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Russia in the Arctic

The End of Illusions and the Emergence of Strategic Realignments



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Center

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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered profound changes in the Arctic region, the consequences of which remain uncertain in the long term. Long spared the effects of global geopolitical tensions, the polar space has, in recent decades, become the theater of extensive cooperation and close dialogue between Russia and the Western Arctic states. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 shattered this trust, which had been built on scientific, economic, and cultural exchange and on a consensus-based approach to common challenges, such as those concerning the environment, through regional institutional mechanisms.

Although regional forums for dialogue have continued to function, no new diplomatic or strategic initiatives were commenced between 2014 and 2022. Indeed, a growing number of military exercises have caused a new antagonism to set in, evoking the Cold War. The war in Ukraine has heightened this trend, which has since been confirmed by Finland and Sweden joining NATO. Having been diplomatically isolated at the regional level, Russia has been stepping up its initiatives to form alternative partnerships, with a plan to develop the north of its territory, including the Northeast Passage, also known as the Northern Sea Route (NSR).

As one of the Kremlin's geopolitical priorities since the start of the twenty-first century, the Russian Arctic is now feeling the effects of this new geostrategic configuration, including a slowdown in industrial and economic projects—under Western sanctions—and a radical change in the region's Russian population, conditioned by the war in Ukraine and by animosity toward the West. This long-term shift has structurally distanced the Russian Arctic from the rest of the polar region, drawing it somewhat closer to Asia. Furthermore, this fracture in the region has fueled global geopolitical changes marked by the rivalry between China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific space.

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Introduction

In taking up the two-year rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council on May 20, 2021, Russia's ambition was to make it a "showcase" for the country's "strategic and diplomatic influence".¹ The full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, compromised the implementation of plans made in the early part of the Russian chairmanship and caused upheaval in the polar region, resulting both in a paralysis of regional institutions and in procedures to admit Finland and Sweden to NATO. Three decades of increasingly fruitful regional cooperation, especially in science and economics, drew to a sharp close. The emergence of Arctic governance by the states of the region in the early 1990s allowed the United States and Russia to maintain a dialogue and cooperate on common issues, such as preserving biodiversity, ensuring the safety of maritime traffic in the Arctic Ocean, and pursuing the fight against climate change. This Arctic "exceptionalism", which made the polar region uniquely exempt from geopolitical tensions, had already been partly damaged in 2014, and it now seems beyond repair.²

Given these unfavorable developments for Russia, which finds itself diplomatically isolated in the region, and which has seen progress in its energy projects stalled as a result of economic and financial sanctions, Moscow has tried to adapt. A realignment of the country's northern policy toward Asia is now perceived as the only viable alternative.

This text was translated from French into English by Cadenza.

1. F. Vidal, "Le Conseil de l'Arctique à l'heure russe", *Éditoriaux de l'Ifri*, May 18, 2021, available at: www.ifri.org; See also E. Canova *et al.*, "Présidence russe au Conseil de l'Arctique: Le réveil d'un géant", working paper, *Groupe d'Études Géopolitiques*, May 2021, available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

2. T. Melchiorre and M. Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, "The Illusion of the Arctic 'Exceptionalism'", *High North News*, June 29, 2022, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

The end of post-Cold War governance: The “hybridization” of Russia’s polar strategy

A paradigm shift and a return to the strategic concepts of the Cold War

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the security and military context in the Arctic region has deteriorated, while Russian military activity in the area has been stepped up. At the root of this realignment is a strategic decision by Moscow to remilitarize its northern space in order to achieve a threefold goal of restoring, modernizing, and extending its military infrastructure.³

It was at the start of the 2000s that the Kremlin decided to link its geoeconomic ambitions with an enhanced military capacity (both quantitatively and qualitatively) in the region. Russia’s Arctic posture has remained primarily defensive. The sense of threat on Russia’s part is relatively broad, encompassing non-state risks (such as acts of sabotage against critical infrastructure, illegal exploitation of natural resources, and crisis management in disaster scenarios) as well as risks emanating from both Arctic and non-Arctic states.⁴ To ensure respect for its sovereignty in its northern space and to defend its national territory against such threats, Russia has acted to reinforce surveillance measures in the western parts of its Arctic territory. Radar units such as the Rezonans-N system and various defense systems (Pantsir-SA, Bastion-P, S-400 SAM) have hence been deployed the length of the northern coast, as well as on Russia’s Arctic archipelagoes. All of these measures are aimed at bolstering the defense of the Kola Peninsula and maintaining a “bastion” strategy for the country’s nuclear submarines, while the various military facilities in the Arctic region can assist the state in its efforts to promote economic development there. The Ministry of Defense facilities hence provide twofold solutions for the

3. M. Petersen and R. Pincus, “Arctic Militarization and Russian Military Theory”, *Orbis*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2021, pp. 490-512; M. Paul and G. Swistek, “Russia in the Arctic: Development Plans, Military Potential, and Conflict Prevention”, *SWP Research Paper 2022/RP 03*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2022, available at: www.swp-berlin.org.

4. K. Zysk, “Russia’s Military Build-Up in the Arctic: To What End?”, *CNA’s Occasional Paper Series*, CNA, September 2020, pp. 7-9.

development of economic activity related to the extractive sector in the Arctic (oil, gas, and minerals) and the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR).⁵

However, this posture is also an offensive one in the sense that the Arctic serves as a stage for projecting Russian power in the North Atlantic via the GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) gap.⁶ This imaginary line, tracing a strategic passage, is once again among the primary strategic maritime concerns for NATO—and also for the Russian navy.⁷ In 2023, a British parliamentary report highlighted that the renewed strategic interest in this passage since the end of the Cold War could be explained by intensified Russian submarine activity.⁸ Behind this observation lies a profound change in the security architecture of the European continent, particularly in its northern regions.

The war in Ukraine represents a genuine tipping point and is putting a strain on the entire Russian military apparatus, including in the Arctic. The Ministry of Defense has stretched the conventional forces stationed in the area to such an extent that, according to Norwegian intelligence, the land presence on the Kola Peninsula is now at one-fifth of its previous strength.⁹ Human and material losses in Ukraine appear to have been especially high among Russian units normally based in this part of the Russian Arctic, such as the 80th Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade.¹⁰ Furthermore, key military infrastructure sites in the polar region, such as the Olenya air base, where Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers have been launched on missions to Ukraine, may be considered prime targets for acts of sabotage by the Ukrainian forces.¹¹ In this context, there appears to be no conventional threat toward the Nordic countries in the short-to-medium term. To partly counteract the weakening of its conventional forces in the region, the Russian Ministry of Defense intends to set up drone bases all along the northern coastline. The deployment of these drones (the Russian-made Inokhodets and Forpost models) is intended to significantly bolster

5. J. Kjellén, “The Russian Northern Fleet and the (Re)militarisation of the Arctic”, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, Vol. 13, 2022, p. 49.

6. C. Wall and N. Wegge, “The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War”, *CSIS Brief*, CSIS, January 2023, available at: www.csis.org.

7. R. Pincus, “The GIUK Gap’s Strategic Significance”, *Strategic Comments*, Vol. 25, No. 8, 2019, pp. i-iii.

8. House of Commons, *Defence in Scotland: The North Atlantic and the High North*, Scottish Affairs Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2022-23, 2023, p. 26.

