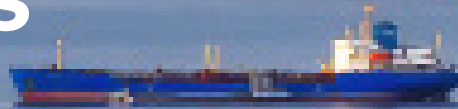


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Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic: Implications for Nordic countries and recommended policy responses

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Executive summary

- Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia and China pledged to strengthen their cooperation in the Arctic. This report examines the prospects for increased collaboration between Russia and China in the region, focusing on energy, critical minerals, shipping, military and security issues, and governance. It also explores potential scenarios for and the possible consequences of Sino-Russian cooperation for Nordic states in each of these areas and makes policy recommendations.
- The main consequence of increased Sino-Russian **energy cooperation** in the Arctic is that revenue from Chinese energy imports is fuelling Russia's war economy. Despite pledges to strengthen energy ties, however, Chinese partners have paused participation in a flagship Russian energy project and appear reluctant to commit to future projects. This highlights the limitations of the energy partnership. Chinese energy companies are likely to continue to balance support for Russian energy projects with the need to avoid western sanctions. To reduce Russian revenues from Arctic energy exports, western governments should focus on enforcing and monitoring existing sanctions. A price cap on Russian gas could also be considered.
- While there are signs of increased collaboration on the mining and processing of **critical minerals**, Russia remains cautious about becoming over-dependent on China and lacks access to advanced processing technology, which China is unlikely to share. A "critical mineral alliance" between the two countries is therefore unlikely. Nordic countries should work to reduce their reliance on China by enhancing EU cooperation and developing supplementary supply chains and processing capacity.
- Increased Russian **energy shipments** to China via the Northern Sea Route heighten the risk of an oil spill, as sanctions have led Russia to use less safe vessels. The partial suspension of Arctic governance mechanisms, which mitigated risks and ensured a swift response, has increased this threat. Nordic countries should continue to support the resumption of Arctic Council working group activities. They could also consider additional sanctions on Russia's shadow fleet.
- China and Russia have held high-profile **joint military exercises** in the Arctic but it is unclear whether this indicates a genuine intention to cooperate more closely or is mainly posturing aimed at deterring the US and its allies. China's lack of a permanent military presence and its weaker military interests in the region compared to Russia's constrain deeper cooperation. Rather than a potential Sino-Russian alliance, the main military threat to Nordic countries in the Arctic currently comes from Russia. Nonetheless, Sino-Russian cooperation on dual-use research and technologies could present risks to Nordic countries that warrant careful evaluation.
- **Arctic governance** remains a point of friction between Russia, which supports the status quo, and China, which is dissatisfied with the current structure. By continuing to support the existing governance framework, Nordic countries can leverage this friction. This approach would also help to confine some aspects of Sino-Russian cooperation to the Arctic Council and other regional multilateral bodies, where it can be more easily monitored. Sino-Russian cooperation in this area appears relatively limited for the time being, which suggests that the potential risks from this collaboration are relatively low.

- Sino-Russian cooperation varies according to area, each of which has unique limits and risks that require tailored responses. The wholesale exclusion or isolation of China and Russia from Arctic cooperation is neither realistic nor desirable and could backfire, potentially driving them closer together. Strict limits on collaboration with Russia will remain in place for the foreseeable future. The challenge will be to balance strong pressure on and isolation of Russia while managing limited cooperation on critical areas such as climate research, which has been severely compromised by the lack of Russian data, and preventing Russia from forming new alliances with China and other “Russia-friendly” countries in these domains.

Introduction

Since Russia launched its full-scale war on Ukraine in February 2022, China has provided Russia with substantial political and economic support.¹ While clear limitations and red lines have emerged in the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, it has endured and even deepened in some areas despite western sanctions and criticism. The two countries have pledged to cooperate more closely in the Arctic, a region of which Russia is highly protective and where it has previously been cautious about allowing China too much access and influence.²

Scholars and analysts differ on how much this rhetoric has translated into genuine cooperation in the Arctic. Some emphasize that Sino-Russian cooperation is constrained by numerous factors, and view it as lofty rhetoric with few tangible results.³ Others, however, believe it to be substantial and that it could pose a significant challenge to states in the Western Arctic.⁴ Most seem to agree that if China and Russia forge a closer Arctic partnership, it could significantly alter the balance of power in the region with important consequences for both regional and global security.

