From complex to weaponized interdependence:
Scenario-building in the Arctic*

De la interdependencia compleja a la militarizada:
construcción de escenarios en el Ártico

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Abstract

The Ukraine war poses significant challenges to the Arctic and its mantra, “High North–Low Tension.” The pause of the Arctic Council, widespread sanctions against Russia and the expedited application of Finland and Sweden to North Atlantic Treaty Organization are changing the contours of the region. This article analyzes how the Russian invasion of Ukraine impacted Arctic affairs through the lens of the Sino-Russian relationship, utilizing Farrell and Newman’s (2019) concept of weaponized interdependence to outline future geopolitical scenarios. Findings indicate that Western incorporation of Beijing in Arctic dialogues is key to hedge economic, political and security dependencies to Russia.

Key words: Arctic, China, Russia, weaponized interdependence.

JEL classification: F5

* This article was written in fall 2023, before Sweden officially joined North Atlantic Treaty Organization on 7 March 2024.
1. Introduction

Pressure is mounting in the Arctic. Although historically viewed as an exceptional space for cooperation among Arctic States—Russia, the US, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Canada—Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 poses challenges for the region. The Arctic Council paused, Western sanctions targeted Russian activities in the Arctic and Finland and Sweden expedited their application to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Once defined by the mantra “High North-Low Tension” the region is undeniably transforming after the onset of the war (Holm, 2023).

These dynamics have recalculated the Russian approach to the Arctic, namely within economic, political and security dimensions. With the remaining Arctic seven icing Russia out of Arctic governance, Moscow has pivoted to Chinese counterparts for support in developing the Northern Sea Route and Arctic energy projects. Consequently, can the Arctic be viewed as an exceptional place for cooperation anymore? How might Russia reposition itself in the future now that it has been blocked from traditional Arctic fora?

This article unpacks these questions by evaluating how the Arctic increasingly became a global arena, accelerated since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Far North is central for Russian grand strategy, and Beijing is embedded in objectives set by Moscow. Applying Farrell and Newman’s (2019) concept of “weaponized interdependence” illustrates how a danger is arising for Russia to coerce partners by creating new Arctic governance mechanisms, likely benefitting Russia and curbing Western ambitions to monitor climate change and reduce risk for major environmental disasters in the Arctic.

I argue that following the invasion of Ukraine, the future of Russian activities in the Arctic are inextricably linked to China’s continued financing of these ambitions. How the remaining Arctic States choose to include China and other non-Arctic States into future frameworks of cooperation will be key in mitigating a Russian-dominated Arctic network.

The following sections investigate how the Sino-Russian partnership has grown in the Far North, outlining why Arctic exceptionalism has come to an end and how Sino-Russian activities advanced following the annexation of Crimea. Dependencies continue to intensify between the two countries since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Further, I delve into how the Arctic is transitioning into a state of “weaponized interdependence” by examining four plausible scenarios: (1) Sino-Russian economic cooperation intensifies, (2) NATO solidifies its presence in the Northern Flank, (3) an Arctic Council 2.0 develops, and (4) a combination of the three previous scenarios occurs and Russia establishes an alternate Arctic forum. By evaluating these scenarios and understanding the coercive nature of interdependencies, it is

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1 Author uses Arctic seven to describe Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Canada and the US.
2 Author uses Arctic, Far North and High North interchangeably in the article.
clear Russia can weaken the Western foothold in the region. How the Arctic seven proactively respond to these potential events can hedge Russian influence.

2. Arctic exceptionalism as short-sighted over the last decade

The Arctic is often viewed as a case of “exceptionalism” or being free of security spillovers from external conflicts. The concept implies that global crises have little to no impact on the Arctic (Käpylä & Mikkola, 2015). Even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Arctic cooperation remained steady. While the Arctic seven imposed sanctions on Russia in response to the crisis, multilateral fora in the region continued to operate: the main consequence being the suspension of military collaboration with Russia in the Arctic.

The Arctic Council (AC), the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), other regional fora and bilateral relationships comprise Arctic governance, creating intricacies in the region (Table 1). Disputes on continental shelf claims, illegal fishing and coordination of search and rescue capabilities are thus managed through a mixture of multilateral engagement. One explanation for why Arctic cooperation sustained after the annexation of Crimea can be found in complex interdependence, a theory introduced by Keohane and Nye (1989) in their book *Power and Interdependence*.

Byers (2017) applies complex interdependence to explain how cooperation in the Arctic continued after the annexation of Crimea, namely through the AC and UNCLOS. Complex interdependence strays away from traditional realist notions of military power, instead promoting three pillars: “an absence of hierarchy among issues, the presence of trans-governmental and transnational channels of contact, and near irrelevance of military force.” He argues that in the Arctic, the AC (1) does not have issue hierarchy because it focuses on scientific research, (2) has transnational ties through different working groups, Indigenous groups and non-Arctic observer States, and (3) is without a security mandate. Following the logic, these dynamics give rise to different political processes, encompassing linkages, agenda setting and international institutions. Dependencies and separation of issue areas allowed tension to be diluted in the Arctic, with another example being that UNCLOS sets the legal framework to arbitrate continental shelf disputes and is largely accepted by the international community.

