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Melting Ice-caps, Consolidating Interests:
Assessing the Compatibility of China and Russia's Cooperation in the Arctic

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Abstract

The melting icecaps in the Arctic have led to consolidating interests in the region, triggering sensational headlines predicting a ‘scramble of the Arctic’ type of scenario. Particularly China’s growing presence in the region, in conjunction with its steady rise as a great power, has led to concern in the international and Arctic community. At the crossroads of this lies Russia, a traditional Arctic power seeking to find a fine balance between letting in foreign powers while preserving the privileged status Arctic states enjoy in the region. As the largest Arctic state, Russia is China’s major gateway to the Arctic. Their cooperation in this region has taken on a determining role in the overall relationship between the two states, which has been deepening since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. So far, their relations seem to succeed far beyond the gloomy expectations of classical explanatory frameworks, such as the balance of power theory, moving away from the logic of power politics. While academics raise a valid point stressing their growing imbalance, diverging interests and underlying mistrust, it fails to account for the equally growing interdependence between China and Russia. To be able to better understand the compatibility of their cooperation in the Arctic beyond such realist framings, this thesis adopts a poststructuralist lens to assess China and Russia’s respective security discourses on this region. This lens allows for the evaluation of the ‘unobservable’ and ‘immeasurable’ contexts of the Sino-Russian relationship in the form of discourse that, as this thesis argues, to a great extent guide and direct the relationship despite its observable growing power disparity. The results show that by uncovering the national identity-driven foreign policies behind the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic, a picture of a more durable relationship can be drawn. Having both adopted a discourse that encourages mutually beneficial cooperation that shelves their differences, the hurdles their cooperation may face are outweighed by the potential benefits this will bring about. This research concludes by emphasizing the special nature of Sino-Russian relation, based on mutualism, respect, and flexibility. This model for cooperation may lay the groundwork for future partnerships to come in a post-Western world order.

Keywords: Arctic Security, Sino-Russian relations, Poststructuralism, Securitization, Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COSCO	China Ocean Shipping Company
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CNODC	China National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Company
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ICBC	China's Industrial and Commercial Bank of China
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
NSR	Northern Sea Route
PDA	Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis
PBOC	People's Bank of China
PSR	Polar Silk Road
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCIO	The State Council Information Office (China)
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
Yamal LNG	Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG)
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

1 INTRODUCTION

International politics has arguably never been more in flux than it is today. Yet, an often overlooked area amid all the more obvious flashpoints that we face is the Arctic. Pushed by global warming, the Arctic is melting at an unprecedented rate, from which we can expect a nearly ice-free Arctic by 2030 as the region continues to warm at approximately twice as fast as the global average.¹ Overwhelmingly altering and threatening the region's ecosystem², the thawing ice unlocks promising geostrategic opportunities at the same time³; the Northern Sea Route (NSR) will become accessible for commercial shipping, thereby significantly reducing travel time and fuel costs for shipping companies, and resources that used to be inaccessible due to the Arctic's ice caps will suddenly be 'open for grabs', as predicted by media channels, politicians, and scholars.⁴

As the largest Arctic state in the world, and considering the Arctic as its main strategic bastion for its great power status⁵, Russia is at the forefront of taking leadership of these new transformations to come. One-quarter of the Arctic coastline and 40% of the land area falls under Russia's control, home to three-quarters of the Arctic's population.⁶ Most importantly, 20% of Russia's GDP derives from Arctic economic activities such as natural resource extraction.⁷ Considered as vital to matters of sovereignty and economic development, the Arctic region and the development thereof is of utmost importance to Russia.⁸ This has been displayed in Russia's recent efforts to re-'militarize the Arctic', as it re-opened an Arctic military base dating from the Cold War era and started patrolling the NSR along its coast from the Kara Sea to the Pacific Ocean.⁹ This has led to general concern from the international community, afraid

¹ Muyin Wang and James E Overland, "A sea ice free summer Arctic within 30 years: An update from CMIP5 models," *Geophysical Research Letters* 39, no. 18 (2012): 1.

² Soon Kong Lim, "China's Arctic Policy & the Polar Silk Road Vision," in *2018 Arctic Yearbook: Arctic Development in Theory & In Practice*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot (Akuyeri: Northern Research Forum, 2018), 420.

³ Linyan Huang et al., "Is China's interest for the Arctic driven by Arctic shipping potential?" *Asian Geographer* 32, no. 1 (2015): 59; Klaus Dodds and Mark Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 117.

⁴ Soon Kong Lim, "China's Arctic Policy & the Polar Silk Road Vision," in *2018 Arctic Yearbook: Arctic Development in Theory & In Practice*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot (Akuyeri: Northern Research Forum, 2018), 420.

⁵ Marlène Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy: A Power Strategy and Its Limits." *Russie.Nei.Visions* no. 117 (Ifri, 2020): 3.

⁶ Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9.

⁷ Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 9.

⁸ Camilla T. N Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Possibilities and Constraints*, Stockholm: SIPRI, 2017, 46.

⁹ Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 10.

this could turn the Arctic into a playground for military power display between the US and Russia, just like back in the Cold War era.

This worrying image of the Arctic region as a breeding ground for increased geopolitical tension and future conflict is fuelled by concerns regarding China's rapidly emerging involvement in the Arctic over the past few years, which has been particularly problematized. China has been, and will continue to be, at the forefront of getting more involved in the Arctic region, labelling itself as a 'near-Arctic state', despite the large distance between China and the Arctic.¹⁰ After having gained observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013¹¹, the main regional council and high-level forum for intergovernmental cooperation in the Arctic¹², China has started investing more heavily in the region by opening a new research station to conduct research on the Arctic's climate and the environment, and by building a new nuclear icebreaker ship.¹³ It justifies its presence by emphasizing the Arctic's transition from a regional to an international sphere of interest, in which it wishes to partake. This is exemplified in a white paper released by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on their Arctic Policy:

*"The Arctic situation now goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature, having a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole, as well as on the survival, the development, and the shared future for mankind."*¹⁴

At the crossroads of this, we witness the unexpected but substantial rapprochement between Russia and China since the former's annexation of Crimea, for which their cooperation in the Arctic region has become another determinant element. A realization that to succeed in their Arctic ambitions, they undeniably need one another is rapidly bringing the two closer together, in which Moscow provides the geostrategic location for resource exploitation as well as access to the NSR and Beijing the necessary funding.¹⁵ In the High North, their cooperation ranges from the construction of mega-ports, billion dollar deals to develop Russian energy

¹⁰ Elana Wilson Rowe, *Arctic Governance. Power in Cross-Border Cooperation* (Manchester University Press, 2018), 6; Sanna Kopra, "Climate Change and China's Rise to Great Power Status: Implications for the Global Arctic," in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, ed. Matthias Finger and Lassi Heininen (Springer, 2019), 134; Xing Li and Bo Peng, "The Rise of China in the Emergence of a New Arctic Order," in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, ed. Matthias Finger and Lassi Heininen (Springer, 2019), 207.

¹¹ Lim, "China's Arctic Policy," 421.

¹² Li and Peng, "The Rise of China in the Emergence of a New Arctic Order," 201.

¹³ *Ibid*, page 209.

¹⁴ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (Beijing, 2018).

¹⁵ Dick Zandee, Kimberley Kruijver and Adája Stoetman, *The Future of Arctic Security: The Geopolitical Pressure Cooker and the Consequences for the Netherlands*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020, 14.

sources, to the development of satellite navigation that can replace the US-owned GPS. Through Chinese ‘infrastructure diplomacy’ in the Russian Arctic, Moscow has received sufficient funding to realize projects of national importance while China has gained a financial and energy foothold in the terrestrial and maritime Arctic.¹⁶

The rapprochement in the Arctic is indeed just one of the many consequences of a political context of growing distrust between both Russia and China vis-à-vis the West, bringing the two closer together beyond just the Arctic. After its annexation of Crimea, the downing of flight MH17, military interventions in Libya and Syria, and the poisonings of Skripal and Navalny, Russia could not be on much worse terms with the West.¹⁷ Faced with sanctions, economic stagnation and weak oil prices, Russia looks East, at its long-lost friend China, for comfort. At the same time, the latter equally struggles with the West in its quest for a position representative to its emerging power in the current global order. Confronted with a growing backlash in the international community against its treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, influence operations abroad, and military activities in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Himalayas¹⁸, China seeks alternatives from the West to further its interests abroad and has welcomed Russia’s reorientation to the East with open arms. Over recent years, they have developed stronger ties in crucial areas such as energy questions, mutual defence of their borders, currency arrangements, military and industrial cooperation, free airspace usage and prevention of crime and terrorism.¹⁹

In the face of growing instability in the world, be it in the form of a worldwide pandemic or the disintegration of the current-day world order, the possibility of a full-fledged Sino-Russian alliance adds to already pre-existing concerns in the Western world and has evoked substantial debate within the security arena. Together, they may form a strong ‘anti-western’ alliance that could have a significant effect on world politics and global economic structures.²⁰ Yet scholars disagree on how to view their complex relationship and its durability, with some

¹⁶ Fanqi Jia and Mia M. Bennett, “Chinese Infrastructure Diplomacy in Russia: The Geopolitics of Project Type, Location, and Scale,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no. 3-4 (2018): 367.

¹⁷ Bobo Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order.” *China International Strategy Review* 2 (2020): 309.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Marcin Kaczmarek, “The Future of Chinese-Russian Relations: The Next Round of Go” in *Russian Futures 2030*, ed. Sinikukka Saari and Stanislav Secieru, (Paris: The EU Institute for Security Studies, 2020), 90; Hilary Appel, “Are Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin Partners? Interpreting the Russia-China Rapprochement,” *PONARS Eurasia*, July 19, 2019, 2

²⁰ Ko Sakai, “Russia and China’s anti-West partnership threatens global order,” *NikkeiAsia*, April 4, 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Russia-and-China-s-anti-West-partnership-threatens-global-order>

labelling it as a ‘strategic partnership’²¹ that will stand for some time and threaten the Western neoliberal order, while others see it as a mere ‘axis of convenience’²² bound to fall apart at some point due to growing power discrepancies between the two. While academia raise a valid point stressing their growing imbalance, diverging interests and underlying mistrust, it fails to account for the equally growing interdependence between China and Russia that has been driving the two closer together despite their differences.

This is strikingly evident when focusing on their cooperation in the Arctic: a region where the potential for their relationship as well as its contention exists simultaneously. In fact, a closer look into the literature on their interaction in the Arctic region reveals an increasing interdependence between the two states through deepening their cooperation, drawing a picture of a more stable and durable relationship than is generally perceived. China has become essential to Russia's Arctic strategy, while the latter is vital to the former to gain a foothold in the Arctic and become a legitimate stakeholder in the region. Most of all, both countries prioritise the stability of the Arctic region in their respective Arctic policies, in stark contrast with the plethora of media headings and articles predicting a ‘scramble of the Arctic’ type of scenario.²³

This thesis argues that the resulting ambivalence is to a substantial degree explained by the predominance of materialist narratives within the literature, expressed by traditional realist geopolitical assessments on the Sino-Russian relationship in particular. Given the Arctic’s potential for resource extraction and opening up new sea routes, it should not come as a surprise that a geopolitical lens is adapted by scholars to assess the region and the dynamics taking place within it. Yet these approaches, building on traditional notions of security, offer a limited picture of what state interactions resemble. While a traditional geopolitical perspective may be suitable to predict and retroactively assess calamitous clashes in the Arctic region and beyond, it fails to make up for the current Sino-Russian relationship that goes beyond a zero-sum continuum.

This is thoroughly illustrated in the first two chapters of this thesis, of which the first provides an in-depth analysis of the existing literature on the general Sino-Russian relationship. This analysis is then contrasted with the conclusions drawn from the literature on their

²¹ Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies.” *Foreign Affairs* 95 no. 1 (January/February 2016): 96.

²² Lo, Bobo. *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*. London: Chatham House, 2008): 54.

²³ Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles*.

cooperation in the Arctic in the following chapter. The final part of this thesis adopts a poststructuralist perspective through the application of securitization theory to show that Sino-Russian relations do not fall within the margins of realism, but instead require a different lens to account for the uniqueness of their relations at stake. Poststructuralism holds that foreign policies should be understood as discursive practices through which identities are constructed.²⁴ Instead of quantifying the materiality aspects of the relationship, this perspective allows to assess the ‘unobservable’ and ‘immeasurable’ contexts in the form of discourse that, as this thesis argues, to a great extent guide and direct the Sino-Russian relationship despite its observable growing power disparity. Examining how China and Russia’s foreign policy in the Arctic stems from their carefully crafted national identities, combined with the existing literature, this research seeks to answer the following question: *to what extent do the security discourses of Russia and China on the Arctic explain the compatibility of their cooperation in this region?*

By answering this question, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature in the following three ways. First, by moving beyond the predominant positivist understandings of state to state relations, it brings to the foreground the underlying dynamics at play in the Sino-Russian relationship in a region of increasing importance for the two. This allows for a better understanding of the Sino-Russian relationship as a whole, particularly as to what drives their rapprochement despite their obvious differences. This research wishes to illustrate how their growing power imbalance in materialistic terms does not necessarily serve as an obstacle in the blossoming of their relationship and can in fact be compensated through re-assuring speech act. By uncovering the national identity driven foreign policies behind the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic, a picture of a more durable relationship can be drawn.²⁵

Second, while the undeniable growth of China as a global power will inevitably make relations with Russia increasingly asymmetric and more risky for the latter, this thesis sheds light on Beijing’s way of fostering foreign relations - seeking to divert attention away from any perceived risk the other may feel. China does so by emphasizing the mutually beneficial aspects of its relationship with Russia and its efforts to reassure the balanced nature of their relations seems to serve as a way to overcome growing power imbalance and has so far avoided the two

²⁴ Lene Hansen. “Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy,” in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 109.

²⁵ Milja Kurki and Colin Wight, “International Relations and Social Sciences,” in *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*, ed. by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steven Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22.

countries from falling into a Thucydides trap. Studying China's way of forming and fostering relations is of utmost importance, given the country's increasingly dominant role in today's world. A better understanding of China's logic behind the way the country frames bilateral relations is useful in comprehending how China behaves in other areas. A realist and Western account of China's conduct of foreign policy risks drawing incomplete conclusions that fail to grasp the country's rationale behind its conduct. Hence, a fundamental change in the way we understand and analyse international relations may be needed when it comes to China.

Lastly, this thesis raises awareness to the Arctic, a region of rapidly growing significance to international politics and the study of IR given the unstoppable changes brought about by climate change. While this has so far led to ample research emphasizing the negative consequences of this competition on the Arctic security, studying the security underpinnings of both Russia and China's presence in this region could draw a more promising and peaceful picture of cooperation in the region for the future to come.

2 THE EVOLUTION OF THE SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONSHIP SINCE 2014

Before pinpointing the complex dynamics present in the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic Region, it is crucial to understand the driving forces behind their general rapprochement and how, and through which theoretical background, this has been framed in the literature. This section identifies trends, dominating views and gaps present in the scholarly literature on the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship that this thesis subsequently seeks to answer to. While Moscow and Beijing's interactions have a rich history, this thesis takes the year 2014 as a starting point to limit the scope of the research and thus primarily draws on recent literature. The primary reason for this start date stems from the fact that the repercussions of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 have played a key role in the substantial rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing that followed. This chapter will highlight the unprecedented developments that have taken place within the two countries's bilateral relationship ever since this event.

This literature review starts by laying out two key streams of thought within the far-flung scholarly literature discussing the Sino-Russian relationship, serving as important reference points throughout the rest of this chapter. It will then assess why and how this

relationship has deepened since the events that unfolded in 2014 according to the existing literature, and how this has been framed by both streams of literature. Lastly, this chapter sheds light on two key debates taking place in the scholarly literature on Sino-Russian relations. The first debate discusses whether China and Russia's shared normative view on the international order is a substantial factor of convergence or not. The second debate revolves around China and Russia's growing power imbalance, in which scholars disagree on the extent to which this asymmetry will serve as an obstacle in the future of the two countries' bilateral relations.

