

Russia, the Arctic and Northeast Asia

The Strategic Importance of the Far North

Rafael Contreras Luna

Historically, the Arctic has been much more important to Russia than to other Arctic countries. In Soviet times, the development of the Arctic was of paramount importance and it was used by the Soviet government to legitimise its great power status to domestic and international audiences. It is argued in this paper that the administration of President Putin has re-established a narrative on Russia as an Arctic power. In this sense, Russia not only seeks to exploit natural resources and develop the Northern Sea Route, but to project status as it conceives of itself as a great power. This paper suggests that the Arctic is not only becoming more important for Russia itself but also for Northeast Asian countries, as China, Japan and South Korea require a stable regional environment and secure supply of natural resources, which are essential for their prosperity and stability. In this sense, diverse partnerships are being developed between Russian and Northeast Asian countries; this work analyses the key components of those partnerships and its potential benefits. The development of the Far North constitutes an essential component in Russia's larger and long-term project to develop Asiatic Russia. It would be fallacious to examine Russia's Arctic strategy only through the prism of the current confrontation between Russia and the West.

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Since Russia expanded to the Pacific, the Far North¹ has been ingrained in the Russian national consciousness. In Soviet times, the development of the Far North was of paramount importance for the country's great power status; civilising the tundra was conceived by the Soviet leadership as one of the nation's greatest achievements. The Soviet period of Arctic exploration and development had the emphasis on national glory and science. It is argued in this paper that the administration of President Putin attempts to re-establish the narrative on Russia as an Arctic power, albeit on a different manner.

Russia is one of the few great powers to have a noun *velikoderzhavnost* – greatness - to define its status and position in the world. This 'greatness' is a central element of Russia's national identity and exerts huge influence in the country's foreign policy making. One of the key elements used to sustain Russia's aspirations to be a great power is its Asiatic Russia. In the last decade, Putin has been constructing the narrative that development of Siberia, the Russian Far East (RFE), and the Arctic will further the development of Russia. The development of the Russian Arctic constitutes an essential component in the country's larger and long-term project to develop Asiatic Russia. It would be fallacious to examine Russia's Arctic strategies only through the prism of the current confrontation between Russia and the West. Certainly, the crisis in the Ukraine has negatively affected Russia's plans for the region. Nevertheless, as Saint Petersburg scholar Alexander Sergunin argues, the crisis has minimally affected Russia's Arctic long-term strategy, as Russia started to talk about the Arctic before other countries did and long before the current confrontation with the West started. What is more, Russia's plans in the Arctic are part of a much bigger plan of developing the entire Asiatic Russia, a project that Putin has stated would take Russia the entire century to accomplish. As per Soroka, 'Russia is playing a long game in the Arctic'.²

This article suggests that the Arctic is not only becoming more important for Russia itself and its great power status, but also for Northeast Asia (NEA), as China, Japan, and South Korea require a stable regional environment and secure supply of natural resources, which are essential for their prosperity and stability. The melting Arctic ice has in recent times pushed NEA countries to pay more attention to the re-

gion. Indeed, China, Japan and South Korea joined the Arctic Council³ in 2013 as permanent observers. The three countries are turning north in quest of shipping routes, oil, gas, scientific research and to enhance their international profiles. Similarly, China, Japan, and South Korea see the Arctic as a kind of barometer of climate change and, therefore, they consider that non-Arctic states have the right to participate in discussions and decision-making. Russia is apparently the most promising Arctic partner for NEA countries as it is not only the closest to them, but it is the largest circumpolar state and possesses the longest Arctic shoreline; it is also the nation that apparently has the highest ambitions in the region. It could be said that there is a synergy between Russia's turn to Asia and its longstanding effort to re-develop the Arctic, and Northeast Asia's turn north. Within this framework, Russia seeks to establish effective partnerships with NEA countries in the region.

Russia's Arctic strategies are not determined only by material incentives but also by internal ideas based on its self-image as a great power. Russian plans in the Arctic are pursued if they satisfy status-seeking demands.⁴ Therefore, it would be inaccurate to analyse Russia's Arctic policies only through the prism of geopolitics or realism excluding a constructivist approach, as it would neglect the possibility of a close nexus between cooperation and the country's reassertion of great power status. Anne Clunan argues that Russia's national interests and foreign policy cannot be defined on the basis of conventional cost-benefit assessments.⁵ The self-image of Russia as a great power exerts a decisive influence on how interests are defined by the state.⁶ In terms of international affairs, the priority of the Russian leadership is to ensure the position of Russia as a global power.⁷

This article pursues a research study⁸ focusing on these ideas: Russia's insistence on its great power status and the idea of Russia as an Arctic power. It tries to explain the significance of the Far North for Russia in a historic, economic, and political perspective; but also how the Arctic remains a central element defining and promoting Russia's quest for great power status. It aims to examine how the previously mentioned ideas relate to the apparent necessity of Russia to develop the Arctic and the Northern Sea Route (NSR), and the diverse partnerships Russia is promoting with NEA countries. The function and perception of the Russian Arctic is not exclusively internal or external but arises out of the interaction of the two. Therefore, this article does not only focus on changes in the Russian Arctic in the post-Soviet period;

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but also on the new circumstances in Northeast Asia and the strategic interests of China, Japan, and South Korea in the region.

This article is organised as follows. Firstly, it tries to locate the Arctic within the Russian imaginary, from Mangazeya to the single-industry towns; it emphasizes the particular importance of the region in the Soviet era. Secondly, it attempts to answer the question: What is the Arctic for Russia? This section describes the main features of the Russian Arctic and the position of the region within the new international order, and it examines the current political, economic, legal, and security issues of the region for Russia. Thirdly, this work examines the strategic interests of China, Japan, and South Korea in the Arctic and its drivers which include security, political, economic, and scientific factors, putting emphasis on the potential benefits of a Russia-NEA partnership in the region. This section is largely empirical and descriptive. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting upon the relevance of the Arctic for Russia and Northeast Asia, Arctic governance, and the risks of potential conflicts in the region.