9. T. Nilsen, “Land Forces at Kola Reduced to One-Fifth, Norwegian Intelligence Says”, *The Barents Observer*, February 13, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

10. M. Humpert, “Ukraine War Taking Toll on Arctic Material and Personnel”, *High North News*, February 17, 2023, available at: www.highnorthnews.com; A. Staalesen, “Deputy Commander of Russian Arctic Brigades Is Killed in Ukraine”, *The Barents Observer*, November 30, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

11. T. Nilsen, “Arctic Russian Airbase ‘Undoubtedly’ on Radar of Ukrainian Armed Forces, Expert Says”, *The Barents Observer*, January 9, 2024, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

surveillance missions along the NSR while also supporting search and rescue operations in the area.¹²

Russia, nonetheless, remains a strategic threat to NATO in the region.¹³ Given the presence of ballistic missile submarines and the nuclear warhead storage facilities there, Russia's nuclear doctrine has made the Kola Peninsula its key site, especially in terms of second-strike capability.¹⁴ The Arctic remains a space for demonstrating the capabilities of Russia's strategic arsenal, as was illustrated in November 2023 with the firing of a Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missile in the White Sea from the new Borei-class *Imperator Aleksandr III* submarine, the seventh vessel of its class to enter service—two of these submarines are assigned to the Northern Fleet, while the other five belong to the Pacific Fleet.¹⁵ Over the next ten years, four new Borei-class vessels (of a total of twelve Boreis that were expected to join the Russian navy to replace the Delta IV-class submarines in the early 2030s) are set to join, and thus complete, the Northern Fleet.¹⁶

Strategic threat aside, Russia's hybrid activities serve as a lever of intimidation and coercion against other Arctic nations, especially the Nordic states. As the main vectors of destabilization for these states, such activities exploit the weaknesses of the opposing camp using non-military means, including the deployment of a panoply of political, informational, and economic tactics.¹⁷ These actions, which can take a wide variety of forms, are aimed at destabilizing Nordic societies through saturation. For example, Moscow appears to be using migration as a coercive tool against Finland. Over the course of November and December 2023, Finland received a sudden influx of migrants at its border with Russia, facilitated by

12. "Na Kamchatke i v Arktike razmestyat bazy tyazholykh bespilotnikov" [Heavy drone bases will be deployed in Kamchatka and in the Arctic], *Izvestia*, April 12, 2024, available at: <https://iz.ru>.

13. A. Edvardsen and B. A. Molid Martinussen, "Russia's Forces in the High North: Weakened by the War, Yet Still a Multidomain Threat", *High North News*, January 12, 2024, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

14. Kjellén, "The Russian Northern Fleet", p. 39. On Russian nuclear doctrine, see the presidential decree, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 02.06.2020 g. No. 355: Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v oblasti yadernogo sderzhivniya" [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of June 2, 2020, No. 355: On the foundations of the state policy of the Russian Federation in the area of nuclear deterrence], Moscow, Presidency of the Russian Federation, March 5, 2020, available at: www.kremlin.ru. According to a recent study, Russia holds 4,380 nuclear warheads for its strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces. See H. Kristensen *et al.*, "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2024", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 80, No. 2, 2024, pp. 118-145.

15. "Podvodnii kreiser 'Imperator Aleksandr Tretii' vypolnil ispytatelny pusk ballisticheskoi rakyety" [The 'Imperator Aleksandr III' cruiser submarine carried out a test launch of a ballistic missile], Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, November 5, 2023, available at: <https://function.mil.ru>.

16. Six other Borei-class submarines will also be deployed as part of the Pacific Fleet. See E. Johns, "Upgrades to Russia's Nuclear-Capable Submarine Fleet", Federation of American Scientists, February 7, 2024, available at: <https://fas.org>.

17. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2023.

the Russian security services.¹⁸ Issues around remembrance have also been used to put pressure on Norway.¹⁹

What is more, Russia has been threatening the critical infrastructure of other Arctic countries, including some particularly exposed power plants and waterworks in the Barents area.²⁰ The sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipeline in September 2022 (responsibility for which has still not been established) illustrates the fragility of such infrastructure. To meet this threat, and with support from Germany in particular, Norway has stepped up the surveillance of its maritime infrastructure in the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea.²¹ What is more, it is possible that Russian scientific and fishing vessels are being used to conduct espionage and sabotage missions.²² Finally, GPS jamming is increasingly common around the Barents Sea, presenting a risk to civil aviation.²³ The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO may give rise to an increase in this type of hostile activity throughout Northern Europe,²⁴ reinforcing the climate of distrust and making any prospect of constructive dialogue all the more remote. All of this is leading to a structural dissociation between the Russian Arctic and the rest of the polar region and is helping to form a new geostrategic reality.

Arctic diplomacy suspended

The launch of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine in February 2022 provoked the most serious diplomatic crisis in the Arctic region since the end of the Cold War, shaking the foundations of Arctic governance and affecting the functioning of intergovernmental institutions in which Russia had been actively participating. Strongly condemning Russia's military aggression and violation of international law, the Nordic

18. T. Nilsen, G. Chentemirov and O. Krivtsova, "FSB Arranges Transport to the Border, Motel in Kandalaksha Claims", *The Barents Observer*, November 21, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

19. In October 2023, an incident arose between the town of Kirkenes and Russian citizens over the monument commemorating the liberation of Finnmark by Soviet troops in 1944. See A. O. Holm and B. A. Molid Martinussen, "Norwegian-Russian Battle of Wreaths During the Commemoration of Finnmark's Liberation", *High North News*, October 29, 2023, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

20. T. Jonassen and B. A. Molid Martinussen, "Nordland Chief of Police: 'The Russian Intelligence Threat Has Never Been Greater'", *High North News*, October 2, 2023, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

21. "Norway and Germany Signed a New Declaration of Intent Agreed to Enhance the Bilateral Co-operation in the Area of Security and Defence", Ministry of Defense of Norway, September 12, 2023, available at: www.regjeringen.no.

22. B. Mørch Pettersen, "Spionskipene" [Spy ships], *NRK*, April 19, 2023, available at: www.nrk.no.

23. A total of 93 incidents of GPS signal jamming were recorded in eastern Finnmark in 2022, up from 18 in 2021. See S. Strøm, "Kraftig økning av GPS-jamming over Finnmark" [Sharp rise in GPS jamming over Finnmark], *NRK*, February 24, 2023, available at: www.nrk.no.

24. In January 2024, GPS signal jamming was recorded to have been conducted from the exclave of Kaliningrad against Poland and the Baltic states using the Tobol satcom suppression system. On the changing security context in Northern Europe, see P. Baev, "Les nouveaux défis de la Russie sur le théâtre européen de la Baltique et du Nord", *Russie.Eurasie.Visions*, No. 130, Ifri, November 2023, available at: www.ifri.org.

countries suspended all their joint activities under European multilateral structures such as the Northern Dimension (a European Union program) and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC).²⁵ Established in 1993, BEAC, which brought together the Nordic countries and Russia, was the first multilateral structure to effectively break up as a result of Moscow's actions. In September 2023, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally announced the country's withdrawal from this subregional organization following the refusal of Finland to cede the rotating presidency to Russia, thus reducing the intergovernmental organization to the three states of Fennoscandia.²⁶

As for the Arctic Council, seven of its eight member states²⁷ were “temporarily pausing participation in all meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies”.²⁸ The Council's activities have since significantly slowed, even if its administrative operations continue.²⁹ Russia has indicated several times that an ongoing paralysis could prompt it to withdraw.³⁰ While talk of existing institutional frameworks being permanently mothballed may seem premature, any such upheaval could jeopardize the achievements of a regional governance set-up that has been in existence since the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, Moscow's diplomatic isolation on the regional stage has tarnished the record of Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021–2023), during which the bulk of the activities organized were eventually restricted to addressing domestic concerns.³¹ The outbreak of the full-scale

25. “The Northern Dimension and BEAC Suspend Activities Involving Russia”, European Parliament, March 30, 2022, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.

26. “Zayavleniye MID Rossiiskoi Federatsii o vykhode Rossii iz Sovyeta Barentseva/Yevroarkticheskogo regiona” [Declaration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation on the withdrawal of Russia from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, September 18, 2023, available at: <https://mid.ru>.

27. Established in 1996, the Arctic Council comprises eight permanent member states: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States.

28. “Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine”, US Department of State, March 3, 2022, available at: www.state.gov.