2.1 DOMINANT NARRATIVES ON THE SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONSHIP

The intensifying Sino-Russian relationship has caught the interest and fascination of many scholars alike. While this resulted in an extensive literature body rich in its number of contributions, this richness tends to diminish when it comes to theoretical diversity and used frameworks of analysis. The majority of research published on the relationship between China and Russia falls within the spectrum of traditional realist thinking. Yet within this thinking, there is a wide discrepancy regarding the depth, nature and durability of Russia and China's relations and its potential impact on the international order, and the balance of power between the two states. This chapter branches this debate into two self-labelled streams of literature; the sceptics and the reserved optimists, distinguished by their assumptions on the very nature of the Sino-Russian relationship. These complementary narratives are analytically helpful to grasp how the relationship is explained and construed by the scholarly community. While the sceptics, who remain predominant in this debate, tend to point out the pitfalls and limitations of the relationship, the reserved optimists underline elements that strengthen the relationship and forge it ahead.

“The sceptics”, despite recognizing a progressive intensification of the relationship between Moscow and Beijing, challenge the official optimistic discourse of the strategic partnership and hold little expectation for the duration of what they consider an ‘instrumental’²⁶ relationship. Lo labels Sino-Russian relations as a mere ‘axis of convenience,’ considering the relationship in many respects to be an ‘anti-relationship’²⁷, while others regard the partnership

²⁶ Angela Stent, *Putin's World Russia Against the West and with the Rest (Twelve, 2019)*, 7.

²⁷ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 43.

to be more superficial than strategic, opportunistic²⁸, and most of all, based on realpolitik and a mere convergence of (self-)interests.²⁹ This side of the debate is endorsed by scholars who consider Moscow as a secondary partner to Beijing that relies more on the latter than the other way around, witnessing a worrying rise in the two countries' asymmetry.³⁰ Sooner or later, China's growing sphere of interest would threaten Russia's self-proclaimed privileged interests in its post-Soviet space.³¹ This asymmetry is predominantly determined by looking at the two countries' respective material capabilities, and thus, relying on a traditional realist assessment, in which the power gap is indeed the most visible and acute.³² Within such an assessment, the relationship is underpinned and limited by a perpetual lack of trust³³, referring to historical clichés of enmities and mistrust and Russia's overall uneasiness about China, the so-called fear for the yellow peril.³⁴

This stream nevertheless carries a wide spectrum of opinions and dubiety, with on the one side scholars who acknowledge the relationship to be instrumental but overall robust³⁵, and on the more extreme side those who simply disregard the warming relationship, stating that "history provides all we need to know about the characteristics of Russia–China ties."³⁶ Generally, the literature addresses the depth and future of the Sino-Russian relationship with growing scepticism which, according to Kaczmariski, dates back to the mid-2000s³⁷. 'Reality' and the predominant 'realist' literature thus seem to be on diverging paths, increasingly further removed from one another: the more profound Beijing and Moscow claim their relations to be, the more vocal sceptical and pessimistic scholars and analysts are.

The 'reserved optimists', a smaller group of scholars in the literature, are generally more constructive regarding the lasting nature of Beijing and Moscow's relations, described by some as a strategic partnership³⁸, by others to be on a trajectory to become an entente³⁹, or even a

²⁸ Constantinos Filis, "Could a Chinese-Russian Strategic Alliance Challenge the Power of the West?" *LSE*, June 16, 2015.

²⁹ Elizabeth Buchanan, "There's No (New) China–Russia Alliance," *ASPI: The Strategist*, June 26, 2020.

³⁰ Kaczmariski, "The Future of Chinese-Russian Relations," 92; Robert S. Ross, "Sino-Russian Relations: The False Promise of Russian Balancing," *International Politics* 57 (2019): 843.

³¹ Kaczmariski. *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, XIV.

³² Kaczmariski, "The Future of Chinese-Russian Relation," 90; Ross, "Sino-Russian Relations," 57.

³³ Kaczmariski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, p. 2.

³⁴ Joseph Jr. Nye, "A New Sino-Russian Alliance?" *Project Syndicate*, Jan 12, 2015.

³⁵ Stent, *Putin's World*, 7.

³⁶ Buchanan. "There's No (New) China–Russia Alliance."

³⁷ Kaczmariski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 2.

³⁸ Ying, "How China Sees Russia," 96.

³⁹ Vasily Kashin, "Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, October 22, 2019; Sergei Karaganov, "China and Russia Are Quasi Allies... on Strategic Affairs Russia and India Have Serious Conversations Only at Top Level," *The Times of India*, February 27, 2018.

'quasi-alliance'⁴⁰. Recognizing that China and Russia's 'quasi-alliance' may remain unexpressed for the foreseeable future, Seriola argues that "the military and security rapprochement of the Sino-Russian axis is now indisputable."⁴¹ Thus, the reserved optimists stress the convergence of Chinese and Russian interests and the growing interdependence of the two states.⁴² This side of the debate takes their relationship more serious, arguing that the rapprochement between the two most powerful non-liberal states not only has fundamental implications for their immediate neighbourhood, but for the international order and global governance as a whole.⁴³ However, the majority of this small stream of literature remains generally stuck in a realist interpretation of international relations, albeit a less doomy one than the sceptical stream of literature. It emphasizes that their relationship is not one out of convenience, nor born out of desperation, but one of deliberate consideration to balance against US supremacy in global affairs.⁴⁴

A refreshing and rare voice within this underrepresented stream of literature is that of Kaczmarzski. In his book "Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order", he conversely adopts a social constructivist lens to assess the Sino-Russian relations after the 2008 financial crisis until late 2014, arguing that traditional great power theories fail to account for the warming rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing despite Russia's relative decline and China's dazzling rise, and thus their growing power asymmetry.⁴⁵ However, similar assessments that move away from realist accounts assessing the Sino-Russian relationship have been minimal ever since, a period during which unprecedented developments took place within their relationship that are in dire need of re-assessment.

⁴⁰ Michael Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?" *Iddle*, November 29, 2019.

⁴¹ Carlotta Seriola, "The West Watches for a Sino-Russian Military Alliance," *Global Risk Insights*, January 11, 2021.

⁴² Kaczmarzski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 24.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 1.

⁴⁴ Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?"

⁴⁵ Kaczmarzski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 3.

2.2 THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE 2014 UKRAINIAN CRISIS

The Ukrainian crisis in 2014 is widespreadly considered to have served as a major accelerator for the rapprochement between the two countries⁴⁶. In this year, international tensions between Russia and the West reached a tipping point after Russia's annexation of Crimea following western sanctions. After having deployed its troops and conducting a semi-referendum, Russia proceeded with the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in March 2014. In the months that followed, the Kremlin sponsored separatist entities in the neighbouring provinces and gathered over 40,000 troops by the Ukrainian border. The Ukrainian crisis subsequently caused the West to install three waves of economic sanctions against Russia.⁴⁷ These heavily targeted Russian government officials and entities through assets freezes, visa bans, and control on exports of energy technology crucial for Russia's economy in its development of the Russian Arctic.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, oil prices, Russia's main commodity, reached an all-time low that combined with the effects of the sanctions led to a deep stagnation of its economy.⁴⁹ Tuzova and Qayum calculated that the Russian ruble declined in value by 59 percent relative to the U.S. dollar in a matter of only six months in 2014, increasing inflationary pressures on the country.⁵⁰ Given Russia's extremely deteriorated relationship with the west, symbolically exemplified by its membership suspension of the G-8⁵¹, closer ties with China was subsequently its best viable strategic alternative⁵², labelled by some as Russia's 'pivot to the East'.⁵³ Upgrading their relationship, Moscow and Beijing ratified their 2014 Strategic Partnership not long after Moscow's annexation of Crimea.

As an established world economy after decades of spectacular growth, China serves as a crucial substitute source of finance and business for Russia after the events that unfolded in 2014.⁵⁴ While China adhered a neutral position on Ukraine, it quietly became Russia's largest

⁴⁶ See for example: Ties Dams, Louis van Schaik and Adája Stoetman, *Presence Before Power: China's Arctic Strategy in Iceland and Greenland*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020; Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 20; Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?"; Ross, "Sino-Russian Relations"; Tom Røseth, "Moscow's Response to a Rising China: Russia's Partnership Policies in Its Military Relations with Beijing." *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 4 (2019): 271.

⁴⁷ Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 15.

⁴⁸ Yelena Tuzova and Faryal Qayum, "Global Oil Glut and Sanctions: The Impact on Putin's Russia." *Energy Policy* 90 (2016): 140.

⁴⁹ Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 20; Ross, "Sino-Russian Relations," 847.

⁵⁰ Tuzova and Qayum, "Global Oil Glut and Sanctions," 141.

⁵¹ Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 16.

⁵² Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?"

⁵³ Seriola, "The West Watches for a Sino-Russian Military Alliance."

⁵⁴ Oleg Gladunov, "Сырцевая Колония Навсегда? Россия Рискует Превратиться В Нефтегазовый Придаток Китая," *Svobodnaya Pressa*, October 19, 2014.

external investor after the EU.⁵⁵ In 2014 alone, China's investment in Russia grew by 80 percent.⁵⁶ A much-publicized deal that emerged from the 2014 Strategic Partnership is the extensive \$400 billion agreement signed in May 2014 between China National Petroleum Corp and Russian energy giant Gazprom in which the latter is to supply 38 billion cubic meters of gas to China annually for 30 years, starting in 2019.⁵⁷ This deal is generally regarded as a prime example among the sceptical scholars showcasing both Russia's weakened position vis-à-vis China since its relations deteriorated with the West as well as China supposedly taking advantage of Russia's vulnerable state of affairs. According to Stent, this gas deal, which involved the construction of a gas pipeline known as 'the Power of Siberia', was made possible by Beijing's now favourable position to Moscow and is regarded as a major win for China, one that it had been aiming for years. China managed to negotiate "a cheap price and equities in the deal, including ownership of part of the pipeline infrastructure."⁵⁸ However, as pipelines are immovable once they are placed, long-term infrastructure commitments like that of the Power of Siberia demonstrate confidence and willingness to compromise, which, according to Korolev, – a reserved optimist –, is an indicator for promising future relations.⁵⁹

From a political perspective, scholars highlight Moscow's endorsement of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) shortly after in May 2015 as a significant development, proclaiming the project to be in harmony with its aims of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).⁶⁰ This was monumental given Russia's initial hesitance to supporting the initiative, fearing China would compete for influence in its neighbourhood.⁶¹ In the end, China's BRI aims to boost China's access to natural resources; unfold new markets for its manufactured goods services; expand Beijing's economic influence across Eurasia; and secure a friendly and secure neighbourhood.⁶² Yet, the 2015 agreement between the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), the 'belt' component of China's BRI, and Putin's EAEU has proved "an indispensable confidence-building measure" according to Lo, helping to take away such fears.⁶³ The possibility to connect it to the EEU would indeed mean direct access to Russia's sphere of influence in Central Asia,

⁵⁵ Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order," 317.

⁵⁶ Ying, "How China Sees Russia," 98.

⁵⁷ Nye, "A New Sino-Russian Alliance."

⁵⁸ Stent, *Putin's World*, 223.

⁵⁹ Alexander Korolev, "The Strategic Alignment Between Russia and China: Myths and Reality," *The Asian Forum*, April 30, 2015.

⁶⁰ Appel, "Are Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin Partners?," 2.

⁶¹ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 95.

⁶² Bobo Lo, "Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia, and the West," *Lowy Institute Analysis* (July 2020), 9.

⁶³ Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order," 310.

allowing China to connect the landlocked part of the BRI with vital European markets via train routes and highways.⁶⁴ Hence, after Russia's endorsement, the country suddenly emerged as one of the five largest recipients of Chinese outbounds direct investment (ODI) as part of the latter's BRI, bridging Asia and Europe,⁶⁵ taking their economic and political cooperation to a higher level.

Taking this example, it should not come as a surprise that 'sceptical' scholars consider China's welcoming stance towards Russia as advantageous and opportunistic. The latter's situation namely provided another venue for the former to spread its norms, influence and most of all, investments beyond its borders.⁶⁶ According to this predominant train of thought, China found a way to exploit its competitive advantage and Russia's strategic weakness in the wake of the 2014 crisis⁶⁷ - a typical line of reasoning in grand-strategy thinking. China would be deliberately engaging in a strategic relationship with Russia while engaging with the US and Europe on the side to achieve its specific economic, political, and security goals. Most critically, if the relationship would ever be put to a test in the future, the sceptics believe China would eventually choose its Western partners of Russia⁶⁸. This expectation demonstrates a lack of trust in the potential Sino-Russian relations hold. Hence, politically, they consider the relationship to be rather weak, arguing that neither side has shown itself prepared to support each other on key geopolitical issues if doing so would harm its own interest.⁶⁹ On the contrary, the reserved optimists consider these developments to be examples pointing to the confluence of mutual interests of the two states, in which China opened up to intensifying ties with Russia to foster a win-win situation, both domestically and internationally, for the two states. This would eventually consolidate a degree of mutual interdependency that would inevitably increase the costs of any potential set back of the relationship.⁷⁰

Moreover, fuelled by worsening ties with the US, both Beijing and Moscow have shown unprecedented willingness to cooperate on more sensitive areas that previously seemed unthinkable to be discussed⁷¹, most notably on a military level. While enhanced defence

⁶⁴ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 29.

⁶⁵ Bob Savic, "Behind China and Russia's 'Special Relationship': China and Russia's Carefully Curated Relationship Is Increasingly Having a Global Impact." *The Diplomat*, December 7, 2016.

⁶⁶ Jia and Bennett, "Chinese Infrastructure Diplomacy in Russia," 349.

⁶⁷ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 29.

⁶⁸ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 15.

⁶⁹ Mikhail Korostikov, "Дружба На Расстоянии Руки: Как Москва И Пекин Определили Границы Допустимого," *Kommersant*, May 31, 2019.

⁷⁰ Ying, "How China Sees Russia"; Korolev, "The Strategic Alignment Between Russia and China."

⁷¹ Kashin, "Tacit Alliance."

cooperation already started to unfold as early as 2012, its level and scope has increased significantly since the Ukraine crisis.⁷² Military convergence now takes a central place in the debate on China and Russia's rapprochement.⁷³ The reserved optimists consider these developments to forecast the creation of a military alliance between China and Russia, taking into consideration China's growing participation in Russian strategic command-staff exercises, or strategic operations like the frequently cited joint Russian-Chinese bomber patrol in July 2019. This first joint patrol took place over the Pacific Ocean, therefore sending out a clear signal to the West demonstrating their ability of collective action in the event of dispute with the US, according to Kashin.⁷⁴ Kofman adds that it equally showed Moscow's willingness "to aggravate others in the Asia-Pacific region for the pursuit of closer ties with China".⁷⁵ Additionally, military procurement between Moscow and Beijing has skyrocketed since 2014: SIPRI calculated that 70% of Chinese arms imports derived from Russia between 2014 and 2018.⁷⁶ After initial resistance over intellectual property concerns, Russia agreed in 2015 to sell China some of its most advanced weapons systems for \$7 billion, including 24 of Russia's SU-35 Fighter Jets, Amur Submarines, and four of its S-400 Surface-to-Air Missile.⁷⁷ In particular, the Su-35 is listed as one of Russia's most advanced military aircraft, one that had not been previously sold to any foreign country.⁷⁸ Seeking to make their military ties more formal, Beijing and Moscow agreed in 2017 to draft a three-year roadmap to establish a legal framework for bilateral military cooperation.⁷⁹ On top of that, Russia acknowledged in 2019 that it is helping China to create a missile launch detection system⁸⁰, underlining the reserved optimists' argument that the two are heading towards even closer military cooperation, giving rise to growing concern among policymakers in the west.

Analysts from the sceptical side of the debate attribute the increased arms trade between Moscow and Beijing to the former's new-fangled preparedness since the Ukrainian crisis to transfer sophisticated military systems which it has previously withheld from the latter, who is taking full advantage of it.⁸¹ These previously-held concerns had mainly to do with China's

⁷² Paul Schwartz, "Sino-Russian Defense Relations Intensify," *The Asan Forum*, December 23, 2015.

⁷³ Dmitry Gorenburg, "An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation," *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, April 2020.

⁷⁴ Kashin, "Tacit Alliance."

⁷⁵ Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?"

⁷⁶ Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018." Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018." *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2019, 6.

⁷⁷ Appel, "Are Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin Partners?," 3.

⁷⁸ Gabriel Domínguez, "Why Russia Needs China to Buy Its Weapons." *Deutsche Welle*, November 24, 2015.

⁷⁹ Kashin, "Tacit Alliance."

