

Russia–China Cooperation in the Arctic: A Pathway to Technological Sovereignty

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Abstract. This article examines Russian–Chinese cooperation in the Arctic, with the primary objective of assessing its role in advancing technological sovereignty and safeguarding the national interests of both states. It reviews domestic scholarly perspectives in Russia and China on sovereignty challenges and strategic threats, and explores bilateral mechanisms for mitigating these risks. The study also analyzes the implementation of current and recently updated Arctic strategies of both nations. The findings indicate that while Russia and China maintain distinct national priorities, their strategic interests largely converge, thereby strengthening the potential for sustained bilateral cooperation in the Arctic region.

Keywords: Arctic, Russia, China, cooperation, sovereignty

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Introduction

In the context of a changing global world system, in the context of the collapse of the “Pax Americana”, a system of a unipolar world in which the United States claims world domination, all mankind comes to a situation where old rules, norms, international law, international organizations cease to operate, and new ones are still being formed. The global dominance of the United States and its satellites in the G7, NATO, the European Union, and the Commonwealth of Nations is weakening and losing its influence, and new entities based on the principles of equality and partnership, such as BRICS+ and the SCO, are only beginning to strengthen their positions[1].

In such circumstances, even the world's largest countries have to defend their sovereignty and national interests.

China's technological sovereignty is heavily dependent on global trade. China is the world's largest exporter of technological products and at the same time the largest consumer of natural resources.

To a large extent, China's technological sovereignty depends on the stability and security of international trade routes. But global trade has recently become more and more dangerous, especially shipping. In the 2020s, there were cases of the Suez Canal being blocked, and Somali pirates periodically threaten to attack merchant ships. The year 2025 became especially tense, the Yemeni Houthis periodically blocked traffic in the Persian Gulf, and the war between Israel and the United States with Iran, although it took several days, blocked air transport in the Middle East and threatened to block maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, there have been cases of piracy by the fleets of the United States and European countries against ships of neutral countries.

China needs a safe route that minimizes the threat of transportation, such as a railway route through Russia and Central Asian countries, or the Northern Sea Route through the Arctic.

On the other hand, Russia is also under unprecedented political pressure from the countries of the “Collective West”.

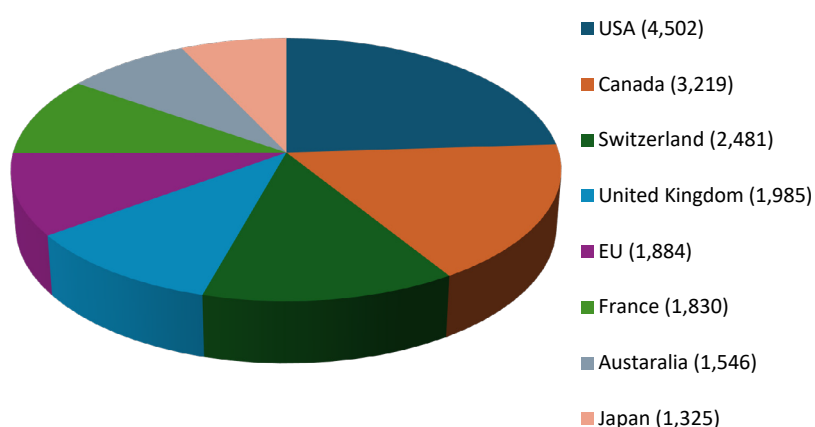
Currently, 16,077 sanctions have been imposed on Russian individuals and legal entities, which is almost six times more than before February 22, 2022 (Table 1).

Table 1. Ranking of Countries by the Number of Western Sanctions

Rating	Country	Sanctions before February 2022	Sanctions after February 2022
1	Russia	2695	16077
2	Iran	3616	1377
3	Syria	2598	313
4	NORTH KOREA	2052	119
5	Belarus	788	666
6	Venezuela	651	96
7	Myanmar	458	530

Source: compiled by Sergei B. Zainullin, Shuang Lei based on data from S.B. Zainullin, O.A. Zainullina [2].