Further, the AC is perceived as the most legitimate forum to discuss issues in the region, for Arctic and non-Arctic States alike (Raspotnik & Østhagen, 2021). The Council kept the agenda focused on “mutual problems and opportunities” related to climate change and research, maintaining collaboration between members, observers, Indigenous groups and other sub-regional fora (Byers, 2017). Similarly, UNCLOS is seen as the key apparatus to manage and maintain continental shelf claims, as the legal framework mainly benefits Arctic States: “Arctic coastal States derive…benefits from UNCLOS, which excludes non-Arctic States from the continental shelf resources.”
# Table 1
**Arctic Fora Used for Multilateral Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Year est.</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Homepage to forum</th>
<th>Active as of October 2023?</th>
<th>Reference re: activity post-Ukraine invasion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arctic Council (Permanent members: Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, the United States; Permanent participants: Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich’in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Saami Council)</td>
<td>1996 under the Ottawa Declaration</td>
<td>“The Arctic Council is the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous Peoples and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic…All Arctic Council decisions and statements require consensus of the eight Arctic States”</td>
<td>Arctic Council</td>
<td>Yes – slow restart following Norwegian takeover of chairmanship.</td>
<td>Update on the Arctic Council with Norwegian chairmanship (31 Aug 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arctic Economic Council (Members: The United States, Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Russian Federation, South Korea, Germany, Greece)</td>
<td>Created during the 2013-2015 Canadian chairmanship of the Arctic Council</td>
<td>“The Arctic Economic Council (AEC) is an independent organization that facilitates Arctic business-to-business activities and responsible economic development through the sharing of best practices…We support market accessibility and provide advice and a business perspective to the work of the Arctic Council”</td>
<td>Arctic Economic Council</td>
<td>Yes – AEC largely continued despite geopolitical changes.</td>
<td>2021 Annual Report AEC (published May 2022) - see page 8 for chairman message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arctic Coast Guard Forum (Members: Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States)</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>“The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) is an independent, informal, operationally-driven organization, not bound by treaty, to foster safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic”</td>
<td>Arctic Coast Guard Forum</td>
<td>Yes – but only between China (as observer) and Russia. Remaining members boycotted.</td>
<td>Russia and China Memorandum for maritime law enforcement (26 April 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum</td>
<td>Year est.</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Homepage to forum</td>
<td>Active as of October 2023?</td>
<td>Reference re: activity post-Ukraine invasion</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barents-Euro Arctic Council</td>
<td>1993 under the Kirkenes Declaration</td>
<td>“Cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region was launched in 1993 on two levels: intergovernmental Barents Euro-Arctic Council and interregional Barents Regional Council. The overall objective of Barents cooperation has been sustainable development”</td>
<td>Barents Euro-Arctic Council</td>
<td>Restarting now – Russia withdrew on September 18, 2023 and activities in the BEAC will continue, according to the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.</td>
<td>Finnish statement on BEAC (22 September 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Maritime Organization</td>
<td>1958 the IMO Convention went into force</td>
<td>“IMO – the International Maritime Organization – is the United Nations specialized agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine and atmospheric pollution by ships”</td>
<td>International Maritime Organization</td>
<td>Yes – however, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is posing challenges to the IMO to effectively govern vessels in the region. Polar code continues to be enforced as well.</td>
<td>IMO update header (n.d., suggested it was published in early 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Dimension</td>
<td>Initiated in 1999 and renewed in 2006</td>
<td>“The ND policy aims at supporting stability, well-being and sustainable development in the region through practical cooperation. The Northern Dimension operates through four partnerships on the environment, public health and well-being, transport and logistics, and culture”</td>
<td>Northern Dimension</td>
<td>No – the latest news from the ND is the joint suspension of the program. Webpages linked on this table have all been suspended since October 2023.</td>
<td>Link to suspension press release.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea</td>
<td>Adopted in 1982</td>
<td>“The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea…lays down a comprehensive regime of law and order in the world’s oceans and seas establishing rules governing all uses of the oceans and their resources”</td>
<td>UNCLOS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Author's own work.
Complex interdependence consequently asserts that the interwoven nature of the Arctic helped the region remain stable during and after the annexation of Crimea. Though, as Käpylä and Mikkola (2015) argue, the Arctic has never truly been insulated from global events: “the contemporary Arctic is not only global but –precisely because it is global– no different from any other region.” The authors point out that the emergence of an “exceptional” space came out of the immediate post-Cold War environment. New Arctic fora –including the Arctic Council– ushered in an era of “desecuritization.”

However, 2007 and 2008 shifted the perception of the Arctic’s geopolitical importance. In August 2007, Russia planted a flag at the sea bottom of the North Pole as a symbol for a continental shelf claim: “[global] media and political attention [on the Arctic] exploded after the flag-planting episode” (Offerdal, 2011). Coupled with alarming data of rapid sea-ice melt, “Russia, Canada and Denmark, prompted in part by years of warming and ice retreat [in 2007], ratcheted up rhetoric and actions aimed at securing sea routes and seabed resources” (Revkin, 2007). The race to capture Arctic resources was amplified by a study released by the US Geological Survey in 2008, revealing the Arctic was estimated to hold 13% of undiscovered oil and 30% of undiscovered natural gas reserves. (US Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2012).

As of 2023, the Arctic is believed to be warming at four times the rate of the rest of the world (Rantanen et al., 2022), see Figure 1 for sea ice melt. These dramatic

![FIGURE 1
ARCTIC SEA ICE EXTENT
(2006/2023)](image)

**SOURCE:** (Arctic Centre University of Lapland, 2023)
changes reinforce the region’s vulnerabilities to economic exploitation, while adversely impacting communities that live in the Far North. Käpylä and Mikkola (2015) emphasize that there was a burgeoning distrust of Russian activities in the region in the last decade, notably as Russia rebuilt its Cold War era military capabilities in the Arctic. This, paired with the increased Chinese focus on the Arctic, alarmed Western leaders. Most famously in 2019, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticized both Russia and China for their “aggressive” actions in the region at an AC meeting in Rovaniemi (Sengupta, 2019). The speech encapsulated the sentiment that the Arctic is not insulated from global dynamics. Although Arctic cooperation and its governance structures remained intact following the annexation of Crimea, the region has become increasingly securitized.

3. A growing but reluctant partnership between Russia and China in the Arctic

China’s involvement in the Arctic dates back to the 1980s, via its initial polar explorations and research. Yet Beijing became a noticeable Arctic stakeholder in the 2000s, through deploying its own icebreaker capabilities, joining the Arctic Council as an observer in 2013 and garnering recognition for its research in the polar regions. Dubbing itself as a “near-Arctic State,” China aims to become a “polar great power” through involvement in economic activities, diplomacy, scientific research and knowledge sharing in the region (Doshi et al., 2021). China’s 2018 White Paper on the Arctic outlines that national economic, scientific and security objectives will sustain in the future and that the region is important strategically (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

From a broader perspective, the partnership between China and Russia has grown under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin: “Economically, China is Russia’s largest…trading partner, while Russia is China’s principal source of energy imports” (Lo, 2020). As Lo (2020) argues, the two countries have mutual interests in their political objectives, economic activities, security outlook and strategic calculus.

For the Arctic, the partnership is slow-going and somewhat restricted (Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018; Moe et al., 2023). Politically, Russia was viewed as being partially responsible, along with Canada, for delaying China’s status as a permanent observer to the Arctic Council, attributed to overall wariness in Beijing taking a more formal role in Arctic affairs and governance (Pincus, 2020; Greenwood & Luo, 2022). Moe et al., (2023) draw on reports from Russian and Chinese scholars to pinpoint this tension: “Russia [aims to protect] its own national control as well as the privileges of all the Arctic coastal States, [while] China [presses] for international order.”