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Schwartz, "Sino-Russian Defense Relations Intensify."

reverse engineering practices, and most of all, with “lingering worries about arming a potential future adversary.”⁸² In need of capital due to its dire economic situation after 2014, these worries have been pushed to the side. ‘Sceptical’ observers are also less convinced of the emergence of a military alliance between the two states, and even less concerned about their increased military cooperation. In fact, while Russian transfers of military apparatus to the latter have increased substantially in recent years, Moscow still trades more hi-tech weaponry to India and has significantly bolstered exports to other Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Turkey.⁸³ Even though Chinese and Russian armed forces are interacting more, concrete integration is not yet taking place.⁸⁴

Taking their intensified economic, political, and military cooperation over the past five years into account, the importance of the events that unfolded in 2014 are evident. However, it is important to point out that the recent rapprochement does not imply that Russia did not recognize the potential of intensified relations with its large neighbour before. Indeed, Moscow and Beijing signed a ‘strategic partnership’ in 1996⁸⁵ in which they advocate their joint vision to develop towards a multipolar world order in the 21st century. This partnership proved to be mostly symbolic in nature.⁸⁶ Stent, a more moderate voice in the sceptical stream of the literature, refers back to the year 2001 as a milestone in Sino-Russian relations insofar as it laid the groundworks of their current strategic partnership⁸⁷, thanks to the signature of a new treaty of ‘friendship and cooperation’.⁸⁸ According to her, President Putin had the intention to improve ties with China from the moment he entered the Kremlin as a way to compensate for Russia’s deteriorating ties with the West. Befriending his rapidly rising neighbour, Putin sought to bear the fruits of Chinese growing and increasingly diverse capital market.⁸⁹ Others consider the rapprochement between China and Russia to be largely explicable by the unprecedentedly amicable personal relations and leadership under President Xi Jinping, who became President of China in 2012, and President Vladimir Putin. Indeed, the two do not shy away from regularly

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 317.

⁸⁴ Dmitri Trenin, “How Cozy Is Russia and China’s Military Relationship?” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, November 19, 2019.

⁸⁵ Savic, “Behind China and Russia’s ‘Special Relationship.’”

⁸⁶ Huiyun Feng, *The New Geostrategic Game: Will China and Russia Form an Alliance Against the United States?* Copenhagen: DIIS, 2015, 23.

⁸⁷ Stent, *Putin's World*, 219.

⁸⁸ Nye, “A New Sino-Russian Alliance.”

⁸⁹ Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, 219.

calling each other ‘best friends’ and from communicating their respect for each other in public.⁹⁰

The literature rightfully points out the great extent to which the events encapsulated by Moscow’s annexation of Crimea served as a direct impetus for Russia to accelerate its already warming relationship with China⁹¹, outweighing, or at least bringing to the background, any strategic and trust-related concerns it may have. However, the duration as to how long such concerns will remain in the background is a topic of ample discussion in the scholarly literature. Indeed, the extent to which China and Russia’s differences, particularly their growing power imbalance, may serve as an obstacle in the two countries’ rapprochement has led to stark debate. The next section of this chapter will further unpack these scholarly discussions.

2.3 A SHARED NORMATIVE APPROACH TOWARDS THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA: SHALLOW OR A SUBSTANTIAL FACTOR OF CONVERGENCE?

The complementarity of the two dominant narratives on the general Sino-Russian relationship is further exemplified in the debate on China and Russia’s normative approach towards the international arena. This debate mainly revolves around a perceived similarity of both countries’ visions of the international arena, and, if this similarity exists, to what extent their shared visions could serve as a factor of long-term convergence that might ultimately threaten the established international order. The dominant train of thought is that while China and Russia may have grown closer to one another to counterbalance US dominance, the two states hold inherently different views on the future of the international order and globalization as a whole, which will drive as a factor of divergence and potentially undermine the flourishing of their relations in the long run.

A majority of both ‘sceptical’ and ‘reserved optimist’ scholars are of the opinion that Beijing and Moscow hold to a large extent a shared normative approach towards the international arena, acting as a primary driving force of convergence between the two powers. Stressing China and Russia’s common desire to condemn US unilateralism and Western liberal

⁹⁰ Serioli, Carlotta. 2021. “The West Watches for a Sino-Russian Military Alliance.”

⁹¹ Buchanan, “There’s No (New) China–Russia Alliance.”

interventionism⁹², this train of thought seems embedded in the sceptics' general assessment of their partnership as one that works for now but is shallow and instrumental in nature. Some go as far as to state that their relationship can only be understood today "in terms of its opposition to something else (the West)"⁹³, a sort of "anti-relationship"⁹⁴. Indeed, a large number of scholars argue that Moscow and Beijing are 'allied' in a notionally strategic sense to challenge US dominance in the international system and contest American attempts to retain a dominant presence in their respective regions, thus seeing this as the most important motive for warming their relationship.⁹⁵ This commenced not long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when both states deemed a strategic partnership necessary in geopolitical as well as symbolic terms to counterbalance US unipolarity.⁹⁶ According to Laruelle, the resurgence of independent geopolitical tensions with the US means they can take advantage of these by strengthening their bilateral relationship.⁹⁷ Likewise, Kofman, a renowned 'reserved optimist', considers Russia and China's alignment to be principally "a balancing one against U.S. efforts to retain primacy in international politics".⁹⁸

One prominent example highlighted in the literature to support this standpoint is the new commitment Moscow and Beijing have shown in advocating for reform of the international financial and economic architecture⁹⁹, with the aim of reducing the role of the US dollar as a prominent reserve currency. The two nations have repeatedly expressed their intention to denominate bilateral trade deals in Rubles and Yuan over US dollars.¹⁰⁰ In 2014, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) and the Central Bank of Russia signed an arrangement for a currency swap worth 150 billion yuan and 815 billion rubles, and this agreement significantly boosted bilateral trade.¹⁰¹ Savic also refers to a co-arrangement between China's Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and Russian state-owned Gazprombank of up to 6 billion

⁹² Bobo Lo, "China-Russia Relationship Key to the Emerging World Order," *Lowy Institute*, April 1, 2017; Wright, Thomas, "The Return to Great-Power Rivalry Was Inevitable: With Neo-Authoritarianism on the Rise, the Old Assumptions Undergirding a Common Set of Western Values Just Won't Do." *The Atlantic*, September 12 2018; Paul Dibb, *How the Geopolitical Partnership Between China and Russia Threatens the West*, Barton: ASPI, November 2019, 4; Stent, *Putin's World*, 209.

⁹³ Michael Cox, "Not Just 'Convenient': China and Russia's New Strategic Partnership in the Age of Geopolitics." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 4 (2016): 319.

⁹⁴ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 4.

⁹⁵ Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?"; Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 26; Stent, *Putin's World*, 209.

⁹⁶ Kaczmarek, Marcin, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 1.

⁹⁷ Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 21.

⁹⁸ Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?"

⁹⁹ (Savic, December 07, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Appel, "Are Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin Partners?," 2.

¹⁰¹ Bob Sovic, "Behind China and Russia's 'Special Relationship': China and Russia's Carefully Curated Relationship Is Increasingly Having a Global Impact." *The Diplomat*, December 7, 2016.

yuan in ‘Baikalbond’, a yuan-denominated Russian government bond issued in Russia, as another example of their increased economic entanglement; it represents the largest ever offshore issuance of yuan foreign sovereign bonds ever taken.¹⁰²

Subsequently, concerns have been raised as to how their intensified relations may fundamentally impact the US-led international order. Observers fear a new binarism could emerge and prevail, with the West and its partners and allies on one side, and the Sino-Russian strategic partnership on the other.¹⁰³ The shared goal to challenge US dominance would help Russia and China to promote a global environment that support the legitimacy and stability of their respective regimes, thus considering their foreign policy and bilateral relationship as an ‘extension of domestic politics’.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, domestically the two share broadly similar views on the importance of state sovereignty, the need for tight central control over politics and society¹⁰⁵, and most notably, their mutual interest in securing their respective domestic regimes.¹⁰⁶ As argued by Kaczmarek, “the ‘sanctity’ of sovereignty and non-intervention in internal affairs provides the glue for the relationship.”¹⁰⁷ Both countries consider territorial integrity as one of their core interests, and their support for each other on this matter represents a substantial aspect of the relationship.¹⁰⁸ Both Moscow and Beijing’s shared priority to maintain domestic stability and secure their respective regimes¹⁰⁹ dictates their foreign policy choices, and hence, the evolution of their bilateral relationship.

Yet this same body of literature, dominated by the sceptics, overwhelmingly stresses the inherently different views both states hold on the ‘desirable’ characteristics of a more revisited international order. While China and Russia mutually agree that the liberal world order and US unilateralism is distressing, their overall assessment of it differs substantially, with notable implications for their strategic cooperation. Whereas China is considered a ‘system-player’ that is notably less revisionist and who profits from the liberal world order, Russia often appears as more interested in bypassing the system.¹¹⁰ While the latter considers the liberal order as a major cause for its loss of international status and influence after the Cold War, the former conversely acknowledges that this very system helped the country to grow into the

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Wright 2018

¹⁰⁴ Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 307-308.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 308.

¹⁰⁶ Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*. 24

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, 209.

¹¹⁰ Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 315.

global superpower it is today. It provided the groundworks necessary to undertake ambitious project like that of the BRI, building its power and influence abroad.¹¹¹ China insists, however, to be recognized as such in the international community.¹¹²

Moreover, Lo argues that the vague formulation of Russian and Chinese leaders when calling for a new multipolar order, calling for a ‘polycentric system of international relations’, conceals different outlooks on global governance; while Russia envisions a great-power consensus with the US and China and in which it would take on the role as balancing power between the two, China holds a ‘bipolar-plus’ vision of the international order. In this vision, Beijing is recognized as the only true counterpart of the US – still a leading power -, with Moscow unable to match their level of power.¹¹³ Thus, while the two have forged “a practical bond based on the interest in keeping mainly the US from undermining their domestic order and global position”¹¹⁴, the dominant narrative is that diverging views and interests lie beneath the surface of such shared ambitions.

2.4 GROWING POWER IMBALANCE: A SIGN OF WEAKNESS OR STRENGTH?

China and Russia’s growing power asymmetry has led to fascination among scholars, representing one of the most covered themes in the scholarly literature on Sino-Russian relations. As briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, sceptical scholars continuously refer to the growing power imbalance as the main reason why the relationship is doomed to fail. Assessed from a realist point of view, the material gaps are indeed widening. In particular, the economic gap has increased as a consequence of the imposition of Western sanctions that have deepened Russian reliance on China. While China is Russia's largest trade partner (15% of trade), Russia accounts for less than 1% of China's trade.¹¹⁵ Expert fear that such a dependence on China could in the long-run turn into a critical vulnerability.¹¹⁶ This vulnerability is further worsened by the Russian economy’s almost sole focus on the export of natural resources, which

¹¹¹ Kaczmarek, “The Future of Chinese-Russian Relations,” 95.

¹¹² Lo, “China-Russia Relationship Key to the Emerging World Order.”

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Treinin.

¹¹⁵ Kaczmarek, “The Future of Chinese-Russian Relations,” 91; Stent, *Putin's World*, 222.

¹¹⁶ Saari, Sinikukka, and Stanislav Secieru, eds. 2020. *Russian Futures 2030*. Chaillot paper 159. Paris: The EU Institute for Security Studies, 2.

risks turning Russia into an ‘energy appendage’ to China, serving as its ‘resource cow’¹¹⁷ and as a mere ‘gas station’.¹¹⁸ Most of all, the argument holds that Beijing is more important for Russia, both in political and in economic terms, than the other way around. While Russia is definitely a useful partner to China, it will always remain a secondary one.¹¹⁹

According to Kluge, the current COVID-19 pandemic has further shifted their balance of power in Beijing’s favour, as the latter’s way of handling the crisis has accelerated its economic and geopolitical rise in stark contrast to a struggling Russia.¹²⁰ Experts expect this power imbalance to further deepen for the years to come, with China continues its rise to the status of a superpower, and Russia continuing to struggle with long-term economic stagnation. This growing asymmetry will certainly have a significant impact in their long-term development trajectories.¹²¹ Confirming these fears, Moscow’s GDP of 1.7 trillion US dollars, with a growth rate of 2.3 percent in 2018 stands in clear disparity to Beijing’s GDP of 13.6 trillion dollars, associated to a growth of 6.6 percent.¹²² Filis therefore argues that Moscow will eventually have to seek alternative ways “to offset the growing imbalance that, in the long term, will undermine its position on the world stage”.¹²³ For this reason, this extreme ‘sceptical’ scholar is predicting that the growing asymmetry is destined to impact the current rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing.

Yet the reserved optimists, as well as some less extreme sceptics, have debunked several of the abovementioned arguments, asserting that the power asymmetry is not as stark and detrimental as the overwhelming body of literature portrays. Politically speaking, this relationship is offering many advantages to Russia, ranging from legitimacy and support on international issues to geopolitical space to oppose Western influence in its neighbourhood. These advantages are expected to counterbalance the vulnerabilities associated to the current economic asymmetry.¹²⁴ In fact, Russian scholars like Trenin argue that maintaining a strategic partnership with Beijing is in Moscow’s best interest, as their stronger relationship has been perceived as succeeding to strengthen the latter’s geopolitical and geoeconomics positions at

¹¹⁷ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 85.

¹¹⁸ Nye, “A New Sino-Russian Alliance.”

¹¹⁹ Kaczmarek, “The Future of Chinese-Russian Relations,” 91.

¹²⁰ Janis Kluge, “Russia’s Economy: From Dusk till Dawn?” in *Russian Futures 2030*, ed. Sinikukka Saari and Stanislav Secieru, (Paris: The EU Institute for Security Studies, 2020), 47.

¹²¹ Kaczmarek, “The Future of Chinese-Russian Relations,” 92.

¹²² Ross, “Sino-Russian Relations,” 846.

¹²³ Filis, “Could a Chinese-Russian Strategic Alliance Challenge the Power of the West?”

¹²⁴ Røseth, “Moscow’s Response to a Rising China,” 269.

times when its relations with the West rapidly deteriorated.¹²⁵ As for China, Lo, another ‘sceptical’ scholar, emphasizes how the Sino-Russian relationship is indispensable for the country’s realization of its foreign policy goals, and especially those related to the BRI, stressing that the relationship is actually more balanced than it used to seem.¹²⁶

Such arguments seem to point out that Beijing and Moscow’s widening economic chasm is overcome by having established a relationship that rests on a complementarity of interests. Many examples could be raised to support this argument. For instance, while Chinese manufacturing exports and hi-tech companies are increasingly making their way into Russia’s consumer market, Russia provides China with essential crude oil imports and is the latter’s sole supplier of high-end military items.¹²⁷ Moscow has also become Beijing’s largest source of electricity imports, while gas imports are continuously on to rise with the completion of the Power of Siberia pipeline in December 2019¹²⁸ and China’s demand for energy only growing.¹²⁹ Hence, reserved optimist scholars emphasize that the advantages are not only one-sided, they are mutual. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that Moscow is also active in diversifying relations across the Asian and European continent to avoid being overly reliant on Beijing.¹³⁰ For example, while remaining committed “to upgrade its relations with India to the level of its relations with China”, Russia has also fostered closer cooperation with Japan and rejuvenated links with several European countries. According to Trenin, this multilateral approach represents a core element of Russia’s foreign policy, aimed at building a more favourable geopolitical equilibrium in Eurasia.¹³¹

As for Russia turning into China’s energy appendage, Korolev labels this as one of the dominant myths used by scholars to illustrate why Sino-Russian relations would not work. He uncovers this myth by contrasting Moscow trade relations with Europe, which have also been energy-dominated for years:

“if Russia has been able to manage such asymmetrical trade relations with Europe for decades (even through troubled Ukraine),

¹²⁵ Dmitri Trenin, “How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World.”

¹²⁶ Lo, Bobo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 310.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Appel, “Are Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin Partners?,” 2.

¹²⁹ Ellyat, Holly, “Are Russia and China the Best of Friends Now? It’s Complicated, Analysts Say,” *CNBC*, September 27, 2019.

¹³⁰ Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 315; Ali Wyne, “The Limits of China-Russia Cooperation: Beijing-Moscow Ties Remain More Superficial Than Strategic,” *WSJ*, May 22, 2014; Dmitri Trenin, “How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 1, 2020.