The leaders of the current round of sanctions against Russia are the United States, Canada, Switzerland and the United Kingdom with 3,551, 2,765, 2,225 and 1,749 restrictions, respectively (Figure).



Sanctions by Issue Countries

These statistics allow us to conclude that Russia has become the main target of sanctions and sanctions against Russia have been imposed precisely by the largest countries of the “Collective West”. The introduction of a record number of sanctions increases the relevance of technological security more and more. Taking into account the increasing level of cooperation between Russia and China. The Arctic can become one of the key platforms for joint efforts to ensure the sovereignty of friendly countries.

Materials and Methods

This article uses such research methods as a review of monographs and scientific articles by Russian and Chinese scientists, analysis of statistical data, and study of strategic documents of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on cooperation in the Arctic region. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has not been used in this paper.

Results and Discussion

Development of Russia's Arctic Strategy

The Arctic is of key importance for Russia's resource supply. A significant part of Russia's natural resources is located in the Arctic zone (Table 2).

Table 2. A significant Part of Russia's Natural Resources Is Located in the Arctic Zone

Resource	Reserves, %	Production, %
Platinoids	95	99
Nickel	74	100
Cobalt	55	92
Apatite ores	67	99
Rare earth metals	61	100
Bauxite	14	64
Gas	~80 years	~83 years
Oil	~130 years	~10 years

Source: compiled by Sergei B. Zainullin, Shuang Lei.

As a result of the implementation of the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and ensuring National Security for the period up to 2020:

- Life expectancy at birth in the Arctic zone increased from 70.65 years in 2014 to 72.39 years.
- The migration outflow of the population from the Arctic zone has decreased by 53 percent since 2014.
- The unemployment rate (according to the methodology of the International Labor Organization) decreased from 5.6 percent in 2017 to 4.6 percent in 2019.
- The share of the gross regional product produced in the Arctic zone in the total gross regional product of the subjects of the Russian Federation increased from 5 percent in 2014 to 6.2 percent.
- The share of funds from the budgets of the budgetary system of the Russian Federation in the total volume of investments in fixed assets carried out in the Arctic zone increased from 5.5 percent in 2014 to 7.6 percent in 2019.
- The volume of cargo transportation in the waters of the Northern Sea Route increased from 4 million tons in 2014 to 31.5 million tons in 2019.
- The share of households with broadband access to the Internet information and telecommunications network in the total number of such households in the Arctic zone increased from 73.9 percent in 2016 to 81.3 percent in 2019.
- The share of modern weapons, military and special equipment in the Arctic zone increased from 41 percent in 2014 to 59 percent in 2019.

It can be concluded that the implementation of Russia's previous Arctic Strategy has led to positive results, but the Arctic needs further infrastructure development.

Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 645 dated October 26, 2020 On the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period up to 2035 defines the main national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic:

- Ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.
- preservation of the Arctic as a territory of peace, stable and mutually beneficial partnership.
- Ensuring a high quality of life and well-being of the population of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation.
- The development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation as a strategic resource base and its rational use in order to accelerate the economic growth of the Russian Federation.
- Development of the Northern Sea Route as a competitive national transport communication in the world market of the Russian Federation.
- Environmental protection in the Arctic, protection of the native habitat and traditional way of life of the indigenous small-numbered peoples living in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as the small-numbered peoples).

In addition to the Strategy, the President of Russia has adopted the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period up to 2035.

The fundamentals establish the directions for the implementation of the state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic:

- The integrated social and economic development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation, as well as the development of its infrastructure.
- Development of science and technology in the interests of Arctic exploration and innovative development.
- Environmental protection and environmental safety.
- Development of international cooperation.
- Ensuring the protection of the population and territories of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation from natural and man-made emergencies.
- Ensuring public safety in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation.
- Ensuring the military security of the Russian Federation.
- Protection and protection of the state border of the Russian Federation.

