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# JAMS

Special Issue on Arctic Security



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# Chinese Arctic Expansion

## How Beijing Benefits from Moscow's Isolation

Captain Mark Vicik, USA

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**Abstract:** Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine caused immediate disruption to the Arctic's strategic environment. This shift has caused Russia to partner more closely with China, giving Beijing new opportunities to advance its goals in the region. This article explores the impacts that this shift could have on China's activity in the Arctic. First, it describes the history of China in the Arctic to define its strategic objectives in the region. Then, it argues that the geopolitical changes following the war in Ukraine have given Beijing new opportunities to advance these Arctic goals. Finally, it assesses this shift's strategic impact to the United States and its allies. This work provides a critical insight into changing power dynamics in the Arctic in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Arctic, China, Russia, infrastructure, Sino-Russian partnership, civil-military fusion

**O**n 24 July 2024, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) announced that it had intercepted two Russian and two Chinese bombers flying together in Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone.<sup>1</sup> This incident represented the first joint patrol between the two militaries in the region. While Russian military activity in the Arctic is considered commonplace, the addition of Chinese forces offered a striking illustration of

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important changes reshaping the region's security landscape. For more than a decade, Beijing has expanded its interest in the Arctic and has increasingly sought to improve its ability to exert influence in the region. Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine gave Chinese leaders new opportunities to advance this goal. Russian aggression in Ukraine triggered significant backlash from many countries, particularly in Western Europe, leading to Moscow's increasing political and economic isolation. This separation was particularly pronounced in the Arctic, where all states in the region except Russia are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—including Finland and Sweden, which joined the alliance in response to the invasion—and have strongly opposed Russian aggression. This geopolitical division in the Arctic has forced Russia to lean more heavily on non-Arctic states for partnership in the region. China, having long sought greater influence in the region, is emerging as an increasingly important partner for Moscow. This growing Sino-Russian partnership is providing Beijing with new outlets to expand their economic, political, and military activity in the Arctic, which will pose unique challenges to the United States and its allies. While American leaders are focused on shifting dynamics between European Arctic states, China's rising prominence in the Arctic may ultimately prove to be one of the greatest enduring security challenges in the region.

## **China's Arctic History**

During the past decade, global attention on the Arctic has increased as climate change reduces year-round ice coverage and opens access to new energy deposits, fisheries, and transportation routes in the region. Recognizing the Arctic's increased significance, Chinese leaders have sought to establish a footprint in the region. Most observers argue that China's interest in the Arctic has largely been driven by the need to support their energy requirements and designs for global commercial expansion.<sup>2</sup> Lacking physical territory in the far north, Beijing is building a presence in the region through engagement with multinational institutions, economic investment in Arctic states, and scientific activity. These efforts have been designed to integrate China into the Arctic "status quo" to build a position from which to better leverage the Arctic's commercial benefits.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, China's engagement in Arctic institutions reflects a desire to integrate into regional governing bodies, while advocating for an increase in the status of non-Arctic states in these organizations. In 2013, China was granted observer status in the Arctic Council.<sup>4</sup> The Arctic Council, the region's most robust multinational organization, is a forum for international collaboration on human development, progress on environmental issues, and scientific research between Arctic states, indigenous groups, and interested observers.<sup>5</sup> China's po-

sition as an observer allows it to participate in the council's deliberative process, but decision-making authority resides ultimately with the member states: the Arctic states Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States. Beijing has sought to mitigate this separation by shoring up its own Arctic identity, and by highlighting the importance of Arctic issues for states outside of the region. For example, China's 2018 Arctic policy white paper, Beijing's clearest blueprint for its Arctic ambitions, defines itself as a "near-Arctic state" and advocates for greater influence in issues "vital to the existence and development of all countries and humanity," including scientific research, resource exploitation, security, and global governance.<sup>6</sup> By claiming its own Arctic identity and focusing on the global implications of Arctic developments, Beijing has sought to use multinational institutions to establish its presence in the region.

In addition to diplomatic engagement, China's Arctic strategy has been predicated on investments in economic development projects in key Arctic states. The philosophy behind this effort is again laid out in Beijing's 2018 white paper. It presents the creation of a "Polar Silk Road," modeled on the "One Belt, One Road" strategy of economic expansion through global infrastructure development.<sup>7</sup> This polar addition would focus on developing infrastructure in Arctic states to facilitate China's commercial expansion. In practice, Beijing has implemented this policy through major investments in energy and other related economic projects in Arctic states. During the past decade, Chinese companies have sought to cement economic ties to a variety of Arctic states through infrastructure projects, such as the Isua Iron Ore Mine, the Kvanefield rare earth project in Greenland, and various mining and energy projects in Canada.<sup>8</sup>