¹³¹ Trenin, “How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World.”

why is it assumed that a similar pattern of relations with China is going to be a problem?”¹³²

Andrey Ostrovskiy, a Russian expert on Russia-China relations, takes this argument even further, questioning why is it necessarily a problem or weakness for Russia to be China’s ‘energy appendage’. In the end, Europe is still a huge market for Russia’s energy exports and diversifying its markets Eastward would only be in Russia’s benefit.¹³³

The debate on Moscow and Beijing’s growing imbalance takes an interesting turn when inspecting the military aspect of their relations; as for military technology and weaponry, Russia still retains the upper hand against China. While the majority of scholars consider Russia’s willingness to sell highly advanced military equipment to China as a sign of desperation, forced to accept a more vulnerable position by strengthening the latter¹³⁴, some point out that in fact “the arms trade between China and Russia is where China becomes dependent on Russia and not the other way around”¹³⁵, thus serving as an exception in the general trend of their relations¹³⁶. For China, Russia has become the main source of advanced military hardware¹³⁷; as mentioned earlier, 70% of Chinese arms imports derived from Russia between 2014 and 2018.¹³⁸ Hence, there is a certain level of consensus among the scholars that in military terms, Russia retains superiority over China, allowing the former to balance a relationship that is increasingly leaning toward the latter to some extent.¹³⁹ Yet, the question is for how long Russia will maintain this advantage.

If any conclusion is to be drawn from this debate, it would be the undeniable uniqueness of the Sino-Russian relation. The outnumbered reserved optimist, who focus more on why the relationship does work rather than why it does not, carefully suggest that the asymmetry between the two countries’ material power is not as relevant as it may seem or is presented in the literature. From their perspective, what matters is the fact that China and Russia treat each other as equals even when they are not¹⁴⁰, and that the two have identified a clear interest in consolidating and expanding their cooperation *despite* their differences and growing imbalance.¹⁴¹ Scholars like Laruelle have subsequently coined the term ‘negotiated balance’ to

¹³² Korolev, “The Strategic Alignment Between Russia and China.”

¹³³ Gladunov, “Сырьевая Колония Навсегда?”

¹³⁴ Røseth, “Moscow’s Response to a Rising China,” 276.

¹³⁵ Korolev, “The Strategic Alignment Between Russia and China.”

¹³⁶ Stent, *Putin’s World*, 222.

¹³⁷ Korolev, “The Strategic Alignment Between Russia and China.”

¹³⁸ Wezeman et al., “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018,” 6.

¹³⁹ Dmitri Trenin, “How Cozy Is Russia and China’s Military Relationship?”

¹⁴⁰ Kofman, “Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?”

¹⁴¹ Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 310.

describe Sino-Russian relations.¹⁴² The underlying guiding principles of the relationship are often neglected in scholarly research. Such principles have been along the lines of “never against each other, not always with each other”, as articulated by Trenin.¹⁴³ This ‘negotiated balance’ that paves the way for rapprochement is difficult to grasp by scholars who assess the relationship from a traditional realist perspective. Conversely, more attention should be given in the literature to the uniqueness of the Sino-Russian relationship, and on the fact that it has evolved in an increasingly turbulent and erratic world.¹⁴⁴ Most notably, their relationship based on mutualism, respect, and flexibility may lay the groundworks for future partnerships to come in a post-Western world order, “offering a model for how major countries can manage their differences and cooperate in ways that strengthen the international system.”¹⁴⁵

3 PROBLEM FORMULATION, CONTRIBUTIONS AND THEORY

3.1 PROBLEM FORMULATION

The literature on Sino-Russian relations makes one believe that realpolitik considerations are directly and uniquely responsible of their rapprochement. Yet, following this train of thought, these considerations could also, under different circumstances, drive them apart. However, mere realist assessments are not enough to evaluate an alliance, as other elements of economic, political, and military cooperation needs to be integrated in the analysis. This leaves room to wonder whether this conversely would be possible when assessed through a different lens, especially given the fact that the Sino Russian relation *do* seem to work despite their differences. Actually, this “exceptional” alliance seems to succeed far beyond the gloomy expectations of classical explanatory frameworks, such as the balance of power theory, moving away from the logic of power politics: Russia did not attempt to counterbalance China’s rise, nor did the latter use its growing capabilities to compel the former to do so.¹⁴⁶

In this context, it would be important to discuss the relevance of assessing the relationship between Moscow and China in a fixed typology of state-to-state relations. Is, in

¹⁴² Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 22.

¹⁴³ Trenin, “How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World.”

¹⁴⁴ Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 310.

¹⁴⁵ Ying, “How China Sees Russia,” 96.

¹⁴⁶ Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 3.

fact, the ambiguity around their state of relations - and with this the thesis refers to both leaders' repeated reciprocal public confirmations underscoring that their relationship is strong and will stand, disregarding their growing power imbalance and potential subsequent fears - the very thing that is driving the two towards a lasting and meaningful partnership? As Kofman mentioned, what ultimately matters is that Russia and China *treat* each other as equals, despite their differences. Answering this question demands a renewed focus on how Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin interact and maintain their relations through official speeches and written statements, thus redirecting and attributing the concept of power to language rather than materiality.

To limit the scope of this research, the Arctic is introduced as a relevant case study to investigate the real nature of China and Russia's bilateral relationship, as it represents an area of key strategic interests for both nations. A region currently facing the consequences of climate change, with melting icecaps unleashing unprecedented economic potential, the Arctic has naturally attracted a plethora of research studies aimed at anticipating the potential geopolitical tensions that may arise as a result of this unexpected and unforeseen evolution. With the majority of these studies embedded in a traditional geopolitical, realist framework, this thesis considers an assessment of the evolution of Sino-Russian relations in this region and of their respective security discourses on the Arctic as a promising example to untangle the 'exceptionality' of this cooperation. Research on Sino-Russian relations through a critical security lens has so far been limited, particularly in the Arctic region. This thesis therefore seeks to answer the following question: *To what extent do the security discourses of Russia and China on the Arctic explain the compatibility of their cooperation in this region?*

This thesis main research question could be further deconstructed into five different sub-questions:

1. *How has the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic so far been covered in the scholarly literature?*

More specifically, what are China and Russia's complementary as well as diverging interests in the Arctic, according to the literature?

2. *What is China's security discourse on its presence in the Arctic?*
3. *What is Russia's security discourse on the Arctic?*

4. *Taking the conclusions from the literature and the analysed security discourses together, to what extent are the security interests and subsequent discourses of China and Russia on the Arctic compatible?*
5. *How do these conclusions relate and add to existing understandings on the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship more generally?*

3.2 CONTRIBUTIONS THIS RESEARCH OFFERS

Taking a critical look at not only how Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic have been covered in the academic literature, but also on how they have been framed, articulated and presented by both countries' official narrative, the thesis aims at offering three sorts of contribution. First, by moving beyond the predominant positivist understandings of state to state relations, it brings to the foreground the underlying dynamics at play in the Sino-Russian relationship in a region of increasing importance for both. This allows for a better understanding of the Sino-Russian relationship as a whole, particularly as to what drives their rapprochement despite their obvious differences. This research seeks to illustrate how their growing power imbalance in materialistic terms does not necessarily serve as an obstacle in the blossoming of their relationship and can in fact be compensated through re-assuring speech act, seeking to add theoretical rigor to the debate. Second, this thesis provides new insight on China's way of establishing foreign relations that seems to fall beyond the margins of realist understandings. Beijing's emphasis on the mutually beneficial aspects of its relationship with Russia and its efforts to reassure the balanced nature of their relations seems to serve as a way to overcome growing power imbalance and has so far avoided the two countries from falling into a Thucydides trap. Studying this new way of forming and fostering relations by China is of utmost importance, given China's increasingly dominant role in the international community, and naturally, in the study of IR. Third, it raises awareness to the Arctic, a region of rapidly growing significance to international politics and the study of IR given the unstoppable changes brought about by climate change. While this has so far led to ample research emphasizing the negative consequences of this competition on Arctic security, studying the security underpinnings of both Russia and China's presence in this region could draw a more promising and peaceful picture of cooperation in the region for the future to come.

3.3 POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND SECURITIZATION THEORY

“...Theories are like different coloured lenses: if you put one of them in front of your eyes, you see things differently. Some aspects of the world will look the same in some senses, for example shapes, but many other features, such as light and shade of colour, will look very different, so different in fact, that they seem to show alternative worlds.”¹⁴⁷

When one thinks of Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic, it is not surprising to immediately refer to the study of geopolitics - the relationship between the physical environment and the conduct of foreign policy¹⁴⁸ -, particularly in its most classical form: the Heartland theory of Mackinder (1904). According to this theory, whichever state that holds control over the central and northern parts of Asia and Europa, including the Arctic – dubbed as the ‘heartland’ – would end up controlling the world.¹⁴⁹ This theory originally placed the former Soviet Union at the centre of world politics. Despite the Soviet Union’s fall, the theory has gained renewed attention of the past few years in response to China’s promising BRI and particularly its growing influence in Eurasia; would China become the new great land-power of the 21st century? Given Eurasia’s immediate access to the Arctic through Russia, it could equally explain China’s interest in the High North. However, it does not make up for the environmental challenges and subsequent impacts that the world experiences today, similar to power politics more generally; the traditional understanding of IR based on the assessment of material interests, power, and territory.¹⁵⁰ Despite this, and in line with consolidated literature, “realist theories of international affairs are once again the height of fashion.”¹⁵¹

Yet the previous listed factors do not reveal much about the nature of the relationship between two powers. According to Kaczmariski, shifts in power “have to be negotiated in the process of bilateral interactions and translated into changes of states' identities and interests.”¹⁵² Following this logic, Moscow and Beijing are actively adapting to the ongoing shift taking place. Yet Kaczmariski remains a rare voice in the literature acknowledging the importance of identity crafting in the foreign policies of China and Russia, and the subsequent influence this

¹⁴⁷ Steve Smith, “Introduction: Diversity and Disciplinarity in International Relations Theory,” in *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*, ed. by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steven Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

¹⁴⁸ Lassi Heininen, “Arctic Geopolitics from Classical to Critical Approach – Importance of Immaterial Factors.” *Geography, Environment, Sustainability* 11, no. 1 (2018): 176.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Heininen, “Arctic Geopolitics from Classical to Critical Approach,” 177.

¹⁵¹ Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” 307.

¹⁵² Kaczmariski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 4.

has on their interaction. Therefore, and in contrast to the literature's overwhelming reliance on rationalist theories, and thereby, a positivist approach when it comes to assessing the nature of the Sino-Russia relationship - this paper adapts a reflectivist, poststructuralist lens as the theoretical base for this thesis, seeking to *understand* rather than *explain* the consolidating Sino-Russian relationship. According to poststructuralist theory, foreign policy relies upon representations of identity, while the formulation of foreign policy reinforces and reproduces these identities. It thus understands foreign policy as a discursive practice that considers material factors and ideas as inseparable from one other.¹⁵³ Instead of quantifying the materiality aspects of the relationship, it seeks to assess the 'unobservable' and 'immeasurable' contexts in the form of discourse that, as this thesis argues, to a great extent guide and direct the Sino-Russian relationship despite its observable growing power disparity. The latter has been abundantly pointed out by scholars in the existing literature, predominantly attempting to locate the causal role (growing power imbalance) in determining the nature of the two's relationship and, on the basis of this analysis, draw conclusions and predictions. While useful in its predictive capacity to envision the future trajectory of the relationship between Moscow and Beijing, rationalist approaches do not necessarily succeed in grasping to understand why the relationship is functional and is likely to continue to be functional, despite their growing power imbalance. Therefore, using a deep ontological conceptual tool like that of post-structural discourse analysis, this thesis seeks to uncover the deep meanings behind the Sino-Russian relationship that exist beneath the surface appearance of observed reality.¹⁵⁴

The decision to choose post-structuralism as the theoretical foundation for this paper is carefully considered. Often disregarded for being unscientific and unable to say anything useful about the 'real world'¹⁵⁵, poststructuralism has been endlessly contested in the field of IR. It is essential to point out, however, that post-structuralism in fact builds to a great extent on realist theories, sharing and critically engaging with realist tradition's concern with important concepts like *power*, *materiality* and the *centrality of the state* in IR.¹⁵⁶

Unpacking this threefold of crucial IR concepts, poststructuralism sees these from a different, critical perspective. First, the concept of *power* is predominantly applied to Sino-Russian relations in its traditional form through a balance of power framework, thereby

¹⁵³ Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, (Oxon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 1.

¹⁵⁴ Kurki and Wight, "International Relations and Social Sciences," 22.

¹⁵⁵ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 192.

¹⁵⁶ Hansen, "Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy," 97.

assessing their aggregate bilateral balance of power in material capabilities, be it economic, technological, or military assets. Considering power as the currency of international politics, realist studies pay careful attention to how much power one state relatively holds over the other. 'Power' in this sense is regarded either as an end in itself, or as a means to an end, which would ultimately be the survival of the state.¹⁵⁷ Following this logic, and given the prevalence of realism in IR studies, it makes sense that the growing power imbalance between Moscow and Beijing has taken a central place in the existing literature. It also explains the general pessimistic outlook of the trajectory of their relationship given their widening power gap which would ultimately lead to a clash. In contrast, poststructuralism theorizes power through discursive practices, perceiving language to be a 'medium of both communication and mystification' that holds political power.¹⁵⁸

It should be noted though that when analysing discourses, poststructuralism does not assume language to be a transparent medium that simply mirrors what is taking place in the world. As theorized by Hansen, a prominent poststructuralist scholar, "language is the medium through which foreign policy actors seek to make their policies appear legitimate, necessary, and 'realistic' to their relevant audiences."¹⁵⁹ Applying this to the topic of this thesis, the discourse analysis to be undertaken asks which threats, values and identities are being invoked by both China and Russia to understand their intensified cooperation in the Arctic region. At the same time, it offers a framework that considers domestic-level-factors that influence bilateral affairs.¹⁶⁰

In terms of *materiality*, in direct relation to the concept of power, poststructuralism equally considers this to be ascribed significance through discourse.¹⁶¹ Considering both ideas and material factors to be essential elements in the research process, poststructuralism insists that ideas always emerge in a material context.¹⁶² Therefore, by adopting a poststructuralist lens, this thesis breaks away from the often overly simplified dichotomy between rationalist and reflectivists theories and their implied focus by the former on materialist issues and by the

¹⁵⁷ John J. Maersheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steven Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72.

¹⁵⁸ Robert B. J. Walker, "Culture, Discourse, Insecurity," *Alternatives* 11, no. 4 (1986): 495.

¹⁵⁹ Hansen, "Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy," 102.

¹⁶⁰ Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, 4.

¹⁶¹ Hansen, "Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy," 101.

¹⁶² Kurki and Wight, "International Relations and Social Sciences," 25.

latter on ideas. As argued by Campbell, national identities can be better understood through human interactions rather than material factors.¹⁶³

At the same time, this lens embraces to a greater extent the complexity of international relations. While it agrees that politics is interests-driven, as confirmed by Sino-Russian relations, it holds that these interests are articulated by discursive practice; namely, foreign policy actors who justify their actions for being in the interests of a state's constructed identity.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, according to Weldes, a poststructuralist scholar, "national interests are social constructions that emerge out of a ubiquitous and unavoidable process of representation."¹⁶⁵

It equally regards the state as the central actor in international relations, yet considering the state as a subject constituted in discourse that strives to uphold particular visions of themselves – their self-proclaimed identity - through foreign policy discourses. Hence, it differs in that it does not consider the state to be a rational actor. Instead, states establish and evoke identities as a precondition for action, thus considering identity to be 'performative', setting poststructuralism apart from constructivism, who consider identity to be intrinsic and less subject to change.¹⁶⁶ Particularly, this focus on performativity makes poststructuralism emphasize the power of speech acts.¹⁶⁷ All these considerations inevitably point towards a broader understanding of what foreign policy entails; namely as a practice through which 'otherness' is constituted in reference to our 'identity'.¹⁶⁸ Rather than being fixed by nature, identity is thus formed in relation to difference, "neither is difference fixed by nature - difference is constituted in relation to identity."¹⁶⁹

Adopting the previously discussed poststructuralist's epistemology, this thesis seeks to link identity to security through engaging with the Copenhagen School's securitization theory to best understand China and Russia's foreign policy behaviour. It thus embeds itself in the field of (critical) security studies, a rapidly emerging and growing subfield of IR in which wide-ranging discussions take place regarding the concept of security, its different meanings,

¹⁶³ Campbell 1998, as cited in Lida Bteddini, "Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity." *Human Security Journal* 8 (2009): 114.