China Has Long Been Involved in Arctic Affairs

In 1925, China joined the Svalbard Treaty and began to participate in resolving Arctic issues. China's membership in the International Arctic Science Committee in 1996 marked its more active participation in scientific research in the Arctic. Since 1999, China has organized a number of scientific expeditions to the Arctic, using its Xue Long ("Snow Dragon") research vessel as a platform. In 2004, China built an Arctic station in Ny-Ålesund in the Svalbard archipelago.

China's policy and position regarding participation in Arctic affairs is aimed at achieving the following goals:

1. Deepening research and exploration of the Arctic. The Arctic is of great value for scientific research. Arctic exploration is a priority and the main focus of China's activities in the Arctic.

2. Protecting the Arctic environment and combating climate change. China adheres to international law regarding the protection of the Arctic environment and ecosystem, as well as the conservation of its biological resources, and is actively involved in solving problems related to environmental and climate change in the Arctic.

3. Rational and legitimate use of Arctic resources. The Arctic is rich in resources, but its ecosystem is fragile. China stands for the protection and rational use of the region and encourages its enterprises to participate in international cooperation in the exploration and use of Arctic resources, maximizing their advantages in capital, technology and the domestic market.

4. Active participation in Arctic governance and international cooperation. China is striving to improve and complement the Arctic management regime. China is working to regulate and monitor the activities of Chinese citizens, legal entities, and other organizations in the Arctic in accordance with legislation to ensure that their activities comply with international law and national laws on environmental protection, resource conservation, and sustainable development.

5. Promoting peace and stability in the Arctic. China is committed to strengthening cooperation with Arctic States in the fields of maritime and air search and rescue, early warning of maritime emergencies, emergency response, and information exchange to properly address safety issues such as maritime accidents, environmental pollution, and maritime crimes.

A review of the strategies of Russia and China reveals the harmonization of the key goals of both states in the Arctic, in particular in the fields of science, ecology, economic development, and security.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said back in 2013: “To turn the Northern Sea Route into an international route that is competitive compared to traditional important routes such as the Suez and Panama Canals”.

In June 2017, the State Committee for Development and Reform of the People’s Republic of China and the State Oceanic Research Administration of the People’s Republic of China (SOA) jointly published “Proposals for maritime cooperation in the framework of the Construction of the Belt and Road”, which proposed the creation of three “blue” economic corridors, including “active assistance to the joint construction of the “blue” economic corridor, connecting Europe across the Arctic Ocean”.

In 2024, Russia launched a year-round operation plan for the NSR and, to facilitate transportation in the eastern section, added Tiksi port in the Laptev Sea as an international port.

In the “Joint Statement of China and Russia”, published in May 2024, it was announced: “... to establish a Subcommittee on Cooperation on the Northern Sea Route within the framework of the mechanism... The PRC and the Russian Federation will contribute to the transformation of the Arctic sea routes into an important international transport corridor, and encourage enterprises of the two countries to strengthen cooperation in increasing cargo turnover of the Arctic sea routes and building logistics infrastructure for them. To deepen cooperation in the field of polar shipbuilding and ship construction technologies” [3].

The Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC Central Committee) of the 20th convocation was held in Beijing from

October 20 to 23, 2025. The main result of the plenum was the consideration and adoption of the document “Proposals of the CPC Central Committee on the development of the 15th five-year program for National Economic and social Development”.

The Plenum set the following objectives for China’s development for the 15 Five-year period from 2026 to 2030:

- progress in high-quality development;
- increasing scientific and technical independence and power;
- comprehensive deepening of reforms;
- cultural and ethical progress in the whole society;
- improving the quality of life;
- promotion of the “Beautiful China” initiative;
- strengthening the national security shield [4].

