

# Russia's Reimagined Arctic in the Age of Geopolitical Competition

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## Abstract

The melting Arctic serves as a precursor for a renewed geopolitical contest among the great powers. Russian policy posture of developing Yamal LNG and opening of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a global shipping artery sets the course for Russia on the Arctic's chessboard. Similarly, the revival of the Northern Fleet shows Moscow's anticipation to counter the maritime threats coming from the United States. Meanwhile, the US approach is likely to challenge the Russian claims on NSR and Arctic militarization in the context of Sino-Russian cooperation. Finally, using the qualitative content analysis, the article argues that the melting Arctic has enabled Russia to increase its geopolitical influence due to its topography and military might, which has intensified geopolitical competition in the region.

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The Arctic is an ample tale of economics and oil, territories, and politics, particularly the Russian reassertion on the Arctic region.<sup>1</sup> Climate change is a precursor for the new geopolitical contest as the dawn of global warming is changing the peaceful pace of the region. The unprecedented changes in the Arctic are setting the course for a challenging geopolitical situation for Russia vis-à-vis other major competitors, including the United States, collaborating with its allies to counter the Russian territorial claims and maintain a free and open Arctic.<sup>2</sup>

Russian Arctic strategy aims to develop untapped energy reservoirs to elevate its economy.<sup>3</sup> This includes the interrelated projects of Yamal LNG (liquefied natural gas) and the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which are strengthening the Russian economy, reducing maritime routes, and assisting Russia to become a dominant power in the region. Besides this, Russian attempts to develop and utilize the NSR as a global shipping artery raise the value of the Arctic in the Kremlin's geopolitical calculus. Moreover, Russia perceives the United States as a geopolitical competitor in the Arctic. Thus, Moscow is undergoing an overhaul of the Soviet-era bases to counter threats to its oil and gas terminals and reinforce its position as a maritime power.<sup>4</sup> Russia's declining energy assets and its status of an energy superpower as its foreign policy tool are the motives to maintain its hold on the untapped energy reservoirs in the region.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the interplay of economics and geopolitics has transformed the region into a hotspot for a renewed geopolitical competition among the great powers.

The United States has been the least active in the Arctic region after the Cold War. Nevertheless, it holds important strategic interests in the growing Russian and Chinese presence in the region. Washington's approach is likely to discourage the Russian claims on the NSR and militarization of the Arctic. Similarly, the United States is actively building the icebreakers to counter the Russian superiority in the icebreakers fleet.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the US collaboration with its regional NATO allies aims to establish security equilibrium against the growing Sino-Russian cooperation in the region.

The shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Arctic has posed several challenges to the Russian dominance. These challenges will likely hinder the Russian economic and geopolitical ambitions. Thus, the changing dynamics requires Russia to undertake a comprehensive approach regarding the United States and its allies. Likewise, Russia must utilize Sino-Russian cooperation prudently in its shared animosity with the United States, coupled with balancing Chinese cooperation by solving out the legal discrepancies. Thus, a coherent approach will enable Russia to pursue its broader economic and geopolitical goals.

The growing Russian activities in the region are knotted with its broader geopolitical and economic goals. Therefore, to understand Russia's interplay of politics and economics, this article is divided into four parts. The first part undertakes an in-depth analysis of the changing dynamics in Russia's Arctic policy. It also analyzes the policy actions including Yamal LNG, the opening of the NSR, and the revival of the Northern Fleet. The second part will analyze the role of the United States as a geopolitical competitor as it is concerned with the Russian and Chinese presence in the Arctic. The third part analyzes Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic region. The last part concludes the article by discussing challenges and the way forward.

### **Russian Arctic Policy**

The Arctic has gained prominence to the Russian international agenda. The resource competition in the barren region can easily be a source of conflict in the near future. The upsurge in the Russian activities can be seen in the revival of the Northern Fleet, development of new oil and gas terminals including Yamal and Shtokman, and expansions in Russian exclusive economic zones by taking approval from the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.<sup>7</sup>

The continuous warming of the Arctic coupled with aspects of national security and Russia's deteriorating relations with the West, especially after the Ukrainian crisis, have forced Russia to look for alternative options. Meanwhile, the increasing significance of the Indo-Pacific is reflected in Russian policy documents that indicate the priority of a "turn East."<sup>8</sup> These drivers of the Russian Arctic strategy determine the main objectives, primary goals, and strategic policies of the Russian Federation. Also, it validates the measures regarding the strategic planning of social and economic development and preserving Russia's national security and territorial integrity. The Arctic zone of the Russian Federation comprises the areas of Sakha Republic, Arkhangelsk, and Murmansk. Additionally, Krasnoyarsk territory, Nenets, Yamal-Nenets, and Chukchi districts are the areas where Russia advocates for autonomous rights and jurisdictions under the perspective of international law.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Russia Arctic Policy 2020–2035***