China has routinely had the greatest success pursuing these infrastructure projects in Russia. The Yamal liquid natural gas (LNG) project, in Russia's energy-rich Yamal Peninsula, illustrates this economic cooperation. The project was completed in 2017 by Russian company Novatek with 20 percent of its funding from Chinese companies, to include less than 10 percent directly from the Chinese Silk Road Fund.<sup>9</sup> Now operational, it ships LNG primarily to Asian markets, and Beijing considers it an "anchor" to future increased commercial expansion in the region.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent projects, ranging from development of the Payakha oilfield to technical collaboration on the development of icebreakers, illustrate the depth of growing Sino-Russian cooperation in the region.<sup>11</sup> For Beijing, infrastructure investment and economic cooperation with Arctic states through the "Polar Silk Road" project provide the opportunity to secure greater influence in the region despite its lack of Arctic territory.

Beijing has long seen scientific research as a gateway to gain greater access in the region and familiarity operating under its challenging natural conditions. Its 2018 Arctic white paper stresses that "scientific research in areas under the

jurisdiction of Arctic States should be carried out through cooperation” and that “all States have the freedom of scientific research on the high seas of the Arctic Ocean.”<sup>12</sup> In 2004, it established the Arctic Yellow River Station in Svalbard, a hub of scientific activity that gave Chinese scientists experience living and working under Arctic conditions year-round while conducting strategically important work like satellite monitoring.<sup>13</sup> Beijing’s scientific pursuits have also helped enable their economic activity in the Arctic. Polar scientific research by the *Xue Long*, which until 2019 was Beijing’s sole operational icebreaker, provided China with invaluable experience conducting maritime operations in the high north, which helped enable infrastructure development projects and maritime transit expansion in the region.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, scientific activity has been a primary method through which China has established a position in multinational governing organizations. Beijing has long described its polar scientific research as the foundation of its “right to speak” on regional matters.<sup>15</sup> This ongoing Arctic research was a key source of leverage as it sought admission to the Arctic Council, with Chinese leaders claiming interest in the region through the country’s scientific pursuits.

For the past decade, Beijing has sought to establish its economic and diplomatic presence in the far north to gain access to Arctic resources. Throughout that period, Chinese leaders have pursued this goal by expanding its influence in regional multinational organizations and investing in Arctic infrastructure, all bolstered through scientific research projects. However, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine triggered major disruption to the geopolitical environment in the Arctic, which has provided new opportunities for Beijing to pursue its objectives in the region.

## **Chinese Arctic Activity Following the Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

China’s Arctic policy during the past decade can generally be characterized as expanding influence and entrenching its presence in the region through economic and political mechanisms. Given this framework, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has disrupted the status quo in a manner that has provided Beijing important new opportunities to pursue its long-term goals in the region. Moscow’s aggression was swiftly met with political condemnation and economic sanctions, driven largely by the United States and its allies in Western Europe. This backlash disrupted many of the normal cooperative trends in the Arctic. In March 2022, the seven non-Russian permanent members of the Arctic Council condemned Moscow’s war in Ukraine and suspended the organization’s activities, freezing the work of the most substantial multinational organization in the region.<sup>16</sup> Concurrently, a series of sanctions packages driven by the United States and Western Europe have reduced Russia’s access to foreign investment



in Arctic infrastructure, and potentially reduced the commercial benefits of its Arctic energy holdings by restricting access to Western markets.<sup>17</sup>

The result of Moscow's diplomatic isolation and economic disruption has been a desire to increase connections with non-Arctic partners in the region. Russia's March 2023 *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, which defines Russia's new foreign policy strategy a year out from the invasion, outlines this shift. The document's discussion of the Arctic—which, perhaps tellingly, appears just above a section on Eurasian affairs that demands “strengthening . . . strategic cooperation with the People's Republic of China”—calls for “establishing a mutually beneficial cooperation with the non-Arctic states pursuing a constructive policy toward Russia . . . including developing infrastructure of the Northern Sea Route.”<sup>18</sup> This new policy document signals Moscow's desire to open up to greater ties with non-Arctic states that have been less critical of its militarism in Europe, thereby compensating for the post-invasion disruption to its economic and diplomatic posture in the high north. China, having long sought opportunities to expand their access to the region, is well positioned to take advantage of this new Russian outlook.

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many countries, particularly the United States and those in Western Europe, have sought to restrict their imports of Russian energy. The impact was pronounced in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, with Russian exports of seaborne oil dropping by 15 percent due primarily to reductions in imports from the United States and the European Union.<sup>19</sup> Moscow scrambled to offset this export drop by strengthening its commercial ties to countries more friendly to its aggression in Ukraine. The result was an 11 percent increase in oil exports to China by the end of June 2022.<sup>20</sup> For Russia's Arctic economy, which relies heavily on crude energy exports, this increased reliance on Chinese markets will notably strengthen Beijing's ties to the region.