¹⁶⁴ Hansen, "Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy," 109.

¹⁶⁵ Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999), 15.

¹⁶⁶ Hansen, "Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy," 101.

¹⁶⁷ Weiqing Song, "Securitization of the "China Threat" Discourse: A Poststructuralist Account." *China Review* 15, no. 1 (2015): 150.

¹⁶⁸ Hansen, "Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy," 101.

¹⁶⁹ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 9.

interpretations, and referent-objects. Traditionally, security politics are regarded as fine-grained strategies to defend the nation state or an alliance of states. Along this logic, material factors and military capabilities must take a centre stage in the assessment of international relations.¹⁷⁰ As the literature review has demonstrated, this particular perspective is prevalent in the literature on the Sino-Russian relationship; both countries' national identity is assumed to be settled, ignoring to explore the underpinnings of their security discourses in relation to their self-proclaimed identities. In contrast, from a poststructuralist perspective, security politics has to be analysed "as one of the most important practices through which states *construct* their identity."¹⁷¹ From a poststructuralist viewpoint, most notably coined by Ole Weaver, security is considered to be a discursive practice and should be studied by assessing whether and how an issue is securitized – referring to securitization theory.¹⁷² Theorized by the Copenhagen School, scholars within this school reject the idea of a conceptual, general definition of security, and instead stress the constructed nature of security. According to them, the securitization of an issue involves the depiction of a specific issue as an existential threat to national security – to the 'national Self' - justifying emergency measures to response to that threat.¹⁷³ Thus, topic needs to be signalled and construed for it to become a security issue, highlighting the discursive importance of security. Doing so, poststructuralist theory considers the national and international spheres as each other's opposites, but also as each other's 'constitutive Other':

"This delineation of a radical difference between the national and the international has led 'security discourse' to construct identity in terms of a national Self in need of protection against a radically threatening Other"¹⁷⁴

Along this logic, security is thus considered to be a performative act, as 'securing' something involves the careful construction of the Self and the existential threats it faces.¹⁷⁵ Focusing ontologically on language, the epistemological focus of the PDA section of this thesis is the articulation of identities and policies¹⁷⁶, in which identities are considered to be both a product and a justification for security policy.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁰ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 30.

¹⁷¹ Lene Hansen, "A Case for Seduction? Evaluating the Poststructuralist Conceptualization of Security." *Cooperation and Conflict* 32, no. 4 (1997), 374-374.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 369.

¹⁷³ Matt McDonald, "Climate Change and Security: Towards Ecological Security?" *International Theory* 10, no. 2 (2018): 156.

¹⁷⁴ Campbell 1992 as cited by Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 30.

¹⁷⁵ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 199.

¹⁷⁶ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 20.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The remaining part of this thesis aims at better identifying the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic region. Before introducing the detailed analysis of the Arctic case, this section will briefly describe the methodological considerations taken and the research model chosen to provide an adequate answer the research question. First, the following chapter is devoted to the assessment of the existing literature on Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic in order to untangle both complementary and diverging interests at stake for both countries in the region. The conclusions to be drawn from this assessment can then be contrasted with those from the general literature review on Sino-Russian relations. At the same time, reviewing the existing literature on the relations between Moscow and China in the Arctic provides the context necessary for this research to subsequently conduct a poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA) on China and Russia's security discourses in the Arctic. The conduct and methodology of this PDA is inspired by the work of Wegter¹⁷⁸, who replicated Hansen's research model of applying PDA to study the Bosnian war, and is based around four key factors: the number of Selves; the intertextual model chosen; the study's temporal perspective; and the number of events.

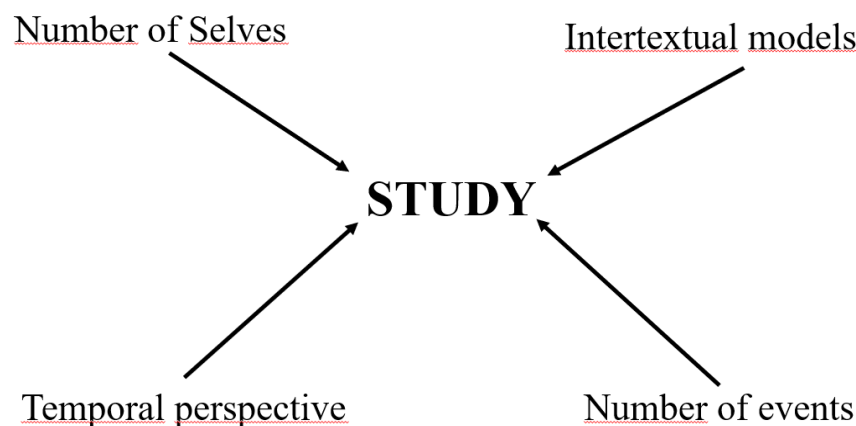


Figure 1: Hansen 2006's research design for discourse analysis

¹⁷⁸ Laura Wegter, "Where the unstoppable force meets the immovable object: Understanding the Sino-Russian relationship through the lens of China's SREB and Russia's EEU", Master's diss., (Leiden University, 2018).

4.1.1 Number of Selves

The number of ‘Selves’ refers to the number of subjects, be it states or communities, one decides to study. For the sake of this thesis, two Selves, namely that of Russia and China in their security discourse on the Arctic. Pinpointing the selves of Russia and China allows to subsequently compare these, and most of all, assess the extent as to which these discourses are compatible with one another and provide ground for further engagement.

4.1.2 Intertextual research model

"Epistemologically and methodologically, to understand foreign policy as discourse implies analysis of texts."¹⁷⁹

The PDA analysis section of this thesis consists of the study of policy documents, statements and speeches, holding on to the notion that each text “makes its own particular construction of identity”.¹⁸⁰ Yet it should consider the concept of ‘intertextuality’, acknowledging that texts are always situated within and against other texts, drawing upon those in the construction of their identities and policies. Official discourses, be it in the form of speeches, interviews or statements, should thus not be viewed outside of its larger ‘textual web’ but embrace its intertextuality.¹⁸¹

In her comprehensive study, Hansen suggests three different models for how texts can be systematically organized in relation to official foreign policy discourse and make sense of them. The different models are structured along a decreasing link to official foreign policy discourse; the first model specifically focuses on political leaders with official authority, the second broadens to include other major actors within the foreign policy debate, like oppositional parties, and the third model takes an even wider analytical scope by including other material that is not explicitly linked to official policy discourse.¹⁸² This thesis has chosen for the first model to investigate the constructions of identity in China and Russia’s official discourse on the Arctic, limiting the analytical lens specifically to official authority figures. This model, with its focus on official discourse also fits the purpose of this thesis most closely, namely to critically assess and compare the security discourse of China and Russia on the Arctic. The objective of the other two intertextual models are conversely more suitable for studies that aim

¹⁷⁹ Hansen, “Discourse Analysis, Post Structuralism, and Foreign Policy,” 95.

¹⁸⁰ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 49.

¹⁸¹ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 49.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 54 -55.

to assess the stability and possible transformation of official discourses, which falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

4.1.3 Temporal perspective

The temporal perspective refers to the timeframe of the research undertaken.¹⁸³ To prioritize quality and depth over quantity, this thesis has chosen to focus on a very specific timeframe: 2014-2021. The selected texts cover key moments identified as relevant to assess Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic: the installations of Western sanctions, China's continued rise to a great power status, increased awareness to the speed of the melting icecaps in the Arctic, and involving the first few years after China gained observer status in the Arctic council. Hence, studying this particular timeframe is expected to generate valuable knowledge on discursive changes, or repetition, across well-defined key moments, allowing for a better nuanced assessment of today's compatibility of Russia and China's ambitions in the Arctic.

4.1.4 Number of events

In discourse analysis, the term 'event' can be rather broadly defined, being either applicable to a specific policy issue or, for example, to war, both being considered as a single event.¹⁸⁴ For the sake of developing a clear and tangible research design, this thesis labels the security discourses by Russia and China on the Arctic as a single event. While multiple event studies seek to compare different issues within a certain set of time, this thesis instead compares different security discourses on a single 'event': the changing security scene in the Arctic triggered by climate change.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 69.

¹⁸⁴ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 71.

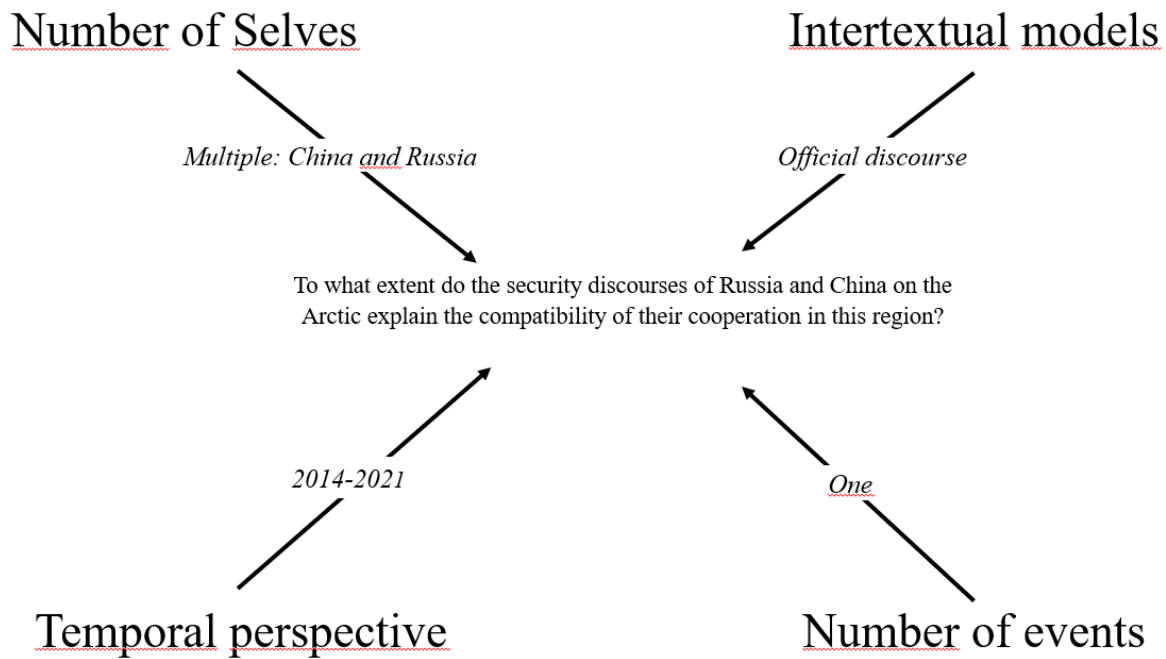


Figure 2: Overview research design

4.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

After summarizing consolidated literature discussing Sino Russian relations, the thesis will now continue assessing their interactions in the Arctic. This will be done first by assessing the scholarly literature on Sino-Russian relations on the Arctic. The focus will then shift towards primary sources to conduct the PDA on the security discourses of Russia and China on the Arctic. Poststructuralism primarily draws on primary documents, be it in the form of official texts, speeches, reports, or other policy documents. The PDA component of this thesis thus assesses the (semi-)official discourse of China and Russia on the Arctic, focusing primarily on statements made by their respective heads of States, but also by other politicians who rank in the official top. These statements are made either in an official or non-official context. The documents used for analysis include policy documents, interviews, speeches, and official statements.

As for the analysis of these documents, no clear-cut strategy is laid out as to how to conduct a PDA. However, given the research question and purpose of this thesis, I developed a three-step analytical framework to proceed. First, the PDA seeks to identify the different identities constructed in China and Russia's security discourse on the Arctic. Drawing on the

ontological and rather fluid understanding in PDA that security discourses include the construction of multiple identities, or ‘Selves’, the first step is indeed to identify the different Selves that have been constructed in order to examine who or what is securitized in the name of this identity. This means that a country can take on two different ‘Selves’ to achieve different policy goals. With the usage of the coding programme QDA Miner Lite, the chosen documents have been systematically analysed to cross-check any recurring patterns that allow for the identification of these different Selves.

The use of three analytical lenses of *spatiality*, *temporality* and *ethicality* as laid out by Hansen to assess foreign policy discourses allows to bring out the important political substance of the constructed identities behind, and reproduced in, Russia and China’s Arctic discourse. According to Hansen, security discourse can be considered as “a particular spatial, temporal and ethical instantiation”.¹⁸⁵ First, the understanding of identity as spatially constructed concept involves the assumption that identity is relationally constituted, always requiring the construction of boundaries and thus the demarcation of the ‘space’ of the Self.¹⁸⁶ A relevant example of this would for example be that of Arctic states versus non-Arctic states, emphasizing the spatial demarcation, and thus identification, of Arctic states that fall within the Arctic circle in contrast of states that do not. Second, foreign policy discourses very often involve the construction of a *temporal* identity; an identity that is based on temporal themes like development, progress, change, continuity and repetition. A classic example is that of the nation state versus the international space, in which the former locates the possibility of progress, be it economically or politically, within the boundaries of the state in contrast to the international space.¹⁸⁷ Lastly, foreign policy discourses often refer to an *ethical* identity as well to justify their actions. This can be witnessed when state officials justify their actions to the national public by emphasizing their duty and sense of responsibility to protect the country’s national interests.¹⁸⁸ Most of the time, states use a combination of all three instantiations of identity construction. Hence, this means that all three analytical lenses should equally be taken into consideration.

After having identified the ‘Selves’, it is necessary to identify the existential threats to the identified Selves that have been put forward in the chosen documents. To be able to securitize something requires the discursive act to represent an issue as a threat to Self, thereby

¹⁸⁵ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 49.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 43.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

justifying the securitization act. To uncover the securitization act, it is therefore important to identify the different threats of the Selves that can be found. After having fulfilled these steps, a thorough comparative study of the two unpacked security discourses follows to understand how do they differ and in what ways they are compatible.

5 SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE ARCTIC

The Arctic has been officially recognized as an emerging region of importance to Sino-Russian relations and increased Arctic cooperation understood as a substantial element in their recent bilateral rapprochement.¹⁸⁹ Documents and joint statements regarding their comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation also increasingly include the Arctic as an important element of their partnership.¹⁹⁰ As the Arctic's economic potential is slowly being unlocked while its icecaps melt, the region's significance for both states and their relations will only grow for the years to come. This has subsequently led to a surge in research led by Russian and Chinese Polar scholars on how their relationship plays out in the Arctic. This debate is often misled by catchy headlines implying a 'scramble for the Arctic' type of situation. In this scenario, China, whose contribution to the region is already far exceeding the contribution of most Arctic states themselves¹⁹¹, is commonly identified as a threatening actor whose only goal would be to selfishly exploit the newly available resources in the region. However, this thesis will show that the reality is more nuanced and complex. To understand it, the dominant narratives in the existing literature on Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic will be discussed in order to compare these to the main findings of existing literature on the general Sino-Russian relationship.

¹⁸⁹ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, v.

¹⁹⁰ Mariia Kobzeva, "A Framework for Sino-Russian Relations in the Arctic." *The Arctic Institute*, May 5, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Valur Ingimundarson, "Managing a contested region: the Arctic Council and the politics of Arctic Governance," *The Polar Journal* 4, no. 1 (2014): 191.