The Arctic in Imperial and Soviet Russia

In the sixteenth century the Tsardom of Muscovy was almost a land-locked country; it did not have coastlines in the Baltic or in the Black Sea, with the exception of the village of Kholmogory (later Arkhangelsk) in the far north which traded with Europe. In 1582 Yermak took Isker and subdued the khanate of Siberia and conducted what was later known as the conquest of Siberia. Afterwards, Russian Cossacks, explorers and *promyshleniki* (fur traders) began to colonise Siberia by building forts at strategic points along the river routes to the east and to the north.⁹ As a result, in 1601 the first Russian settlement above the Arctic Circle was established: Mangazeya. The legendary town of Mangazeya on the Taz River played a crucial role in Russia's expansion into Asia as it served as a fur-trading port and base for the Russian advance into Siberia. A continuous sea route was established from Arkhangelsk to Mangazeya, this was an early precursor to the Northern Sea Route.¹⁰ As a result, by 1615 the trade volume of Mangazeya surpassed that of all the rest of Russia.¹¹ Nevertheless, due to its remote location it became clear to the new Tzar Mikhail that Mangazeya could not be controlled. Consequently, the port was closed in 1619 and fur trade was re-routed. This resulted in the rapid decline of the town and its later abandonment. As the town was built in one of the most inhospitable parts of

the Eurasian landmass, its exact location was forgotten and remained unknown until its ruins were discovered in 1967.¹²

In the sixteenth century the idea arose in Europe that a northern sea route connecting Europe to the Pacific Ocean existed, and consequently, Europeans began to explore the Arctic Ocean and reached the Taimyr Peninsula.¹³ They could not go farther east, however. In the seventeenth century, Russian explorers moved along the river basins of the great three Siberian Rivers and reached Siberia's Arctic shoreline, but they did not have the means to go farther. Similarly, there were rumours of the proximity of America and Asia and the existence of a strait between them. The Russians first reached Chukotka in the 1640s and began to explore that remote land. An expedition led by Semyon Dezhnev sailed in 1646 from Anadyrsk west to the Kolyma River and then north to the Arctic Ocean, reached the north-eastern tip of Siberia, rounded the Chukotka peninsula and passed through the strait dividing Asia and North America (the Bering Strait).¹⁴ Dezhnev was unaware of this, however, he did not know he was proving that Asia and America were separate continents and his report remained unknown until the mid-eighteenth century.

Peter the Great recognised the great advantage Russia would enjoy if the route existed and a month before he died, he entrusted Vitus Bering with the execution of an expedition to determine whether Asia and America were joined and to find a route to North America.¹⁵ In 1728 the expedition led by Bering rounded the extremity of the continent (the Chukchi Peninsula) and without realising it, passed through the strait separating Asia and America (now the Bering Strait). Due to restricted visibility, he could not see Alaska and therefore did not realise how close America was, but he confirmed that both continents were in fact separate.¹⁶

In 1730 the new Empress Anna proposed that Bering undertake a second mission which was later called the Great Northern Expedition or Second Kamchatka Expedition. The Expedition was 'one of the most elaborate, thorough, and expensive expeditions ever sent by any government any time'.¹⁷ The Great Northern Expedition was divided into three different vectors. The second vector was intended to explore the Russian Arctic and to chart Siberia's Arctic shoreline from Arkhangelsk to Chukotka.¹⁸ This would confirm the existence of the northern route connecting Europe and the Pacific Ocean. This mission was divided into five different segments and even though not all the segments were completed (especially the last one from the Lena River

to the Bering Strait), most of the exploration and survey of the Russian Arctic shore was accomplished. Nevertheless, interest in Arctic waned during the reigns of Elizabeth and Catherine the Great.¹⁹

CEJISS 3/2019 Several expeditions to the Arctic took place in the nineteenth century but only by the end of the century could the Russians successfully navigate the entire sea route along the Arctic. The Arctic began to play an important role for Russia only in the first half of the twentieth century when the Soviet Union began to explore and set up permanent stations and villages in order to exercise sovereignty and exploit natural resources. During Soviet industrialisation the resources located in the Soviet North began to play a central role in the Soviet centrally planned economy. A major industrial base was created, as well as a transport infrastructure. The Soviet government created many single-industry strategic towns above the Arctic Circle and their development was considered a state priority.²⁰ These mono-towns were usually established in remote areas on permafrost and under some of the most extreme and unfavourable weather conditions in the world: Dikson, Vorkuta, Norilsk, among others. The 1970s and 1980s were the golden years of such Arctic cities as their population grew exponentially, and the government drastically improved human comfort and livability of the Arctic cities. The harsh conditions were compensated by higher incomes and social benefits.

The Soviet Union put settlements and populations in some of the coldest places on Earth due to the belief that “all its territory must be populated to be possessed and governed.”²¹ The leadership sought to “impose the authority of the Soviet State on the open tundra.”²² In fact, compared to other northern countries, the Russian Arctic is different as it has more Arctic cities: out of 125 Arctic cities in the world, 93 are located in Russia, 22 in Alaska, 5 in Canada, and 5 in Norway.²³ These settlements are scattered across the vast Russian tundra and have few limited connections to the rest of Russia. The city of Norilsk epitomises the Russian Arctic town. Indeed, inhabitants of Norilsk refer to the rest of Russia as *materik*, the frequently used Russian word for mainland as the city is not connected to the rest of the country by road or railway. “Due to its Arctic location, severe climate, permafrost, isolation, size, and the level of urbanization, the city of Norilsk is unique and can be viewed as an improbable, yet truly Arctic city.”²⁴

The severe deterioration of living conditions in the early 1990s resulted in a dramatic population decline in the region, particularly in

mono-towns and ports along the Arctic coastline. Indeed, some ports on the Laptev and East Siberia seas were totally depopulated and officially abandoned. At the present time, snow-covered abandoned houses, schools, polar stations, and other buildings across the Arctic are only the living memory of the golden years of Arctic development. Certainly, the Soviet development of remote Arctic regions has left a problematic legacy for modern Russia; this can be seen throughout the Russian Arctic region. Perhaps, no other city embodies this problematic legacy better than Vorkuta. In Soviet times, this former GULAG camp became the third largest Arctic city and one of the largest coal sources of the country. In the 1990s, however, the situation in this single-industry town was “catastrophic” and Vorkuta was deemed to disappear. In 2003, the private company *Severstal* bought the state-owned company *Vorkutaugol* and since then conditions in the city have slightly improved. Nevertheless, the situation is far from being normalised: eight out of thirteen coal mines have closed, and large parts of the city have been practically abandoned.²⁵ The future of the city is totally uncertain as it depends directly on how profitable coal extraction will be.