In addition to its increased need for Chinese markets post-invasion, Moscow has become increasingly reliant on Chinese support for infrastructure development and for help evading sanctions. Prior to the invasion, Novatek sought to increase its LNG production in the Yamal Peninsula through a new infrastructure project called Arctic LNG-2. More than 20 percent of the project's total investment came from Chinese firms, while 10 percent came from France's TotalEnergies and critical engineering and technical support came from German, Norwegian, and Italian firms.<sup>21</sup> Following the invasion, TotalEnergies retracted all funding, and many of the European engineering and design firms withdrew support, which halted the project's progress. However, sustained investment from China, as well as the substitution of Chinese technology for sanctioned European engineering support, allowed the project to come online in December 2023 and has allowed for additional growth in infrastructure as of

July 2024.<sup>22</sup> This post-invasion economic cooperation appears to be continuing to expand, with Moscow and Beijing signing a new agreement on the development of a titanium mine in the Russian Arctic in February 2023.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese leaders have long sought to use investment and infrastructure development to establish a presence in the high north. Moscow's need for export markets and economic support to offset the effects of Western sanctions has provided Beijing with an opportunity to expand its access to the Arctic economy through Russia since February 2022. However, this Sino-Russian economic alignment also appears likely to enmesh Beijing in the post-invasion tensions in the region. Many observers suggest that the NATO-member Arctic states may become more wary of Chinese investment due to China's warm relationship with a militant Russia.<sup>24</sup> This skepticism from NATO's Arctic states, however, has so far been offset by the benefits of new investment opportunities in Russia. Additionally, the disruption to normal trends in the region has opened new opportunities for Beijing to secure a political role in the region.

The war in Ukraine placed significant stress on the multinational institutions that have long fostered cooperation in the Arctic, most notably the Arctic Council. This disruption to the status quo has provided Beijing with new outlets to establish a diplomatic presence in the region. For the past decade, Chinese leaders have seen their country's status as an Arctic Council observer as key to its identity as a viable actor in the region. From that position, they have routinely sought to promote the capacity of non-Arctic states to exert influence in the region.<sup>25</sup> The deepening Sino-Russian partnership following the invasion of Ukraine has provided Chinese leaders with new opportunities to build bilateral ties with Moscow on Arctic issues, opening new venues for Beijing to foster its political influence in the region. In October 2022, China's special envoy for Arctic affairs stated that China could not recognize the legitimacy of the Arctic Council without the inclusion of Russia, signaling an interest in developing alternate governing institutions in the region.<sup>26</sup> In March 2023, Beijing and Moscow agreed to the creation of a working group to develop the Northern Sea Route, illustrating their interest in developing new bodies through which to manage Arctic affairs.<sup>27</sup> Beijing has historically sought recognition from multinational Arctic institutions to bolster China's legitimacy in the region and to provide venues through which to influence Arctic affairs. The post-invasion disruption to Arctic governance, and Moscow's ensuing isolation, has given Chinese leaders new opportunities to advance this goal, as Russian leaders have looked to enhance bilateral institutional ties with states more friendly to their aggression in Ukraine.

During the past decade, China has worked to gradually increase its economic power and political influence in the Arctic. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine offered a disruption to Arctic trends that has provided Beijing with

new opportunities to pursue its agenda in the region. Shocked by international sanctions, Moscow has increasingly come to rely on China as an energy export market and an investor and technical partner in Arctic infrastructure projects. This shift has provided Beijing with new mechanisms to advance their economic presence in the region. Additionally, disruptions to Arctic governing regimes and Moscow's need for new partners in the region have given Chinese leaders the chance to establish new diplomatic institutions in the region. These shifts will provide Beijing with important new outlets to continue to expand their presence in the Arctic.

## **Security Implications of China's Arctic Expansion**

The deepening of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, and Beijing's new-found opportunities to advance its goals in the region, will pose a distinct security challenge to the United States and its allies. The deepening of ties between Beijing and Moscow, while primarily economic and diplomatic, has come to include military cooperation as well. In addition to the combined patrol between Chinese and Russian bombers near Alaska in July 2024, the two militaries conducted Joint naval patrols off the Alaskan coast in 2022 and 2023.<sup>28</sup> This military cooperation in the high north can be expected to increase as Russia and China strengthen ties through other means in the region. In this reshaped Arctic security environment, leaders in the United States need to expect more frequent, and more complex, contact with Chinese military capabilities in the far north. It will be critical for the United States and its allies to respond to these challenges in a way that keeps the risk of outright conflict low, while ensuring their continued defense in the region.