The policy posture adopted by Moscow as its Arctic strategy 2020 includes the utilization of the Arctic as a strategic resource base to fulfill the country's socio-economic needs.<sup>10</sup> It also centers on using the NSR as a national transport route for Russia in the Arctic. The strategic priorities of the Russian Federation can be

seen in the expansion of the resource base region to fulfill its energy needs.<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising that the Arctic accounts for 10 percent of Russia's GDP and 20 percent of its exports. Therefore, the region is crucial in the strategic designs of the Kremlin. While dealing with military and security, the Russian government favors an auspicious operating regime, including the army and other military formations. Therefore, the deployment of the Northern Fleet demonstrates the Russian intent to protect the NSR. Meanwhile, the policy posture of 2035 shows the Kremlin's urge to access the naval chokepoints in Greenland, Iceland, and the UK to demonstrate the significance of Russia's sea power. Hence, the opening of the NSR and the revival of the Northern Fleet is transforming Russia from a continental to maritime power in the region.

The parallels in the policy postures of 2020 and 2035 exist in the Russian national interest in naming the Arctic as a strategic resource base. Moscow is aiming to utilize the opportunity to develop energy reserves, including 85.1 trillion cubic meters of natural gas and 17.3 billion metric tons of crude and condensate oil. Moreover, it is also trying to intensify its LNG production to 91 million tons by 2035. Furthermore, it is planning to increase the role of the Arctic in crude and condensate oil production to 20 percent in 2024, 23 percent in 2030, and eventually 26 percent in 2035. However, these economic gains are highly dependent on the successful functioning of the NSR.<sup>12</sup>

The strategic plan to develop the NSR as a global shipping route will allow the Kremlin to play a dominant role in Arctic geopolitics. While referring to the security interests linked to the NSR, the role of the Northern Seas Fleet cannot be overlooked to intercept the aggressive actions by NATO countries in Norway.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the intensified activities of the Northern Fleet to establish an effective monitoring system for surface and underwater activities show how regulation and control of shipping along the NSR is a priority for the military as an effective stakeholder.<sup>14</sup>

### **Opening of the NSR: A Strategic Enabler for Yamal LNG and the Northern Fleet**

The development of the NSR is crucial for the Kremlin's strategic designs and the Arctic's future geopolitical course. The NSR remains closed for eastbound shipping for half of the year due to Arctic ice. The change in the climate patterns unlocked the NSR much earlier during the past year, which significantly reduced the time for Yamal LNG cargoes to reach East Asian markets.<sup>15</sup> The success of Yamal LNG endeavors on developing the Arctic infrastructure depends upon the functioning of the NSR because it can assist the Kremlin in extending its influ-

ence to the Asia-Pacific.<sup>16</sup> Yamal LNG will allow the Kremlin to attract potential customers by offering them the Arctic LNG at a low cost. Moreover, Novatek's smooth price enhances the company's portfolio in global market positioning.<sup>17</sup> James Henderson has argued that the NSR not only provides a shortcut from Yamal to Asia, but also provides an alternative to the US-controlled maritime routes. He further asserts that the Russian military modernization along the NSR has made it a "potential leverage point" amid growing geopolitical competition.<sup>18</sup>

The Northern Fleet remains a focal point when it comes to maritime shipping in the NSR. The Kremlin has elevated the significance of the Northern Fleet by upgrading its status to a military district. According to Matthew Melino and Heather A. Conley, Moscow's ambitions to project Russian power in the Arctic is an "avenue of approaches" for United States.<sup>19</sup> The Murmansk-based fleet is crucial for safeguarding maritime shipping in the NSR. Moreover, the addition of offensive and defensive capabilities to the Northern Fleet includes the equipment of S-400 and hypersonic missiles, which shows the Kremlin's concern regarding the security of the route. Moreover, the induction of the *Knyaz Vladimir*, a Borei-A strategic missile submarine armed with Bulava ICBMs and 667BDRM Delfin submarines equipped with Sineva ICBMs, is a powerful signal to other actors regarding the Russian defense planning of the Arctic and the NSR.<sup>20</sup>

The growing Russian military presence along the NSR is due to the evolving security concerns revolving around the defense of Russian national security and the denial of US maneuvers. The Kremlin's Northern Fleet is crucial to deny the US claims of freedom of navigation and maintaining Russian status quo in the region. Although the NSR is a strategic enabler for the Kremlin, it however requires the Northern Fleet to deter the United States, a geopolitical challenge for Russia.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the success of the Kremlin's policy is dependent upon the successful functioning of the NSR.

### ***Policy Actions***

Yamal LNG: Gas has remained a strategic element for the Kremlin's economic and political interplay. Russia has used gas as a geopolitical weapon for many years.<sup>22</sup> The project of Yamal LNG is believed to harness 926 billion cubic meters of natural gas. The construction began in 2012 and will last till 2021, costing 27 billion USD.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it is the most successful LNG project during the last decade regarding projects and cost management.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the efficacy of Yamal LNG can be assessed through its efforts to fetch an international consortium. It comprises the French company with LNG expertise (Total), a major consumer of LNG in the form of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and a major financing source in the Silk Road Fund. Similarly, Yamal's success in buying

sales contracts from customers in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and South Asia has enhanced the project to take its final investment development in 2013. However, with a high pace in accordance with its schedule, the rapid development of the project had put its international and domestic rivals in disrepute.