From the decision of the Plenum, it can be concluded that priorities for ensuring sovereignty, development, cooperation and security will correlate in the further implementation of China’s Arctic Strategy.

Thus, Russia and China are purposefully developing cooperation, including in the Arctic zone, and this cooperation is confirmed by both current strategies and long-term development plans.

Chinese researchers are interested in studying cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic.

In the Arctic it is necessary to actively promote and implement a common, comprehensive, joint and sustainable concept of global security, clearly opposing unilateralism and camp confrontation. On the other hand, some countries to the mindset and position of “pan-securitization”, blindly strive for absolute security, expand security perimeters, blur the boundaries of security management, exaggerate the degree of threats, and even use exclusionary and confrontational approaches, politicizing and instrumentalizing issues of economic, trade, technological, and humanitarian issues, turning them into weapons.

China and Russia’s energy cooperation in the Arctic has also been affected by sanctions... Arctic states establish legally binding investment rules for non-regional countries, which significantly increases the risks of liability of Chinese enterprises in the Arctic in areas such as ecology, social security and human rights protection.

Under the influence of U.S. sanctions and the domestic economic situation, Russia continues to expand its openness to Chinese investment. Significant achievements in energy cooperation demonstrate the broad potential for developing comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation between China and Russia in a new era.

Wan Chuqiao finds some difference in the approaches of Russia and China in the management of the Arctic. “Russia insists on an exclusive hierarchical model of Arctic governance with a core of Arctic states, while China adheres to an inclusive management model, involving a wider range of non-Arctic countries and subjects to participate in the management of the Arctic”. But this difference in approaches, in his opinion, does not reduce the dynamics of strengthening cooperation. “Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation is a rational choice made by Russia in the face of sanctions from the United States and other Western countries, and it is developing rapidly” [5].

Yu Huilu, Li Fei, Lin Yinghua, and others, on the one hand, identify constraints in cooperation between Russia and China. “Political mutual trust is a crucial factor in Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation, therefore, strengthening joint research in the field of international relations theory between the two countries serves as an effective policy tool”. They also determined that the United States is an active force, capable of making changes in Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation. Therefore, proper building of Sino-American relations is of paramount importance. But as a conclusion, they note the positive consequences of overcoming sanctions: “The current high level of bilateral relations between China and Russia is partly due to the West’s compression of Russia’s strategic space and the imposition of economic sanctions against it” [6].

Zhu Yan, Wang Shuchun, and Fei Junhui note that although China has long been interested and able to become a partner of Russia in the development of the sea route, it did not rush to include this route in its national initiative until Russia was psychologically ready for it. They identify the evolution of Russia’s position until 2015, “Russia showed no desire to build the Northern Sea Route together with China”. Since 2015, especially after 2017, Russia has changed its attitude towards Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation and began actively inviting China to jointly develop and use the NSR. Russia’s active invitation was an important reason for China’s policy change [7].

They identified the following reasons for the change in Russia’s position:

- As energy projects developed and the domestic and international situation changed, the development of the NSR became more and more relevant for Russia.
- The deterioration of relations with the West and the widening financial gap have increased Russia’s economic and political needs for China on Arctic issues.
- The completion of large-scale military construction in the Arctic and the optimization of the logistics infrastructure of the route have strengthened Russia’s ability to control the NSR and strengthened its confidence in attracting foreign partners.
- In the context of positive cooperation between China and Russia, Russia’s view of China’s participation in Arctic affairs has become more objective and pragmatic.

On the other hand, “China, with significant financial advantages and potential in infrastructure construction, can largely offset the risks and losses caused by Western sanctions” [7].