This report examines the prospects for Sino-Russian collaboration in the Arctic, with a focus on energy, critical minerals, shipping, military and security issues, and governance. It also examines potential scenarios for and the possible consequences of Sino-Russian cooperation for Nordic states in each of these areas and makes policy recommendations. To more accurately assess the consequences of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation, it is essential to evaluate each area individually, as each possesses unique factors that influence the potential for collaboration.

Background: Chinese investments and Sino-Russian cooperation in the Russian Arctic

Investments in mineral resources and energy

Chinese companies have made some major investments in the Russian Arctic in the past decade, particularly in the energy sector (see Table 1). China has invested in Russia's flagship Arctic project, the **Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project**, located in the Yamal peninsula in north-west Siberia. The project, which commenced production in 2017, was developed by a joint venture made up of majority shareholder Novatek (50.1 percent), France's Total SA (20 percent), the CNPC (20 percent) and China's Silk Road Fund (9.9 percent).

Chinese involvement in the project is not limited to investment, but also involves funding and technical assistance. In 2022, the project produced around 21 million tonnes of LNG.⁵ (China imported 71 million tonnes of LNG in 2023.⁶)

China is also involved in Novatek's **Arctic LNG 2 project**, located on the Gyda Peninsula, about 70 km from the Yamal LNG site, on the other side of the Gulf of Ob.⁷ The project is owned by a joint venture that comprises Novatek (60 percent), Total SA (10 percent), CNPC (10 percent), the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (10 percent) and Japan Arctic LNG (10 percent). In 2023, the United States imposed sanctions on the project as part of its efforts to limit Russia's future energy production.⁸ While the project initially appeared to be proceeding despite the sanctions, and Chinese companies continued to deliver crucial equipment,⁹ the sanctions seem to have successfully halted the project. In December 2023, Novatek issued force majeure notifications to its Chinese customers, warning of its inability to deliver LNG as planned.¹⁰ Shortly after, the Chinese, French and Japanese partners also declared force majeure on their participation.¹¹ If ever fully developed, the project is expected to produce nearly 20 million tonnes of LNG per year.¹²

There have been Russian attempts to attract Chinese investment in other LNG projects. Novatek has proposed that the CNPC and the Silk Road Fund be exempt from paying dividend tax on Yamal LNG to free up money for investment in other LNG projects, such as **Murmansk LNG** – a project planned for the Kola peninsula.¹³ However, China is being selective about which projects to engage with and on what terms. For example, despite Vladimir Putin's repeated attempts, Russia has not been able to secure China's full commitment to the planned gas pipeline **Power of Siberia 2**.¹⁴

Under an agreement with Gazprom, China Oilfield Services (COS) has conducted **oil and gas exploration** in the Kara Sea in the summers since 2017.¹⁵ In addition, COS was hired by a Russian oil company in the summer of 2016 to carry out seismic mapping in the Barents Sea, during which the Chinese ship docked in the Norwegian town of Kirkenes.¹⁶ The China Energy Engineering Corporation has reportedly agreed to set up a local office in the Nenets region, which lies along the Barents Sea and the Kara Sea, to explore opportunities for developing gas deposits in the region.¹⁷

Finally, in 2019, the China National Chemical Engineering Group signed an agreement with Neftegazholding to develop the **Payakha Oilfield project**, located on the Taymyr Peninsula in the Russian Arctic.¹⁸ The project will reportedly include processing facilities, pipelines, a shipping dock and a storage facility, among other infrastructure.¹⁹

Chinese investments in Russian mining projects have been relatively limited, although they may be increasing. In early 2023, the China Communications Construction Company signed an agreement with Rustitan to develop the **Pizhemskiye titanium deposit**, the largest deposit of its kind in Russia.²⁰ The project will include the construction of a new railway and the development of a deep-water port for shipping taking the **Northern Sea Route (NSR)** (see Figure 1). The infrastructure will reportedly be used to transport not only titanium, but also other raw materials from the region's mining cluster.²¹

In 2024, the Chinese company MCC International Incorporation set up a partnership with Polar Lithium, a joint venture between the state-owned Rosatom and the world's largest nickel producer, Nor Nickel. Together, they aim to develop the **Kolmozerskiye lithium deposit** on the Kola Peninsula.²² Other mining projects in Russia have Chinese involvement, but none of these are located in the Arctic Circle.²³

Figure 1. Chinese actual or planned investments in or near the Russian Arctic

Source of data: Author's own compilation



* Oil and gas exploration.