Yamal LNG has directly attracted the Kremlin's support, which can be seen in the proposal of the Russian energy minister, Dmitry Medvedev, who ensured the Kremlin's support for the LNG project, which includes a tax exemption for the first 250 billion cubic meters of natural gas, 20 million tons of condensate and exemption of property tax under the Mineral Resource Extraction Tax regime for 12 years. Similarly, the project also reaped \$19 billion—the largest ever project financing in Russia. This leap forward has presented Russia and China with limited choices: either to defect or cooperate. Russian dependence on East Asian markets for the sale of LNG products and Beijing's dependence on Russia to take its expeditions in the Arctic makes it evident that both players cannot get an optimal outcome while deviating unilaterally from the game. Meanwhile, the interstate agreement between Russia and China had also assisted in attracting Chinese shareholders and loans from the Chinese Development Bank. Therefore, Yamal LNG's efficacy in developing hydrocarbon reserves makes it a significant part of Russia's geostrategic calculations.

The rationale behind the Kremlin's support of the project lies in the fact that it has been trying to expand the scope of the LNG industry to reduce its reliance on European markets.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the development of infrastructure, notably the Sabetta port, airfield,<sup>26</sup> and the construction of LNG tankers and icebreaker fleet that will perform 200 voyages per year, requires direct and indirect support from the government.<sup>27</sup> Despite the failures of the Kahrasavey, Baltic LNG, and Shtokman projects, it is necessary for the Kremlin to support Yamal LNG because it enables the Kremlin to achieve its various economic objectives. Nevertheless, Russia knows that without the intensification of the activities on the Arctic and attracting foreign customers it will be difficult for Russia to utilize the region as a strategic resource base. Hence, the Yamal LNG has secured various deals to sell LNG products to its European and Asian customers on a durable basis.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the NSR, with its east- and westbound routes, makes the European and Asian markets accessible. Therefore, the LNG exports coupled with Russian influence over the NSR acts as an enabler for the Kremlin to enhance its status as *an energy superpower and utilize its geopolitical and economic interplay efficiently.*

Opening of the Northern Sea Route: The opening of the NSR is part of the Kremlin's strategic priorities, providing it a shortcut from Europe to Asia.<sup>29</sup> The route significantly reduces the distance from Yamal to Asia as compared to the Suez Canal route. It connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and is considered an

important trade route for Europe and Asia. The route runs from the Russian coast of Novaya Zemlya in the west to the Bering Strait in the east. However, the route remained neglected after the demise of the Soviet Union, both domestically and internationally.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, the commencement of climate change compelled the Putin administration to revive the route, which can be seen in a policy document of 2008 explaining the “exploitation of Northern Sea Route as a national unitary transport communication,” which prioritizes the NSR in Kremlin’s strategic domain.<sup>31</sup> The functioning of the NSR will reduce the geographical limitations on the Kremlin’s sea power while easing its access to the sea.<sup>32</sup> From the Baltic front, Russian ships have to face the sea power of Nordic states in the Gulf of Finland and the Danish straits. Moreover, the Black Sea Fleet had to pass through the Dardanelles strait or Suez Canal route. Hence, the opening of the Northwest Passage and the shipping between the Eurasian land and the Arctic has enabled Russia to become a dominant maritime power. The Kremlin’s strategic designs, as aforementioned, are to utilize the NSR as a global shipping artery under its jurisdiction concerning the international treaties of the Russian Federation.

The NSR is a fuel-efficient alternative for shipping between Far East and Europe and decreases the peril of piracy. The Kremlin is setting out its desire to increase the traffic in the NSR to 80 million tons per year by 2024.<sup>33</sup> The timing of the goal may not seem realistic; however, by 2030, the NSR will emerge as a key trade route. The available statistics of 2018 depict a significant increase in the gross revenue of transportation by 84 percent per annum. The turnover via the NSR amounted to 19.7 million tons, among which Novatek’s project accounted for 8.4 million tons, crude oil and refined products for 7.8 million tons, and gas condensate for 0.8 million tons. It shows that hydrocarbons comprised 86 percent of total transportation in 2018.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, 2019 statistics witnessed a significant surge in the transportation turnover to 31.5 million tons that marked an increase in maritime cargo traffic. Therefore, the NSR is among the crucial strategic calculations of the Kremlin’s policy postures.<sup>35</sup>

The interrelated projects of Yamal LNG and the opening of the NSR are crucial for the commercial and geopolitical future of the country. The opening of the NSR will strengthen the Russian influence in the Arctic and provide short access to Asia-Pacific and European markets. Moreover, the strengthening of Russian presence in the Arctic and supplementing the socioeconomic conditions of the region depend upon the Kremlin’s strong influence on the NSR.