29. On May 11, 2023, a soft transition of the Arctic Council's chairmanship from Russia to Norway took place during a meeting conducted online from Salekhard, capital of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, thus respecting the rules of procedure of the intergovernmental body. Despite the reduced, more discreet format, this diplomatic encounter at least avoided the Council being mothballed. See, on this matter, C. Canova and P. Pic, “The Arctic Council in Transition: Challenges and Perspectives for the New Norwegian Chairship”, The Arctic Institute, June 13, 2023, available at: www.thearcticinstitute.org; and “Arctic States and Indigenous Permanent Participants Convened for the 13th Arctic Council Meeting and Issued Statement”, Arctic Council, May 11, 2023, available at: <https://arctic-council.org>.

30. Interview with a North American diplomat; A. Krog, “Russisk exit fra Arktisk Råd kan få alvorlige konsekvenser” [Russia's withdrawal from the Arctic Council could have serious consequences], *Altinget*, November 23, 2023, available at: www.altinget.dk. In February 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that Russia had not ruled out leaving the Arctic Council, see: “V MID nazvali usloviye dlya vykhoda iz Arkticheskogo sovyeta” [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has set out the conditions for withdrawal from the Arctic Council], *RIA Novosti*, February 6, 2024, available at: <https://ria.ru>.

31. The format of the events organized under the 2021–2023 chairmanship of the Arctic Council was modified and scaled back, given the non-participation by the other countries in the zone. This included the Safe Arctic 2023 training exercises, which simulated various types of incident in the far north. See

war in Ukraine brutally cut short the program of exercises, which Moscow had intended to use to demonstrate its political and economic successes in the region and to reinforce its image as a dominant power. In this complex diplomatic context, Russia sought to stop the consequences of its military actions in Ukraine from reaching the Arctic. However, as far as the other states in the region were concerned, the Arctic Council could not ignore the situation. Despite the continuing deterioration in relations between the West and Russia, none of the parties in the region has yet taken the risk of making a definitive break, which would endanger the fundamental fields of cooperation of the polar region.

A climate of distrust, and the last remaining spaces for dialogue

The loss of trust in Russia on the part of the other Arctic states is reflected in their respective bilateral relations. Indeed, the diplomatic tensions between Russia and the other Arctic countries have continued to rise, and these states have drastically reduced their exchanges with Moscow. Iceland, for example, lowered the status of its diplomatic relations with Russia while providing financial support to Ukraine.³² As for Finland, its bilateral relations with Moscow have been greatly diminished since 2022, thus placing the country on the front line with Russia.³³ Finland's president, Alexander Stubb, elected in February 2024, announced that relations with Russia (in particular, contact between diplomats and border services) would remain limited for as long as the war in Ukraine continued.³⁴ Similarly, relations between Sweden and Russia have seriously deteriorated, with political, commercial, economic, and cultural exchanges all suspended,³⁵ and Sweden's accession to NATO only fueled Russian hostility toward Stockholm. For Moscow, Sweden's joining the Western military alliance made the country a security threat.³⁶

"Safe Arctic 2023 Exercises to Be Held in Nine Arctic Regions of Russia", Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council, 2023, available at: <https://as.arctic-russia.ru>.

32. "Press Release on Iceland's Decision to Downgrade Diplomatic Relations", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, June 10, 2023, available at: <https://mid.ru>; "Russia Accounts for Iceland's Unfriendly Moves in Bilateral Ties – MFA", TASS, March 20, 2024, available at: <https://tass.com>.

33. See, on this subject, "Putin Warns of 'Problems' With Finland After NATO Membership", *The Moscow Times*, December 18, 2023, available at: www.themoscowtimes.com; and J. Kampfner, "In Finland, the 'Existential Threat' of Russia Looms – and US Rescue Is Far from Certain", *The Guardian*, February 2, 2024, available at: www.theguardian.com.

34. "Finland's President-Elect Says No Political Ties with Russia Until Ukraine War Ends", *The Moscow Times*, February 12, 2024, available at: www.themoscowtimes.com.

35. "Russia Regrets Suspension of Political, Cultural Ties with Sweden – Putin", TASS, December 4, 2023, available at: <https://tass.com>.

36. "Sweden to Be Seen as Threat by Russia After Joining NATO – Senior Russian Lawmaker", TASS, March 7, 2024, available at: <https://tass.com>.

Relations between Norway and Russia, which had long been fruitful, have deteriorated definitively, leaving the Joint Norwegian-Russian Fisheries Commission for the Barents Sea as the last sanctuary of bilateral cooperation between the countries.³⁷ Despite this erosion of its relations with Moscow, Norway's stance is different from that of its Nordic neighbors. The Norwegian government has decided to maintain institutionalized cooperation with Russia in order to preserve its geoeconomic interests and to retain some diplomatic room for maneuver.³⁸ During the annual Arctic Frontiers conference in Tromsø in January 2024, a number of Norwegian officials and experts underscored Russia's importance for the survival of the Arctic Council.³⁹

Scientific cooperation under threat

With governance in the polar region in a state of paralysis, the dynamics now in motion are endangering cooperation that has been in place since the 1990s, such as the exchanges between indigenous populations in Russia and in other Arctic nations, which are now considerably reduced.⁴⁰ Similarly, there is increasing disquiet within the scientific community given the diplomatic impasse. With the polar region heating up four times faster than the rest of the planet,⁴¹ scientific collaboration in collecting and analyzing atmospheric, glaciological, and marine data is essential for anticipating changing climate conditions in the region, as well as the global consequences of these changes. Russia, which accounts for 53% of the Arctic Ocean coastline, is a crucial field of research for observation work in polar science. Since the full-scale war started, scientific collaboration has substantially reduced, and Russian researchers have become increasingly isolated from their Western counterparts as a result. Networks of Arctic researchers are vital for fostering a shared sense of belonging in the region.⁴² Hence, although some professional relationships have continued at an individual level, international research projects and the significant funding behind them have been paralyzed by the inability to pursue

37. A. Edvardsen and B. A. Molid Martinussen, "Norway and Russia Reached a Fisheries Agreement for 2024", *High North News*, October 24, 2023, available at: www.highnorthnews.com. Regarding cooperation between Norway and Russia, see F. Vidal, "Regional Governance: The Case of the Barents Region", in M. Finger and G. Rekvig (eds.), *Global Arctic: An Introduction to the Multifaceted Dynamics of the Arctic*, Cham: Springer, 2022, pp. 389-405.

38. J. O. Vyvial, "Videreføring av samarbeid: Norsk-russisk kontakt i en geopolitisk anstrengt tid" [Continuing cooperation: Norwegian-Russian contacts at a time of geopolitical tensions], *FNI Report*, No. 8, Fridtjof Nansen Institute, 2023, available at: www.fni.no.

39. T. Jonassen, "Without Russia, the Arctic Council Will Not Survive", *High North News*, February 1, 2024, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

40. A. Edvardsen, "Cooperation With the Sámi on the Russian Side Is Severely Affected by Russia's War", *High North News*, September 29, 2023, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

41. M. Rantanen *et al.*, "The Arctic Has Warmed Nearly Four Times Faster Than the Globe Since 1979", *Communications Earth & Environment*, Vol. 3, article 168, 2022, available at: <https://doi.org>.

42. S. Andreeva, "Science at Stake – Russia and the Arctic Council", *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, Vol. 14, 2023, pp. 112-131.

scientific missions on Russian territory.⁴³ The impossibility of accessing Russian research facilities illustrates the practical difficulties of conducting scientific research, engendering a “biased view on Arctic change”.⁴⁴ For example, the Arctic PASSION project, which is intended to make environmental observations easier to access and understand, has had its work in Russia suspended, and exchanges with its Russian institutional partners have been disrupted.⁴⁵ In the meantime, members of the polar scientific community have endeavored to resume cooperation in specific, crucial domains, such as the changing conditions of the permafrost. Indeed, monitoring the permafrost, which covers two-thirds of Russia’s surface, is fundamental, given the potential risk of a massive release of carbon into the atmosphere caused by thawing.⁴⁶ For the Western scientific community, the appearance of a blind spot in the data would significantly affect research work in this field.