Exploration and development of the Arctic has been much more important to Russia than to Western countries: “For as long as Russia has existed as a country, and particularly during the twentieth century, the Arctic has occupied a special place of prominence in its national development.”²⁶ For the Soviet leadership industrialising and urbanising some of the most inhospitable territories in the world was viewed as one of the USSR’s greatest achievements.²⁷ Indeed, for Russia the development of the Far North is a history of a fierce battles against the incredibly severe conditions of the Arctic; a history full of stories of success and tragedy.²⁸ Russians felt proud of civilising the tundra and overcoming the extreme harsh weather conditions. As Pier Horensma observes: “What to many had been a cold and empty area has been changed by icebreaker expeditions and polar stations into a miraculous empire, in which heroic battles were fought and records achieved.”²⁹

Russia’s strategic interests in the Arctic

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Arctic apparently lost its importance for Russia; the policies of the country to the north focused on measures only to respond to the economic and social crisis originating from the demise of the USSR. Indeed, the Arctic was not a priority until the mid-2000s when it gradually regained its strategic importance

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for Russia. Economic and security interests of Russia in the Arctic have considerably changed in the last two decades. Arguably, one of the most important factors contributing to this new reality is the recent retreat of the ice in the Arctic Ocean as it has brought international attention back to the area.³⁰ Although the ice is not retreating in a predictable way, climate models predict that the Arctic Ocean will be ice-free in summer sometime between 2030 and 2050.³¹ Apart from the obvious effects on the local and global environment, this unlocks a wide range of both opportunities and security challenges: the opening of Russia's Northern Sea Route have led to predictions of shortened trade routes saving thousands of miles and many days at sea- between Europe and East Asia. Forecasts of large oil and gas reserves have given rise to concerns over sovereignty, security and sustainability throughout the region.³² An oft-cited report by the US Geological Survey estimates that the Arctic could be home to 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of the undiscovered gas, more than 80 percent located offshore, in addition to abundant metal and non-ferrous deposits of copper, zinc, diamond, gold, silver and nickel and fishing resources.³³

Arguably, Russia has the highest ambitions in the Arctic as it has important economic, social, environmental, and military-strategic interests in the region. The Russian government refers to the Arctic as an area of strategic national interest and constantly emphasises the importance of the region. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin stated that "The Arctic is a Russian Mecca."³⁴ After Norway, Russia was the second Arctic country to formulate an Arctic strategy. In 2008 the Russian Federation's Security Council set out the basic national interests in the Arctic and its vision of the future, defining the Arctic as Russia's main strategic resource base and the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation, emphasising its commitment to international laws. Similarly, *The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2020 and Beyond* focuses on the priorities of Russia's Arctic policies. "This strategy aims to transform the region into Russia's future resource base by providing greater investments, protecting Russian borders and safeguarding territory, ensuring environmental safety, promoting science and research, and contributing to international stability."³⁵ In 2013 *The Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation* was approved by President Putin; it focuses on the sustainable socio-economic development of the Rus-

sian Arctic. These two documents comprise Russia's Arctic strategy. Russia is operating at various levels in the Arctic: political, economic, military, and legal.

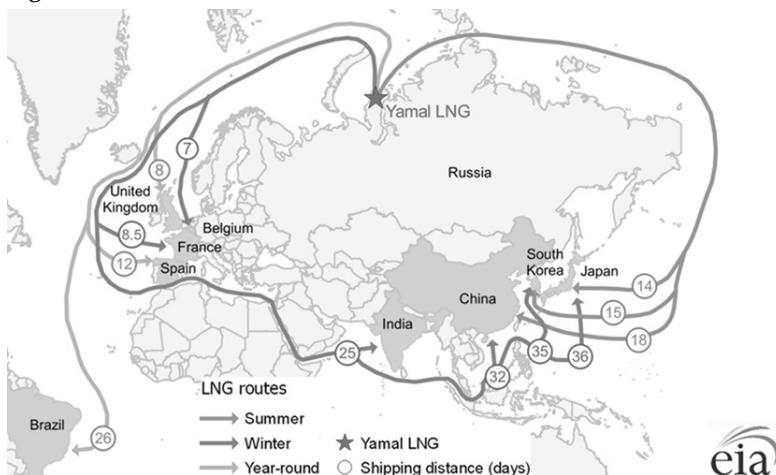
Russia has strategic economic interests in the Arctic. The aforementioned report by the US Geological Survey estimates that most of the oil and gas potential of the Arctic is located in the Russian sector: 60 percent of the undiscovered Arctic oil and gas.³⁶ Similarly, the Russian Arctic nowadays produces about 11 percent of the country's gross domestic product and approximately 22 percent of the total Russian exports. The region accounts for 95 percent of Russia's gas production and 70 percent of the country's oil production. The Arctic is also abundant in other mineral resources such as diamonds, nickel, cobalt, and copper, among others.³⁷

The Northern Sea Route comprises a set of sea routes along the Russian Arctic shoreline providing access to different Russian ports: Novy Port, near the mouth of the Ob River; Dikson, Dudinka, and Igarka at the mouth of the Yenisei River; Tiksi at the Lena River; and Pevek and Mys Shmidta along the coastline of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, among others. The NSR is of interest to global shipping firms as an alternative to the longer southern routes between East Asia and Europe. The competitive advantages of the NSR are the speed of delivery and the resulting financial savings, as well as being a safer route. Nowadays, the route is opened through the ice and maintained by Russian nuclear ice breakers. The Rotterdam-Yokohama route, for instance, could be reduced from 18,350 km to 11,100 km.³⁸ Russian leadership has placed special emphasis on the development of the NSR. President Putin has defined it as a "future international transport artery that will compete with other maritime routes."³⁹ Thus, "the modernisation of the Northern Sea Route for international commercial use becomes strategically important for Russia."⁴⁰ Russia's *Transportation Strategy to 2030* establishes aims such as developing the NSR and the river networks that link it to the interior of the country.