Revival of the Northern Fleet: Since the Cold War, the Arctic has held a geopolitical significance in the systemic competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. However, it lost its geopolitical relevance in the 1990s after the

demise of Soviet Union, but again reemerged due to Russia's determination to reinstate its military prowess soon after the North Pole expedition in 2007.<sup>36</sup> The Russian Arctic strategy aims to sustain Russia's status as an energy superpower by developing its oil and gas terminals. Similarly, the refurbishment of the NSR is linked with the Russian objective to preserve its "territorial integrity." The yoke between these policy postures resonated in Putin's statement during his election campaign of 2011 that "*We will also beef up our military bases there, and we will certainly increase national security in the north.*"<sup>37</sup> However, the economic concerns of Russian Arctic policy are knotted with the matter of prestige that ultimately relies on military might. The Northern Fleet and its nuclear-powered submarines equipped with ballistic missiles consolidate the Kremlin's beliefs on the primacy of "*hard power.*"<sup>38</sup>

The privilege of the Northern Fleet not only enhances the Kremlin's geographical position but also grants it a "*strategic advantage*" to conduct hostile operations against its adversaries.<sup>39</sup> Geostrategists acknowledge the significance of the Northern Fleet by addressing Russia's lack of access to the sea. This is evident from H. P. Smolka's analysis of the Russian fleet stationed at Murmansk, which has access to the high seas thus transforming Russia from land to naval power.<sup>40</sup>

The Kremlin has recently upgraded the status of the Northern Fleet amid the growing significance of the Arctic in its policy circles. The presidential decree signed by Putin<sup>41</sup> granted the Northern Fleet the status equivalent to the existing four military districts of East, West, and South.<sup>42</sup> Rob Huebert analyzed this move as "*...a recognition that offensive and defensive capabilities of the Northern Fleet represent one of the most important elements of the Russian military.*"<sup>43</sup> The Kremlin's modernization of the Northern Fleet aims to protect its oil and gas terminals, which are strategic assets for the Kremlin. This development includes the stationing of the S-400, which strengthens the Russian air defense capabilities. Moreover, the Kremlin has increased its offensive capabilities by equipping the MIG-31 of the Northern Fleet with Kh-47M2 Kinzhal missile, which will project the military prowess of the Kremlin in the Arctic.<sup>44</sup>

The security concerns linked with the NSR revolve around preserving Russian territorial integrity and denying foreign incursions. The Northern Fleet remains at the center when it comes to the regulation of shipping in the NSR. Moreover, the Kremlin is also intensifying its presence to intercept the actions of the foreign military forces in the region, which includes the joint exercises of the United States, Norway, and NATO above the Arctic Circle in 2018.<sup>45</sup> The access of the Northern Fleet to the High Seas will provide it an offensive capability, while the functioning of the NSR will put Russia in a position to control the traffic in the



region. Hence, the Kremlin's aggressive military buildup in the Arctic is to contain NATO and respond to the US maneuvers.

### **The United States as the Primary Geopolitical Competitor**

The emergence of Russia as a militarily and strategically dominant power has conflicted with the US interests in the region as Washington views the growing Russian influence as a threat to its national security. The changing dynamics are the prelude for the United States to counter Russian military presence in the region. Russian flexing of military muscle has raised worries among the Arctic states, including US allies. Biden's administration therefore is concerned by enhanced Russian military capabilities.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, increased Sino-Russian cooperation has raised alarms in Washington, evident in the newly published US Arctic Strategies—notably the US Navy's *A Blue Arctic Blueprint* and the US Army's *Regaining Arctic Dominance*.

The US Department of Defense's *Arctic Strategy 2019* identified three threats to the US national security interests in the region.<sup>47</sup> The first threat is the possibility of an attack on the US homeland, made more likely by increasing cooperation between Russia and China.<sup>48</sup> The second threat is the challenge to the rules-based order from Russia and China by using the NSR and possible use of force against foreign vessels operating against Russian regulations. That is why American officials have regarded the region as “nobody's lake.”<sup>49</sup> Finally, the third threat is the possibility of “strategic spillover” from rising tensions in the Arctic.<sup>50</sup> To counter these threats, a response is expected from US military presence in the region, specifically by the US Coast Guard. However, as per the hearing on maritime security, the US Coast Guard is regarded as weak compared to the Russian Navy.<sup>51</sup> This position has concerned the United States over aggressive actions of Russia and China.<sup>52</sup> However, it also shows the gaps in the US ability to maintain its rules-based order in the Arctic.<sup>53</sup>

Russia's large icebreaker fleet, increasing investment of China in Greenland, and the declaration of the NSR as a “polar silk road” has alarmed the policy circles in Washington.<sup>54</sup> Washington is eager to build icebreakers, evident as the United States lacks the “hard power” in the region as compared to the Russian icebreaker fleet.<sup>55</sup> However, this will remain the case because the United States will not be able to create its “largest icebreaker” until 2024.<sup>56</sup>

