic Northern Sea Route. However, the *Rusanov* sailed from the Arctic port of Sabetta on June 25, making the voyage to China in 24 days rather than the 18 days estimated in 2017 by the US Energy Information Agency (Lelyveld, 2018: *Radio Free Asia*).

From its perspective, the Russian side indicates that Yamal LNG is essentially an independent project of bilateral complementarity, rather than a framework for comprehensive bilateral cooperation in all energy fields. There have been no related projects up for discussion to this point. Furthermore, uncertainties exist on the real cost of operations through the Northern Sea Route.

In addition, in terms of the capital structure, forming a wholly Chinese-funded or a simple Sino-Russian joint venture does not serve Russian interests of energy security. The Russian Federation will search for possible sources of cooperation besides Chinese investment. Although it is difficult to find other investors under the pressure of sanctions from the European Union (EU) and the US, as a trade war between China and the US has commenced, China's ability to invest in Russia and in other countries must be taken into account. In May 2018, it was reported that China and Russia were in discussions to sign a memorandum on the issues of their cooperation in the Arctic region (TACC, 2018: *TACC*), but there has been no further definitive confirmation. According to Russian officials, Russia does not believe that China's presence in the Arctic is a warning to Russia, but sees it rather as a potential bilateral partner in the region (РИА Новости, 2018: *РИА Новости*).

It is obvious that both China and Russia intend to avoid putting all their stakes on one single project. At the same time, both sides try to diversify their investments in the Arctic region. Up until now, the Chinese government has focused on its Silk Road on the Ice projects, mainly on the "proactive energy cooperation of the NSR" based on scientific research. In addition to the Yamal project, China National

Chemical Engineering Group Corporation (CNCEC) and Russian ROSNEFT signed a cooperation agreement to develop the Payaha project in 2019. Today, China has research stations on Svalbard (Yellow River Station, est. 2004) and Iceland (the China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory, est. 2018). In Sweden, China has its first overseas land satellite receiving station (the China Remote Sensing Satellite North Polar Ground Station, est. 2016), and with Finland, it has agreed to establish a joint research center for Arctic space observation and data sharing services. China's first home-built icebreaker, *Xue Long II*, was finished in 2019, and plans for building a nuclear-powered icebreaker have been unveiled (Kopra, 2020: *The Arctic Institute*).

In addition to energy sectors, the China-Russia relationship also extends to other key areas with the involvement of a third party. On July 23, 2020, Russia's second-largest telecommunications company, MegaFon, disclosed that it had launched offshore survey work for a planned $1 billion trans-Arctic subsea fiber-optic cable project that will connect Europe and Asia. Beginning on August 5, the surveys will reportedly be undertaken by MegaFon's joint venture with the Finnish firm, Cinia, and the Russian-state-owned enterprise, Rosgeologia. The two-phase survey is expected to determine an optimal route for the Arctic cable by 2021. Some reports also indicate that the cable will have a landing point in China, and, indeed, state-owned China Telecom has consistently expressed interest in working with Cinia on this project (although there has been little tangible evidence of Chinese participation in the project to date). The Russian media and Russian commentators, however, have again recently alluded to the interest of "MegaFon's Chinese partners" in the context of the upcoming surveys (RWR Advisory Group, 2020: *RWR Advisory Group*).

Even though Russia occupies a pivotal position in the region, Arctic affairs are much more complicated than pure energy concerns. In other words, a Sino-Russian partnership in the energy sector reflects only partial facts of the broad dimensions of cooperation and competition in the Arctic region. Considering a private investor like Guggenheim, highly visible energy projects like Yamal LNG can only paint a fraction of the economic picture in the Arctic. Guggenheim's Arctic project inventory includes a data center in Norway, a Finnish biomass-to-ethanol plant, and a Swedish lithium-ion battery factory, among many other projects that fall outside the more conventional categories of fossil fuels, mining, roads and railways. For Russia, the receding sea ice represents the withdrawal of a natural barrier that has long protected its northern

border. For the non-Arctic states, they regard themselves as Arctic stakeholders. They want to make sure they are not blocked from the Arctic by the coastal states. They also want to make sure they are treated as equal partners (Dillow, 2018: *Consumer News and Business Channel*).

7. Conclusions

This article begins with theoretical inquiries on the utilities of structural realism and neoclassical realism in analyzing the Sino-Russia relationship in the Arctic area. We argue that structural factors, especially the new containment strategies adopted by the United States, help promote a closer partnership between China and Russia. However, it is the domestic context, such as historical memory and mutual distrust, which limit the scope and directions of the Sino-Russia relationship. Integrating structural and neoclassical aspects of international relations, we argue that promoting domestic economic development is a key factor to link Chinese and Russian initiatives in the Arctic region. On the other hand, joint efforts of domestic developments are still constrained by institutional inefficiency and concerns over economic dependence. We argue that the assertion of the formation of military expansionism based on a Sino-Russian alliance in the Arctic area is over-exaggerated.

Russia's position on Arctic sovereignty in terms of history, politics, and law is very clear. Russia's Arctic policy is embedded in such a macro framework of foreign policy. Under Putin's presidency, there will be no fundamental changes. Russia and China will engage in detailed diplomatic talks to serve the interests of the two countries. On the other hand, Russia's military readiness in the Arctic region has been a long-standing national goal. As a near Arctic state, China has demonstrated self-restraint on sovereignty and territorial issues in the Arctic region. China's diplomacy in Arctic affairs includes taking proactive action to consolidate its major power status and making potential contributions to multilateral mechanisms in the Arctic region. However, China's recent assertive actions in other regions still raise doubts about its real intentions in the Arctic.

The major factor constraining Russian Arctic activity is Russia's economic capacities. This key factor will influence whether Russia can make comprehensive investments in the region in the long run. The current economic situation and industrial structure of Russia does not suggest an optimistic outlook. The only real

option Russia has for economic assistance is China. On the other hand, Russia has a strong incentive to diversify inbound foreign direct investment and search for other economic partners from other parts of the world. This demonstrates Russia's suspicion of China's economic influences in the region. As the preceding pages indicate, the Chinese strategy is to integrate domestic local development with the Silk Road on the Ice through linkages with Russia's Eurasian Union plan. Whether such economic initiatives could alleviate mutual suspicions and enhance new mechanisms of deep integration deserves further attention.

On different occasions, China has confirmed its stance of respecting the sovereignty claims of the Artic states. Russia adopts the consistent stance that the sovereignty, territory, and resources of the Arctic are owned by the countries concerned and only by these parties. The Russians even regard the Arctic region like the Caspian Sea, and take the treatment model of the Caspian Sea into the treatment of the Arctic Ocean. According to the Russian perspective, near-Arctic countries, including China, can only act as auxiliary subjects to the dominant role of the core Arctic countries. Russia has expressed its strong and clear intention to serve as a dominant power with full control over the region. Given these pre-conditions of strong Russian assertiveness in Arctic relations, a formal military alliance between Russia and China will certainly be met with a strong response from NATO, and thus destabilize the security environment of the Arctic region.

Recent tensions in the Sino-American relationship may even push Russia and China closer. However, given the lack of solid mutual trust and confidence, a formal alliance between the two countries appears to be unrealistic. The Chinese may adopt multi-lateral diplomacy to strengthen ties with Nordic countries and undertake joint efforts of collective development in the Arctic region. As China is a newcomer to Arctic affairs and an emerging global power, its actions of multilateralism and Russia's counter actions will be the focus of both academics and policy makers for the foreseeable future.

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