More generally, it is essential to have access to information obtained on Russian soil for the purposes of reliably systematizing and modeling the changing climate system. Asian powers—primarily China, but also India—have maintained their scientific cooperation with Russia.⁴⁷ This emerging and strengthening trend in cooperation is restructuring flows of scientific data and information while calling into question the future of scientific collaboration in the polar region.⁴⁸ In spite of continuing distrust between the Western Arctic states and Russia, the Arctic Council remains an essential vehicle for restoring cooperation in the field of polar science.⁴⁹ On February 28, 2024, under the Norwegian chairmanship, the Arctic Council announced a gradual resumption of exchanges—to be conducted remotely at first—among working groups of experts and scientists.⁵⁰ The recommencement of direct cooperation remains a distant prospect, however, notwithstanding the issues around the climate emergency.

43. A. Witze, “Russia’s War in Ukraine Forces Arctic Climate Projects to Pivot”, *Nature*, Vol. 607, article 432, 2022, available at: www.nature.com.

44. E. López-Blanco *et al.*, “Towards an Increasingly Biased View on Arctic Change”, *Nature Climate Change*, Vol. 14, 2024, pp. 152-155, available at: www.nature.com.

45. A. Witze, “Russia’s War in Ukraine Forces Arctic Climate Projects to Pivot”, *op. cit.*

46. L. Westerveld *et al.*, *Arctic Permafrost Atlas*, Arendal, Norway: GRID-Arendal, 2023. The thawing of the permafrost decomposes the organic matter that it contains, releasing carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄), two powerful greenhouse gases. This release is said to exacerbate the process of global warming, contributing to a positive feedback loop that could have an effect for several centuries. See also T. Bouffard *et al.*, “Scientific Cooperation: Supporting Circumpolar Permafrost Monitoring and Data Sharing”, *Land*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 2021, available at: www.mdpi.com.

47. C. Heng, “There’s a Strong Case for an Asian Arctic Dialogue”, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, August 22, 2023, available at: www.belfercenter.org.

48. P. Devyatkin, “Can Arctic Cooperation Be Restored?”, *The Arctic Institute*, March 28, 2023, available at: www.thearcticinstitute.org.

49. A. Rettman, “West Restarts Arctic Science with Russia, Despite Mistrust”, *EUobserver*, October 11, 2023, available at: <https://euobserver.com>.

50. “Arctic Council Advances Resumption of Project-Level Work”, *Arctic Council*, February 28, 2024, available at: <https://arctic-council.org>.

The stalling of the “Arctic” project

War, a new reality for the Russian population in the Arctic

In Russia’s Arctic territories, like in the rest of the country, the war has disrupted the lives of the Russian population, distancing them from the West, a pivot facilitated by the political conditioning that has taken place among various social bodies.⁵¹ Since the start of the twenty-first century,⁵² the polar region has witnessed an increasing militarization of society, initiated by the Russian power—the Orthodox Church and the education system serving as cogs within this mechanism.

Orthodox clergy in the Murmansk region supported the war from the outset, evoking a battle against “the Antichrist”.⁵³ Russia’s religious authorities have supported the country’s military actions, serving as a moral guarantor for the Kremlin’s stated goals. Their stance seeks to legitimize a war that has been presented as part of a wider confrontation against the West. In order to reinforce this narrative, Russian religious leaders in the Arctic have been targeting the other countries in the region and engaging in acts of provocation. In the summer of 2023, for example, an Orthodox cross was erected, under the authority of Bishop Iyakov of Naryan-Mar and Mezen (Arkhangelsk Oblast), at the Russian settlement of Pyramiden in Norway’s Svalbard archipelago.⁵⁴

In northern educational institutions, as elsewhere in the country, ideological conditioning of pupils has become gradually more widespread. “Patriotism centers”, which have been set up as a catalyst for disseminating traditional values, offer “initial military preparation”.⁵⁵ From September 1,

51. A. Kolesnikov, “The End of the Russian Idea: What It Will Take to Break Putinism’s Grip”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 5, September-October 2023, pp. 60-76.

52. See on this subject O. Konkka, “Quand la guerre s’invite à l’école: La militarisation de l’enseignement en Russie”, *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 30, Ifri, May 2020, available at: www.ifri.org.

53. A. Staalesen, “As Bombs Fall on Ukrainian Churches, the Metropolitan of Murmansk Says This Is a War Against Antichrist”, *The Barents Observer*, March 25, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

54. T. Nilsen, “Bishop Iyakov, Who Backs Putin’s War, Raised Giant Cross at Svalbard without Norway’s Knowledge”, *The Barents Observer*, August 12, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>; video of the erection of the Orthodox cross-posted on the Vkontakte social network by the Arktikugol state trust, August 10, 2023, available at: <https://vk.com>.

55. A. Staalesen, “North Russian Region of Arkhangelsk Wins Praise for Efforts to Militarise Its Youth”, *The Barents Observer*, April 21, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

2024, Russian schools will include mandatory classes on “Foundations of the security and protection of the Motherland” (*Osnovy bezopasnosti i zashchity Rodiny*), which includes the teaching of military theory and how to pilot drones.⁵⁶ In some Arctic districts, such as Pechenga in Murmansk Oblast, where there is a military base, schools are even more exposed to military mobilization, as a majority of pupils’ fathers are participating in the conflict in Ukraine (up to 85% in some cases).⁵⁷ Indeed, the regional authorities in Murmansk have launched a support program especially for families participating in the war, with various benefits offered to the children of mobilized families, such as free transportation, meals, and vacations in Crimea or Sochi.⁵⁸ The adoption of policies such as these accentuates the degree of social stratification among young people in the Arctic region.

In the polar region, indigenous populations find themselves disproportionately mobilized among the ranks of the Russian army to participate in the war. The partial mobilization of men aged between 18 and 49, ordered by Vladimir Putin in September 2022, is said to have targeted such populations in particular.⁵⁹ International bodies have denounced the systematic practice of partial mobilization in certain Russian regions, such as the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), whose population is 49.91% Yakuts, 2.24% Evenks, and 1.61% Evens.⁶⁰ Mobilization is being carried out indiscriminately in the rural territories of this Arctic region, without taking into account the demographic and ethnic make-up of the population—and this includes those who are not even eligible for military service.⁶¹ This situation is accentuating socioeconomic tensions in a context where the local authorities do not have the budgetary capacity or decision-making powers to resolve the problems in their region.⁶² In particular, the departure of men for the Ukrainian front has left the northern regions with structural shortages of human resources. Between 2022 and 2023, the regions of Arkhangelsk and Murmansk and the republics of Komi and Karelia saw their labor forces drop by 60,000, 40,000, 35,000, and 31,000,

56. P. Yachmennikova and A. Voronov, “Minprosveshcheniya rvetsya v boi” [Education minister eager for battle], *Kommersant*, November 16, 2023, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

57. A. Staalesen, “School Year in Pechenga Starts with a Greeting to Warriors in Ukraine”, *The Barents Observer*, September 4, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

58. T. Nilsen, “Murmansk Gives More Benefits to Students and School Children of Soldiers Fighting in Ukraine”, *The Barents Observer*, March 14, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

59. The Russian Federation contains 47 small indigenous communities—the largest of which has a population of 50,000—in the whole of its territory. See L. Latypova, “Ethnic Minorities Hit Hardest by Russia’s Mobilization, Activists Say”, *The Moscow Times*, September 27, 2022, available at: www.themoscowtimes.com.

60. T. Tumusova, “L’identité juridique des peuples autochtones de Yakoutie et le droit russe”, *Droit et Cultures*, Vol. 77, No. 1, 2019, pp. 169-185.

61. “Violations of Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) During Partial Military Mobilization”, *Cultural Survival*, September 30, 2022, available at: www.culturalsurvival.org.