Kuan Zengjun and Ou Kaifei note the increasing role of BRICS in the development of the Arctic. As the overall economic power of the BRICS countries increases markedly and their international agenda is constantly strengthening, the institutionalized BRICS platform has become an important platform for global governance. Arctic governance has become an important part of global governance. Among the BRICS countries, Russia is an Arctic state, while China and India have become observer states in the Arctic Council; in addition, some BRICS countries have already begun cooperation in the Arctic. There are certain foundations for the development of joint Arctic governance for the BRICS countries, but at the same time they face numerous challenges. The BRICS countries should make full use of the existing framework for cooperation and put Arctic governance issues on the agenda. Through direct or indirect participation in the joint management of the Arctic, the region may eventually become a new area for BRICS countries to cooperate in the field of governance.

The researchers propose to create a trilateral mechanism for cooperation between China, Russia and India in the field of governance, and on the basis of bilateral and trilateral cooperation to promote the participation of all BRICS countries in the management of the Arctic [8].

The core of Sino-Russian cooperation in shipbuilding is the deep complementarity of the advantages of the parties. Russia has extensive experience in the design and operation of icebreakers, while China provides solid support through strong manufacturing capabilities and the potential for technological innovation. Military cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic has reached a new stage: joint naval exercises, air patrols and coast guard operations mark a significant strengthening of the military presence of the two countries in the region. These military exercises have a double strategic importance. On the one hand, they enhance the defensive capabilities and military projection capabilities of China and Russia in the Arctic region; on the other hand, they send a clear signal to Western powers, indicating the growing military presence and operational capabilities of China and Russia in the Arctic, where geopolitical competition is intensifying. These actions not only strengthened military trust between the two countries, but also sent a clear signal to the international community about the increased military presence of China and Russia in the Arctic. The researcher notes that the existing competition for resources does not hinder coordination and cooperation. Despite the existence of competition and potential disagreements, China and Russia's cooperation in the Arctic remains in full compliance with their comprehensive strategic partnership. Its key goal is to jointly counter the expansion of the influence of the United States and its allies in the Arctic region. The coordinated actions of the two countries in the fields of energy resources development and infrastructure development reflect not only a common interest in opening alternative trade routes and ensuring the security of resource supplies, but also their strategic consensus on the transformation of the management architecture in the Arctic. The evolution of the current geopolitical configuration further highlights the complex nature of this partnership. Despite the fact that both sides continue to publicly emphasize the strategic importance of cooperation, the ongoing latent competition for control of resources, economic dominance and the right to vote in the management of the Arctic may affect the depth and sustainability of future cooperation in the region. This fragile balance sheet system requires the parties to properly address deep issues such as benefits distribution and strategic positioning by promoting pragmatic cooperation.

Li Zhenfu, Wang Qun, and Qi Xinli note that a new concept of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation is being proposed as part of the Global Arctic perspective. It includes: strengthening regional ties between the program for the revival of China's Northeast and the program for the development of the Russian Far East in order to deepen network density between the two countries; creation of an international land-sea transport network connecting Asia and Europe and extending north to the Arctic Ocean, based on the vertical path of the "Silk Road over Land and Ice" and the horizontal path of the "Belt and Road"; as well as the creation of a platform for information and cultural exchanges between China and Russia in the context of the "Global Arctic". They also point out the advantages of cooperation for both Russia and China. For Russia, faced with isolation and sanctions from the United States and its NATO allies, actively adopting the concept of the "Global Arctic" and using its new identity to expand international cooperation may be a new opportunity to implement its Arctic strategy. For China, the concept of the "Global Arctic" deepens the integration