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Investment in connectivity, shipping and infrastructure

China is dependent on Russia to advance its Arctic shipping and connectivity agenda. Although China's ambition is to develop three Arctic routes – the Northeast passage (which includes the NSR), the Northwest Passage and the Transpolar Sea Route – the Russia-controlled NSR has the greatest commercial potential. Transit numbers through the NSR have increased rapidly in the past decade, mostly due to an increase in Chinese traffic. Following a dip in 2022 because of western sanctions and the departure of most western operators, transit volumes recovered and broke records in 2023.²⁴ Nonetheless, the number of transits through the NSR (75 in 2023) is minuscule compared to the 90 000 ships that pass through the Malacca strait each year.

Chinese companies have invested in railways and ports in the Russian Arctic to facilitate transportation of resources to China through the NSR. Most of these projects are still at the planning or early development stages. For example, a subsidiary of the Chinese defence trade company, China Poly Group, is reportedly involved in the development of a **deep-water port in Arkhangelsk**.²⁵ Several of the mineral resource projects that China has invested in also involve infrastructure development.

Security and military cooperation

In April 2023, the Chinese Coastguard signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Russian Federal Security Service on the development of **maritime law enforcement**.²⁶ This agreement paves the way for Sino-Russian cooperation in Arctic waters in areas such as counterterrorism and combating illegal migration, as well as countering the smuggling of drugs and weapons, and illegal fishing.²⁷ Following this agreement, the Chinese coastguard conducted its first joint patrol with Russia in Arctic waters in October 2024.²⁸

In August 2023, Russia and China carried out a **joint naval patrol** in the Arctic, described by one US commentator as the largest such patrol to pass by the Alaskan coast.²⁹ In July 2024, the two countries conducted their first-ever **joint bomber patrol** near the coast of Alaska.³⁰

China and Russia have also agreed to integrate their **satellite navigation networks** – the Beidou and Glonass systems, respectively. This agreement will allow Russian satellite stations to be installed in China and Chinese stations to be established in Russia.³¹ According to experts, this could allow China and Russia to share more accurate information about ships entering and leaving the Barents Sea, and also enable more precise navigation by Russian submarines.³²

Table 1. Chinese actual or planned investments in or near the Russian Arctic

Source of data: Author's own compilation

Project	Resource	Owner/local partner	Chinese investor	Form of participation	Status
Yamal LNG	LNG	Novatek	China National Petroleum Corporation & Silk Road Fund	Minority owner	In production
Arctic LNG 2	LNG	Novatek	China National Petroleum Corporation & China National Offshore Oil Corporation	Minority owner	Production suspended due to sanctions
Murmansk LNG	LNG	Novatek	No known Chinese participation yet	Russia seeking Chinese investment	Construction appears to have been halted
Nenets AO	LNG	Unknown	China Energy Engineering Corporation	Local office in Nenets region	Exploring investment opportunities
Nan Hai Ba Hao	Oil	Gazprom Nedra	China Oilfield Services	Contracted	Annual mapping
Payakha Oilfield	Oil	Netfegaz	China National Chemical Engineering Group	Memorandum of Understanding	Exploration
Pizhemskeye	Titanium, infrastructure	Rustitan	China Communications and Construction Company	Memorandum of Understanding	Exploration
Kolmozerskeye	Lithium	Polar Lithium	MCC International Incorporation	Technical assistance	Exploration
Arkhangelsk deep-water port	Port	Private investors, investment firms	China Poly Group	Interested in contributing funding	In development

Consequences, risks and policy options for the Nordic region

Closer Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic could significantly affect the balance of power in the region, with major implications for regional security. This section explores potential developments and scenarios in the areas of energy resources (oil and gas), critical minerals, Arctic shipping, military and security issues, and Arctic governance, and proposes policy actions for each area.

Energy cooperation

The most apparent risk to Europe from deepened Sino-Russian energy cooperation is that energy exports to China help sustain Russia's war economy. Without the revenues from these energy exports, it is doubtful how long Russia could afford to continue its war in Ukraine.