Travelling along the NSR poses several challenges for Russia, however. Firstly, high operation costs and the unpredictability of the Arctic weather seriously limit the viability of using the route. The shallow depth of some parts of the route and the retention of ice, particularly in the Vilkitskiy Strait (Taymyr Peninsula) seriously restrict the transit of ships even in summer.⁴¹ In the long term, trans-Arctic regular shipping through the NSR remains uncertain. The number of vessels mak-

ing the full length of the route rose from four vessels in 2010 to around 50 in 2012 and to 71 in 2013, however, in 2014 it slumped to about 25. The number of vessels traversing the route increased slightly in 2017. Total cargo volume on the NSR increased from 2.8 million tonnes in 2013 to 7.5 million tonnes in 2016. It is said that total cargo volume on the NSR rose in 2017 by 40 percent.⁴²

Figure 1. The Northern Sea Route.



Source: Global Security.

Opening the Northern Sea Route has prompted discussion regarding the sovereignty of the route. Russia seeks to secure the region legally due to the several national claims on maritime borders and rights on the Arctic between circumpolar states. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) grants sovereignty rights for exploring and exploiting natural resources over a 370 km economic exclusive zone (EEZ). Sovereign rights over a wider area can be claimed if it is demonstrated with geological evidence that the area claimed is a prolongation of its land territory. In 2001 Russia made its first legal claim and submitted a proposed outer boundary to its continental shelf in order to extend its EEZ beyond the two hundred nautical miles as stipulated by UNCLOS. Russia's claim stems from the argument that the Mendeleev and Lomonosov ridges are a continuation of the Siberian shelf. This claim was first submitted to the UNCLOS, however, the Commission argued that there was insufficient data for its support and recommended Russia to present more geological evidence. Russia

worked on its application for several years and resubmitted its claim in 2015. Nevertheless, the revision of Russia's new submission can take a long period of time. Moreover, extraction of hydrocarbons would not be profitable for decades to come as these areas are very deep and distant.⁴³ By the same token, it should be emphasised that more resources are located within Russia's EEZ. Consequently, it could be argued that Russia's legal strategy and primary concern is not the acquisition of territory for natural resources but "in keeping foreign powers out of what it regards as its strategically vital region."⁴⁴ It should be underlined that Russia plans to solve the problem peacefully and within the UNCLOS framework as it has much to lose doing otherwise.⁴⁵ Russia attempts to be perceived as a play-by-the-rules Arctic actor that fulfils a leadership role.⁴⁶

In recent years Russia has substantially increased its military activity in the Arctic in order to improve its military capacity on an operational level. For instance, in 2017 the Defence Ministry announced the completion of a new military airbase on Franz Joseph Land, the northernmost part of Russia's territory and only less than 200 kilometers from the North Pole. In addition to this facility, Russia has built a series of other military facilities along its Arctic coast and airbases on the islands in the Arctic Ocean. This situation has brought concerns to some Arctic and non-Arctic actors.

The increasingly more assertive and active stance of Russia in the Arctic has fuelled speculation about a new Cold War, particularly in Western publications, however, it should be noted that Russia's Arctic military strategies do not greatly differ from those of other Arctic states. In military terms, Russia seeks to secure and defend its interests in the region as any other country does: by increasing its presence and creating a favourable operating system regime for its armed forces, troops and coastal border guards.⁴⁷ It should be emphasised that Russia's Arctic approach is more the return of a major power to a normal level of activity in a region that was practically neglected due to the decay of the armed forces.⁴⁸ In words of the Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov: "A lot of people are wondering: what are Russians doing in the Arctic? There is talk that Russians are building up their [military] presence there, but I think the answer here is very simple. We are ensuring the security of our country on our legitimate territory."⁴⁹ Russia's "limited modernisation" of the military in the Arctic has more to do with deterrence against NATO and patrolling the large area

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rather than for obtaining offensive capabilities.⁵⁰ In general, the early predictions of military conflict in the region seem for the time being groundless as the level of intergovernmental cooperation has gradually increased. It should be noted that nearly all the oil and gas deposits are within the EEZ of the coastal states.

One initiative epitomises Russia's great power ambitions in the Arctic: the Yamal LNG Project. This initiative constitutes Russia's flagship Arctic project and one of the biggest LNG undertakings in world. Located in Sabetta in the Yamal Peninsula under extreme cold conditions, Yamal LNG is currently the northernmost LNG plant in the world. Yamal LNG is owned by Russia's Novatek (50.1%), together with France's Total (20%), Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) (20%), and recently by China's Silk Road Fund (SRF) (9.9%). The LNG plant is being developed in three phases. The first phase started operations in December 2017. The total production capacity will be 16.5 million tonnes of LNG per year when the three liquefaction trains will be functioning by 2019 and it is the second LNG plant in Russia after Sakhalin-II.

As global LNG production has been growing considerably in recent years, Russia has therefore reconsidered its focus on pipeline exports. In 2017, Russia was the seventh larger LNG exporter, with exports of 10.8 million tonnes Russia accounted for 4.2 percent of global market share. With Yamal at full operation Russia's LNG capacity will grow more than 100 percent thus gaining a foothold in LNG production. Russia's market share in global LNG exports will increase to more than 10 percent as the country's total liquefaction capacity will increase to 27.3 million tonnes.⁵¹ Russia is aiming to increase the volume of LNG exports by developing five additional projects: Sakhalin-II expansion, Far East LNG, Vladivostok LNG, Arctic 2 (Pechora) LNG, and Baltic LNG.

It should be noted that the situation in the Arctic is now more difficult for Russia than prior to the crisis in the Ukraine. Moscow scholar Egor Makarov argues that Western sanctions against Russia were primarily directed to Arctic resource extraction and many projects were cancelled or postponed. Indeed, US and EU sanctions aimed to restrict financial borrowing and export of technologies to Russia. Consequently, the future of Yamal Project appeared uncertain as the United States and the European Union imposed sanctions on Novatek in 2014. Novatek could keep the Project afloat, however, as US sanctions prohib-

ited gas and oil exploration whereas EU did not.⁵² Therefore European companies such as Total could still participate in the Project. In terms of financing, Novatek turned to China and sold a 9.9 percent stake of Yamal LNG to SRF, a state-owned interest fund. By the same token, Chinese banks loaned an additional 12 billion to Yamal LNG.⁵³ Similarly, other Chinese investors have shown interest in Novatek's Arctic 2 LNG.

Figure 2. Russia's LNG Plans.



Source: Warwick Business School.