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3 In contrast to this, Chinese officials point to 1925 in the 2018 White Paper due to China being a signatory to the Spitsbergen Treaty.
To become a permanent observer, a unanimous vote is needed among the Arctic States. Observer States do not have the right to vote but can contribute resources to Arctic Council working groups. Political validation is tied to observer status, as it signals “that a [non-Arctic] country has a legitimate interest in the Arctic” (Stephen & Stephen, 2020). China was eventually admitted in 2013, taking six years for observer status to be granted.

To avoid over-reliance on Russia, China pursues a foreign policy that leverages the appropriate regional fora and bilateral partnerships to build recognition with other Arctic States, especially the Nordics. Generally, this approach helped China avoid the geopolitical turmoil between Russia and other Arctic States in the last decade (Greenwood & Luo, 2022). Through diverse relationship building, Beijing expects that it will have some autonomy to pursue its economic and scientific interests (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). Although adhering to governance mechanisms in the Arctic, Stephen & Stephen (2020) identify, “a key aspect of China’s Arctic Policy is to reframe the Arctic as a global space” and improve existing governance mechanisms. Beijing is “building two mutually reinforcing narratives to gain legitimacy…one territorial, highlighting its near-Arctic location and involvement in Arctic research, and one globalist, highlighting the extraregional impacts of Arctic change” (Moe & Stokke, 2019).

The aftermath of Western sanctions on Russia in 2014, however, accentuate that Russia is willing to pivot to China, with the development of the Arctic a key tenant of their partnership (Greenwood & Luo, 2022). The promise of energy reserves, shorter shipping routes via the Northern Sea Route along Russia’s coastline and access to other resources, such as fish stock, critical minerals and rare earth metals, attracted China and other non-Arctic States. China and Russia have grown – albeit reluctantly– in their Arctic partnership.

3.1. The development of the Polar Silk Road from 2018 onwards

The Polar Silk Road (PSR) launched in 2018, as an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a plan to enhance connectivity and trade to China and is the “crown jewel in China’s grand strategy” (Pincus, 2020) (Figure 2). The PSR is viewed as enriching the BRI program through access to the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and to natural resources that have become accessible due to climate change. Consequently, the agreement on the PSR can be viewed as a step forward in the Sino-Russian Arctic relationship. Of key importance is the commercial usage of the NSR to shorten the distance to Asian markets from Russia. The route is estimated to halve the number of days it would take to travel from Europe to Japan via the Suez Canal (Humpert, 2011).

Although NSR development has the potential to yield high returns with shorter shipping times, the lack of infrastructure and heavy investment needed pose significant risks: “Arctic maritime transport is viewed with rising caution… [China
is] less prepared to commit…to heavy investments where the expected returns are potentially high, but uncertain and still far in the future” (Moe & Stokke, 2019). Chinese stakeholders acknowledge that the needed capital investment to refurbish ports, improve navigational infrastructure and build new icebreakers are obvious barriers, limiting the ability to increase volumes of cargo in the short-term. Assessing overall Sino-Russian Arctic maritime cooperation reveals it “has not really taken off. Chinese businessmen note the poor investment climate and unstable regulations, especially regarding taxation” (Moe et al., 2023).

Alexeeva and Lasserre (2018) also highlight that cooperation in NSR infrastructure is limited due to Russian regulations that restrict foreign vessel navigation along the route, “send[ing] a clear signal that Russia won’t share control over the NSR with any country, including China, despite formal inclusion into the BRI.” As a result, “the PSR has now been toned down by both parties” (Moe et al., 2023). This change in attitude can be attributed to an overall feeling in Russia that the PSR started to “overshadow” NSR discourse, whereas Chinese officials felt that the conditions to develop the PSR as a gateway to Europe were solely dictated by Russia: “Chinese authorities did not want their version of a PSR…to be a mere appendix to Russian plans.” As a result, plans for developing the route remain unclear, despite loose promises in official statements.

FIGURE 2
MAP OF THE POLAR SILK ROAD

SOURCE: (Arctic Centre University of Lapland, n.d.)

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In terms of energy extraction, this reluctance can be seen again in the Yamal liquified natural gas (LNG) project. When seeking investment, Novatek—one of the largest Russian natural gas producers—initially looked for European stakeholders for investment but ended up relying on Chinese banks, firms and the Chinese Silk Road fund. As infrastructure and technology were being built, and the impact of Western sanctions from the Crimean crisis took hold in 2014, Novatek turned again to Chinese partners to design and build equipment, and China ended up being the second majority stakeholder at 29.9% and Novatek at 50.1%. After Yamal went live in 2017, Moe et al. (2023) explain that Moscow’s rhetoric on the issue largely focused on the benefits that the project will bring to the Russian economy, whereas the Chinese narrative emphasized how Yamal demonstrates Chinese Arctic capabilities. Hence, there were discrepancies in messaging and perceived contribution, although it is typically viewed as a mutual success story for the partnership.

While the pivot east might signal a closer partnership in the High North after 2014, Russia remains hesitant to share polar technologies with Chinese counterparts. In reality, expectations and national perception of projects under the PSR have been mismatched, as “Beijing does not simply want to exchange cash for energy in the Arctic. China is using cooperation with Russia in the Arctic to gain expertise and know-how in the critical energy sector” (Pincus, 2020). Chinese firms are expecting to pick up some knowledge in Arctic energy development and are providing the needed, hefty investment to extract resources and develop the Russian Arctic. Meanwhile, Russian counterparts remain selective in how they engage China in the Arctic due to national security concerns and an overall mistrust of Chinese sentiments in opening the Arctic Ocean as a global commons.

4. The impact of the war in Ukraine on Arctic affairs

The end of Arctic exceptionalism came to the forefront once Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Three key developments in the Arctic emerged: (1) the pause of the Arctic Council, (2) the widespread sanctions regime on Russia, and (3) Finland and Sweden’s application to NATO. Together, these geopolitical changes will continue to alter and redefine the contours of the region politically, economically and militarily. These also signal a change in dependencies and linkages in the Arctic, instilling long-term repercussions on the Sino-Russian partnership and overall governance in the region.

4.1. The pause of the Arctic Council in March 2022

In March 2022, the Arctic Council released a statement that it would temporarily pause all activities and boycott Council meetings in Russia, as Russia was holding Council chairmanship (Office of the Spokesperson, 2022). In general, there is a
perception that without Russia, “the Arctic Council will lose legitimacy and goodwill” as Russia has the largest share of Arctic coastline, holds half of the Arctic population, majority of Arctic industry and is a key to research contributions, search and rescue support and domain awareness (McVicar, 2022). Any meaningful policy or action in the High North consequently hinges on Moscow’s inclusion.