62. K. Yokogawa, “Russia Lacks the Financial Resources to Improve Living Standards in the Arctic: A Case of the Sakha Republic”, *Polar Science*, No. 101051, January 24, 2024, available at: <https://doi.org>.

respectively.⁶³ For the Kremlin, concentrating the war effort in these communities allows mobilization to be minimized in major urban centers such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg, thus reducing the prospect of a significant protest movement.⁶⁴ In the major cities of the Russian Arctic, such as Arkhangelsk (pop. 298,500) and Murmansk (pop. 280,500), protests have been marginal, as citizens have been put off by a campaign of intimidation against activists and journalists.⁶⁵

Pressure from sanctions on economic development

Since March 2014, extractive projects in the oil and gas sector in the Russian Arctic have been the target of economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union (EU). The sanctions that were imposed following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have reinforced those already in place and have disrupted the progress of Russian economic projects in the region, especially in the hydrocarbons sector, where the long-term profitability of these projects has been called into question.⁶⁶ The sanctions are targeted at both the extraction infrastructure and the means of transporting the extracted resources to the international marketplace, especially via the NSR.⁶⁷

The sanctions policy of the United States has specifically targeted entities involved in the procurement of materials and cutting-edge technology supplied by foreign companies on which Russia still relies for future energy projects in the polar region.⁶⁸ Among the major oil and gas projects in the area, the liquefied natural gas production site Arctic LNG 2, a Novatek project, is unquestionably the most affected by the sanctions regime. The halting of the supply of Western cryogenic technologies, such as gas turbines made by the American firm Baker Hughes, heat exchangers from the German-founded multinational Linde, and compressors

63. G. Chentemirov, “‘The Situation Is Catastrophic’. There Is No One to Work in Russia’s North”, *The Barents Observer*, January 10, 2024, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>. While mobilization seems to be accelerating this phenomenon, the shrinking of the active population in the region in fact stems from an underestimation of a demographic trend that has been in place for several decades.

64. E. Zmyvalova, “The Rights of Indigenous Peoples of Russia After Partial Military Mobilization”, *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, Vol. 14, 2023, pp. 70-75.

65. In Arkhangelsk Oblast, the Russian authorities have been pursuing a multifaceted policy of repression, including harassment on social media, mass denunciations, public apologies, and exclusion from the education system. For more detail, see G. Chentemirov and O. Krivtsova, “How the State Crushed the Protest Movement in the Arkhangelsk region”, *The Barents Observer*, September 5, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

66. N. Flegontov, “Vozhdeistviye ekonomicheskikh sanktsii na finansirovaniye neftegazovikh proyektov v rossiiskoi Arktike” [Impact of economic sanctions on the funding of oil and gas projects in the Russian Arctic], *Post-Soviet Issues*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2023, pp. 218-233.

67. “Taking Additional Sweeping Measures Against Russia”, US Department of State, November 2, 2023, available at: www.state.gov.

68. “Imposing Further Sanctions in Response to Russia’s Illegal War Against Ukraine”, US Department of State, September 14, 2023, available at: www.state.gov.

manufactured by Siemens of Germany, has hampered completion of the first of three liquefaction trains (units that process and liquefy natural gas).⁶⁹ Despite these obstacles, Novatek announced in December 2023 that the initial phase of the Arctic LNG 2 plant would nevertheless be commenced while awaiting the first deliveries, constituting a symbolic victory for the Russian authorities in the face of pressure from Western sanctions.⁷⁰ These sanctions increased the overall costs of this strategic project to nearly \$25 billion—a 17% increase.⁷¹ In the context of the sanctions, some of the foreign minority shareholders, such as the French multinational TotalEnergies, have declared force majeure and suspended their participation in the project.⁷²

As a further example of the obstacles that have been faced, the South Korean shipbuilders Samsung Heavy Industries indicated in December 2023 that the manufacture of blocks and equipment was being halted for ten of the fifteen Arctic carriers under construction, these tankers being essential for transporting LNG to import markets.⁷³ Western countries, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, have maintained the pressure by pursuing a strategy of continuously and systematically reinforcing the sanctions regime against this project, in spite of Russian actors' persistence in pursuing it.⁷⁴ As for the EU, discussions on the fourteenth package of economic and financial sanctions against Russia included the prospect of prohibiting the transshipment of Russian LNG to European ports, closing off opportunities for re-exportation to third countries.⁷⁵ Russia would need to use new supply chains and means of payment that could operate independently of Western countries in order to avoid such ongoing consequences and to ensure the long-term viability of Novatek's LNG production sites (Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2).⁷⁶ Overall, a

69. F. Lasserre and H. Baudu, "The Consequences of the War in Ukraine in the Arctic", *Network for Strategic Analysis*, Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario), 2023, available at: <https://ras-nsa.ca>.

70. "Arctic LNG 2 Actually Operating, We Expect First Shipments in Q1 – Novak", *Interfax*, December 27, 2023, available at: <https://interfax.com>; M. Humpert, "From Ukraine to the Arctic: The War's Impact on Russia's Northern Energy Ambitions", *High North News*, March 18, 2024, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

71. S. Sukhankin, "US Sanctions Hamper Russia's LNG Strategy in the Arctic", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 21, No. 2, The Jamestown Foundation, January 9, 2024, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

72. The shareholder structure of the Arctic LNG 2 project is as follows: Novatek (60%), TotalEnergies (France, 10%), CNPC (China, 10%), CNOOC (China, 10%), and a Japanese consortium comprising Mitsui and JOGMEC (10%). The decision to declare force majeure is leading foreign shareholders to relinquish their responsibilities for financing and executing LNG offtake contracts. See T. Dyatel, "Arktik SPG-2' teper sam po sebe" ["Arctic LNG-2" is now on its own], *Kommersant*, December 25, 2023, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

73. "Samsung Heavy Says It Has Stopped Making Blocks for Russian Shipyard", *Nikkei Asia*, December 26, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com>.

74. M. Humpert, "Latest Round of US and UK Sanctions Takes Aim at Russia's Arctic LNG 2 Project", *High North News*, February 26, 2024, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

75. I. Urbasos Arbeloa, "Banning Russian LNG Transshipment in European Ports: A Pragmatic and Effective Measure", *Real Instituto Elcano*, May 14, 2024, available at: www.realinstitutoelcano.org.

76. "Szhizheniye v okruzhenii" [Ambient liquefaction], *Kommersant*, March 15, 2024, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

significant proportion of Russia's gas export capacity (around 135 billion m³ per year) is vulnerable to multiple risks linked to bans, sanctions, delays, logistical constraints in the transportation of LNG, and the willingness of China, the biggest consumer of Russian gas, to contract more pipeline gas. Given these circumstances, Russian gas export revenues are forecast to reduce by 55 to 80% by 2030 compared with 2022—when the industry's revenues reached a record level of \$165 billion.⁷⁷

Mining activities in the Arctic are also slowing significantly. In particular, the development of the Syradasayskoye coalfield in the Taymyr Peninsula has effectively been halted by US sanctions against the project operator Severnaya Zvezda (Northern Star), which is currently unable to fund the construction of the polar-class bulk carriers needed for coal shipments.⁷⁸ Indeed, it is the lack of land-based infrastructure that makes maritime transport so critical for coal exports. The twelfth package of sanctions adopted by the EU in December 2023 directly targeted Russia's diamond sector, which had hitherto been spared, depressing the economy of the Russian Arctic.⁷⁹ The region accounts for the entirety of the Alrosa group's diamond production in Russia (77% in Yakutia and 23% in Arkhangelsk Oblast).⁸⁰ The First Ore Mining Company, a subsidiary of the state-owned Rosatom, has shelved plans to operate a floating mining and processing plant together with the Finnish company Mesto Outotec, meaning that it has had to review its development plan to exploit the Pavlovskoye lead and zinc deposit on the Novaya Zemlya archipelago.⁸¹ In April 2024, the US Department of the Treasury introduced new sanctions prohibiting metal exchanges such as the London Metal Exchange (LME) and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) from accepting aluminum, copper, and nickel produced by Russia.⁸² This decision, which partly cut off Russia from the international metals market, targeted the country's revenue from these critically important metals.

77. A.-S. Corbeau and T. Mitrova, "Russia's Gas Export Strategy: Adapting to the New Reality", Center on Global Energy Policy, Columbia SIPA, February 21, 2024, available at: www.energypolicy.columbia.edu.