Despite the official rhetoric from both Russia and China, which have repeatedly pledged deeper energy cooperation,³³ clear limits have emerged in their bilateral energy ties. As noted above, China has yet to fully commit to the Power of Siberia 2 project, and Chinese partners have suspended participation in the Arctic LNG 2 project due to concerns about the potential for US sanctions.

From a European energy security perspective, efforts to reduce reliance on Russian oil and gas have been costly but more successful than many analysts predicted.³⁴ Dependence on Russian energy is likely to decline further in the coming years as Europe transitions to renewable energy,³⁵ and sanctions on Russian LNG are tightened.³⁶

The risks attached to deepened Sino-Russian energy cooperation perhaps have less to do with Europe's energy security than a potential trade conflict with China. Sino-Russian energy cooperation could reach a level that is unacceptable to Europe if, for example, China were to systematically help Russia to evade western sanctions aimed at stifling Russia's energy revenues.³⁷ This could involve systematically delivering LNG from sanctioned projects, either openly or covertly, or supplying construction materials and participating in the development of such projects.

Although it may seem unlikely today, this scenario could trigger a broader trade conflict between China and Europe, with far-reaching consequences for the economies and security of the Nordic countries. The most likely scenario, however, is that Chinese energy companies continue to walk a fine line between supporting Russian projects and evading western sanctions. While some Chinese companies have been targeted by sanctions, most appear to be complying, even after the sanctions were further tightened.

To limit Russian revenues from Arctic energy exports, western governments should focus on enforcing and monitoring existing sanctions, such as the oil price cap and the export restrictions on LNG technology. Additional measures, such as a price cap on LNG, could also be considered. A report by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air estimates that such a cap would have reduced revenues from Russian LNG by as much as 60 percent in 2023.³⁸

Critical mineral cooperation

It has been suggested that western sanctions on Russia could lead to closer cooperation between China and Russia in the critical mineral sector.³⁹ For Russia, cooperation with China

could help to offset the supply shortfalls caused by western sanctions. Some Russian analysts even advocate a Sino-Russian **critical mineral alliance** aimed at depriving the West of supply. Similarly, some Chinese analysts argue that China should deepen its cooperation with Russia on Arctic resource development to offset what they regard as US-led attempts to contain China and stifle its future access to mineral and energy supply chains.⁴⁰

On the surface, China and Russia seem ideal partners: Russia has rich resources of critical minerals, including large reserves of lithium,⁴¹ and some of the world's largest deposits of rare earth elements, many of which are in the Arctic.⁴² China is not only the world's biggest producer of most critical minerals and materials, but also the biggest consumer of and market for them.⁴³

Collaboration has deepened in some respects since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Trade in metals such as aluminium and nickel has surged.⁴⁴ There are signs that Russia is working to integrate its critical mineral supply chain with China's by investing in Chinese mining projects, a move aimed at offsetting the impact of cancelled western partnerships and export bans on certain critical raw materials imposed by western countries.⁴⁵ MCC International's partnership with Rosatom and Nornickel to develop lithium resources on the Kola Peninsula is another sign of the deeper collaboration between the two countries.

There are, however, reasons to be sceptical about a Sino-Russian critical minerals alliance. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chinese analysts already considered investing in Russia's mining sector to be high risk.⁴⁶ Chinese investors now face additional challenges, as western sanctions threaten to cripple the prospects of Russian mining projects.

Russia needs to attract foreign investment but remains suspicious of Chinese involvement in strategic sectors and regions such as the Arctic. Much like Europe, Russia has struggled to reduce its excessive dependence on China for the supply of critical minerals.⁴⁷ It has selectively welcomed Chinese funding and technical assistance but not allowed foreign companies to take control of major mines.

China is likely to continue to offer funding, purchase mineral raw materials and assist with the building of mining and shipping infrastructure in the Russian Arctic. However, it is unlikely to share the advanced production technology that Russia needs to advance up the critical mineral value chain. The Chinese government is tightening control over these technologies, and even issued a formal ban on the export of rare earth processing technology in December 2023.⁴⁸ It is probably concerned that sharing them with any country, even a strategic partner such as Russia, could undermine China's dominant role in critical mineral supply chains.

Despite these limitations, however, there are risks that Nordic countries and their partners should keep an eye on. For example, a significant proportion of Europe's rare earth metals is transported from China to Europe by Russian rail.⁴⁹ It is possible that Russia could attempt to restrict, halt or increase the cost of this transport.