The AC created a space where “Arctic State leaders benefited from having a forum in which they could address regional issues at high diplomatic levels” (Balton & Bloom, 2021). A study conducted by Kankaanpää and Young (2012) reveals that 84% of participants in the AC believe that the Council has produced an impact, with an overall success rating of 3.36 out of 5, with 5 equating to “considerable impact.” The pause accentuates a loss of information-sharing with Russia that will be challenging to restart. This not only affects circumpolar dialogues for States, but also impacts permanent participants of the AC, including Indigenous groups (Canova & Pic, 2023).

While the remaining Arctic States boycotted Russia’s chairmanship in 2022 and for the first half of 2023, Moscow continued its Arctic programing domestically. The chairmanship rotates every two years, and the transfer from Russia to Norway was done quietly in May 2023. Once the Norwegian chairmanship was secured, the Council removed its webpage banner stating the AC had paused activities (Canova & Pic, 2023).

How the AC will advance its objectives without Russia remains unclear. Russia amended its Arctic Strategy to emphasize national interests and removed any mention of AC cooperation in February 2023 (Humpert, 2023a). The strategy emphasizes that Russia will work with States bilaterally on economic, scientific, cultural and cross-border activities. These changes, along with a reinvigoration of other Arctic strategies, such as the US’ in October 2022, highlight that the Arctic is not losing strategic importance (The United States Government, 2022). Still, it is unclear how scientific research and soft policy issues will move forward, effectively slowing down significant work done by AC working groups. The Council is a consensus-based organization, and moving forward without Russia on certain initiatives and ministerial meetings can be viewed as a “violation of [Russia’s rights as a member State]” (Canova & Pic, 2023). In other words, the AC will be unable to advance its objectives effectively as-is without an arrangement with Moscow.

4.2. The repercussions of sanctions on Russia and its Arctic ambitions

Since the start of the Ukraine war, Russia has dealt with a series of financial, military technology and energy sanctions from the West. The US restricted Russian access to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT). This effectively prevents Russian banks from making international transfers, as SWIFT is the intermediary that “authoriz[es] transactions, authenticat[es] parties, and record[s] exchanges” (Farrell & Newman, 2019). For
military technology, the US Department of Commerce has blocked the exportation of high-tech products, including semiconductors to “curtail [Russia’s] military capabilities” (Berman & Siripurapu, 2023). Similar sanctions on military technology are in effect by the European Union (EU).

Arguably, the sanctions with the most intended impact to the Russian Arctic are energy related. The Arctic accounts for 80% of natural gas production and 20% of crude oil production in Russia as of 2022, and Russian energy projects in the region are ramping up (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2022b). One crucial deal is Arctic LNG 2, based in the Utrenneye field in the Gydan Peninsula. It will include three LNG trains with an eventual capacity for 19.8 million tons \textit{per annum}, or 6.6 million tons per train. These are intended to be transported to Asia-Pacific markets via the Northern Sea Route along Russia’s coastline (Novatek, n.d.). Arctic LNG 2 is one of the largest LNG projects for Novatek in the Arctic region, next to Yamal, which produces 16.5 million tons of LNG per year (Total Energies, 2017).

Novatek found investors in Total (French), CNPC (China), CNOOC (China), JOGMEC (Japan) and Mitsui (Japan). However, as the Ukraine war broke out, sanctions from the US and the EU targeted Russian oil, LNG and coal. These sanctions were heavy handed, as the EU relied on Russia 45% of its energy imports in 2021 (IEA, 2022a). European energy companies either ended their involvement or took write-offs in Russian energy projects (Humpert, 2022a). The EU’s fifth round of sanctions required European firms to drop any activities with Russia by the end of May 2022 (Humpert, 2022b). Once these sanctions took effect, Russia struggled to maintain access to the technical knowledge and equipment to develop the LNG trains, pausing the project in the short-term.

Despite these obstacles, the Arctic LNG 2 project installed its first train in Gydan in August 2023, with work on the second and third quickly underway according to Novatek (Novatek, 2023). To counteract sanctions, Novatek substituted technologies via Chinese suppliers, such as turbines (Webster, 2023). There is also indication that sanctions may not have been as effective in ending European involvement after May. It is reported that a Dutch company, Rex Box, continued to transport LNG modules along the Northern Sea Route in 2022 and 2023 (Humpert, 2023b).

4.3. Finnish and Swedish membership to NATO and Russia’s Northern Fleet

The invasion of Ukraine also incited an unprecedented situation where Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership. The two Nordic States contribute to the Alliance via 5G capabilities, interoperability as historical partners to NATO, air and sea capabilities for the Arctic and Baltic regions and mechanisms to counter hybrid threats (Thatcher, 2022). Finland is one of the top producers of ice breakers globally, while Sweden has a strong navy that is adept to Arctic conditions. The Alliance will likely have a greater focus on the Arctic, apparent during the 2023
NATO Summit in Vilnius: “In the High North, [Russia’s] capability to disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge to the Alliance. NATO and Allies will continue to undertake necessary, calibrated, and coordinated activities, including by exercising relevant plans” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023).

NATO involvement in the region has been historically limited due to the lack of perceived threat perception and consensus among NATO States in addressing the Arctic more explicitly in the Alliance’s priorities (Auerswald, 2020). Norway is one of the few States that facilitates NATO exercises in its Arctic territory, and the war in Ukraine underscored the need to consolidate the Alliance’s approach to the Arctic (Conley & Arts, 2023). Russia’s overall reaction to the announcement of NATO application for Sweden and Finland “was negative but muted” (Lokker & Hautala, 2023).

Finnish and Swedish membership will reshape security architecture in Northern Europe, namely as Russia becomes the only non-NATO Arctic State. This is critical because Russia’s Northern Fleet is housed in the Arctic, near the Finnish-Russian border on the Kola Peninsula. The Northern Fleet is at the center of Moscow’s efforts to defend its Arctic region. It is responsible for protecting Russia’s western and central Arctic territory and holds the key assets for Russia’s second-strike nuclear capability (Kjellén, 2022).