Although Novatek is not a state company, the Russian government placed special emphasis on the Project in Sabetta and gave a lot of support. At the opening ceremony in December 2017 in Sabetta, President Putin stated: "The Yamal project paved the way for the Arctic route. It will contribute to the development of the energy industry in the whole world as well as Russia and Europe."⁵⁴ For Putin this undertaking is

“extremely important” not only for the energy sector but as part of a more ambitious project to develop the Arctic.⁵⁵ In this sense, the project in Sabetta could trigger other development plans in the region. According to Russia’s great power status, as the country develops the Arctic it confirms its great power status. Consequently, Yamal LNG project represents to Russia an opportunity to demonstrate its power as even under the current sanctions is still capable of following its plans. For Russia, Yamal LNG is a complete success as the country showed that it can bypass Western sanctions by partnering with Asian countries, particularly China. “Economic advantages aside, the successful completion of Yamal LNG holds considerable propaganda value, as it will undoubtedly be spun to highlight Russia’s technological prowess and the impotency of Western sanctions.”⁵⁶

Before the crisis Russia relied on Western financing and technology to develop large projects in the Arctic. The conflict with the West in the Ukraine accelerated Russia’s attempt to integrate Asiatic Russia into Northeast Asia. In general, Northeast Asian countries are becoming more important to Russia, particularly China. Russia’s Arctic plans should be viewed within the context of Russia’s ambitious long-term project to develop Asiatic Russia and integrate it into Northeast Asia. The function and perception of the Russian Arctic is not exclusively internal or external but arises out of the interaction of the two. Therefore, the second part of this article considers the new external conditions in Northeast Asia to connect them to Russia’s external strategy in the Arctic and ideas on great power identity.

Northeast Asia and the Arctic

China

The Chinese government for a long time did not establish a particular strategy on the Arctic. Similarly, there was no official statement of policy or high-level pronouncement on the Arctic. Apparently, the region was neither a top foreign policy priority for China nor an immediate interest, but part of a long-term strategy⁵⁷ as with numerous other second-tier foreign policy issues.⁵⁸ Chinese scholars and scientists gradually started paying more attention to the area and suggesting policies to the government as Chinese leaders were still in the early stages of developing an official policy toward the region.⁵⁹ Finally, in January 2018 the government adopted an official strategy for the Arctic when

the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China published a white paper titled *China's Arctic Policy*. In this paper China portrays itself as a near-Arctic state and being "an active participant, builder and contributor in Arctic affairs who has spared no efforts to contribute its wisdom to the development of the Arctic region."⁶⁰ Similarly, by issuing this whiter paper the Chinese government aims "to expound its basic positions on Arctic affairs, to elaborate on its policy goals, basic principles and major policies and positions regarding its engagement in Arctic affairs."⁶¹

China seeks a role in determining the political framework and legal basis for future activities in the Arctic.⁶² The Chinese government sees the Arctic as an environmental zone and an arena for economic opportunities: "These interests are crosscutting and environmental preservation goes hand-in-hand with commercial interests."⁶³ It should be emphasised, that China has historically maintained a low profile on Arctic issues, possibly so as to not cause alarm among Arctic states. As a Chinese specialist asserts, "China needs to make it clear to major Arctic players that as non-Arctic country it recognises Arctic nation's sovereignty and related rights in the area."⁶⁴ China's interests in the Arctic are economic, geopolitical and ecological.⁶⁵

The melting ice in the Arctic will likely have profound effects on the country's climate; China is very susceptible to rising seas levels. Consequently, China's activities are focused on environmental issues; it participates actively in several research projects, especially on issues concerning the impact of the melting polar ice on the country's environment and geological and mineral extraction. In effect, China has one Arctic research station: the Arctic Yellow River Station on Svalbard Island, established in 2003. China also has a large ice breaker, the Xue Long, which rescued the Russian icebreaker Akademik Shokalskiy. It could be argued that scientific research legitimises China's claims in the Arctic as a non-Arctic state.

China is interested in the NSR as the Chinese economy is highly dependent on international shipping. The country therefore sees the melting ice of the Arctic as an opportunity to use the NSR as an alternative route to transport goods in summer from Europe to Asia and vice versa. It is the shortest route for commercial shipping, particularly for the eastern ports. In 2013, the first Chinese merchant ship travelled to Europe via the NSR. Secondly, it is a safer route. China is the largest consumer of energy and it is vital to its interests to ensure safe transit

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of oil and gas, and the shortcut via NSR not only would diversify energy supplies to China but shipping via the Arctic would give it the ability to avoid dangerous routes.

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China is also interested in resource development, and access to energy and mineral resources under the Arctic seabed. To avoid conflict with the Arctic states, particularly with Russia and Canada, China continuously emphasises its recognition of the Arctic state's sovereignty and that it is seeking only to form a partnership with them. As the head of the Polar Research Institute of China stated, “[...] we insist that these resources are not ours, and China’s partnership with Arctic countries in the sector will come naturally as it is part of the widening economic cooperation among countries in the context of globalisation.”⁶⁶

Of the Arctic states, China has been giving priority to cooperation with Iceland and Denmark in the last decade. China-Iceland cooperation in the Arctic is particularly active and both countries are gradually working more closely. Recently both countries signed a free trade agreement, and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation was granted a license to explore oil and gas resources in the Draki area.⁶⁷ Similarly, Denmark is looking for closer cooperation with China, particularly in sectors such as mining, fishing and sea-route development.⁶⁸

As it has been said, the ongoing crisis between Russia and the West has negatively affected Russia’s plans to develop the Arctic as cooperation and exploration projects have been cancelled or postponed. “Sanctions on Russia have made it difficult for energy projects to get the capital they need from the West. Companies like Novatek, the independent company operating Yamal LNG, have instead looked to China, which sees in Russia opportunities for geopolitical and economic gains.”⁶⁹ Consequently, for Russia its partnership with China in the Arctic seems to be crucial in the mid-term. “China presents itself not only as a potential customer of Russian Arctic resources, but it could also offer Russia what it needs in terms of capital and financial banking for the development of Russia’s energy and transport infrastructure in the Arctic.”⁷⁰ As Mia Bennett notes, Yamal LNG Project is not just Russian but it is also Chinese. Sanctions obliged Russia to completely refinance the project and the future of it was uncertain until China decided to finance the project. Consequently, China sees Yamal LNG also as its own success story.⁷¹

Apart from Yamal LNG, both countries are planning to develop projects in the Barents and Pechora seas. CNPC signed an agreement

with Soucomflot to coordinate efforts to use the NSR and the shipping of hydrocarbons as Russia's expertise in terms of icebreakers is essential for China.