For the Nordic countries, the primary concern is not the potential risk of a Sino-Russian "critical mineral alliance" in the Arctic, but their heavy reliance on China for critical materials. To address this, Nordic countries should continue to deepen cooperation within the EU and in initiatives such as the Minerals Security Partnership.⁵⁰ Reducing dependence on China will present challenges, however, as the country dominates most critical mineral supply chains, particularly in downstream processing and the manufacture of components embedded with

these materials. Completely excluding Chinese companies from supply chains might be unrealistic and unnecessary, as it would be too costly and lead to lower quality products.⁵¹ Efforts to reduce reliance on China will be long term. They will require the EU to collaborate with other countries on diversifying supply chains and strengthening processing and manufacturing capacities, while also selectively continuing to cooperate with China.

Shipping and maritime security cooperation

Despite their rhetoric about deepening cooperation, Arctic shipping is another area of friction between China and Russia. As Chinese scholars have pointed out, the two countries differ in their interpretations of China's "**Polar Silk Road**": Russia focuses narrowly on the Northern Sea Route while China envisages a broader network connecting Arctic maritime routes with ports, rail, airports and other infrastructure.⁵² This broader vision requires China to collaborate with countries beyond Russia, particularly the Nordic countries. Russia, however, fears this could reduce its role to that of a mere transit zone.⁵³ These differing perspectives probably explain why joint statements by the two countries avoid the term "Polar Silk Road" and instead refer to the development of "Arctic waterways".⁵⁴

A considerable risk of increased cooperation between China and Russia on Arctic shipping, and the resulting increase in traffic along the NSR, is the potential for an Arctic oil spill. Following the West's sanctions on Russia linked to its war against Ukraine, most western companies have ceased operating along the NSR, leading to a decline in the number of modern ice class tankers. Some of these have been replaced by less safe and less capable tankers that lack the reinforced hulls required to navigate icy waters.⁵⁵

Most of the oil transported by these tankers is heading for China and India, the main export destinations for Russian crude oil.⁵⁶ Russia has also compensated for the shortage of tankers by employing a "**shadow fleet**" made up primarily of older, uninsured vessels with concealed ownership.⁵⁷ The vast majority of these ships transport oil, although there are also a limited but growing number of LNG carriers within the shadow fleet.

As traffic along the NRS increases, there is a growing risk of an oil spill. A major oil spill would be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to clean up and could have disastrous environmental consequences for Arctic peoples and the sensitive Arctic ecosystem. The partial suspension of the Arctic governance mechanisms designed to reduce the likelihood of accidents and ensure a swift, coordinated response to potential spills (see below) has further increased the risk. Although cooperation never completely ceased and some has been restored, tensions between Russia and the other Arctic states – especially if they intensify – could still hinder effective communication, delay data sharing and complicate joint exercises.

In addition to supporting resumption of Arctic Council working group activities and other regional governance mechanisms, the Nordic states, along with their allies and partners, should consider additional sanctions on Russia's shadow fleet. For instance, analysts have suggested that western governments might consider sanctioning countries that import energy transported in these ships.⁵⁸

Military and security cooperation

The Chinese and Russian militaries have conducted joint exercises in the Arctic. However, it is difficult to determine whether these activities indicate a genuine readiness for closer military cooperation in the region or are primarily aimed at posturing and deterring the US and its allies. Deeper cooperation appears to be limited by several factors. While China has military interests in the Arctic – Chinese military analysts, for example, believe that the region could play a crucial role in China's nuclear deterrence – these interests are not nearly as significant as Russia's. Unlike Taiwan or the South China Sea, the Arctic is not considered a Chinese region of “core interest” where China would readily consider deploying a large-scale military force.⁵⁹

Rather, China views the Arctic as a **“strategic new frontier”** (战略新疆域) – a future arena for great power competition over geopolitical influence and strategic resources,⁶⁰ and a region where China must establish a presence and develop strong capabilities to achieve its goal of becoming a global superpower.⁶¹ In the not-too-distant future, China may consider more limited and targeted operations to protect its interests in the region. Over the past decade, the polar regions have been increasingly integrated into China's security strategy. The 2015 National Security Law, for instance, calls for China's “activities, assets, and other interests in outer space, the international seabed area, and the polar regions” to be safeguarded.⁶²

