



China and Russia in the Arctic: From a Bumpy Ride to Deeper Engagement

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By Daniel Balazs

SYNOPSIS

Amid growing navigability and strategic competition in the Arctic, China and Russia are deepening their security, commercial, and research cooperation within the region.

COMMENTARY

The Arctic is rapidly shifting from the periphery to the forefront of geopolitical attention. Alexus Grynkevich, a US Air Force general serving as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, recently stated that Russia-China collaboration in the Arctic is a concern for the alliance. His comments came as Beijing and Moscow are stepping up joint maritime and air patrols in the area.

A scrutiny of the development of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic reveals that the trend is here to stay. Russia's dependence on China's economic clout is exacerbated by international sanctions, while Beijing gains geographic access to commercial pathways and resource-rich areas by collaborating with Moscow. As the United States and European countries bolster their security posture in the region, they have to come to terms with increasing Sino-Russian presence there.

The Enduring Importance of the Arctic

The Arctic may be far up North, but it lies at the heart of critical contemporary geopolitical developments. First, as the ice caps are melting and the region is becoming more navigable, the prospect of shorter transit times between Europe and Northeast Asia makes it a focal point of economic interest for major trading states.

Second, it has a geostrategic location in the vicinity of major military powers such as the United States and [Russia](#), which station significant [military assets](#) there. For instance, Russia's Northern Fleet is based in the region, while the US operates the Pituffik Space Base in northern Greenland, with the rest of its Arctic forces spread across Alaska.

Third, the Arctic is home to vast [repositories](#) of [resources](#). The area [accounts](#) for about 10 per cent of global commercial oil output and roughly 25 per cent of commercial natural gas supplies. At the same time, the Arctic [hosts](#) abundant rare-earth elements, as well as extensive reserves of metals, minerals, and precious stones.

It is no wonder then that states scramble to enhance their commercial and security presence in the Arctic. In January 2026, the United States [expressed](#) a strong interest in gaining sovereign control of Greenland, purportedly to prevent China and Russia from [establishing](#) a strategic foothold. Subsequently, European states such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands started [bolstering](#) their military clout in the region.

This increasing engagement takes place in a geopolitical environment that is characterised by a shift in Sino-Russian cooperation on Arctic affairs.

The Arctic – Where China and Russia have not always seen eye to eye

China and Russia have a longstanding strategic [partnership](#) that encompasses military [drills](#), [trade](#), and science and technological [cooperation](#). This includes cooperation in the Arctic. The two sides [launched](#) the Ice Silk Road in 2017, which combines the development of the Arctic with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Nevertheless, the Sino-Russian partnership in Arctic affairs is [far from smooth](#). Most of the frictions stem from their different approaches to the region and state capacity.

Russia's engagement in the region is predominantly driven by the logic of [sovereignty](#) and national [security](#). Economic development is also part of Moscow's approach to the region, but Russia [lacks](#) the financial clout to [enhance](#) infrastructure [there](#), making it reliant on external funding and partnerships.

China, on the other hand, adopts a [diversified](#) approach to the Arctic, focusing on cooperating with multiple partners on development, commercial use, and scientific research in the region. At the same time, Beijing wields more financial [prowess](#) than Russia to facilitate the [construction](#) of infrastructure in the Arctic.

This divergence led to [friction](#) between the two sides in the past. In 2012, Russia [barred](#) Chinese research ships from carrying out surveys along the Northern Sea Route during China's fifth Arctic expedition. Russia was also [reluctant](#) to [support](#) China's bid for observer status in the Arctic Council, which was ultimately [granted](#) in 2013.

Russia's suspicion over Chinese activities in the Arctic persisted into the early 2020s. In 2021, reports [suggested](#) that some in Russia have tried to curb China's access to non-nuclear icebreaker technology. Furthermore, Russia's state nuclear company Rosatom [awarded](#) a €55 million tender for a floating [dock](#) to service nuclear icebreakers to Turkey's Kuzey Star Shipyard, [despite](#) a [lower](#) bid from China's Jiangsu Dajin Heavy Industry.

Geopolitical Pressure Warms up Icy Arctic Ties between Beijing and Moscow

In recent years, friction points between Russia and China seem to be [fading](#) away. As [international](#) actors [sanctioned](#) Russia to weaken its war effort in Ukraine, Moscow's relationship with Beijing is [deepening](#), and the former has become more welcoming of the latter in the Arctic. This shift is observable through their closer security, commercial, and research cooperation in the region.

When it comes to security, Russia's Federal Security Service and China's Coast Guard [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding to [cooperate](#) on maritime law enforcement in the Arctic in 2023. Subsequently, Russian and Chinese naval vessels [conducted](#) joint [patrols](#) near the Aleutian Islands off Alaska, which prompted the US to dispatch destroyers to monitor their activities.

Sino-Russian security cooperation persisted in 2024. In July that year, the North American Aerospace Defense Command [intercepted](#) two Russian Tu-95 and two Chinese H-6 bombers operating together near Alaska's Air Defence Identification Zone. In October, China's Coast Guard [announced](#) its first entry into Arctic Ocean waters during a joint patrol with Russia.

There is more to the Sino-Russian security posture in the Arctic than joint patrols. While details of such cooperation remain scarce, 2025 reports [suggest](#) that Russia and China are also stepping up their uncrewed [capabilities](#) in the Arctic, which provides unique advantages in a region with such harsh conditions.

In the realm of commerce, Russia seems to be jettisoning concerns that used to limit its cooperation with China. In 2024 and 2025, Moscow and Beijing [revealed](#) plans to construct high ice-class container ships and [agreed](#) to train specialists in polar navigation to support commercial shipping along the Northern Sea Route.

At the same time, Russia and China [restarted](#) joint maritime research missions in the Arctic in 2025, after a five-year hiatus. The mission [concentrated](#) on studying ancient ocean conditions, past climate patterns, and ecosystems.

The Prognosis: Deepening Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic

The key takeaway is that international sanctions exacerbated Moscow's reliance on Beijing and smoothed the formerly bumpy collaboration between China and Russia in the Arctic.

This trend is likely to persist, as the underlying drivers of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the region – continued international pressure on Russia, China's

deepening interest in the area, and a bolstered Western security posture there – remain firmly in place.

This trajectory is not without constraints. Russian sensitivities over sovereignty and control in the Arctic, continued sanctions exposure for Chinese firms, and the high operational and financial barriers of Arctic projects all have the potential to slow or complicate cooperation.

These dynamics point to an Arctic in which Sino-Russian coordination is likely to expand, but unevenly and incrementally, responding to opportunities and limitations. For regional states, the challenge will not be to halt this alignment, but to navigate an environment where joint Sino-Russian military, economic, and research activities become a more persistent feature of Arctic affairs.

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