Although Russian assets have moved from the Northern Fleet –including naval and ground forces, with ground forces taking the biggest hit– to Ukraine, Wall and Wegge (2023) found that “no Northern Fleet warships or submarines have been reported destroyed in the conflict [nor] any of the Northern Fleet air capabilities.” Further, financial and military technology sanctions will have an impact on the future strengthening of the Northern Fleet, with some delays in rumored asset enhancements like an autonomous torpedo drone, nuclear icebreakers and aircraft improvements.

Although remilitarization of the Northern Fleet will take time, Russia continues to prioritize it in defense strategy: “Moscow reportedly relocated several nuclear-capable bombers to the Kola Peninsula,” and the Arctic is considered to be “a security bastion for Russia” (Lokker & Hautala, 2023; Pincus, 2020). The Russian approach to the Arctic is largely informed by external threats, with NATO expansion at the forefront. The strategic importance of the Arctic is unlikely to wane. As Boulègue (2022) explains, “polar politics feed into Russia’s sense of itself as a ‘great power’.”

4.4. The impact of the Ukraine war on the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic

These three outcomes have crucial implications for the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic. Ahead of the invasion in late February, Putin visited Beijing to hold
talks during the XXIV Olympic Winter Games. In a joint statement, Xi and Putin highlighted that they would continue to intensify “practical cooperation for the sustainable development of the Arctic” and “reaffirm[ed] their focus on building the Greater Eurasian Partnership in parallel and in coordination with the Belt and Road construction” (President of Russia, 2022). Since then, China has visited Moscow following the invasion and has refrained, along with India, from condemning Russia for invading Ukraine.

An investigation on Chinese perception of the Ukraine war by Bachulska and Leonard (2023) reveals that China views the US as “instrumentalizing the war in Ukraine and NATO’s involvement in the conflict as part of its efforts to contain not only Russia, but also China.” Through anonymized interviews with Chinese scholars, the authors discovered that Beijing sees itself as counterbalancing the US approach to foreign policy and has remained neutral in order to build partnerships through the BRI. Although there were frustrations on the length of the war and inability of Russia to complete its “special mission” quickly, there is an impression that “Xi’s and Putin’s political fates are intertwined… [as] their shared goal is to reshape the US-led international order.”

The invasion of Ukraine brings the Sino-Russian relationship at the forefront of Russian Arctic development and tests the viability of their relationship in the Far North. On the one hand, China has lost a relative sense of autonomy to pursue bilateral partnerships and voice its Arctic interests on a global stage in the AC. Reporting done by the South China Morning Post highlighted that despite the loss of the AC and increasing divide between Russia and the other Arctic States, Beijing will continue to pursue its “low key but active” policy in the Arctic while staying ready “for further surprises such as the collapse of the Arctic Council” (Zhou, 2022). Moreover, the imposition of sanctions on Russia has made Chinese investors tread carefully on their involvement in Arctic projects, due to a general awareness that the Sino-Russian partnership is being viewed under a microscope.

On the other hand, Beijing is in a strategic place. The foundation of the Sino-Russian partnership has shifted following the start of the Ukraine war. Practically, Russia is diverting to China to make up for the “exodus of money, technology, and buyers from Russian energy projects” (Eiterjord, 2022). Novatek has been pursuing an import substituting strategy to reduce risk of further sanctions and avoid reliance on foreign technologies such as shipbuilding, engineering and plant operators though the efficacy of this has been slow-going. As European partners, such as the French Technip Energies, start to roll off Russian energy projects as a result of sanctions, China has an inflated role in filling the gaps for investment and expansion of Arctic projects.

Still, how Russia and China decide to overcome their mutual distrust is critical. Recent diplomatic statements and the impact of sanctions signal that linkages between the two countries are tightening in the Arctic, but a long-term and deliverable-oriented plan for the Polar Silk Road and related projects remain absent. For China, investment conditions and political concessions impact whether
involvement is worth it, whereas for Russia, national control over the sea route and avoidance of the global commons concept for the NSR continues to be a point of contention (Moe et al., 2023). The current conditions in the Arctic, however, are indicating that there may be changes in these dynamics. China and Russia are at a precipice to define their partnership more concretely for the long-term.

5. From complex to weaponized interdependence in the Arctic

This article has outlined how the Arctic is not—and in the last decade has not been—an exceptional region. Practically, climate security continues to be a massive risk as Arctic sea ice is melting at an alarming rate. With Russia holding half of the Arctic coastline and population, Moscow has a major stake in how the future of the region will unfold. The Sino-Russian partnership only augments the challenge in reinstating a new, low tension normal for the Arctic, as the region is impacted by economic, military and political changes. These three areas, as Pincus (2020) highlights, are key for how the remaining Arctic seven should position itself against the Sino-Russian partnership.

This change from exceptionalism to tension can be explained by the transition from complex to “weaponized interdependence,” particularly within the context of economic and political dimensions. The concept was introduced by Farrell and Newman (2019). The authors argue that asymmetric networks allow certain actors to have coercive power over interdependent relationships. Networks oftentimes have central nodes or hubs, where some members have more access to information than others.

Weaponization is done through a panopticon effect or a chokepoint effect. The panopticon effect refers to “where one or few central actors could readily observe the activities of others. States that have physical access to or jurisdiction over hub nodes can use this information to obtain information passing through.” The chokepoint effect is where certain States have the “capacity to limit or penalize use of hubs by third parties. Because hubs offer extraordinary efficiency benefits, and because it is extremely difficult to circumvent them, States that can control hubs have considerable coercive power.”

One example the authors point to is the US’ application of SWIFT against terrorism following the 9/11 attacks. Considering SWIFT is the de facto communication system for international payments, the US was able to use the system as a panopticon by gathering information on terrorism through identifying payments that helped pinpoint “terrorist operations, co-conspirators and planning.” Moreover, the US utilized the chokepoint effect by having Iranian banks removed from the SWIFT system, inhibiting terrorist organizations from funding their networks and operations.

The Arctic Council could to a certain extent be viewed as one of those central hubs that existed in the region prior to the invasion of Ukraine. However, information
that passed through the Council was scientific and less focused on economic activities and security. Therefore, weaponization has not been feasible, as the organization was not asymmetric in nature. Current dynamics suggest weaponized interdependence is key to consider for future scenarios following the invasion of Ukraine. This is because new hubs are likely to be built as a result of the isolation of Russia, the growing partnership between China and Russia and the general power Russia yields due to its overall physical presence in the Arctic.