The US strategy in the Arctic will be moving on the three lines of action. First, it will aim to enhance the capabilities of the US Coast Guard in the Arctic.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the United States will be using the International Maritime Organization to adopt international code for ships operating in polar water and to question Russian maneuvers in the region.<sup>58</sup> Second, to strengthen the rules-based order,

the United States will be eager to cooperate with NATO allies in the region.<sup>59</sup> It is evident from Biden's faith in the alliance and the most recent discussion over US-Canadian defense cooperation.<sup>60</sup> Yet, it will be based on adding strategic and operational depth to the regional position of Arctic allies. The Trump administration debated Greenland's sovereignty, Denmark's role as a strategic enabler for US interests in the region, and surveillance of Russian actions.<sup>61</sup> Third, the United States will aim to promote resilience and prosperity in the region. Hence, US promotion of Arctic values is evident from Trump's approach toward the Arctic Council. Despite the reluctance of Trump's government toward multilateralism, he was vocal about promoting cooperation among Arctic states through the Arctic Council.<sup>62</sup> However, while conceptualizing Biden's climate policy and his approach toward multilateralism, his actions will be aiming to use the "Arctic Council to strengthen US relations with allies."<sup>63</sup>

Historically, US ties with regional allies go back to 1867, when the United States acquired Alaska and fostered economic, diplomatic, and strategic ties with the Arctic states that are the part of NATO.<sup>64</sup> These allies have been supportive of US military presence since WWII, especially Denmark and Canada. The United States was able to establish bases that were critical to the war effort in the High North and the Arctic, hence adding to the strategic depth of the United States in case of any escalation. These strategic points are marked as critical ventures to the US strategic calculations that will create a geopolitical challenge for Russia and China.

The United States has been skeptical toward China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has gained a new dimension due to the melting Arctic.<sup>65</sup> The Chinese investments in technological and environmental domain have posed a challenge for the United States in the region. Moreover, China's plan to gain a military base in Greenland in 2016 has signaled to the United States that China is using the cover of its investments to plant a military toehold in the region.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the United States is incentivizing the region by building three Greenland airports to pressure the government against the Chinese deal.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the strengthening of diplomatic and commercial relations with Greenland is to diversify the economic prospects beyond fishing, strengthening ties, and to counter expanding Chinese influence in the region. Similarly, Pompeo's bid for European and North American states to form a coalition against Russian and Chinese interests in the region increases the geopolitical competition between the regional players.<sup>68</sup>

In an interview, Carla Sands, US ambassador to Denmark, stated that Denmark is "*willing to fight with Americans shoulder-to-shoulder and do things that many of our allies won't.*"<sup>69</sup> Thus, Washington's decades-long disinterest in the Arctic is reversing and leading toward strong US-Danish cooperation against Russia. At

the same time the Pentagon can be seen rallying its allies, indicated by Pompeo's statement that ". . .we are counting on our partners in Greenland and Denmark to lead with us."<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, Norway's government requested the United States to increase the number of marines from 330 to 700, which has matched Washington's desire to intensify military presence in the region.<sup>71</sup> Hence, geopolitical proximity of these actions will increase hostility between Norway and Russia, as Russia has warned Norway that such actions would have "consequences."<sup>72</sup> Therefore, it is evident that the stage is heating up for competition in the region.

Despite the military superiority that Russia enjoys in terms of icebreakers, US military actions cannot be sidelined. In October 2018, the USS *Harry S. Truman* and its associated escort sailed above the Arctic Circle, the first such strike group to do so since the Cold War.<sup>73</sup> This operation in the Norwegian Sea means that Washington is raising its game in the Arctic. Moreover, VADM Linda L. Fagan, who oversees Coast Guard operations in the Arctic and Pacific, states that "*we're obviously watching both the Russians and the Chinese quite closely.*" Despite the vitality of the geopolitical competition, the difference in military power might hurt the United States.<sup>74</sup>

The weak US naval presence can be observed from statement offered by Coast Guard Capt. Gregory Tlapa, who commands the lone USS military icebreaker traveling to the Arctic each year. He stated that, "The nation doesn't have deep-bench strength in terms of capabilities to operate up here and project power and protect our national interests."<sup>75</sup> This is why the US Navy, like the other branches of the US armed forces, has introduced a new Arctic strategy.<sup>76</sup> The United States has maintained its military presence in the northern base of Thule, Greenland, which is 750 miles north of the Arctic, hosting radar systems that will scan for any nuclear missiles launched against the United States.<sup>77</sup> Although the United States lacks the deep-bench strength in the Arctic, recent steps are raising its influence in the region.