78. "Taymyrskomu uglyu ne khvataet balkerov: AEON poka nye zakazala ni odnogo sudna dlya svoego arkticheskogo proyekta" [Not enough bulk carriers for Taymyr coal: Aeon has not yet ordered any vessels for its Arctic project], *Kommersant*, October 24, 2023, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

79. "EU Adopts 12th Package of Sanctions Against Russia for Its Continued Illegal War Against Ukraine", Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), European Commission, December 19, 2023, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu>.

80. D. Leven, "Blood Diamonds", *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, November 9, 2023, available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu>. See also F. Vidal, "La stratégie minière russe: Ambitions géopolitiques et défis industriels", *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, No. 43, Ifri, April 2023, available at: www.ifri.org.

81. G. Kostrinsky, "Rosatom' otkazalsya ot plavuchego GOKa za polyarnym krugom iz-za sanktsii [Rosatom has abandoned plans for a floating mining and processing plant in the Arctic Circle due to sanctions], *Kommersant*, April 18, 2023, available at: www.vedomosti.ru; see also Vidal, "La stratégie minière russe".

82. "United States and United Kingdom Take Action to Reduce Russian Revenue from Metals", United States Department of the Treasury, April 12, 2024, available at: <https://home.treasury.gov>.

While the abovementioned sanctions relate to Russia's technological and financial dependence on the West for conducting its geoeconomic projects in the region, Moscow has spent a decade establishing alternative economic channels outside the Western sphere.⁸³ The tightening of Western sanctions is a response to the circumvention strategies developed to complete Russian economic and industrial projects, especially in the Arctic.⁸⁴ Russia has repeatedly managed to find gaps in the globalized economy, maintaining maximum financial and economic flexibility.⁸⁵ For instance, Turkey has become the strategic bridgehead for legally rerouting Russian petroleum products to EU countries by relabeling the fuel's origin.⁸⁶ In parallel, Russia must rely on the resilience of its industrial ecosystem to pursue its northern development program, as illustrated by the growing synergy between Rosatom, which acts as the operator of the NSR, and the Norilsk Nickel mining company.⁸⁷ Aside from coordinating on the potential to exploit the significant lithium deposits in the Kola Peninsula, industrial cooperation has allowed Norilsk Nickel to use Rosatom's cutting-edge technology (including radioisotope equipment) to improve its production processes.⁸⁸

Against this background, a paradigm shift is taking place in the development of Russia's shipbuilding capacity for the NSR. A program to build a fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers that can operate throughout the year from the country's northern coastline has become a priority for the Russian government (see Table 1).⁸⁹ The government is also considering the possibility of building a new high-technology shipyard. Although the Western sanctions regime and the pursuit of a high-intensity war have progressively dampened the Kremlin's plans for development in the Arctic, Russia's technological and capability autonomy in this regard may offer its economic partners some reassurance on the practicability of the NSR. Beyond that, Russia is seeking to consolidate this new paradigm and is

83. N. Gould-Davies, "Russia, the West and Sanctions", *Survival*, Vol. 62, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, pp. 7-28.

84. M. Humpert, "New US Sanctions Target Russia's Arctic LNG 2 – 'Our Objective Is to Kill that Project'", *High North News*, November 13, 2023, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

85. While the export restrictions imposed by sanctioning countries have sharply reduced Russian imports of high-tech products, especially dual-use items such as semiconductors, Moscow has successfully established alternative import channels from China and Turkey that allow it to maintain the country's industrial production capacity. See H. Simola, "Latest Developments in Russian Imports of Sanctioned Technology Products", *BOFIT Policy Brief*, No. 15, Bank of Finland, 2023, available at: <https://publications.bof.fi>.

86. V. Jack, "How Turkey Became Putin's 'Pit Stop' for Selling Camouflaged Fuel to the EU", *Politico*, May 15, 2024, available at: www.politico.eu.

87. "Rosatom i 'Nornikel' izuchat perspektivy razvitiya atomnoi energetiki v Noril'skoye" [Rosatom and Nornickel will consider the prospects for developing nuclear power in Norilsk], *Rosatom*, November 13, 2023, available at: <https://rosatom.ru>.

88. "Rosatom to Supply Nornickel with New Generation Radioisotope Instruments", *Norilsk Nickel*, March 26, 2024, available at: <https://nornickel.com>.

89. E. Alifirova, "Ledokoly, novaya verf, tekhnologicheskaya nezavisimost" [Icebreakers, a new shipyard, and technological independence], *Neftegaz.ru*, May 20, 2024, available at: <https://neftegaz.ru>.

hence accelerating the geoeconomic shift of its northern regions toward Asia.

Table 1. Development program for nuclear-powered icebreakers on the Northern Sea Route up to 2030

Operation status	New-generation nuclear-powered icebreakers (propulsive power in megawatts (MW))
In service	Arktika, Sibir, and Ural (60 MW)
Late 2024	Yakutia (60 MW)
Between 2026 and 2030	Chukotka, Leningrad, and Stalingrad (60 MW)
By 2030	Rossiia (120 MW)

The Russian Arctic and Asia: Toward an integrated space?

Setting a geopolitical course for Asia

In an effort to circumvent its diplomatic isolation in the Arctic arena, Russia has been stepping up its political and economic initiatives to attract non-Arctic countries. For Moscow, these countries, especially the BRICS+ nations, ought to be able to participate in the development of the polar region and contribute to the success of the NSR.⁹⁰ Backing this global change of direction, Vladimir Putin signed a decree in February 2023 amending the Arctic Strategy 2035, which was first published in March 2020. Whereas the original text called for the “strengthening of good neighborly relations with the Arctic states”, the updated version calls for the “development of relationships with foreign states on a bilateral basis [. . .] taking into account the interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic”.⁹¹ The Russian authorities set out their willingness to expand scientific cooperation with non-Arctic countries, with the communities of Barentsburg and Pyramiden in Svalbard—currently undergoing a process of economic reconversion—potentially serving as a showcase for Russian scientific research in the polar region, attracting researchers from countries judged sufficiently close to Russia, such as Brazil, China, India, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam.⁹² The development plan for an international science center in Pyramiden, which would include annexes in the settlements of Grumant, Kolsbey, and Barentsburg, envisages the creation of a consortium of research and educational institutions and organizations from friendly

90. As of January 1st, 2024, there are ten BRICS+ countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

91. Presidential decree, “Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 05.03.2020 g. No. 164 – Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035 goda” [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of March 5, 2020, No. 164: On the foundations of the state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic to 2035], Moscow, Presidency of the Russian Federation, March 5, 2020, available at: www.kremlin.ru; Presidential decree, “Vneseny izmeneniya v Osnovy gosudarstvennoi politiki v Arktike na period do 2035 goda” [Amendments have been made to the foundations of the state policy in the Arctic to 2035], Moscow, Presidency of the Russian Federation, February 21, 2023, available at: <http://kremlin.ru>.