Despite its strategic importance for China's global ambitions, however, China is likely to remain cautious about becoming involved in any military confrontation between Russia and NATO in the Arctic. For the foreseeable future, the primary military threat to Nordic countries in the Arctic will come from Russia rather than from the Chinese-Russian military partnership. Even if its military readiness in the Arctic is believed to have been weakened by the war against Ukraine and the resulting western sanctions, Russia's militarization of the region has outpaced that of other Arctic states.⁶³

Joint Sino-Russian military exercises in the Arctic are likely to continue and increase in both frequency and scope. Nonetheless, despite its weakened position vis-à-vis China, experts doubt that Russia is ready to allow Chinese troops or submarines to be permanently stationed in its Arctic region. China does not have any known permanent military presence in the Russian Arctic, and it is doubtful that China has a strong interest in establishing such a presence there.⁶⁴ A formal military alliance between the two is even less likely, given China's longstanding policy of non-alignment and its need to maintain stable relations with the West. The two countries repeatedly emphasize that their partnership is superior to those of “Cold War military alliances”.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, various forms of China-Russia cooperation have **dual-use potential**, especially in the research field. As mentioned above, the two countries have taken steps to integrate their satellite navigation systems, which could enhance navigation precision for Russian submarines and provide both countries with more accurate information about ships passing through the Barents Sea.

While acknowledging the limitations of Sino-Russian military cooperation in the Arctic, Nordic countries and their allies should closely monitor Sino-Russian joint military exercises for indications of enhanced interoperability of their forces in the region. In addition, they should carefully evaluate the risks associated with Sino-Russian collaboration on dual-use

research and technologies in the Arctic. Strengthening coordination through forums such as NORDEFCO and deepening ties with their Arctic NATO allies will be crucial to addressing these challenges.

Cooperation on Arctic governance

Significant frictions also exist between China and Russia on Arctic governance.⁶⁶ China officially recognizes the legitimacy of the Arctic legal framework and rarely criticizes it in public. In domestic discussions, however, prominent Chinese Arctic scholars have criticized the Arctic governance system as fragmented and ill-equipped to manage the rapidly changing conditions in the region.⁶⁷ China advocates more inclusive mechanisms, often seeking the support of other non-Arctic nations.

Russia is an advocate for the status quo and supports the idea that Arctic governance is the sole responsibility of the Arctic states. Russia has objected to China's self-identification as a **"near-Arctic state"** (近北极国家), even expressing agreement with former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement that "there are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing".⁶⁸

The question arises whether the isolation of Russia by the other Arctic states will make it more willing to support a greater role for China in Arctic governance, or whether Russia's diminished power relative to China – particularly its reliance on Chinese economic and political support for its war in Ukraine – will compel it to do so.

Russia has recently voiced dissatisfaction with the system of Arctic governance. It suspended annual funding for the Arctic Council in February 2024. The Council halted most of its activities shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, following a joint decision by the seven western member states, although working group activities have since been resumed in virtual format. Russia has threatened to withdraw from the Council "if the Council's work and activities do not correspond to Russia's interests".⁶⁹ Russia has also lost its seat on the International Maritime Organization's governing council since its invasion of Ukraine.⁷⁰

If Russia were to follow through on its threat to withdraw from the Arctic Council, which some experts believe would lead to the Council's collapse,⁷¹ it might consider establishing its own Arctic governance body. In such a scenario, Russia could invite China and other "Russia-friendly" countries to participate.

The implications of such a development are difficult to assess but would be likely to lead to greater instability in Arctic governance. While this scenario cannot be entirely ruled out, however, it remains unlikely. The current Arctic governance framework benefits the Arctic littoral states, and Russia has probably concluded that it has more to gain by maintaining the status quo rather than inviting other countries into the region, which would increase competition and potentially diminish its influence in the long term. Russia's suspension of funding to the Arctic Council appears to be largely symbolic, and has had little impact on the Council's overall budget. Some have even interpreted it as a signal of Russia's support for the Council and a desire to see it restored to its full, intended functions, rather than its current compromised state.⁷²

The most likely scenario is that the Arctic Council will continue in its current compromised form for the foreseeable future, with working groups carrying on some activities but without high-level political meetings. Even if the Council finds a way to gradually resume more of

its normal operations, Russia is likely to maintain a diminished role in Arctic governance institutions for the foreseeable future. This will limit Russia's ability to advocate on China's behalf.