5.1 COMPLEMENTARY INTERESTS IN THE HIGH NORTH

5.1.1 Energy cooperation

*“The oil and gas sector is the flagship of the Russian-Chinese rapprochement, and after 2014, the PRC authorities did everything to gain access to the best Russian assets.”*¹⁹²

Developing Arctic resources and shipping routes while upgrading its military presence in the region has been a longstanding goal for Russia¹⁹³ given that two-thirds of Arctic mineral resources lie in its territory. However, Russia cannot fulfil this goal on its own and requires capital to further develop these resources.¹⁹⁴ The long-term cooperation between Moscow and European countries and companies was abruptly disrupted by the 2014 sanctions on Russian government officials and most of all, on the implementation of new controls on exports of energy technology that were crucial for Moscow to develop the Russian Arctic.¹⁹⁵ The banning on the transfer of equipment and technology for deep drilling below 150-152 metres, as well as on the exploration and development of Arctic shelf shale oil reserves, forced Western companies like Total to halt their cooperation with Russia in the Arctic. At the same time, these sanctions installed strict financial restrictions affecting Russia’s largest banks and corporations (Rosneft, Transneft, Gazpromneft, Gazprom, Novatek), limiting Russia in its effort to seek new funding for Arctic projects in Western financial markets.¹⁹⁶

Dams et al. point out how the West may have underestimated the unintended consequences of the installations of heavy sanctions by having pushed Russia in the arms of China to receive badly needed funds to continue the development of its Arctic.¹⁹⁷ This is strikingly evident in Russia’s main Arctic project, the Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project. In September 2013, before the Ukrainian crisis, Novatek (Russia’s second-largest natural gas producer) and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a contract for the sale of a 20 per cent stake in Yamal LNG. It also involved Beijing receiving 3 million tonnes of LNG per year, which is equal to 18 percent of Yamal LNG’s total capacity.¹⁹⁸ However, after Novatek became the target of Western sanctions, it had no other option than to seek even further engagement with Eastern partners, most notably China, as the Yamal LNG

¹⁹² Korostikov, “Дружба На Расстоянии Руки.”

¹⁹³ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 36.

¹⁹⁴ Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 232.

¹⁹⁵ Tuzova and Qayum, “Global Oil Glut and Sanctions,” 140.

¹⁹⁶ Ekaterina Klimenko and Camilla T. N. Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic,” *SIPRI*, May 11, 2017.

¹⁹⁷ Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 3.

¹⁹⁸ Klimenko and Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic.”

was suffering financially. Already in September 2015, Novatek sold the Silk Road Fund – a Chinese sovereign fund – for around 1.09 billion Euros, making up a further 9.9 percent of Yamal LNG.¹⁹⁹ A few months later, Novatek received a large loan from the Silk Road Fund of 730 million Euros for a period of 15 years to help finance the project. Moving further towards China, it signed more agreements in April 2016 with the China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China and on two 15-year credit facilities of a total amount of EUR €9.3 billion to finance the project²⁰⁰, meaning that in the end, China has provided up to 60 per cent of necessary funds to implement the project.²⁰¹

In exchange, Beijing managed to secure that 80 percent of necessary equipment would have been produced in Chinese shipyards²⁰², and forced Moscow to finance the port of Sabetta on the Yamal Peninsula²⁰³, to allow for the transportation of hydrocarbons from Yamal LNG to Western Europe and the Asia-Pacific region by sea.²⁰⁴ This port would also have an essential role to play in the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), designed to serve Yamal LNG shipments.²⁰⁵ In July 2018, the first shipments of liquefied gas went from Yamal to China along the route that, according to Korostikov, the Chinese media labelled as the ‘Ice Silk Road’.²⁰⁶ Moreover, Novatek decided to start investing on a second LNG extraction project - Arctic LNG 2 -, which would be one of the largest LNG operations in the world. The development of this project takes place in the Gydan Peninsula, on the other bank of the Ob Delta. It is estimated that it can produce nearly 20 million tons of LNG annually.²⁰⁷ Novatek already entered into agreements with the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and the China National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Company (CNODC) - a subsidiary of CNPC – in 2019, deciding it would sell each of them 10 percent of shares in Arctic LNG 2.²⁰⁸

All these developments point out that China has become an indispensable partner for Russia to develop its Arctic energy resources, not only as a key consumer market, but also as

¹⁹⁹ Ibid; Korostikov, “Дружба На Расстоянии Руки.”

²⁰⁰ Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 15.

²⁰¹ Klimenko and Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic.”; Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 15.

²⁰² Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 15.

²⁰³ Laruelle, “Russia's Arctic Policy,” 20.

²⁰⁴ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 18.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Korostikov, “Дружба На Расстоянии Руки.”

²⁰⁷ Laruelle, “Russia's Arctic Policy,” 13.

²⁰⁸ Korostikov, “Дружба На Расстоянии Руки”; Laruelle, “Russia's Arctic Policy,” 14.

the main investor.²⁰⁹ While this enables Russia to continue the developments of its Arctic resources, China has gained a significant new source for gas and is therefore less reliant on gas coming from the Middle East. On top of that, Dams et al. point out that gas from the Yamal peninsula reaches Chinese ports twice as fast as gas coming via the Suez Canal from the Middle East.²¹⁰ According to Brady, Sino-Russian energy cooperation in the Arctic is in this light essential for China to achieve its ‘polar economic security goals’; playing the long game, China’s access and engagement in the polar regions are of utmost necessity to ensure the continuation of stable development of its economy and growing society.²¹¹

5.1.2 The Northern Sea Route (NSR)

After China’s launched its ‘Polar Silk Road’ (PSR) in 2018, much attention has been placed on their joint-cooperation in the development of the NSR, Russia’s traditional Arctic shipping route.²¹² Aside from intensified cooperation on energy extraction in the Russian Arctic, their cooperation on the development of this route is, based on the academic literature, the second-most important element of their relations in the Arctic. To a great extent, the success of their energy cooperation in the Arctic depends on their joint development of the NSR, as the distribution of gas flowing from Yamal LNG highly depends on the opening of this route²¹³; global warming slowly unleashes the potential of the NSR as an international shipping lane, now that the sea route will be navigable two to three days longer each year as the icecaps melt.²¹⁴ If the NSR eventually becomes accessible for commercial shipping, it would significantly reduce travel time and fuel costs for shipping companies.²¹⁵ China acts on the opportunity to ship part of its mineral demands via the NSR as a way to avoid the dominant southern straits of Ormuz and Malacca, straits it considers as overloaded and geopolitically unstable²¹⁶, and it cannot control²¹⁷. This would again be in line with Brady’s argument of China enacting a long-term vision in the polar regions, aware of the potential it holds to ensure its economic security goals in the long run.

²⁰⁹ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 1.

²¹⁰ Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 15.

²¹¹ Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 232.

²¹² Yun Sun, “The Northern Sea Route: The Myth of Sino-Russian Cooperation,” *Stimson* (2018): 1.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹⁴ Kluge, “Russia’s Economy: From Dusk till Dawn?” 52.

²¹⁵ Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles*, 117.

²¹⁶ Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 21.

²¹⁷ Frank Jüris, “Handing over Infrastructure for China’s Strategic Objectives: ‘Arctic Connect’ and the Digital Silk Road in the Arctic,” *ICDS*, March 12, 2020.

Similar to the development of Russia's Arctic energy sources, the NSR requires significant investments in infrastructure²¹⁸, where China can step in - currently representing the second-most active country on the NSR after Russia. Over the past few years, COSCO, China's national carrier, already sent up till thirty vessels through the Arctic, seeking to double its amount of transit passages through the NSR.²¹⁹ However, COSCO did not shy away from repeatedly criticizing the lack of port infrastructure and Russia's obligation to renovate its ports better and strengthen the overall commercial feasibility of the route.²²⁰ In 2018, the China Development Bank provided a 9.5 billion dollars credit agreement to Russian state-controlled Vnesheconombank to financially help develop the NSR and fund other Silk Routes in the Russian Arctic.²²¹

As put forward by Kobzeva, Beijing and Moscow's interests go well-beyond the viability of the route to distribute its energy resources; in developing the NSR and attracting the transit of cargo by sea and Siberian rivers, a navigable NSR along the circumpolar coast of Russia could significantly increase the connectivity of previously unreachable and sparsely populated territories in Russia's Far East.²²² Developing the NSR is thus closely linked with the development of this particular region, as according to Laruelle, "an increased Chinese present in the Arctic would only constitute a half-victory for Moscow if it does not also contribute to the better integration of Russia's Far East in the Asia-Pacific region."²²³ At the same time, improved accessibility to the NSR and greater connectivity could equally boost China's economically underdeveloped Northeastern provinces (Heilongjiang and Jilin).²²⁴ For these two provinces, joint Russia-China working groups have already been set up back in 2015 to integrate the international transport corridor projects Primorye-1 and 2, connecting these regions to Russia's Far East.²²⁵

Sun, who analysed official documentation of the Chinese and Russian government related to their cooperation on the NSR, explains that in the same year, Russia proposed to China to partake in projects that involve the construction of railways, transport cargo freights, and ports

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Malte Humpert, "China Looking to Expand Satellite Coverage in Arctic, Experts Warn of Military Purpose." *High North News*, September 4, 2019.

²²⁰ Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 21.

²²¹ Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 15.

²²² Kobzeva, "A Framework for Sino-Russian Relations in the Arctic."

²²³ Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 21.

²²⁴ Kobzeva, "A Framework for Sino-Russian Relations in the Arctic."

²²⁵ "Development of Primorye-1 and Primorye-2 International Transport Corridors Will Be Discussed at Eastern Economic Forum," *Eastern Economic Forum*, August 13, 2015.

along the NSR.²²⁶ A year later, terms like ‘the Polar Silk Road’ started to emerge in conversations that were held at the Fourth International Arctic Forum. In 2017, at the highest level of state to state affairs, Putin himself expressed his hope for China to connect its BRI to Russia’s Arctic shipping routes.²²⁷ With his analysis, Sun debunks the predominant myth of China having initiated intensified cooperation in the NSR with the launch of its Polar Silk Road, demonstrating that in fact, it was Russia who knocked on China’s door to get involved. While he acknowledges that both have strong and obvious reasons for wanting to develop the NSR, he concludes stating: “the real question is who wants it more.”²²⁸ Laruelle also emphasizes that it was Moscow who invited Beijing to draft a doctrine articulating their joint projects in the Arctic, not the other way around.²²⁹

5.1.3 Satellite Navigation

Satellite navigation represents a new pillar of China and Russia’s increased cooperation in the Arctic. In 2015, Beijing and Moscow announced their plans to collaborate in developing satellite navigation, presenting the initiative as the inevitable consequence of the fact that “both countries have developed navigational systems that ought to be able to compete with or replace the ubiquitous and US-owned GPS”.²³⁰ Three years later, in November 2018, the two countries signed an agreement on cooperation for peaceful purposes of the Beidou (Chinese) and GLONASS (Russian) satellite constellation. This laid the groundworks for shared Russian-Chinese standards for satellite navigation and joint accuracy improvement.²³¹ Korostikov emphasizes how these developments demonstrate increased levels of trust between Moscow and Beijing.²³²

It is worth noting that especially China’s BeiDou seems to be making a lot of progress; Dams et al., highlight how last year, BeiDou brought about worldwide coverage, and is planning to run tests in China’s research station in Svalbard to improve its performance in the High North, as announced in September 2019. This could particularly help to ease navigation in the NSR.²³³ According to Jüris, China’s progress and collaboration with Russia in the field of

²²⁶ Sun, “The Northern Sea Route,” 3.

²²⁷ Ibid, 1.

²²⁸ Ibid, 3.

²²⁹ Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 21.

²³⁰ Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 15.

²³¹ Korostikov, “Дружба На Расстоянии Руки.”

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 15.

digital infrastructure in the Arctic is a crucial component of its ambitious plan to develop a “digital silk road”, the tech-arm of its BRI.²³⁴

5.2 HINDERED BY DIVERGING MOTIVES: OBSTACLES AND CONCERNS IN THE ARCTIC

Yet, and in line with the dominating literature on the general rapprochement between China and Russia, scholars focusing on the Arctic tend to predominantly point out the obstacles and flaws of their cooperation in the region rather than its promising aspects. One of the most discussed issues revolves around Russia’s ambiguity around the extent to which it feels comfortable letting China in on strategically critical projects in the Arctic. This ambiguity is particularly visible in Moscow’s energy cooperation with Beijing in the Arctic, as demonstrated by Klimenko and Sørensen; while Russian companies welcome Chinese investments and loans out of necessity, “they are not entirely comfortable allowing Chinese companies to play too big a role in Russian energy projects, including those in the Arctic.”²³⁵

5.2.1 Russia - caught between a rock and a hard place

This reluctance has all to do with the vital importance of the Arctic to Russia, as the region is crucial to Russian national questions of sovereignty and economic development.²³⁶ However, Moscow is in the difficult position of having to choose which one of these crucial matters to national importance it prioritises, as taking all necessary steps to achieve the latter - to economically develop the Arctic and thus let in partners – might risk undermining the dominant position it beholds in this region.²³⁷ Aside from the fact that Moscow accounts for more than half of the world’s Arctic population²³⁸, and that around 20% of its GDP is generated above the Arctic Circle²³⁹, it is also one of the few regions left where Russia is still undoubtedly the most important player at stake, considering it as its ‘main strategic bastion’²⁴⁰ and a source of

²³⁴ Jüris, “Handing over Infrastructure for China’s Strategic Objectives.”

²³⁵ Klimenko and Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic.”

²³⁶ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 2.

²³⁷ Jacob Stokes and Julianne Smith, “Facing down the Sino-Russian Entente.” *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no.2 (2020): 140.

²³⁸ Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 23.

²³⁹ Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 9.

²⁴⁰ Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 3.

geopolitical leverage.²⁴¹ As argued by Gricius, the region is crucial for its “homeland defence, economic future and as a staging ground to project power in the North Atlantic.”²⁴² The region also holds two thirds of all Moscow’s nuclear weapons and has been subject to remilitarization efforts by Russia, who has reopened fourteen airbases since 2014 and six new military bases along the NSR.²⁴³ While Russia’s militarization of the Arctic has been met with anxiety by other Arctic states, experts like Laruelle point out it is mainly executed out of defensive considerations; while it allows Russia to retain control over its own territory, it also deters potential influences of neighbouring NATO countries, which is particularly relevant in Russia’s context of deteriorating relations with the West. Even though its budgets are limited, it makes sure to target the money that is available on sectors it considers as crucial in its ability to assert its power.²⁴⁴

5.2.2 The Arctic’s transition from a regional to an international sphere of interest

While Russia managed to hold on to this strategy for a long time, the impacts and subsequent opportunities triggered by climate change in the region necessitates Russia to cooperate. This relates back to an ongoing debate regarding the status of the Arctic region itself. While previously perceived to be a regional sphere of interest, experts argue it has transitioned into an international one. Not only does its melting ice caps affect our entire world system²⁴⁵, the economic potential unlocked by the thawing ice has also triggered interests by non-Arctic states²⁴⁶, like China. Natural resources will suddenly become available and new maritime routes are already being planned out²⁴⁷ firmly embedding the Arctic in the global economy²⁴⁸, and as Heininen puts it, fostering the process of the globalization of Arctic geopolitics.²⁴⁹ Indeed, environmental concerns combined with concerns of the potential competition over these new geopolitical benefits in the region have moved the Arctic more and more into an international

²⁴¹ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 38.

²⁴² Gabriella Gricius, “Russian Ambitions in the Arctic: What to Expect: For No Country Has the Arctic Played as Significant a Role as It Does for Russia.” *Global Security Review*, October 4, 2020.

²⁴³ Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 10.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴⁵ Matthias Finger and Lassi Heininen, “Introduction,” in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, ed. Matthias Finger and Lassi Heininen (Springer, 2019), 1.

²⁴⁶ Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles*, 118.

²⁴⁷ Julie Babin, *Arctique. Le grand jeu des puissances asiatiques* (Paris: Éditions du Cygne, 2015), 6.

²⁴⁸ Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles*, 119.

²⁴⁹ Lassi Heininen, “Special Features of Arctic Geopolitics - A Potential Asset for World Politics,” in *The Global Arctic Handbook*, ed. Matthias Finger and Lassi Heininen (Springer, 2019), 218.

security concern as opposed to a regional one.²⁵⁰ As argued by Finger, the Arctic has become global, ecologically, economically, politically and culturally.²⁵¹

Nevertheless, as a traditional Arctic power, Russia struggles to get used to this changing nature of the Arctic, as well as to take full advantage of the economic potential associated to it. As previously demonstrated, Russia has no other choice than to turn to Chinese investors to economically develop the Arctic and fulfil its domestic economic demands. Yet it has demonstrated to be reluctant to let China in on strategically important projects in the region. An example is the previously mentioned Sabetta port, that Beijing pushed Moscow to finance since they were not allowed themselves. While this move made the Yamal LNG project possible, Sørensen and Klimenko assert that it equally reveals Russia's hesitancy and caution to let China play a major role into critical infrastructure projects.²⁵² Moscow's resistance is suspected to be reinforced by China's reputation for 'debt trapping' developing countries by using Chinese funding to 'trap' countries into surrendering their ports when unable to service their debt. Well-known examples of such practices include Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Pakistan.²⁵³

Another striking example showcasing Russia's unease about both the Arctic transitioning into an international sphere of interest and existing tensions between security and economic considerations is the development of the NSR. While Russia wishes to open up the route for international shipping to boost shipping of potential energy and mineral resources, it also wants to retain control over its territorial waters. If the route eventually opens up, Moscow hesitates between either letting foreign ships pay transit fees which could help contribute to funding new port infrastructures, or controlling their passage more strictly under the notion of national security.²⁵⁴ At the moment, Moscow requires ship passaging through the NSR to give an advance notice, to hire Russian icebreakers escorts, to have a Russian pilot on board and to pay a fee. It also prohibits foreign vessels from transporting energy resources along the route.²⁵⁵ For now, Russia still relies on UNCLOS, the Arctic's most important legal framework, Article 234 which justifies the adoption and enforcing of its own national regulations on ice-covered sea masses.²⁵⁶ Yet the ice-caps are melting, and drawing on maritime law, only passage within 12 nautical miles of territorial waters requires authorization, in contrast with Russia's attempt

²⁵⁰ Marc Lanteigne, "The changing shape of Arctic security", *NATO Review*, June 28, 2019.