The US contestation for military dominance in the region will be facing hindrance from the ground and sea routes, due to unavailability of icebreakers and the increasing necessity of strategic cooperation with regional actors. Therefore, the United States is planning to introduce air combat planning in which the United States will have two squadrons of F-35-A in Alaska by 2022, joining the two squadrons of F-22 Raptors already there.<sup>78</sup>

Strategically, the United States might deploy a nuclear submarine fleet due to the rising tensions and disparity in the military capability. The deployment of the large surface warships and sea-based ballistic missile defense systems in the Arctic is due to the periodic visits of US submarines.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the United States will enhance its capabilities to intercept Russian intercontinental ballistic missile

(ICBM) launches at the initial phase and making a preventive strike by ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles, irrespective of their nuclear or nonnuclear nature.<sup>80</sup> However, the execution of these plans will create a hard security threat in the region, which can be observed from the negative response of Russia over joint UK-US naval exercises in the Norwegian and Barents seas in May 2020.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, in October 2019, the largest Russian military exercise in the Arctic since the end of the Cold War was held, which further exacerbated the growing complexities of the region's militarization regardless of global warming.<sup>82</sup> These strategic actions, along with the weakening position of the United States and intensified Sino-Russian economic cooperation will compel the United States to maintain a military toehold in the region.

According to Ambassador David Baltonn, from "America First" to a policy orientation focused on "becoming less isolationist," Washington is keen to cooperate with more than just NATO members in the Arctic.<sup>83</sup> In comparison to Biden, Trump was more vocal toward strategic engagement in the region while Biden tends to be less aggressive.<sup>84</sup> Ulf Sverdrup, director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, is of the view that despite the change in administration, Washington's policies will reflect a "continuity to US foreign policy rather than a change to it."<sup>85</sup>

The United States shares considerable territory with the Arctic, and the region's security environment is tied with the matter of homeland security and national interests. Russia's attempt to utilize the region as a strategic resource base is dragging the region toward geopolitical and resource competition. US rivals Russia and China are utilizing their economic and military power to maintain and enhance their influence at the expense of US national interests.<sup>86</sup> The significance of the region for the Russian military power and development of the oil and gas reserves compels Russia to pursue goals contrary to those of the United States. Similarly, Chinese ambitions to gain access to the Arctic's resources and sea routes to enhance its rise is concerning for the United States.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, Russian inter-related economic and political interests coupled with the extended strategic and geopolitical competition are an irritant to the US interests in the region.

### **Sino-Russian Cooperation and the United States**

The United States as a geopolitical competitor provides a pretext for Sino-Russian cooperation in the region. Russia's domestic challenges catalyzed by its international image due to the Ukrainian crisis ask for greater economic cooperation with the world. Therefore, the Kremlin requires military superiority as well as economic well-being of state activities in the region.<sup>88</sup> Thus, political incentives

are only achievable if Moscow can create opportunities for the world to accept the rules-based order Russia has envisioned to support its regional goals.

Sino-Russian cooperation has entered from two fronts—economic and diplomatic—which is observed in the collaboration over Yamal LNG and the acceptance of China as a “near-Arctic state.” The acceptance of China as a near-Arctic state shows Moscow’s determination to strengthen their already 110-billion-dollar trade relationship by adding the Arctic as another area in which to cooperate.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, economic investments such as the Belkomur railway, the harbor in Arkhangelsk, and the 1161km-long railroad construction from the western Siberian town of Solikamsk through Syktyvkar to Arkhangelsk, are some of the most important infrastructural development to strengthen bilateral ties in the region.<sup>90</sup> This enthusiasm of the Russian officials shows the prospects for the cooperation, but the ball still remains in Russia’s court; the cooperation enables Russia to expand its economic activities and allows strategic engagement with other regional players. Thus, it will enable Russia to encircle the US activities in the region.

Sino-Russian relations are decades long: the first cooperative effort in the Arctic was observed in 2013<sup>91</sup> when the CNPC contracted with Rosneft to survey three areas of the Arctic in the Pechora and Barents Seas. Russia’s oil and gas cooperation with China in the Arctic<sup>92</sup> is comprehensive, which remains to be balanced and pragmatic.<sup>93</sup> Russia is eager for an economic boost, and China wants to expand economic cooperation to avoid the “Strait of Malacca Dilemma,” which is mutually inclusive for both.<sup>94</sup> The Russian Far East has provided grounds for increasing the value of cooperation.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the expansion of BRI projects in the region will open doors for “China’s Arctic Silk Road”<sup>96</sup> while compelling the policy makers to expand partnership beyond the Arctic Circle.<sup>97</sup>

Sino-Russian cooperation is expected to increase regional economic integration. The 2017 development to enhance shipping via the NSR through joint conjunction of the Eurasian Economic Union and BRI provides both sides a chance to align their mutual interests along the NSR.<sup>98</sup> Despite US hostility toward Sino-Russian cooperation, both sides have aimed to cooperate with regional actors. This is evident in 2019’s joint statement that cooperation will be “*based on the rights and taking into account the interests of the coastal state.*”<sup>99</sup> These efforts lift the scope of the mutually recognized principle of cooperation; along with this, it improves the chances for Russia to mitigate legal discrepancies that, if supported by the regional actors, will ardently create a Russian-based order.