Due to the extensive energy ties, strategic partnership, and Arctic policies, Russia could be one of the most promising partners for China in the Arctic, through "mutually advantageous cooperation."⁷² China-Russia cooperation in the Arctic can thus strengthen the strategic partnership between both nations. Nevertheless, as in Siberia and the RFE, the increasing presence of China in the Arctic creates some concern in Russia and could represent a future dilemma for Russia. Additionally, China is still reticent to invest in large Russian projects in the Arctic, Yamal LNG being the exception as the circumstances surrounding were quite unique.⁷³ Moreover, Chinese companies still lag behind the West technologically in the Arctic. China is also concerned about the regulations that Russia could impose on vessels passing through the NSR as China supports the principle of free navigation along the Arctic. Consequently, "China negatively perceives Russia's attempts to prove their rights in accordance to the UNCLOS."⁷⁴

Japan

Japan has been involved in Arctic activities since the 1970s, is not a newcomer compared to China and South Korea and has more expertise on Arctic research and activities as it has conducted scientific research in the region for a long time. It has neither an official policy nor a strategy for the region, however. Several scholars and members of the private sector have thus urged the government to devise an official Arctic policy outlining the country's interests and how they can be met. There is no cross-ministerial organisation to deal with Arctic affairs, but there are several government's ministries involved in Arctic issues and some universities and institutes conduct Arctic research.⁷⁵

Japan pursues science diplomacy in the Arctic as its major interests in the region are related to scientific research, the effects of climate change and the potential impact on global climate. According to the government, protecting and understanding the Arctic environment is the main aim of Japanese involvement in the region, because climate change in the Arctic impacts the global climate.⁷⁶ Japan believes that as a responsible member of the international community, it should participate in the protection of the Arctic environment.

Japan positions itself as a maritime state willing to make an important contribution to Arctic scientific cooperation.⁷⁷ The aim of Japan's Arctic policies is “[...] to build on the achievements it has made so far, maintaining its low-profile position as a non-Arctic or non-coastal state, while at the same time emphasizing Japan's past contribution to Arctic research.”⁷⁸ As noted, Japan has conducted polar research since the 1970s. In 1973 it founded the Centre for Arctic Research under the National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR) and has established two observatories on Svalbard. Japan has carried out different research projects in the Arctic.⁷⁹ Similarly, Japan has contributed to the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), one of the Arctic Council working groups. “[Japan] is willing to contribute actively and constructively to the work of the Council by providing expertise gained through scientific research activities.”⁸⁰

The Japanese Institute of International Affairs has recommended the government to use its financial means and technology in the field of resource exploration and take advantage of its expertise and technology to play a leading role in Arctic research.⁸¹ In this regard, according to Kazuyuki Shiraishi, Director-General of the NIPR: “Arctic research is drawing attention in recent years in particular, along with growing interest in global warming. NIPR steadily implements the Arctic Climate Change Project as one of Green Network of Excellence (GRENE) programs in collaboration with various research communities.”⁸²

Japan's Arctic policies are backed by tools of science and technology. For instance, in 2018 the proposal *Utilizing Scientific Knowledge in the Arctic: Japan's Contribution* was officially submitted to the State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan. This proposal conceives Japan as a “neutral non-Arctic State” [which] can provide objective scientific data for the Arctic policy and rule making.”⁸³

One of the major potential economic benefits for Japan is the opening of the NSR, as it would make travel to and from Europe shorter, safer, and cheaper. The distance from Yokohama to Rotterdam along the Northern Sea Route is 43 percent shorter than via the Suez Canal.⁸⁴ The Japanese government, along with different ministries and institutes, has carried out feasibility studies of the route and the possibilities of using it for commercial shipping. In fact, Japan carried out with Russia and Norway one of the first international programmes aiming to prove the viability of the NSR. Nevertheless, the opening of the NSR will increase traffic in Northeast Asia and for Japan, this creates con-

cerns about increased traffic and sea power struggle,⁸⁵ as this could disrupt military balance in East Asia.⁸⁶

Japan's policies in the field of energy resources involve looking for opportunities to develop oil and gas fields in cooperation with the Arctic States, particularly with Russia, in order to improve its energy security. Nonetheless, scepticism remains high as the technological difficulties and harsh weather conditions may significantly increase costs. Similarly, the possible benefits of the NSR to Japanese businesses are still uncertain, especially due to extreme weather conditions in the Arctic. "Uncertain, intermittent weather forecasting and the lack of reporting of icy ocean conditions also pose serious hazards for Arctic shipping."⁸⁷ Based on current evidence, the Japanese business community still does not believe that there are significant opportunities in the Arctic, even if the ice-melting continuous. "For them, there are too many uncertainties to generate the kind of financial benefits that would encourage them to make substantial investments required to operate in the Arctic."⁸⁸

Partnership with Russia in the Arctic would not only help to strengthen bilateral ties but would be an opportunity for Japan to engage more in the region through cooperation with the most important player in the Arctic. "It will also give Japanese energy and maritime corporations and scientific institutions valuable Arctic access."⁸⁹

Cooperation with Russia in the field of infrastructure development and the organisation of navigation along the NSR may open opportunities for new projects. As noted, Japanese enterprises and institutions have already conducted feasibility studies for using the NSR, and the countries could partner in different projects aimed to rebuild and modernise the decaying infrastructure along Russia's Arctic coast. Russia and Japan held talks in 2013 about beginning commercial shipping through the Arctic Ocean; Russia even proposed simplifying the procedures for applying for use of the NSR.⁹⁰

For Japan and Russia, partnership in the extraction of energy resources and research other sources of energy in the Arctic may also be attractive, partnership with Japan in sustainable development of energy resources could be a new opportunity for cooperation, given Japanese know-how in energy extraction and Japan's need to find alternative sources of energy. Another field for cooperation is research. Russia-Japan cooperation in Arctic research started in the 1990s and has been developing. The first official discussions on cooperative research

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between Japan and Russia on the Arctic, following the recommendation by the Japan-Russia Joint Committee of Science and Technology Cooperation, took place in 2014 in Japan, and both sides discussed twelve different themes such as the effects of climate change, weather forecasting, ecosystems, and sea navigation.⁹¹ According to Sergunin, Japan-Russia cooperation on Arctic research appears to be one of the more promising fields for bilateral cooperation.