6. Scenario building for the future of the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic

Based on the trajectory of the Sino-Russian partnership, statements released from China, Russia, NATO and the US, along with the impact of the pause of the Arctic Council, sanctions and the expansion of NATO to Sweden and Finland, Arctic cooperation will change. How Arctic cooperation will change is still unclear. Without the Arctic Council playing as much of a mediating role and the region becoming impacted by diplomatic cleavages, asymmetry will become more apparent.

One future scenario could be that (1) Chinese investments in the Northern Sea Route and Arctic energy projects progress, and the two countries will have burgeoning dependencies in the economic dimension. Another scenario may be (2) as NATO strengthens its posture in the region through the membership of Finland and Sweden in the Northern Flank, China and Russia counterbalance Alliance activities in the Arctic. A third scenario would be (3) an “Arctic Council 2.0” is advanced through the leadership of the West, limiting participation from Russia as the war continues in Ukraine, affecting the political dimension of the Sino-Russian relationship. A fourth possible scenario could be that (4) a varied combination of the three previous scenarios is true, and the political, economic and military divide may produce new hubs of international cooperation in the Arctic – one centered with the Arctic seven States and the other centered on Russia, China and India.

These four scenarios are critical to consider for how the Sino-Russian partnership might change in the region. Understanding the impact allows for better dependency management and risk aversion for the remaining Arctic seven. The following subsections outline these four scenarios, analyzes how growing hubs of interdependence could yield some weaponization effects and explores some nuances that are critical for the West to examine in order to restrict uncertainty in an already volatile Arctic ecosystem.

6.1. Scenario 1: Advancing Chinese investment in the Russian Arctic

In March 2023, Xi and Putin met to discuss the deepening of their relationship, emphasizing expansion in the Northern Sea Route: “We see cooperation with
Chinese partners in developing the Northern Sea Route as promising…we are ready to create a joint working body for the development of the Northern Sea Route” (России, 2023). The extent of this joint body is yet to be determined but represents a symbolic expansion of the Sino-Russian relationship.

The Northern Sea Route continues to be a key economic agenda point for China and Russia. Still, the extent of how much China is involved in NSR and Arctic energy projects will depend on whether Russia continues to grant permission on Chinese involvement in the region. Lo (2020) highlights, “As a much larger economy than Russia, China would seem to dominate the economic dimension of the partnership… but] Russian acquiescence is vital to the success of Chinese economic goals in Central Asia and the Arctic.” The relationship is viewed as relatively balanced with Russia being able to limit Chinese involvement in the region, whereas China has the needed capital.

At the time of writing, however, Beijing has undoubtedly gained further leverage due to sanctions from Europe. Where Russia has some leeway lies in the economic partnerships it intends to pursue in addition to China. India is one potential candidate. In October 2023, Indian and Russian officials met to discuss Arctic shipping, specifically between the NSR and the Eastern Maritime Corridor. While India does import coal and crude oil from Russia, and within the first seven months of 2023 accounted for 35 % of the eight million tons of cargo through the NSR, it has a narrow role in developing the route relative to China (Humpert, 2023c). India views cooperation in the NSR as a way to bolster ship building capabilities and diversify supply chains, and Russia has agreed to train Indian counterparts on how to navigate Arctic waters. Other partnerships that Russia may focus on for alternative sources of income could include BRICS (Brazil, India, China and South Africa) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Edvardsen, 2023b).

Regardless of how Russia distributes its economic partnerships, the reality seems to be leaning toward some sort of overall dependence on China if sanctions withstand. Russian plans in the Arctic are unlikely to ramp down in the near future considering the restart of the Arctic LNG 2 project and the NSR development plan being described by Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister of Russia, as “an obvious strategic priority” for Russia (The Coordination Centre of the Russian Government, 2023). A third of the expected two trillion-ruble budget to develop the NSR is expected to come from the federal budget; the rest requires outside investment due to the lack of infrastructure. Some estimates expect that between 2023 and 2025, 5 to 15 % of Chinese trade will be transported via routes in the Arctic (Steblyanskaya et al., 2022). Consequently, China does have some advantages that can play into weaponizing aspects of the Sino-Russian economic relationship.

The planned NSR board could be viewed as a hub for weaponization to take place, depending on its structure. Ideally, Russia and China would be sharing information on route development so China can provide needed investment and

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4 Shanghai Cooperation Organization includes China, India, Iran and the -stan countries.
Russia can train Chinese counterparts on navigating the route, providing Chinese stakeholders with the needed autonomy to justify enhanced investment (Moe et al., 2023). Yet, China could deploy the chokepoint effect if it wanted to through freezing investment, even if Russia does have other partners it can turn to. In May 2023, “more than 90% of Foreign Direct Investment in the Far East—26 infrastructural projects worth 1.6 billion dollars—were being financed by Chinese State companies” (Gupta, 2023). For the Russian Arctic, the China Development Bank pledged 10 billion dollars in 2018 (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022).

These investment figures reflect that there is an imbalance with Chinese economic power in the region, even while Moscow hedges against Beijing through other partnerships. At the same time, Moscow can limit Chinese influence due to sovereignty claims in the Arctic and weaponizing energy companies, such as Novatek, in curbing Chinese presence. External interest in the Arctic is unlikely to dissipate, sanctions notwithstanding, and Russia continues to provide and control information access to the region. This is important as the Arctic Council is limited in its capacity to act. The panopticon effect is at play for Russia, and in some ways, overrules the ability for China to act, despite economic power. Both States see the risks and intend to be balanced in their approach to the relationship.

For the remaining Arctic seven, this is a key scenario to be aware of. Although the efficacy of the economic partnership between China and Russia is to be seen, underlined by a shaky track record to get projects done in the last decade, having the awareness that China is filling a gap from European sanctions is important as Chinese influence, knowledge and polar capabilities may grow. Sanctions can be somewhat bypassed if the Sino-Russian—and potential inclusion of India—deepens. Further, if the other Arctic States isolate China and Russia out of international fora due to the complicated dynamics in the region, climate security may be put on the backburner. Not having the Arctic Council take an active role in mediating and sharing some information on these activities could yield a different kind of chokepoint effect against the West, as transparency regarding Sino-Russian activities are unclear and gradual advancement in shipping activities, infrastructure and energy projects increase the likelihood of environmental accidents and acceleration of climate change.