²⁵¹ Finger and Heininen, "Introduction," 1.

²⁵² Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 41.

²⁵³ Sun, "The Northern Sea Route," 13.

²⁵⁴ Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 16.

²⁵⁵ Zandee, Kruijver and Stoetman, *The Future of Arctic Security*, 17; Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 16.

²⁵⁶ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 35.

to ‘nationalize’ the NSR.²⁵⁷ As argued by Laruelle, this sends a contradictory message to foreign actors interested in investing in the NSR, and China, Russia’s most important partner in the NSR, has repeatedly complained about Russia’s changing and inconsistent standards as to the future of the route.²⁵⁸ Moscow’s problem is that the prospect of Beijing having its own Chinese fleet of icebreakers would cease the need for Russia’s assistance in the route.²⁵⁹ While China has shown compliance to Russia’s established rules, it does consider parts of the NSR to be international waters and thus open to the right to explore the area.²⁶⁰ Hence, debates over questions of sovereignty and international law have been sparked by the emergence of previous ice-covered territories.²⁶¹ According to scholars, this brings to daylight diverging interests of Russia and China in the Arctic that may be under control now but might clash in the future: “mutual interest will probably drive Russia and China together on many aspects of polar affairs, but their interests are not completely complimentary.”²⁶²

Another obstacle is China’s demand to be more involved in the projects it funds, pursuing tough and long-lasting negotiations as Russia is hesitant to let China further in. “Russian desire for cash has led to many enthusiastic discussions between the two countries on the surface, but they have rendered few concrete projects.”²⁶³ Experts point out that Novatek struggles to secure Chinese financing for its much debated Yamal LNG project, struggles to secure Chinese financing for its much debated Yamal LNG project, underscored by the many delays the eventual deal had been subject to. It also demonstrates China’s superior position in the negotiation process, as it received significant benefits from the deal (having the equipment produced in Chinese shipyard for example).²⁶⁴ This superior position has led scholars to argue that Beijing “would not agree to anything less than a significant controlling and management role” in the projects that it decides to invest in.²⁶⁵ Yet Moscow is reluctant to concede ownership²⁶⁶, exactly playing into Russia’s previously demonstrated difficulty to weigh out its economic and security considerations, as it cannot receive Chinese funding without offering something valuable in return to attract such funding.²⁶⁷ Extra guarantees are particularly desired

²⁵⁷ Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 18-19.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶⁰ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 39.

²⁶¹ Zandee, Kruijver and Stoetman, *The Future of Arctic Security*, 16.

²⁶² Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 232.

²⁶³ Yun Sun, “Why China’s Interests in the Arctic Are Constrained: Worries That China’s Behavior in the South China Sea Foreshadows Future Provocations in the Arctic Are Exaggerated,” *The Wire China*, June 28, 2020.

²⁶⁴ Klimenko and Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic.”

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Lyle J. Goldstein, “What Does China Want with the Arctic?” *The National Interest*, September 7, 2019.

²⁶⁷ Klimenko and Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic.”

by Beijing as the commercial profitability of projects like the NSR are still minimal as long as the route lacks operable infrastructure²⁶⁸. On top of that, scholars like Goldstein argue that the current COVID-19 pandemic and the following reduction of oil prices has worsened the potential for profitability in the foreseeable future, as lower fuel costs have rendered the Russian costs of insurance, ice-breaking, navigation and search and rescue less appealing than before.²⁶⁹ While having a legitimate presence in the Arctic may overrule such concerns over immediate economic profits, China considers the NSR as a long-term project and is therefore in no rush to make investments, “especially when the Russian terms are less optimal”.²⁷⁰ Hence, scholars argue that China is biding its time in the NSR²⁷¹, eager to invest but at the same time staying realistic, thus patiently waiting for better terms and circumstances to arrive before investing further.

5.2.3 Arctic governance and China’s ambitions in the High North

China’s determination to gain a legitimate presence in the region is another factor of potential divergence between the two states. Scholars question Russia’s willingness to make room for China – a powerful non-Arctic state – in the governance affairs of a region so crucial to the country’s national security and power status. With more and more scholars considering China’s increased involvement in the Arctic as a strategy meant at allowing the country to gain respect and acceptance as a legitimate regional stakeholder, the discussion on Arctic governance has become more nuanced and complex.²⁷² China started applying for candidacy to the Arctic Council in 2007, only to succeed in 2013 when it finally gained observer status.²⁷³ As the Arctic’s main regional council and high-level forum for intergovernmental cooperation in the region²⁷⁴, membership to the Arctic Council had been a long-standing objective for China. Russia was particularly outspoken against China’s candidacy and initially decided not to recognize the country’s self-proclaimed status of being a ‘near-Arctic state’, like most other Arctic states.²⁷⁵ Goodman and Sun point out how Russia’s special envoy and senior official in

²⁶⁸ Goldstein, “What Does China Want with the Arctic?”; Sun, “The Northern Sea Route,” 5; Klimenko and Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic.”

²⁶⁹ Goldstein, “What Does China Want with the Arctic?”

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Sun, “The Northern Sea Route,” 10.

²⁷² Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 41.

²⁷³ Lim, “China’s Arctic Policy,” 421; Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 5.

²⁷⁴ Li and Peng, “The Rise of China in the Emergence of a New Arctic Order,” 201.

²⁷⁵ Laruelle, “Russia’s Arctic Policy,” 20.

the Arctic Council, Nikolai Korchunov, openly agreed with the US on the binary division between Arctic and non-Arctic states, thus expressing his objection to consider China as a near-Arctic state.²⁷⁶ Likewise, Stokes and Smith sensed discomfort among Russian policymakers when it comes to China referring to itself as a ‘near-Arctic state’, viewing it as further evidence that Chinese presence is eroding Russia’s dominant role in the Arctic.²⁷⁷ To nevertheless maintain this role, Russia favours bolstering the already existing Arctic legal and political bodies, guaranteeing the rights of Arctic states and thus holding dear to the privileges Arctic states have in setting the rules in the region.²⁷⁸ Yet China insists that seeing how significantly the Arctic region affects other parts of the world, thus reiterating the region’s transition to an international sphere of interests, non-Arctic states should have a right to be involved in Arctic governance.²⁷⁹

This refers to an ongoing debate taking place in the literature as to whether Arctic governance systems are still fit for purpose given the global consequences of the thawing ice. Academia highlight that the Arctic Council is not a body suited to handle the type of challenges it faces today, putting into question the durability of the current Arctic order.²⁸⁰ Originally meant to deal with issues such as conservation, pollution, and climate change, the Arctic Council’s initial stakeholders were primarily the eight Arctic states, indigenous people, and scientists²⁸¹ and noteworthy for its resilient stability despite turbulent international politics.²⁸² The Arctic Council was not created in the form of an international organization with an official treaty, raising the question if long-term regional management and stability will be possible.²⁸³ Ingimundarson argued already back in 2014 that the major stumbling block for Arctic states in the Council is , on the one hand, to maintain their privileged position within the Council, and on the other hand, to elevate the international standing and legitimacy of the Arctic Council by keeping the Council open to non-regional actors.²⁸⁴ The latter is essential as the Arctic’s governance and order is maintained not only by the states within the region but also by a wide

²⁷⁶ Sherri Goodman and Yun Sun, “What You May Not Know About Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic and Why It Matters,” *The Diplomat*, August 13, 2020.

²⁷⁷ Stokes and Smith, “Facing down the Sino-Russian Entente.”

²⁷⁸ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 2.

²⁷⁹ Kopra, “Climate Change and China’s Rise to Great Power Status,” 135; Zandee, Kruijver and Stoetman, *The Future of Arctic Security*, 35.

²⁸⁰ Li and Peng, “The Rise of China in the Emergence of a New Arctic Order,” 197.

²⁸¹ Dodds and Nuttall, *The Scramble for the Poles*, 119.

²⁸² Richard Clifton, “How has cooperation in the Arctic survived Western-Russian geopolitical tension?” *The Polar Connection*, December 18, 2016.

²⁸³ Ingimundarson, “Managing a contested region,” 188.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 183.

variety of global actors who, based on national interest and security concerns, wish to shape or reshape the Arctic order, like China.²⁸⁵

Chinese Arctic scholars argue that China's increased involvement in the Arctic underscores the weaknesses of the Arctic governance system. Even though the Chinese are considered to be a significant actor in the Arctic in terms of regional development, they remain weak actors in the Arctic Council as they have no voting rights.²⁸⁶ Other limitations are the fact that China's financial contribution cannot exceed financing from other Arctic states, as well as the rule that they can only propose projects through an Arctic state.²⁸⁷ Considering China's dramatic increase in their presence and role in the region, Li and Peng argue that the current structure of the Arctic indeed does not properly reflect the new dynamics and development of the global economy.²⁸⁸ It remains to be seen how long China will accept playing only a superficial role in Arctic decision-making processes.²⁸⁹ Yet Arctic states are wary of including China, unsure about the country's intentions in the region.²⁹⁰ This sentiment was reinforced by Beijing, who until recently refrained from specifying its goals in the High North.²⁹¹

What is China trying to achieve in the Arctic? First, Beijing wants to secure a direct access to the governance of a region whose importance has rapidly increased and increase its international status.²⁹² This goal is also driven out of fear for potential exclusion from the region, heightened by the fact that the Arctic's legal and political setting is still not well-established. As an insider, China will certainly play a deeper role in shaping the future development of Arctic governance.²⁹³ By building up a significant geostrategic presence in the Arctic, China does not aim to "dominate the region, but to be able to translate that presence into power if and when the geopolitics of the Arctic heat up," according to Dams et al., who describe the Arctic as an arena in which China's "fate as a superpower" will be decided.²⁹⁴ Along similar lines, Brady considers China's Arctic agenda as part of the country's grand strategy to articulate its vision for the global order and its respective role in it, viewing its presence in the polar

²⁸⁵ Li and Peng, "The Rise of China in the Emergence of a New Arctic Order," 198.

²⁸⁶ Lim, "China's Arctic Policy," 422.

²⁸⁷ Li and Peng, "The Rise of China in the Emergence of a New Arctic Order," 203.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁸⁹ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 38.

²⁹⁰ Lanteigne, "The changing shape of Arctic security"; Linda Jakobsen, Peng Jingchao, *China's Arctic Aspirations*, Stockholm: SIPRI, 2012, 1.

²⁹¹ Huang et al., "Is China's interest for the Arctic driven by Arctic shipping potential?" 62.

²⁹² Kopra, "Climate Change and China's Rise to Great Power Status," 135.

²⁹³ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 9.

²⁹⁴ Dams, van Schaik and Stoetman, *Presence Before Power*, 1.

regions as a way to demonstrate the country's growing global power.²⁹⁵ Though for China to succeed in becoming a global power, it has to continue living up to its core national interests: "maintaining China's social system and state security, to preserve state sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to ensure the continued stable development of the economy and society" – all matters which require a presence in the polar regions, according to Brady.²⁹⁶ Particularly under Xi Jinping, China has stepped up its game to project more power abroad to enhance the country's global prestige.²⁹⁷ As stated by Østhagen, a presence in the Arctic would therefore only be 'natural' for a growing superpower.²⁹⁸

Aware of Russia's hesitation about including non-Arctic states in Arctic governance affairs, China has allegedly been downplaying such ambitions by emphasizing its scientific interests over others²⁹⁹, dubbed by observers as China's conduct of 'science diplomacy'³⁰⁰ that would serve a so-called 'double purpose'.³⁰¹ Beijing long used to explain its growing involvement in Arctic affairs by stressing the importance of researching climate change in the region.³⁰² This led China to undertake multiple Arctic expeditions, provide technical equipment and invest heavily in knowledge accumulation³⁰³ - ending up spending more on Arctic research than Arctic states like the US.³⁰⁴ Scholars view China's science diplomacy as part of the low-profile approach it has been pursuing³⁰⁵, which according to Chinese scholars is designed to avoid provoking misperceptions - a 'China threat'³⁰⁶ - from the Arctic states that could lead to its exclusion from access to Arctic stakes.³⁰⁷

Hence, Beijing is doing its best to spread an international image of being a peaceful and cooperative state to be able to further its interests in the Arctic.³⁰⁸ However, while Russia's stance on letting China in closer in the Arctic substantially shifted in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis when it started accepting Chinese investment in critical Arctic projects, and

²⁹⁵ Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 2.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

²⁹⁷ Appel, "Are Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin Partners?," 4.

²⁹⁸ Andreas Østhagen, "The New Geopolitics of the Arctic: Russia, China and the EU," *Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies* (April 2019), 14.

²⁹⁹ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 11.

³⁰⁰ Marc Lanteigne, "Snow Fort or Ice Path? China's Emerging Strategies in the Arctic," *High North News*, April 19, 2019; Zandee, Kruijver and Stoetman, *The Future of Arctic Security*, 35.

³⁰¹ Reuters Staff, "China Mixing Military and Science in Arctic Push: Denmark." *Reuters*, November 29, 2019.

³⁰² Huang, et al., "Is China's interest for the Arctic driven by Arctic shipping potential?" 62; Klimenko and Sørensen, "The Status of Chinese-Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic."

³⁰³ Zandee, Kruijver and Stoetman, *The Future of Arctic Security*, 35.

³⁰⁴ Ingimundarson, "Managing a contested region," 191.

³⁰⁵ Østhagen, "The New Geopolitics of the Arctic," 14.

³⁰⁶ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 11.

³⁰⁷ Li and Peng, "The Rise of China in the Emergence of a New Arctic Order," 209.

³⁰⁸ Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 8.

after it agreed to China gaining observer status in the Arctic Council, experts nevertheless question the extent to which Russia would accept greater Chinese involvement in, and influence on, Arctic governance, expecting this to remain limited.³⁰⁹ Thus, even though on the surface their interests in the Arctic may seem complimentary, and while the progress made in term of investment deals is definitely impressive, Arctic scholars generally draw a rather pessimistic picture on the depth of the cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic by predominantly pointing out deeper sensitive issues at play that would ultimately limit its fruition.

5.3 AN IMBALANCED RELATIONSHIP?

the literature on Sino-Russian relationship and their specific cooperation in the Arctic remains generally critical, if not sceptical, while questioning the relations' depth and durability. However, a closer look at the arguments made about the two states' reliance on one another in the Arctic draws a rather different picture in terms of regional power balance. Assessing the different interests and strategies of both Russia and China in the Arctic region as presented in the literature, a more balanced relationship between the two powers seems to be present in the Arctic region. The general material difference in power between Moscow and Beijing that is so repeatedly mentioned in the literature seems less of a concern in the Arctic, a region where Russia has traditionally been holding a superpower status. While it is evident that China has become essential for the realization of Russia's Arctic strategy due to rising tensions with the West since 2014 and its subsequent stagnating economy³¹⁰, observers point out that ultimately, China is dependent on Russia if it wishes to increase its activities in the Arctic and become a legitimate stakeholder in the region.³¹¹ As the biggest Arctic state, Moscow stands as an important doorkeeper for non-Arctic states like China.³¹² Therefore relying on Moscow's goodwill and support, Beijing knows that "there is no way to avoid dealing and getting along with Russia in the Arctic".³¹³

³⁰⁹ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 2.

³¹⁰ Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Policy," 13.