South Korea

As a result of its acceptance in the Arctic Council as a permanent observer, the Republic of Korea (ROK) articulated a strategy for the region and in 2013 announced the government's *Arctic Policy Master Plan*, outlining its economic, scientific, and political goals. According to the Deputy Prime Minister Hyun Oh-seok, South Korea is taking the advantage of its status as an observer country on the Arctic Council to enter new markets, and a "comprehensive blueprint" has been drawn up to accomplish that aim.⁹² Indeed, South Korea was the first Asian state to outline a comprehensive Arctic strategy. Basically, the strategy contains four strategic goals: to boost the country's cooperation with Arctic states, strengthening South Korea's scientific research in the Arctic, develop a new Arctic business model, and improve legal and institutional infrastructure.

For the ROK, being involved in the Arctic's governance helps the country to play a role in global matters and to enhance South Korea's international profile. Thus, pride, national privilege, and the need to take a more active foreign policy are some of the reasons for South Korea to be involved in Arctic issues.⁹³ Establishing legal and institutional grounds for participation in Arctic affairs is a priority for South Korea. Thus far, seven government ministries and two agencies manage the country's Arctic activities.⁹⁴

The ROK places special attention on science, and thus, one of the main drivers for involvement in the Arctic is scientific research. According to the Korean Polar Research Institute (KOPRI), South Korea secures its national interests through scientific research, and thus, joint development and cooperation with other Arctic states on research activities is seen as a way to secure national interests.⁹⁵ South Korea has a polar research programme realised by the KOPRI and it established the Dasan station on the Svalbard Archipelago in 2002 to undertake research on the Arctic Ocean. Similarly, the ROK built the

research icebreaker ARAON and has announced the construction of a second icebreaker.

Global climate change concerns South Korea and it actively participates in research to promote green technologies and the sustainable development of natural resources. It believes the Arctic to be a “barometer of climate change,”⁹⁶ and thus it puts emphasis on climate research and particularly climate change in the Arctic.

Shipping, shipbuilding, offshore infrastructure, and energy resources comprise the main economic interests of the ROK in the Arctic. South Korea is practically cut off from the mainland, and therefore relies on maritime shipping for its exports and imports. This over-dependency on maritime imports and specifically on energy imports “[...] means that maintaining safely navigable shipping lanes free from disturbances is vital to state security.”⁹⁷ Along these lines, the opening of the NSR creates several expectations in South Korea, as it can serve as an alternative maritime route to that from the Middle East for the import of hydrocarbons and for exports to Europe. Additionally, transportation along the NSR could reduce fuel costs by 25 percent. For instance, if Arctic oil could replace just 10 percent of Middle East’s oil, South Korea could save at least \$1 billion in transportation costs.⁹⁸

Incidentally, as pointed out by Makarov, the NSR and extraction of energy resources in the Arctic is looked on with special interest by South Korean building companies as it could increase the demand for icebreakers, ice-class vessels and tankers. South Korea’s shipbuilders are among the most competitive firms in the world and have the potential for the construction of icebreakers and ice-class vessels and tankers to transport LNG along the Arctic. Indeed, Hyundai Heavy Industries, Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering, and Samsung Heavy Industries are the three largest shipbuilding conglomerates in the world and build most tankers ordered worldwide.

For the South Korean leadership and scholars Russia is arguably the most important partner for the country in the Arctic.⁹⁹ Both countries have agreed on mutual cooperation in the development of the Arctic, its study, preservation of the environment, the use of the NSR, and on strengthening cooperation in the new field, associated with the construction and operation of icebreakers and ice-class vessels.¹⁰⁰ At the 2017 Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, South Korean President Moon Jae-in noted the compatibility of both countries’ policies and described the potential areas of Russia–South Korea economic cooper-

ation (nine bridges), which include the development of infrastructure, seaports and Arctic shipping routes.¹⁰¹

One of the most promising fields for Russia-South Korea cooperation is shipbuilding as South Korean companies are at the vanguard in technology to navigate in Arctic conditions. Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering (DSME) CEO Jung Sung-lee stated that South Korea “[...] will be the biggest beneficiary from the active development of the Arctic thanks to our high technology in ships navigating the area.”¹⁰² In fact, South Korea is already building carriers to transport LNG from the Arctic. In 2013 DSME signed an agreement with Sovcomflot to build up to 16 icebreaking liquefied gas vessels to transport LNG produced at the Yamal LNG project in Sabetta. The first three Arctic gas carriers were delivered in 2017 and the rest should be delivered by 2020.

Similarly, proposals have been discussed to collaborate by allowing South Korean vessels to use the NSR in its territorial waters¹⁰³ and efforts are made to promote cooperation projects to link ports along the Arctic coast with the main continental shipment terminals and logistics centers.¹⁰⁴ South Korea could be part of a larger NSR stretching from Scandinavia, along Russia and down to Northeast Asia, and Busan could become a major port on the route for vessels into and exiting the NSR.¹⁰⁵ Other areas for bilateral cooperation include the development and modernization of the Russian Arctic ports, and information and communication technologies.

Arctic cooperation with Russia embodies not only an alternative shipping route but a separate source of hydrocarbons to increase energy security. The ROK is interested in cooperation with Russia in the offshore extraction of energy resources, researching other sources of energy and exporting technologies for cooperation due to the large expertise of South Korean companies. For Russia, given the troubled current relationship with the West, partnership with the ROK in the sustainable development of energy resources appears to be a priority.