The expansion of the Sino-Russian partnership displays China's increasing willingness to employ military capabilities in the Arctic. This trend poses a particular strategic concern when coupled with China's economic growth in the region, as Beijing has a variety of policies in place to blend civilian assets and military capabilities. Their often-cited doctrine of "civil-military fusion" authorizes the Chinese Communist Party to co-opt any research, technology, or intellectual property from civilian scholars or private industry to use for military development.<sup>29</sup> This doctrine raises concerns over the militarization of Arctic research and the military application of Arctic-capable technology.

Similarly, a trademark of the "One Belt, One Road Initiative" (BRI) elsewhere in the world is the concept of "dual-use facilities." Beijing markets these infrastructure projects abroad as economic developments; however, Chinese leaders ensure that they are designed and positioned in ways that enable their use as military facilities. In extreme cases, Beijing has attempted to covertly construct military facilities inside of BRI-funded civil infrastructure, as seen in 2021 when the United States uncovered Chinese attempts to build a naval fa-

cility inside a shipping port in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>30</sup> Experts have already seen indications of Chinese-backed infrastructure projects in the Arctic serving “dual-use” purposes.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to concerns over civil-military fusion and dual-use infrastructure projects, Chinese leaders present another challenge to assessing their military activity in the region. When outlining their policy for the polar regions, Chinese leaders present a strategy called “Military-Civilian Mixing.” It states that “military power and civil power should be closely integrated” to enhance military capabilities and “safeguard the country’s interests” without provoking international concern.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, it calls for increasing the use of military forces in the polar regions for “non-war military operations” like search and rescue.<sup>33</sup> This close integration of military and civilian assets, and the more frequent use of Chinese military capabilities for operations outside of armed conflict, will pose complex challenges for the United States and its allies. American leaders need to be prepared for more frequent contact with Chinese military forces in the Arctic. They also need to be able to monitor and assess the nature of China’s activity in the region to be ready to respond in a manner that balances the necessity of national defense without inadvertently escalating tensions closer to armed conflict.

Chinese military partnerships with Russia in the Arctic, coupled with policies blending civilian and military activity, have allowed Beijing to start to advance its military capability in the region. This development deserves particular attention from leaders in the U.S. defense community. Throughout the Cold War, American and Soviet planners both saw the Arctic as one of the most viable access points to launch attacks into their adversaries’ territory. Chinese military activity in the high north is again bringing attention to the region’s strategic importance. In January 2023, in a high-profile incident in which China deployed a high-altitude surveillance balloon to collect information on key American military sites, the balloon entered American airspace at a point just north of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska.<sup>34</sup> This rather unique intelligence operation has been coupled with an increase in more conventional Chinese military activity in the region. Beijing has partnered militarily with Moscow in large-scale exercises like Vostok 2018 and Vostok 2022, which included Arctic maneuvers.<sup>35</sup> NORAD’s July 2024 intercept of Chinese and Russian bombers operating in partnership near Alaska represented a next step in the expansion of Chinese military activity in the Arctic. American strategists need to anticipate an increase in contact with Chinese military assets in the Arctic, and to understand Beijing’s deliberate efforts to blend these military capabilities with civilian activity.

The Sino-Russian military cooperation that grabbed headlines in July 2024 appears to fit a pattern of increasing cooperation between Beijing and Moscow during the past two years. However, this pattern was certainly not preordained.

Despite a history of collaboration between the two countries, Moscow has historically been wary of increases in Beijing's Arctic power. Russian leaders know that opening the region to powerful non-Arctic states will reduce the relative influence of eight Arctic states and will limit the benefits of Russia's Arctic territorial holdings.<sup>36</sup> However, Moscow's wariness of Chinese Arctic activity appears to have been overtaken by their need for international partners in the aftermath of their invasion of Ukraine. Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe opened new outlets for Beijing to pursue its agenda in the high north, and the results may permanently reshape the Arctic security environment and present the United States with a new strategic adversary in the region.

China's Arctic strategy has historically been predicated on economic growth through infrastructure development, integration into regional governing organizations, and the use of scientific research to bolster their legitimacy. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chinese leaders have benefited from Moscow's isolation to further advance this agenda. As part of this tightening of Sino-Russian relations, Chinese military activity in the high north has expanded. None of these developments suggest an imminent risk of armed conflict in the region, and overall, the risk of such a conflict appears to remain low, but this shift will present complex new challenges to American defense leaders. The United States and its allies need to be prepared to factor direct military partnerships between Moscow and Beijing into their assessments of Arctic security. They need to be aware of the potential "dual use" military applications of commercial facilities in the region and the diverse use of military assets through "military-civilian mixing." Finally, they need to be prepared for increased contact with Chinese military assets in the Arctic as leaders in Beijing attempt to normalize their military presence in the region. While the impacts of the war in Ukraine can be seen most prominently in Europe, American leaders cannot allow themselves to ignore the changes that it has triggered in the Arctic security environment as China increases its presence in the far north.

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