6.2. Scenario 2: NATO consolidates its Arctic presence in the Northern Flank

The membership of Finland and eventual membership of Sweden pose challenges to Russian security in its Northern Fleet. While the build-up of Russian assets is limited due to sanctions, a clear signal that Russia may need to enhance some of its defense partnerships in the region could lie with a consolidated Northern Flank in

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5 Far East includes infrastructure projects in the Arctic.
the Alliance. Since Finland joined the Alliance in April 2023, it has been placed under the Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum, along with Denmark, in the Netherlands due to access to the Baltic Sea. Norway, on the other hand, is based in Norfolk, Virginia. Norfolk is responsible for regions bordering the Atlantic, including the Northern Flank in the Arctic. Part of the reason Finland was not incorporated into Norfolk is that the “headquarters is not yet fully operationally capable of defending Europe” (YLE News, 2023).

Ålander (2023) underscores that the divide between the Arctic and the Atlantic, and the Baltic and Central Europe undermines the interoperability and joint capabilities the Nordic States have been building in the Arctic and Baltic regions through forums such as the Nordic Defense Cooperation and other bilateral, trilateral and multilateral frameworks. If NATO decides to house Finland, Norway and eventually Sweden under Norfolk, and prioritize Arctic capabilities as the Alliance has indicated it will in the coming years, there is a big possibility it will provoke a response from Moscow.

During the Ukraine war, it has been reported that China has “contemplate[ed] providing Russia with lethal military aid in support of the war [and] emerging reports [indicate] that Chinese companies have provided rifles and dual-use equipment such as drone parts and body armor” (Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2023). Moreover, China has received military assets from Russia, including Su-27 and Su-35 fighter aircrafts, air defense systems and anti-ship missiles to increase Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific. Even so, how this military partnership translates into the Arctic is complex. If NATO solidifies presence in the region, Moscow may be forced to look to other partners to support capability building. Recently incorporating China as an observer in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum could be considered as one sign that this dimension may strengthen (Landriault et al., 2023). Additionally, China would be a natural partner to consider since it has icebreaker capabilities.

At Vilnius, the official NATO statement emphasizes that Chinese “ambitions and coercive policies challenge [the Alliance’s] interests, security and values” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023). In some ways, this provides a united storyline for the two countries to cooperate on a more advanced level militarily. Regardless, while Chinese attitudes toward the Alliance, particularly the US, are considered negative, Beijing maintains an interest in de-escalating any sort of conflict in the Arctic due to its economic goals and desire to maintain an open dialogue with the West. A series focused on the Sino-Russia relationship done by the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ ChinaPower project following the Ukraine invasion found that there may even be tension within the military dimension due to decreased military spending from Moscow (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2022). Weaponized interdependence is less critical to consider in this scenario, as this is arguably the least developed area in their relationship. However, if Russia decides to embed China into expanding military assets and surveillance capabilities, some asymmetries may emerge.
Solidifying a NATO approach will aggravate Moscow, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko has already promised Russia will enhance military capabilities along its western and northwestern regions as retaliation for Finnish membership to NATO in April 2023 (Trevelyan, 2023). Beijing’s role in these changes is more challenging to predict. One aspect to consider is the willingness of Russia to knowledge-share with China on sensitive security topics. The other is the willingness of the West to engage with Beijing economically and politically in the Arctic. For now, Chinese diplomats are engaging with the Nordic countries on Arctic issues and aim to keep flowing investment to the European Arctic as a part of the Polar Silk Road. These interests seem to outweigh a full-blown Sino-Russian military relationship in the Far North, echoed by the 2018 White Policy Paper that it is in Beijing’s interest to maintain Arctic stability.

6.3. Scenario 3: The establishment of an “Arctic Council 2.0”

With Norway securing the transition of the Arctic Council chairmanship from Russia, how the Council will evolve without the involvement of Russia remains an open question. Some projects that do not include Russia—totaling about 70 out of 128—have now been allowed to proceed (Gricius, 2023). Even so, the likelihood of reincorporating Russia into formal AC activities in the short-term remains minimal. An Arctic Circle survey from 2023 found that Arctic experts in different fields believed there was less than a 20% chance that all eight Arctic countries will resume cooperation in the Arctic Council in the short-term (Landriault et al., 2023). Experts envision a higher likelihood that there will be a new, Western-based AC in the future, though timeframe is contested.

A call for an “AC 2.0,” a forum that advances without Russia in the short-term, has been repeated since the pause of the AC in March 2022 (Rogoff, 2022). The parameters and functions of a potential “AC 2.0” are undecided, but some suggested concepts include (Rogoff, 2022; Gricius, 2023; Greenwood & Luo, 2022; Tingstad & Pezard, 2023):

- Amending the Ottawa Declaration to include security in its mandate.
- Change consensus-based voting to majority-based voting among the Arctic States.
- Preserve existing cooperation by allowing Russia to participate on low-level research projects through Norwegian leadership.
- Prioritization scheme on Arctic projects, focused on holistic and beneficial outcomes for the region.

Adding a security mandate or changing consensus-based voting are the least likely outcomes, as they would instigate a complete exclusion of Russian stakeholders. The risks would be the withdrawal of Russia from the AC, as it did with the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in late September 2023 (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). The third and fourth outcomes are in effect, and Norwegian chairmanship objectives outline that despite geopolitical
headwinds, climate security is the key priority for its chairmanship (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Russia has indicated that it will partake in the Council as long as there is “effective work” but will increase engagement with countries like China, India and Iran in Arctic affairs (Edvardsen, 2023b).

For China, policymakers have reaffirmed their commitment to the Arctic Council ahead of the transition to the Norwegian chairmanship (Edvardsen, 2023a). Part of the reasoning behind this has to do with garnering political legitimacy for Beijing’s activities in the region, while factoring in historical mistrust with Moscow. In a recent visit to Tromsø, Chinese Ambassador to Norway Hou Yue highlighted that “cooperation between the two sides has great potential and the future is promising… China…is willing to strengthen all-around cooperation in fishery, tourism, infrastructure, sustainable development and so on” (Hou, Y., 2023).

Still, how Senior Arctic Officials will collaborate on the higher, political level with Russia is unclear (Edvardsen, 2023c). With Russia taking over the chairmanship of BRICS in 2024, Moscow might leverage the forum to enhance cooperation on Arctic related projects. Already in Svalbard, Trust Arktikugol, a Russian company, has plans to establish an international research station with the BRICs countries. Interested parties so far consist of China, India, Turkey and Thailand (Edvardsen, 2023b).