of bilateral interests, not only demonstrating China's active position and practical contribution to Arctic governance, but also presenting the international community with an example of cooperation rather than confrontation [9]. That the new international environment creates both challenges and opportunities for Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. Arctic tourism, the creation of joint transport and rescue fleets, as well as the modernization of bilateral cooperation mechanisms can become promising areas for Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. The risks and ways are discussed in the literature to overcome them for China's interests in the Arctic. Currently, new trends in the geopolitical game are being observed in the Arctic: the intensification of security rivalry, the complication of economic cooperation and the destruction of the existing framework of interaction. Increased Arctic competition poses threats to Chinese strategic security, damages its international image, reduces space for activities on the high seas, and calls into question the Arctic's governance mechanisms, which it has traditionally relied on. These problems create new risks for the protection of China national interests and rights in the Arctic. As a risk diversification, proposed balancing cooperation with both Russia and other Arctic countries. China needs to deepen cooperation with Russia, balance relations with the Arctic Seven and seek to expand the space for cooperation with them. Chinese authors, considering China's participation in Arctic governance and cooperation, note that Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation should be used as a breakthrough... At the same time, we strive to maintain and deepen dialogue and cooperation with other Arctic states, especially with the Northern European countries. It is necessary to accurately identify the natural features of the changing Arctic situation, combine the protection of the common interests of all mankind with the implementation of China's Arctic policy, strengthen communication and cooperation with stakeholders in such areas as energy development, navigation management, scientific research and environmental protection, constantly seek new areas of cooperation and opportunities for development, actively form a "blue partnership", contribute to achieving more positive results within the framework of the Silk Road on Ice, thereby making a greater Chinese contribution to the sustainable development of the Arctic region.

Undoubtedly, Russia is the undisputed Arctic power. Building on this potential, the formation of identity among the Arctic states and the integration of resources to change the geopolitical and economic situation in the Arctic have become important elements in the implementation of Russia's Arctic strategy. From the point of view of Russia's strategic calculations, its cooperation with China in the Arctic serves as a catalyst for the integrated development of the Arctic and the strengthening of infrastructure. For China, which advocates the creation of the Polar Silk Road, protecting national energy security in the Arctic requires interaction with states with significant influence in the region. Through the exchange of concepts, the formation of an agenda and the promotion of cooperation, it is necessary to achieve effective participation in Arctic affairs. This will help to avoid strategic overstrain due to destructive competition and lay the foundation for China's strengthening role in the development of Arctic energy resources.

Conclusion

Many Chinese researchers note obstacles to increased cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic region, such as competition for resources, sanctions confrontation between Russia and Western countries and Western pressure on

China and other neutral countries to isolate Russia, Russia's fears for its sovereignty over its part of the Arctic region, but they consider such contradictions as uncritical. Much greater factors encourage increased cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic region, such as China's need for Russian resources, common interests in trade and security, and mutual respect for the interests of Russia and China. The development of Russian-Chinese relations in the field of Arctic exploration, strengthening cooperation between the countries, including other countries, primarily the BRICS countries, in the orbit of cooperation, joint trade through the Northern Sea Route, technological development, and security is confirmed by the current actions of the governments of Russia and China, as well as promising Arctic Development Strategies.

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Российско-китайское сотрудничество в Арктике: путь к технологическому суверенитету

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Финансирование. Настоящее исследование не получало внешнего финансирования.

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Вклад авторов. Концептуализация, методология, формальный анализ, предоставление ресурсов, подготовка первоначального варианта, написание, рецензирование и редактирование статьи – С.Б. Зайнуллин, Ш. Лэй. Все авторы прочли и одобрили окончательную версию рукописи.

Конфликт интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Аннотация. Рассмотрено сотрудничество России и Китая в Арктике, основной целью которого является оценка его роли в укреплении технологического суверенитета и национальных интересов обоих государств. Проанализированы российские и китайские научные подходы к вопросам суверенитета и стратегическим вызовам, а также двусторонние механизмы смягчения данных рисков. Особое внимание уделено реализации текущих и недавно обновленных арктических стратегий России и Китая. В результате сделаны выводы о том, что, несмотря на наличие у сторон собственных национальных приоритетов, их стратегические интересы в значительной степени совпадают, что создает благоприятные условия для устойчивого двустороннего сотрудничества в Арктике.

Ключевые слова: Арктика, Россия, Китай, сотрудничество, суверенитет

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