The shared interest in the technological development of the Arctic Ocean has forced both states to join the international trans-Arctic cabling scheme. Furthermore, both are interested in remote sensing between GLONASS—a space-based

satellite navigation system—and the Chinese satellite navigation system BeiDou. This joint endeavor will improve the navigation situation in the Arctic.<sup>100</sup>

Russia remains the anchor of China's engagement in the Arctic. Certainly, the nature of cooperation will have implications for the region, more specifically the United States. However, there exist reasons for such a bond between Putin and Xi Jinping. First, the Chinese desire for “near-Arctic state” status requires Russia's partnership. Russia's status as an Arctic superpower and its ability to influence regional affairs will intensify the nature of Sino-Russian cooperation. Second, Russia is eyeing Chinese financing to commercialize its underdeveloped Far North, especially along the NSR. Hence, these activities will certainly intensify the Sino-Russian cooperation in the region.

Both states cooperate on joint gas projects, including the Sila Sibiri (Power of Siberia) pipeline,<sup>101</sup> which will link the Chinese Irkutsk region with the Siberian gas field in the Yakutia Republic. The agreement was signed between Putin and Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli, which includes other possible explorations, notably Vankor field, which will be linked by an agreement with CNPC. Furthermore, the joint effort to transfer 3 million tons of liquefied natural gas from their collaborative Yamal LNG project for the next 20 years shows the bolstering economic cooperation.<sup>102</sup> These efforts are viewed as the Kremlin's urge to find compliant partners to lift its economy while improving Russia's position in the region.

Moreover, strategic cooperation between Russia and China aims to increase counter actions against the US Navy along the NSR. Hence, the increasing Sino-Russian cooperation raise the concerns for the United States as Beijing's cooperation with Kremlin will not be stopping anytime as no official agreement exists between Russia and China over the limits of Chinese presence in the region. Thus, Washington is pressured to expand its role in the region.

However, there exist several divergences in Sino-Russian cooperation. Despite the strategic reproachment, China neither shares Russian ambitions to confront the United States directly, nor is it willing to harm its relationship with the United States for the sake of the Russian Arctic agenda. Aglaya Snetkov has termed Russia as a “loud dissenter” and China as a “cautious partner.”<sup>103</sup> It is evident in the statement of Chinese diplomat Fu Ying who stressed that “China has no interest in a formal alliance with Russia, nor in forming anti-US or anti-Western bloc of any kind.”<sup>104</sup> Similarly, despite China's growing bilateral engagement with Russia, it is still cautious and has sought ways to steer itself out from the international security crisis with Russian involvement, notably in Ukraine and Syria.

Despite the optimism regarding Sino-Russian cooperation, there exist various limitations to Sino-Russian cooperation. The grievances and mistrust rooted in

the history and differences in the strategic culture, particularly on the Russian side regarding the shift in relative power.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, China's priority regarding its economic growth compels her to align with the United States, which is Beijing's trading partner. Bobo Lo has argued that China and Russia "share neither a long-term vision of the world nor a common understanding of their respective places in it."<sup>106</sup> Hence it can be argued that Sino-Russian cooperation is more like a flexible strategic partnership in which both states are pursuing a pragmatic approach of cooperation on mutual strategic interests. Nevertheless, there exists no long-term strategy to assist or defend each other.

### ***Challenges***

The engagement of Russia in traditional political cooperation can be a prelude to the prudent deployment of NATO forces in Iceland, which can create a security situation in the region while hindering the economic incentives that remain to be the Kremlin's major interest. Similarly, the United States will be eager to create a regional rift in the Arctic through its NATO allies and its Coast Guard activities in the Bering Sea, which is threatening to the Kremlin's socioeconomic and geostrategic interests.

Similarly, China's eagerness to access Arctic resources at the expense of Russia will allow it to hold an upper hand in a relationship between the two.<sup>107</sup> China's short-term goals have clearly been supported by the Kremlin. However, there is no mutual agreement over long-term strategy, which can temper the Sino-Russian partnership as a result of unfulfilled expectations.

Moreover, Beijing's influx in the region by the stratagem of investment, trap, and rule can threaten the Kremlin's orientation in the region. Despite Sino-Russian cooperation, the Chinese role remains skeptical as it desires to maintain a military foothold in the region, which is evident in the Chinese urge to buy a military base in Greenland.<sup>108</sup>

A possible sanction over Russia is expected as discussed in the Report of the Congressional Research Services, which can trigger the prospects for Russian economic gains.<sup>109</sup> Paradoxically, the relation could deteriorate if Russia is unable to balance out its economic cooperation between China and other actors. China's rise and Russia's need of capital for its Arctic project could pose another obstacle for the Kremlin in Sino-Russian cooperation. This orientation is not only expanding the right of the non-Arctic states but threatening the Kremlin to create a Russian-centric regional order.<sup>110</sup> Russia's sovereign claim over the NSR is not legally acceptable as per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), hence viewing the NSR as part of its territorial waters unravels the legal discrepancies.