One of the priorities of South Korea in the Arctic is scientific research, therefore it is keen to develop joint research activities with Russia as “scientific interests and cooperation have remained at the centre of South Korea’s approach to Arctic affairs.”¹⁰⁶ Northern Arctic Federal University (Arkhangelsk) and KOPRI are interested in cooperation in the sphere of joint research and educational programs. For instance, in April 2018 took place in Arkhangelsk the 1st Korea-Russia Workshop on Arctic Research initiated by the Korea-Russia Science and Technol-

ogy Cooperation Center, which was attended by scientists and representatives of both governments and several research organizations.¹⁰⁷

Finally, trilateral cooperation between NEA countries has developed in recent years. For instance, the three countries held their first trilateral talks on Arctic issues in 2016. The second trilateral meeting took place in 2017 in which China, Japan, and South Korea reached an agreement on scientific research.¹⁰⁸ The third Northeast Asian dialogue on the Arctic took place in Shanghai in June 2018, at the summit the three countries attempted to coordinate their engagement in the region and strengthen their scientific diplomacy.¹⁰⁹

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Conclusions

As Arctic ice recedes, the growing economic interest and strategic significance of the Arctic brings security concerns, that have led some academics and politicians to argue that the region is being “re-geopolitised” and is likely to become a geopolitical hotspot in the decades to come.¹¹⁰ Speculations of possible conflicts were triggered in 2007 by the Russian expedition *Arktika* which made the first descent to the ocean bottom below the North Pole and planted a titanium Russian flag on the seabed at 4,261 meters deep. Contrast to grim visions of an Arctic battle over resources and boundaries, this highly contested region remains a largely cooperative one. Indeed, after the crisis in the Ukraine in 2014, all the Arctic states emphasised their commitment to preserve the Arctic as a zone of cooperation and peaceful coordination.¹¹¹

This work examined Russia’s Arctic policies to give insight into the kind of role it expects to play in Arctic affairs. Russian strategies in the Arctic are aimed to ascertain its presence in the region, protect and develop its economic interests, develop its Asiatic Russia, and to demonstrate that it remains a great power. In a like manner, looking into the Russia-NEA limited partnership in the Arctic sheds light on how the mechanism for regional cooperation works, and on how due to the harsh environment and remoteness of the region, and the unknown consequences of Arctic warming, international collaboration is crucial for generating solutions to regional and global issues.

Russia has continued to signal a commitment to Arctic peace and to international law in the Arctic. As argued, its actions and policies are in line with those of the other members of the Arctic Council. Nevertheless, as the NSR passes along its Arctic coast, one of the main potential points of contention of Russia with other countries is the possibility

that Russia could impose strict regulations, high ice-breaking fees and particularly high fees for using the NSR as Russia consider it to be part of its territorial waters. Political conflicts and legal disputes cannot be ruled out in the Arctic. Having said that, claims that Russia's military buildup in the Arctic brings the region closer to a political or armed confrontation seem to be groundless. In the military sphere, Russia is primarily focusing on radar and surveillance capabilities as until recently the Russian military could not monitor its entire Arctic coast. Therefore, the significance of Russia's Arctic military strategy has to do more with establishing permanent presence rather than developing combat capabilities. As per Soroka: "The Arctic represents a region where operating even under optimal conditions requires considerable technical competence and resources, rendering it a geographic canvas upon which states can project power and signal their rising international stature."¹¹² Russia is using the development of the Arctic as to legitimise to domestic and international audiences its great power status in the region. Frequent announcements of Arctic strategy such as the decision to launch a virtual excursion around the new modern airbase in Franz Joseph Land,¹¹³ are aimed to show that Russia has restored its great power capabilities in the Arctic.

Similarly, China's engagement in the region creates some concerns, particularly in Western publications. China believes the Arctic is a common heritage and that actions in the region have global effects, and therefore non-Arctic states should be considered. This, and China's assertiveness in seas closer to it, has fuelled suspicion and generated concerns about the country's real intentions, and has led several analysts and officials to draw a parallelism between the situation in South China Sea and the situation in the Arctic.¹¹⁴ Accordingly, as the Arctic becomes a contested area, Chinese assertiveness in the region will grow fuelled by the need for natural resources and the country will not uphold international laws. Nevertheless, to draw parallels between China's claims in the South China Sea and China's aspirations in the Arctic is problematic, to say the least, as the context is completely different. Moreover, in spite of the fact that China's position strengthened after it was granted the status of permanent observer, this should not be overestimated as the status does not give China more powers. Indeed, China's Arctic interests are quite modest.¹¹⁵

An analogy could be drawn between the Arctic and South China Sea in the sense that the Arctic region has similar great power rivalry,

"but instead offers a good example of peaceful settlements and compromise."¹¹⁶ The situation in the Arctic could give light for establishing an effective framework to manage the growing rivalries over resources and sovereignty issues in East Asia. Wilson Rowe argues that it is a remarkable achievement that the Arctic Council has been largely buffered from the current conflict between Russia and the West.¹¹⁷ As strategic interests of all actors are intricated no one benefits from destabilization. What is more, in the Arctic context, significant "great powers" such as the US and Russia, are best understood as "resting powers."¹¹⁸ Arguably, since the outbreak of the conflict in the Ukraine, the Arctic and space exploration are practically the only fields where Russia-US cooperation remains unaltered.¹¹⁹

The Arctic Council has long had scientific cooperation as its key mandate.¹²⁰ By the same token, science diplomacy has been important for NEA to participate in Arctic affairs. Indeed, the scientific-diplomatic approach has been very useful for NEA countries to promote cooperation with Russia. Arguably for Russia, the major threat in the Arctic may not come from potential interference of other Arctic nations in Russia's regional affairs, but from the consequences of global warming in the Arctic; as temperature in the region increases, the permafrost is melting and there is a major escape into the atmosphere of methane gas.¹²¹ This could have severe consequences for the entire Far North.

This article argues that the Arctic has been historically much more important to Russia than to other Arctic countries, particularly in the Soviet period, and Putin administration attempts to re-establish the narrative on Russia as an Arctic power. Unlike the Soviet paradigm which prioritised the development of northern settlements, the Russian government is prioritising the development of the NSR and oil and gas deposits in the Arctic, particularly LNG. The case of Sabetta is paradigmatic; under the Soviet rationale, it would have been developed an entire city there, in modern Russia it is not the case. The emphasis that the Russian leadership has placed on projects such as Yamal LNG illustrates to what extent the Arctic is important to Russia. Nevertheless, as in Imperial and Soviet times, it seems that the Arctic as much of Asiatic Russia is being developed to a great extent on a geopolitical basis. This is, the Arctic is instrumental for the Russian state. Therefore, it is to be seen whether those projects can positively impact on the development of northern cities as it is not clear where the eco-

nomic benefits go. Russia needs an integral plan for the development of its Arctic zone including single-industry towns that have been practically abandoned by the government.

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Notes

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