China is likely to seek to cooperate on Arctic governance not only with Russia, but with all Arctic states – not least the Nordic states. However, Russia's war in Ukraine and China's refusal to condemn Russia have made this more challenging. This is a key factor limiting China's cooperation with the Nordic states.

Arctic governance continues to be a point of friction between Russia and China. By continuing to support the existing Arctic governance framework, Nordic countries can leverage this friction. This approach will also help to keep certain aspects of Sino-Russian cooperation confined to the Arctic Council and other regional multilateral bodies, where it can be more easily monitored. Thus far, Sino-Russian cooperation within the Arctic Council seems relatively limited and no deeper than that between other countries.⁷³ This suggests that the potential risks from this collaboration are likely to remain low.

Table 2. Risks and concerns of Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation for the Nordic countries, and suggested policy actions.

Source: Author's compilation.

Cooperation	Existing concerns	Worst-case scenario	Most likely scenario	Suggested policy actions
Energy	Chinese imports of Russian energy from the Arctic help to sustain Russia's war economy.	China systematically helps Russia to evade sanctions, triggering a trade war with Europe.	Chinese companies continue to walk a fine line between supporting Russia and evading western sanctions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on enforcing and monitoring existing sanctions Additional measures, such as a price cap on Russian gas, could also be considered
Critical minerals	Sino-Russian trade in critical minerals undermines western sanctions.	China and Russia form a "critical minerals alliance" to limit Europe's supply; Russia blocks rail shipments of critical metals.	Russia partially integrates its supply chain with China, but China does not share advanced processing technology with Russia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue efforts within the EU and through international partnerships to diversify supply chains and enhance the EU's processing capacity Selectively cooperate with China
Military and security	Cooperation on dual-use technologies and joint military exercises.	China and Russia form a military alliance; China fights alongside Russia in a military conflict in the Arctic.	No Sino-Russian military alliance or permanent Chinese troops in the Russian Arctic, but larger and more frequent military exercises.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess the risks posed by Sino-Russian cooperation on dual-use technologies in the Arctic Coordinate with NATO members to address these challenges
Shipping / maritime security	Increased traffic along the Northern Sea Route and Russia's use of non-ice-class tankers raise the risk of an oil spill.	A major Arctic oil spill.	An Arctic oil spill is a low-probability, high-impact event.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the partial resumption of Arctic governance mechanisms Consider sanctions on countries importing energy transported by the "shadow fleet"
Arctic governance	Cooperation is currently limited and the risks relatively low.	Russia leaves the Arctic Council and other regional bodies, forming an alternative and including China.	Russia upholds the Arctic governance framework; its weakened role limits what it can do for China. China does not seriously challenge the Arctic legal framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to support the Arctic Council and other regional frameworks

Conclusion

Weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, China and Russia declared their friendship to have "no limits" and "no forbidden areas of cooperation". In the years since, however, frictions and tensions have emerged. The Arctic can be expected to be a focal point for these tensions, given Russia's protective stance over its Arctic territories and the two countries' differing views on Arctic governance and other regional issues. Despite their increasing reliance on each other to advance their Arctic agendas, factors such as mutual mistrust, fear of dependency, reluctance to share technology and differing priorities continue to limit their cooperation. In future, despite its growing reliance on China, Russia is likely to be selective in involving China in its Arctic region, while China will engage cautiously to avoid western sanctions.

Nordic countries should closely monitor Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation and strengthen their collaboration with NATO members while recognizing the limits of the Sino-Russian partnership. Rather than assessing Sino-Russian cooperation as a whole, it is crucial to understand that the potential for collaboration varies in individual areas, each of which poses unique risks and requires a tailored response. Recognizing the specific factors that limit or facilitate cooperation allows policymakers to design more precise strategies. Efforts to entirely isolate or exclude either country from the Arctic could be counterproductive by potentially driving them closer together. Managing selective and limited cooperation with Russia does not mean normalization. Strict limits on collaboration will remain in place for the foreseeable future. The challenge will be to find the right balance between applying strong pressure and isolation of Russia while still managing to cooperate on critical areas such as climate research, which has been seriously compromised by the lack of Russian data.⁷⁴ Maintaining a degree of cooperation could also prevent Russia from forming new alliances with China and other "Russia-friendly" countries in these areas.



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Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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