In some ways, Russia has weaponized its interdependence with the remaining Arctic seven in the last year. While the pause of the AC is viewed as a necessary move against the backdrop of global events, Russia inversely was able to deploy the panopticon effect as it continues to have awareness of Council activities and goals, and during its chairmanship, continued to do economic projects on a national level. Now that Norway has taken over chairmanship, Russia is somewhat utilizing the chokepoint effect. While looking to other partnerships for Arctic endeavors and carefully watching Council activities, Russia essentially has the power to stop pan-Arctic cooperation all together.

Determining how to effectively govern and adjust the approach of the Council with some inclusion of Russia is integral to preventing the isolation of Moscow and ensuring that climate security can continue to be addressed in the future, especially as business activities in the region advance. Moreover, the Council will continue to provide transparency of Chinese ambitions in the region. It is in the best interest of Norwegian chairmanship and the remaining Arctic States to tread lightly in the future of the AC, prioritizing projects that provide holistic outcomes for the Arctic region –and provides some value to Russia as well. A full-blown “AC 2.0” will incite even more unintended consequences and accelerate the securitization of the Arctic– and possibly, further the Russian ability to weaponize interdependencies.

6.4. Scenario 4: A varied combination of the three scenarios

A fear that is emerging is whether China and Russia, with potential support from India, would develop their own Arctic governance structure that breaks away
from the traditional Arctic Council framework (Milne, 2023). The reality of what this new hub, centered in Russia, could look like is up for discussion. With the burgeoning economic partnership between China and Russia, shift in security architecture for the Arctic and the downsized role of the Arctic Council, Moscow has incredible power against most of the players in the region. Indeed, while sanctions have impacted the current economic situation in Russia via energy exports and ramping up military capabilities, the ability to pivot and find new partners in the region, particularly in the context of BRICS, is indicating Moscow has some footing to advance its plans for developing and defending the Arctic.

If the three previous scenarios are true, Moscow will likely be pushed into creating its own forum that could incorporate economic, political and military elements. Economic is of primary importance as Moscow is engaging in talks with China and India on the Northern Sea Route and energy trade. The political dimension will be harder to determine, as Russia would have the outsized role since it would likely be the only State with Arctic territory in the forum. China may have an enhanced role, but Russia will presumably use the chokepoint effect to prevent outweighed influence of Chinese stakeholders.

The military dimension will also be challenging to pinpoint. Back in 2021, Russia wanted to reinstate high-level military meetings between Arctic States within the auspices of the Arctic Council (Gronholt-Pedersen, 2021). This was largely in response to growth in military troops along the Norwegian-Russian border, but it provides useful indication that with enhanced NATO presence in the region, Moscow could turn to other partners to help better mutually defend its Arctic territory, especially if Arctic economic activity advances and protection of assets is needed.

The essential piece of this puzzle is China. If the other Arctic seven isolate Beijing, it leaves China with no other alternatives except to deepen its relationship with Moscow. Although the US and China have a strained relationship, how the remaining Arctic States, especially the Nordics, include Beijing in Arctic affairs will be crucial to how China navigates its work with Russia. The NSR is one component Russia has over China, but ultimately, Beijing would like to be viewed as a legitimate Arctic actor. Beijing continues to be willing to cooperate in the Arctic Council, engage in trade and investment in the Nordics as a part of the Polar Silk Road and hedge against its access dependency on Russia. The West can keep Beijing in the loop by incorporating it and other observer States in the next iteration of the Arctic Council.

If not, weaponized interdependence will be heightened in the Arctic through the new forum that Russia would choose to develop, leveraging both the panopticon and chokepoint effects. While it is unlikely the other seven Arctic States would be incorporated into this updated framework, some more Western-friendly States could be included, for example Japan, South Korea or Turkey (through NATO membership). This alternate forum could prove lucrative for those wanting to buy into the NSR and economic opportunities the Russian Arctic presents. Further, the mere creation of this new hub can create adverse chokepoint effects for the West in terms of climate security, military activity and global influence for China and Russia.
7. Conclusion

The Arctic is highly interdependent in nature. Reinstating the image of exceptionalism is not realistic anymore as the region has fundamentally changed: “the Arctic cannot be isolated from the current international conflict dynamics as economic and military assets in the region will remain key enablers of Russia’s potential future aggressions and of its ability to achieve its foreign policy goals” (Mikkola et al., 2023). Economic interests are the driving force for non-Arctic States to engage with Russia in the region. China and India are both looking to diversify their supply chains and energy suppliers. Access to the NSR would provide that. The political and military dimensions are important as well, especially within the context of the Sino-Russian partnership. However, where Russia has the most power lies in the interdependencies it can foster economically. Military and political dimensions only amplify the weaponization effect.

In other words, the peace-building messaging behind complex interdependence cannot be used to depict the current situation in Arctic affairs. As Farrell and Newman (2019) put it, “Globalization has transformed the liberal order, by moving the action away from multilateral interstate negotiations and toward networks of private actors.” Holding about 50% of the Arctic coastline, and with the Arctic accounting for about 30% of Russia’s GDP, extracting hydrocarbons and expanding the NSR is key to the future of the Russian economy and national security (Townsend & Kendall-Taylor, 2021).

How successful Russia will be in maintaining and executing these relationships is unclear as a result of its mixed track record and heavy investment needed to actually develop the NSR in the near-term. Regardless, the four above scenarios are important for the West to keep in mind to curb the rising influence of Sino-Russian activities in the region. The scenarios reveal that the historical reluctance continues to be a weak spot between China and Russia, and an effective bilateral relationship in the region will not be met without its challenges. The war in Ukraine has brought Xi and Putin closer to a certain degree, but Beijing remains pragmatic in how it approaches the Arctic. Wanting to have global acceptance as a “near-Arctic state,” China will continue to pursue partnerships—especially with the Nordics— if it continues to be included in global fora.

Many unanswered questions remain for how Arctic cooperation can effectively remobilize after the invasion of Ukraine. Inclusion of China, as well as other non-Arctic States, in whatever form future cooperation in the High North turns out to be, is crucial to offsetting Russia’s ability to create new hubs of Arctic cooperation that, in turn, can be weaponized against the West. Of course, many Arctic development projects will take time to execute, but rebuilding cooperation through the new lens of weaponized interdependence reveals some harsh realities. Particularly, economic activities in the region will advance, climate change is accelerating and Russia will fiercely protect its sovereignty in the region. Without acknowledging these current dynamics, the likelihood of containing unchecked interests in the Far North will be arduous.
Glossary

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
EU: European Union
LNG: Liquified Natural Gas
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSR: Northern Sea Route
PSR: Polar Silk Road
SWIFT: Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication

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