92. “Rossiya i Vyetnam budut vesti issledovaniya na nauchnikh arkticheskikh stantsiyakh” [Russia and Vietnam will lead research at Arctic scientific stations], *RIA Novosti*, April 7, 2023, available at: <https://ria.ru>; T. Nilsen, “Isolated Russia Invites Faraway Countries to Upcoming Svalbard Science Center in Pyramiden”, *The Barents Observer*, October 30, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>. See also the online conference of the Russian Geographical Society (RGO), “Security of Arctic Frontiers: Ecology, History, Images of the Future”, *Russian Geographical Society*, October 26, 2023, available at: www.youtube.com.

countries, including the BRICS+ nations.⁹³ As well as providing a means to mobilize representatives of what the Russian government refers to as “friend states”, the development of this future science center recalls the Soviet past, with the continuation of homegrown, Russian research—*otyechestvennaya nauka*—as one component of this.⁹⁴

Moscow has been engaging in an increasing number of diplomatic initiatives to boost the Arctic region’s economic and industrial development. The increasingly pronounced shift in the NSR’s center of gravity toward the Far East is a core aspect of strengthening the links between Russia and Asian economic powers. To implement this recalibration, the Russian president asked the federal government and regional authorities, together with the state-owned Rosatom, to work up proposals for “the formation of a single maritime transportation corridor”, with the outcome anticipated in 2024.⁹⁵ To demonstrate the interest in using this shipping route as an alternative to southern maritime routes in the long term, India and Russia signed an agreement on developing an eastern maritime corridor linking Chennai with Vladivostok.⁹⁶ At the same time, the two nations made a commitment to train Indian sailors for polar navigation conditions at the Maritime State University in Vladivostok. From Moscow’s point of view, the geopolitical instability in the Red Sea following Houthi attacks on merchant vessels passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb could facilitate a reorientation of commercial exchange between Russia and India by means of joining up the NSR and the eastern maritime corridor. The importance of the Indian market for the Russian Arctic is considerable: 35% of the freight handled at the port of Murmansk in the first half of 2023 was destined for India. This included coal, which, alongside oil, accounts for the bulk of goods imported into India from Russia.⁹⁷

When visiting China in October 2023 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, Vladimir Putin announced that a railway line would be constructed connecting the port cities of Murmansk and Bandar Abbas in Iran.⁹⁸ This link would provide the Russian Arctic port with direct access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. At the same time, Rosatom

93. “Nauka pravit bal” [Science leads the dance], *Russkii vestnik Shpitsbergena*, No. 1, 2024, p. 24.

94. T. Nilsen, “Concerns Emerge Over Moscow’s Push for Expanded Research at Svalbard”, *The Barents Observer*, April 28, 2024, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

95. “Putin poruchil prarobotat vopros yedinogo morskogo koridora po SMP” [Putin gives order to address the issue of a single maritime corridor along the NSR], *TASS*, November 8, 2023, available at: <https://tass.ru>.

96. “Indiya vybiraet Sevmorput – u Suetskogo kanala slishkom mnogo problem” [India opts for the Northern Sea Route – there are too many problems with the Suez Canal], *Vostok Today*, September 28, 2023, available at: <https://vostok.today>.

97. T. Ramakrishnan, “India Accounts for 35% of Cargo Handled by Murmansk This Year”, *The Hindu*, August 15, 2023, available at: www.thehindu.com.

98. “Mezhdunarodny forum ‘Odin poyas, odin put’” [“One Belt, One Road” international forum], Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, October 18, 2023, available at: www.kremlin.ru.

signed a partnership agreement with the Dubai-based Emirati port operator DP World on a joint venture to develop container shipping along the NSR.⁹⁹ Taken together, the various projects involving these new maritime routes for trade and the transportation of raw materials seem set to become embedded in the Asian space. Aside from the public announcements, the funding and completion of this new transportation infrastructure are essential if there is to be any prospect of bringing Russia and Asia together through economic development.¹⁰⁰

A change in the balance of power with China

While rapprochement between China and Russia has accelerated in the polar region, the nature and balance of this relationship have undergone significant change. In March 2023, the visit of Chinese president Xi Jinping to Moscow was intended to demonstrate the two countries' robust bilateral relations. During the summit, Vladimir Putin invited his counterpart to establish a shared space in the development of the NSR, with Russia thus conceding a more significant role for China in the development of the sea route.¹⁰¹ This initiative was renewed in May 2024 when the Russian president visited Beijing to demonstrate the countries' solid bilateral relations in the context of geopolitical upheaval.¹⁰² The multiple exchanges between various Russian ministries and government agencies and their Chinese counterparts provide a further indicator of this intensifying rapprochement, which is particularly apparent in the energy sector.¹⁰³ China's material support for the Arctic LNG 2 project, which is subject to Western sanctions, illustrates the critical importance of such cooperation in this strategic sector.¹⁰⁴ China has delivered two prefabricated modules to

99. "Rosatom and DP World Establish JV for Transit Container Shipping Along Northern Sea Route", *Interfax*, October 24, 2023, available at: <https://interfax.com>.

100. K. Silvan and M. Kaczmarek, "Russia's Approach to Connectivity in Asia: From Cooperation to Coercion", *East Asia*, Vol. 40, 2023, p. 321.

101. L. Filippova, "China's New Role in the Arctic", *Valdai Discussion Club*, May 31, 2023, available at: <https://valdaiclub.com>; A. Fadeev *et al.*, "Energy Cooperation of Russia and China in the Arctic: State and Prospects", *Polar Geography*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2024, pp. 16-32; "Rossiisko-kitaiskiye peregovory" [Russo-Chinese negotiations], Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, March 21, 2023, available at: www.kremlin.ru.

102. D. Goncharov, "Itogi vizita Vladimira Putina v Kitai: Strategicheskoye partnerstvo i novye proyekty" [Outcomes of Vladimir Putin's visit to China: A strategic partnership and new projects], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, May 18, 2024, available at: <https://rg.ru>. See also A. Gabuev, "Putin and Xi's Unholy Alliance", *Foreign Affairs*, April 9, 2024, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

103. "Vstrecha Mikhaila Mishustina s Predsedatelem Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki Si Tsinpinom" [Mikhail Mishustin's meeting with the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping], Government of the Russian Federation, March 21, 2023, available at: <http://government.ru>.

104. M. Humpert, "Delivery of Final Modules for Russia's Arctic LNG 2 Project Highlights Challenge of Designing Effective Sanctions", *High North News*, March 4, 2024, available at: www.highnorthnews.com; M. Humpert, "Chinese Heavy Lift Vessel Carrying New Arctic LNG 2 Modules to Russia Despite Sanctions", *Captain*, May 10, 2024, available at: <https://gcaptain.com>.

enable construction of the second LNG production train to be completed.¹⁰⁵ Despite rumors of US sanctions against Chinese banks and the difficulties of pursuing a gas project that is coming under increasing threat,¹⁰⁶ Beijing has no intention of wavering on its commitment at this stage. As for Norilsk Nickel, which faces a 20% drop in its revenue because of the sanctions regime, it is planning to move its copper smelting plant, constructed in Norilsk, to China, in an effort to overcome the straitened conditions of access to the international market.¹⁰⁷ While this allows the mining firm to get closer to its principal export market, it also increases its strategic dependence on China.

The two countries are also showing signs of broader cooperation in the security domain. In particular, a memorandum was signed in April 2023 between the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), which is tasked with surveillance of the Arctic coastal space, and the China Coast Guard. The agreement concerns “cooperation in the struggle against terrorism, illegal migration, and the smuggling of drugs and arms, and in stopping illegal fishing”.¹⁰⁸ Beyond issues of joint security, the memorandum signals a break with Moscow’s previous political line, which had excluded any foreign presence from its northern space.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the Russian authorities had long insisted on the governance of the Arctic remaining the prerogative of Arctic states.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, China’s presence in the Russian Arctic has been consolidated through direct contacts with regional authorities, pointing to broad economic and industrial cooperation. The numerous visits by Chinese delegations to Russia’s northern regions to promote trade and investment in these territories, such as the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and Arkhangelsk Oblast, illustrate the growing influence of Beijing, which is seen as an essential partner.¹¹⁰ During his meeting with representatives of the Shandong Port Group in September 2023, the governor of Murmansk Oblast, Andrey Chibis, indicated that there would be a strategic reinforcement of the region’s cooperation with China. In the context of developing the NSR, the Russian governor declared

105. A liquefaction train is a production unit composed of a number of elements for treating and purifying natural gas and converting it into LNG.

106. T. Hunnicutt, “US Has No Immediate Plan to Sanction Chinese Banks over Russia, Source Says”, *Reuters*, April 23, 2024, available at: www.reuters.com.

107. “Nornickel to Move Copper Plant Facilities to China, Form JV with Access to Battery Tech”, *Interfax*, April 22, 2024, available at: <https://interfax.com>.