## ***Way Forward***

The increasing geopolitical competition in the Arctic has posed several challenges to Russian interests in the region. Therefore, the changing dynamics require Russia to undertake a comprehensive approach to overcome the challenges posed to its dominance in the region.

Sino-Russian cooperation is based on shared animosity toward the United States, which is a prelude for the Kremlin to cooperate with Beijing by transforming short-term strategy into a long-term strategy to hold the regional stage. If both states can introduce a joint statement over regional cooperation for a longer run, then it will allow Russia to understand the long-term ambitions of China.<sup>111</sup>

To keep the pawns under the Kremlin's control, Russia must balance its cooperative efforts with China against the possibility of falling into a debt-trap. Therefore, Russia must add other players such as India, South Korea, Japan, and Saudi Arabia to diversify its capital pool. For this the ministry of the Russian Far East and Arctic development must be utilized to untangle the potential of the High North and its combination with the Asian states.<sup>112</sup> This is where China must be involved to utilize transport corridors Primorye 1 and 2 (Ministry of Commerce of the PRC 2018) to increase trade, hence opening the European and Central Asian markets for Russia.<sup>113</sup> However, this long-term strategic goal is plausible only if Russia is able to prevent any escalation of conflict with the United States, which will be eager to create a regional rift either through regional platforms, the NATO alliance, or Coast Guard activities in the Bering Sea.

Despite of the growing ante over military competition and the unprecedented naval prowess of Russia in the region, the Kremlin must have an offensive-defensive policy action in the region. Maximization of power is important, yet it is also important to maintain Russia's leading status quo in the Arctic.<sup>114</sup> Hence, it is important to keep the area free of conflict to reap the benefits from the NSR and allow maximum cooperation in the region.

The NSR provides the Kremlin with an opportunity for economic gains and indicates the Kremlin's commitment to the multipolar world. The crisis in Ukraine hurt Russia's global reputation. Therefore, the opening of the NSR, its commitment to build projects in the High North, and the creation of opportunities for international businesses must be utilized to improve its global standing. To achieve these interests Russia must avoid military confrontation of any length with regional players, specifically the United States, which will increase the trust deficit that exists between the Kremlin and the world. Russia plays a vital role in the Arctic<sup>115</sup> by providing icebreaker and navigation support as well as energy pro-



duction. This will allow regional actors to increase their trust in the Kremlin's position which is plausible only through trade, in the region.

Similarly, while joint military exercises can act as a counterweight to US pressure, the Kremlin must keep Chinese military presence out of the region.<sup>116</sup> This doesn't mean that China's desire to hold a military base in the region must meet a green signal from the Kremlin. The maintenance of security in case of confrontation with the United States depends on Russia; China has no interest in being drawn into military conflict with the United States in the region. The Kremlin must assure China that any cooperation in the sphere of maritime security will be to protect mutual economic activities.

Moreover, Russia must solve the legal discrepancies in the region because China, in the interim, is not questioning Russia's position in the Arctic. The right to passage along with Russian definition of the NSR is viewed as a violation of UNCLOS by Chinese experts.<sup>117</sup> Despite the increasing cooperation, Russia must ask China to support its position as the dominant regional power by accepting the jurisdiction of the NSR as Russia's territorial waters. It is possible because China's claim of the nine-dash line in the South China Sea (SCS) is somewhat similar to Russian claims over the NSR; so, a possible trade-off between the two is possible regarding the acceptance of jurisdictions over the NSR and SCS, respectively.<sup>118</sup> Hence, Russia must increase its acceptability even if it requires supporting the Chinese claim over the SCS.

## **Conclusion**

The melting Arctic and resource competition have allowed Russia to gain grounds in the region. The Kremlin's dominance due to its unique topography and overwhelming military presence has made it impregnable in the Arctic. Moreover, the interrelated projects of Yamal LNG and opening of the NSR to enhance Asia-Europe maritime shipping and cooperation with Beijing on the "Polar Silk Road" is a part of the Putin's "Russia's Grand Arctic planning." Meanwhile, the multibillion-dollar investment from Beijing in Yamal is healing the Kremlin's wounds sustained from Western sanctions following its annexation of Crimea. Great-power competition in the Arctic sphere demands that the United States counter growing Sino-Russian cooperation in the region. Putin's hawkish attitude in the Arctic has upped the ante for a stronger policy response from Biden.

Nevertheless, Russia is confronted with the geopolitical challenge of US and NATO allies that are concerned regarding the Arctic militarization and Russian claims over the NSR. Even though the US military position in the Arctic is comparatively weak, US plans to station F-35s in Alaska to augment already-stationed F-22s and the installment of radar systems in Greenland shows the dissatisfaction

of the West toward “dissenter Russia.” On the other hand, balancing Sino-Russian cooperation and solving the legal discrepancies is necessary for Russia to keep the situation under control. Thus, the changing dynamics of the region require Russia to carefully tackle the challenges and exploit the opportunities to utilize the region as its strategic resource base. ★

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