108. S. Shiryaev, “Podpisan memorandum o vzaimoponimanii mezhdru Federalnoi sluzhboi bezopasnosti RF i beregovoi okhranoi KNR” [A memorandum of understanding signed between the Russian Federal Security Service and the China Coast Guard], *Vesti*, GTRK Murman, April 24, 2023, available at: <https://murman.tv>.

109. T. Nilsen, “Russia’s Coast Guard Cooperation with China Is a Big Step, Arctic Security Expert Says”, *The Barents Observer*, April 28, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

110. See the post by the governor of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug on the Vkontakte social network, March 21, 2023, available at: <https://vk.com>; see also the post by the governor of Arkhangelsk Oblast on Vkontakte, May 16, 2023, available at: <https://vk.com>.

himself to be optimistic about attracting Chinese investors in several of the region's economic sectors, such as shipbuilding and forestry.¹¹¹ In May 2024, the governor of Arkhangelsk Oblast, Alexander Tsybulsky, made an official visit to the Chinese port city of Dalian. Aside from cooperation in the energy and agroforestry sectors, issues around ports and logistics in the context of developing the NSR were at the heart of discussions between the Russian governor and the mayor of Dalian, Chen Shaowang.¹¹²

Russia's military intervention in Ukraine has permanently transformed the nature and extent of China's role in this space. Chinese economic initiatives at the level of regional representatives and administrations—that is, at sub-federal levels—could indicate a shift in the balance of power.¹¹³ Given the Chinese regime's desire to safeguard what it considers to be its rights and interests in the polar region, it is possible that Russian and Chinese actions in the area could diverge, threatening the countries' strategic cooperation in the long term.¹¹⁴

The prospect of connecting with the Indo-Pacific space

In August 2023, eleven Russian and Chinese warships sailed into the Pacific Ocean from the Sea of Japan and the Bering Strait to conduct maneuvers off Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.¹¹⁵ Considered a secondary channel for international shipping traffic, and just 85 km wide at its narrowest point, the Bering Strait is the only passage between the Arctic and Pacific oceans. The Indo-Pacific and the Arctic “may be adjacent, but they are very different”,¹¹⁶ yet the strategic proximity between Russia and China represents a coherent geographical framework encompassing these two vast entities. This situation could herald the formation of a new security continuum, linking the polar region with the northeast of Asia, which contains three of the United States' rival nuclear powers: China, North Korea, and Russia.

111. A. Staalesen, “Russian Arctic Regions Strengthen Bonds with Beijing”, *The Barents Observer*, September 20, 2023, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>; see also the Telegram feed of the governor of Murmansk Oblast, September 16, 2023, available at: https://t.me/andrey_chibis.

112. O. Krivtsova, “Gubernator Arkhangelskoi oblasti Tsybulsky posetil Kitai” [Governor Tsybulsky of Arkhangelsk Oblast visits China], *The Barents Observer*, May 15, 2024, available at: <https://thebarentsobserver.com>.

113. P. Ivanov, “Can Russia Get Used to Being China's Little Brother?”, *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2023, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

114. J. Staun and C. Sørensen, “Incompatible Strategic Cultures Limit Russian-Chinese Strategic Cooperation in the Arctic”, *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2023, p. 39.

115. I. Samuels, “Chinese and Russian Vessels Conduct Operations off Alaska Coast”, *Anchorage Daily News*, August 8, 2023, available at: www.adn.com; D. Cusick, “Are Russia and China Teaming Up to Control the Arctic?”, *Scientific American*, January 3, 2024, available at: www.scientificamerican.com.

116. R. Pincus, “The Indo-Pacific Dimension in US Arctic Strategy”, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 7, 2021, p. 98.

The possibility of China and Russia becoming more geostrategically intertwined in the Arctic presents a serious security threat to the Western Arctic nations, especially the United States. The rise of Russo-Chinese military cooperation has led the US Department of Defense to update its strategy, including its methods for training and equipping its armed forces in the polar region.¹¹⁷ The Arctic does not, however, appear to be a likely theater for strategic confrontation between the United States and China as, at this stage, Beijing does not have a military presence there. However, Russia's 2019 proposal to assist China in setting up a missile attack warning system could be seen as a step toward the adoption of a Eurasian security architecture. In the long term, the coverage of this detection infrastructure could potentially stretch from the Arctic to the South China Sea.¹¹⁸

In parallel, the Nordic countries have been strengthening their defense cooperation with South Korea and Japan, as illustrated, in particular, by increased arms sales and by strategic dialogues being initiated—for example between Helsinki and Tokyo.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the convergence of these countries' strategic interests could lead to a strengthened joint maritime policy in the Arctic.¹²⁰ Given this Eurasian axis, the adjacent countries now feel compelled to increase their transregional cooperation,¹²¹ including in the Arctic.

117. H.-G. Bye, "Regaining Arctic Expertise: US Troops in Alaska Making Strides to Become the Army's Arctic Force", *High North News*, February 29, 2024, available at: www.highnorthnews.com.

118. D. Stefanovich, "Can Russia Help China Counter Missile Threats?", *Russian International Affairs Council*, October 8, 2019, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

119. E. Johnston, "Concerns over Russia Draw Finland and Japan Closer Together", *The Japan Times*, May 17, 2023, available at: www.japantimes.co.jp.

120. N. Khorrami, "Finland, Japan, South Korea, and Sweden: A Middle Power Partnership for Enhanced Maritime Capacity in the Arctic", *The Arctic Institute*, October 26, 2021, available at: www.thearcticinstitute.org.

121. A. Banka *et al.*, "Geostrategic Context: Bridging Alliances in the Shadow of Sino-American Competition", *Defence Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2023, pp. 114-121, available at: <https://doi.org>.

Conclusion

Rapid and profound changes in the geostrategic environment in Europe and around the world have directly affected the stability of governance in the Arctic region. Intergovernmental institutions founded in a post-Cold War context appear to have been weakened by a continuing deterioration in relations between Russia and the West since 2014. Moscow has an undisputed military advantage over its adversaries in the Arctic, which is once again becoming a site of confrontation between Russia and the member countries of NATO. Russia has consolidated its military infrastructure along the Arctic coast and around its archipelagos so that it can set the rules of naval activity in the region.

When put into perspective, however, the current dynamics in the region reveal a fundamental paradox. The Arctic serves as a showcase for Russian ambitions while at the same time embodying a peripheral Russia that has been neglected by the central government. While the country's northern territories reveal structural gaps, exacerbated by the war, the availability of resources—human, material, and financial—remains the main challenge for the implementation of Russian projects in the Arctic. This state of affairs has significantly narrowed Moscow's room for maneuver, forcing it to revise its economic and industrial projects.

For the Russian government, a geoeconomic integration of the polar region with the Asian space could resolve an impasse that has only become more acute over the past decade. This pivot, a rhetorical device on Moscow's part,¹²² represents a complex political challenge, and its achievement remains uncertain. Persisting climatic, logistical, financial, and infrastructure barriers to the development of the Northern Sea Route illustrate the challenge of achieving a centuries-old dream that has been nurtured since tsarist times. While Russo-Chinese relations and their evolution over time will remain an essential part of the international system over the years and decades to come,¹²³ Russia's stance in the Arctic, as a vehicle for expressing a new balance of power in the making, is set to play a decisive role in what is now a fractured space.

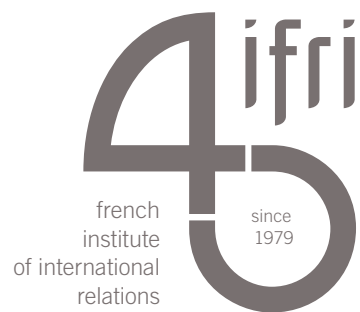
122. See M. Shagina, "Russia's Pivot to Asia: Between Rhetoric and Substance", *Orbis*, Vol. 64, No. 3, 2020, pp. 447-460; V. Kolosov and M. Zotova, "The 'Pivot to the East' and China in Russian Discourse", *Geopolitics*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2023, pp. 879-903.

123. P. Snow, *China and Russia: Four Centuries of Conflict and Concord*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023, p. 527.

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