³¹¹ Geir Flikke, "Sino–Russian Relations Status Exchange or Imbalanced Relationship?" *Problems of Post-Communism*, 63, no. 3 (2016): 160;

³¹² Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 11.

³¹³ Sørensen and Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic*, 11.

This refers back to China's major weakness when it comes to the fulfilments of its Arctic strategy, namely that of not being an Arctic state.³¹⁴ Holding no territory in the Arctic, "the success of Chinese ventures is contingent on Russian permission," as claimed by Lo, adding that despite Russia's need for Chinese investment in projects like Yamal LNG, it still retains a decisive say on how much it lets China in on sensitive areas like governance matters.³¹⁵ For example, before being granted observer status to the Arctic Council in 2013, Beijing had to accept the then newly-established Nuuk criteria which includes committing to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), thereby making itself bound to respect the sovereign rights of Arctic states and rights of indigenous people.³¹⁶ The most it can do for now is to make sure the Arctic remains as open, free and accessible as possible.³¹⁷

Given the importance China has placed on the Arctic region, Sun concludes that it simply "cannot afford to offend Russia."³¹⁸ In the end, the latter represents and remains "the anchor of China's engagement in the Arctic".³¹⁹ This does not mean though that the roles are completely reversed in the Arctic – with the balance of power shifted more toward Russia. On the contrary, the latter remains limited in how much it can do to fulfil its Arctic goals without receiving funding from the Chinese. Beijing has also demonstrated to be a tough negotiator that does not heedlessly invest without having considered all its available opportunities. This attitude gives Beijing the flexibility to negotiate better compromises for any partner, Russia included. As a consequence, the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic appears as more balanced and mutually profitable than any other aspect of their relations. While Sino-Russian experts worry that Russia's increasing dependency on China could turn into a critical vulnerability³²⁰, the former will always hold significant leverage over the latter in the Arctic, especially given that China's ambitions in the Arctic are only bound to grow with the ice caps melting further.

It is important to note, however, that Arctic observers addressing Sino-Russian cooperation in the region comment less on the nature and power balance of the relationship between the two states than general Sino-Russian experts do. Yet this conclusion is nevertheless carefully crafted based on the interests and positions held by both states in the Arctic that are brought forward in

³¹⁴ Sun, "Why China's Interests in the Arctic Are Constrained."

³¹⁵ Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order," 310.

³¹⁶ Ingimundarson, "Managing a contested region," 190.

³¹⁷ *The Wire China*, June 28, 2020.

³¹⁸ Yun Sun, "Why China's Interests in the Arctic Are Constrained."

³¹⁹ Goodman and Sun, "What You May Not Know About Sino-Russian Cooperation."

³²⁰ Sinikukka Saari and Stanislav Secrieru, *Russian Futures 2030*. (Paris: The EU Institute for Security Studies, 2020), 2.

the literature, opening up many questions that continue to remain unanswered. . If an element of equilibrium can be drawn on the cooperation between the two in the Arctic, an increasingly determinant aspect of their relationship, what can this variable say about the durability of their relationship more generally? And why is this undeniable interdependence not reflected, or to a certain extent, neglected, in the assessment of their relationship in broader strategic terms?

6 A PDA OF CHINA AND RUSSIA IN THE ARCTIC

6.1 CHINA'S SECURITY DISCOURSE ON THE ARCTIC

in June 2017, China offered a glimpse of its motivations for its presence in the Arctic in a document titled “*Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*”, released by the State Oceanic Administration and the National Commission on Development and Reform. The analysis officially outlined Beijing’s plans to create a third blue economic passage leading up to Europe via the Arctic Ocean, foreshadowing the so-called ‘Polar Silk Road’. This commitment confirmed Beijing intention to improve maritime transportation conditions in the Arctic region so that Chinese enterprises are able to take part in the commercial use of the Arctic route. This represented the first time that China explicitly lists commercial interests in the region, carefully moving beyond expressing mere scientific and environmental interests. The document equally underscored China’s intention to actively participate in Arctic-related organizations (1.4).

During a meeting with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in November the same year, Xi stressed that Russia and China should work together in the development and utilization of the Arctic navigation channels to create a “Silk Road on Ice” (1.8). Not much later, in January 2018, the State Council Information Office of China published a white paper titled “*China’s Arctic Policy*”, explaining more in-depth its policies and positions regarding Arctic affairs. This paper had been long-awaited by the international community, particularly by several Arctic states who questioned China’s intentions as the country long refrained from specifying its goals in the Arctic.³²¹ In this paper, the term ‘Polar Silk Road’ was officially coined, linking it directly to China’s 21st-century Maritime Silk Road launched in 2013 as part of the country’s ambitious BRI. The Polar Silk Road would facilitate connectivity and

³²¹ Huang et al., “Is China's interest for the Arctic driven by Arctic shipping potential?” 62.

sustainable economic and social development of the Arctic (1.10). Besides shipping potential, the white paper addresses other promising elements that the melting ice-caps will bring about in the Arctic, namely that of resource development and exploitation, fishing and tourism. While the white paper stresses China's commitment to uphold the institutional and legal frameworks at place in the Arctic and respect the sovereignty of Arctic states, it insists that the Arctic situation has gone "beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature". It thereby seeks to legitimize the presence of non-Arctic states in the region and their right to participate in Arctic affairs.

China's discursive representation of the Arctic is that of an international sphere of interest with vital bearing on "the survival, the development, and the shared future for mankind" (1.10). This vision stresses the importance of international cooperation "to safeguard and promote peace and stability in, and the sustainable development of, the Arctic" (1.10) This vision underlies an understanding of the Arctic as a critical area for the near-future of international relations: on the one hand, it is a region that holds the potential to significantly disrupt the world with its thawing ice-caps, be it due to climate mismanagement, or uncoordinated resources grab, on the other hand, the region could pave the way for inclusive international cooperation to jointly develop the Arctic and share the benefits that flow out of it. With the release of its Arctic white paper, China made a strong case for the latter scenario. Against this backdrop, and by insisting on the Arctic's transition to a sphere of international interest, China asserts that the region holds no geographic limit and is open for all states to participate to bear the fruits of jointly developing the Arctic.

China's discursive representation of the Arctic seems to be in line with its general 'official line' as recently reiterated by Xi in a speech he delivered at the World Economic Forum Virtual Event of the Davos in January 2021, in which he calls upon states "to jointly follow a path of peaceful coexistence, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation" (1.11). A deeper look into China's official discourse on the Arctic reveals the Chinese 'Selves' that are evoked and the subsequent securitization discourses that are used to secure the existential threats these Selves face.

6.1.1 China's Identity

Using Hansen's three analytical lenses of *spatiality*, *temporality* and *ethicality* to assess foreign policy discourses it becomes easier to identify the respective identities behind, and reproduced

in, China's Arctic discourse. Two differing 'Selves' can be recognized: China as an ethical, benevolent superpower that emphasizes international cooperation along the lines of shared benefits and inclusive development, and China as a 'near-Arctic' great power that is more inward looking and pursues activities in the Arctic to secure sustained economic growth and respond to a growing energy demand at home. The rest of this section will show how the former identity outweighs the latter to underscore its peaceful intentions, thereby demonstrating how the two Chinese Selves complement each other in pursuing its Arctic policy goals.

Identity 1: China as an ethical, benevolent power

"We come in peace, we come with goodwill, and we come for cooperation." (1.2)

Applying these three analytical lenses to China's Arctic discourse reveal its predominant focus on *ethicality* by constantly referring to the Arctic as a "shared community of mankind", thus involving a constructing of responsibility that goes beyond its national citizenry. Constructing an ethical identity in discourse analysis implies the conscious discursive construction of ethics, morality, and responsibility.³²² In the case of China's Arctic policy, China asserts that the melting icecaps poses both risks and opportunities for the international community, and thus "faces the same threat and shares the same future in addressing global issues concerning the Arctic." It therefore wishes to create favourable conditions for mankind "to better protect, develop, and govern the Arctic" and insists on advancing international cooperation in the Arctic (1.10). Explicitly articulating an international responsibility, China's Arctic white paper undertakes a powerful discursive move by moving the issues as well as the potential of the Arctic out of the realm of the strategic and the 'selfishly national'. China thus uses an explicit evocation of its ethical identity in its Arctic policy discourse. By doing so, it constantly stresses not only the respect it pays to the sovereign rights of Arctic states and to the established institutional and legal frameworks that are of relevance to the Arctic, but also how other States should do the same:

"all States should abide by international treaties such as the UN Charter and the UNCLOS, as well as general international law. They should respect the sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction enjoyed by the Arctic States in this region" (1.10).

Hence, this ethical identity of the Chinese Self transcends national borders and instead articulates a Self with a global sense of responsibility towards the Other and with respect for

³²² Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 45.

international law. The construction of such an identity is necessary for China to achieve its national goal to gain access to, and legitimizes its presence in, the Arctic and to avoid raising suspicion. At the same time, this rhetoric helps China to construct the Arctic as a sphere of international interest that subsequently requires international involvement and presence, thereby taking Arctic affairs out of their previously regional nature. This Chinese Self is therefore articulated as welcoming and friendly to Others and as only bringing goodwill and peaceful intentions to the Arctic to foster international cooperation. This Self does not see itself as superior to other powers but instead relies on fair inclusion in international governance, seeing the Other as ‘equal’, even when stronger. As Xi recently highlighted in his speech in Davos, “the strong should not bully the weak” (1.11). An identity welcoming of other powers, China’s ethical identity as a benevolent superpower thus *desecuritizes* the presence of other powers in the Arctic region.

Yet this universal discourse that China evocates in its Arctic white paper raises questions as to whether this clashes with the assumption that identities are relationally and spatially constituted, given that no juxtaposing Other is clearly identified. In a way, a Self-Other dichotomy clashes with China’s proposition and vision of a world in which states peacefully co-exist and put aside their difference to pursue win-win cooperation. Such a discourse inevitably constructs an Other, namely those who do not share this vision against those that do. China’s Arctic policy thus evokes a spatial and temporal identity as well; while the former is relationally constituted against states who do not share China’s vision, the latter identity calls for progress, development for all, and a more inclusive world order set against the current *status quo* of normative hegemonic power of the West. Although not clearly articulated in the Arctic white paper, Xi stressed this all too well in his speech at Davos in January 2021 which confirms this claim:

“Difference in itself is no cause for alarm. What does ring alarm is arrogance, prejudice and hatred; it is the attempt to impose hierarchy on human civilizations or to force one’s own history, culture and social system upon others. [...] We should stay committed to *openness* and *inclusiveness* instead of *closeness* and *exclusion*. [...] It is important to say no to narrow-minded, selfish beggar-thy-neighbour policies, and stop unilateral practice of keeping advantages in development all to oneself” (1.11).³²³

³²³ Emphasis added.

While Xi does not address the Arctic in this speech, the same vision can be traced back in China's call for Arctic governance to be more inclusive, thereby legitimizing and de-securitizing its presence in the region:

“Through global, regional, multilateral and bilateral channels, all stakeholders — including States from both inside and *outside* the Arctic, intergovernmental organizations, and nonstate entities — are encouraged to take part in cooperation...” (1.10).³²⁴

Identity 2: China as a ‘Near-Arctic’ global power

“China is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs. Geographically, China is a ‘Near- Arctic State’” (1.10)

In the end, China does indeed fall outside of the Arctic. It nevertheless controversially labels itself a ‘near-Arctic state’, “one of the continental states that are closest to the Arctic Circle”, despite the long distance between the country and the region. By evocating this label, China seeks to justify its increasing involvement in the Arctic. A clearly nationally and spatially crafted Self that sets itself apart from both Arctic states and states that are not ‘near’ to the Arctic, this identity construction differs from the previous identified ‘universal’ Self that transcends national borders. While definitely more on the background than China's ethical Self, it nevertheless reveals China's more nationally oriented interests in the Arctic and its ambition to strengthen its position in the international community through its presence in this region. While the China as a benevolent power calls upon states to adhere to the institutional and legal frameworks in place, China as a ‘near-Arctic’ states stresses that at the same time, all states should “respect the rights and freedom of non-Arctic States to carry out activities in this region.” (1.10). Hence, this is a reminder to the eight Arctic states that non-Arctic states *do* have rights in the Arctic, namely to the exercise of scientific research and tap into commercial activities such as fishing, hunting, and mining in the region.

As an emerging superpower, it is no secret China wishes for a role representative to its power in the international community. Being involved in an increasingly important region such as the Arctic is essential and, as pointed out by Østhagen, “the Arctic will be only one of many regions where presence and interaction are components of an expansion of power in both soft

³²⁴ Emphasis added.

and hard terms.”³²⁵ Calling itself “an important member of the international community” and “a responsible major country” in its Arctic white paper (1.10), China is purposely giving off the impression that having a say in Arctic-related international rules and the development of the Arctic governance system is nothing but normal and totally within its mandate as a great power. Already referring to ‘the development’ of the Arctic governance system shows China’s wish to reshape it to its benefit and be properly included. While content right now with its observer status in the Arctic Council, this discourse seems to foreshadow that, in the long-term, China might envision the inclusion of non-Arctic states as full-fledged members of its governance body. This identity seems to ascribe its presence in the region as a way to not miss out or be excluded from near-future regional developments and guaranteeing the capacity to “seize the historic opportunity in the development of the Arctic” (1.5) as it should as an emerging superpower.

6.1.2 Threats to the Self and securitization acts

The act of securitization comes along with the articulation of threats to the constructed Self, as is the case in China’s discursive representation of the Arctic. While China’s identity as a ‘Near-Arctic’ superpower relies on sustained economic growth domestically, its identity as an ethical and benevolent power holds that such growth cannot be seen in isolation of developments taking place in the outside world, therefore promoting close international cooperation. Hence, the two Selves evoke different levels of concern; the former focuses on domestic challenges that might jeopardize its position as a superpower and the latter concentrates on international challenges crucial for its international status as a threat to the Self. The drastically changing environment of the Arctic caused by climate change could count as such an international challenge:

“...Climate change, environment, scientific research, utilization of shipping routes, resource exploration and exploitation, security, and global governance. These issues are *vital* to the existence and development of all countries and humanity, and directly affect the interests of non-Arctic States including China” (1.10).³²⁶

Following this logic, China securitizes the development of the Arctic, a policy the Arctic white paper constructs as of utmost importance for several reasons. First, given China’s heavy dependence on maritime transport as a major trade economy (1.3), a threat to China’s Self as a superpower, the opening up of shipping routes in the Arctic would allow the nations to diversify

³²⁵ Østhagen, “The New Geopolitics of the Arctic,” 14.

³²⁶ Emphasis added.

its routes and serve as alternatives to international chokepoints such as the Strait of Ormuz and Malacca. At the same time, the route cuts travel time and shipping costs to reach Europe (1.3). It thus seeks to play a major role in expanding Arctic shipping routes, calling for all parties to contribute to the building of the 'Polar Silk Road' and encouraging Chinese enterprises to participate into all related infrastructure building projects.

Second, to continue its growth, China needs to secure safe energy supplies. Failure to do so thus poses another threat to its Self as a growing superpower. The Arctic holds the potential to offer energy security to China, considered as a region where the country can mitigate this threat to the Self. As the white paper states, "the Arctic region boasts an abundance of geothermal, wind, and other clean energy resources" (1.10). In short, the "development of the resources in the Arctic may have a huge impact on the energy strategy and economic development of China, which is a major trading nation and energy consumer in the world" (1.10). The development of these resources is thus securitized in reference to the country's identity as a superpower.

Lastly, stating that the "melting ice in the Arctic ... can result in accelerated global warming, rising sea levels, increased extreme weather events, damaged biodiversity, and other global problems" (1.10), China activates its ethical, benevolent power identity to call for international cooperation to addressing climate change in the region. It thus securitizes the threat of global warming in the Arctic as a common threat to the international community.

6.2 *RUSSIA'S SECURITY DISCOURSE ON THE ARCTIC*

Whereas China is a 'newcomer' in the Arctic region, Russia is a traditional and established Arctic power, with almost a third of its territory located in the Far North (2.4). Its discourse on the Arctic dates back to the very existence of the Russian state. This thesis has chosen to focus only on relatively recent (from 2014 onwards) Russian speeches and policies on the Arctic. This decision has not been made to discard the importance of historical meaning and language ascribed to the Arctic, as in fact the current discourse often reproduces old statements and narratives. The identified selection has been oriented at concentrating the analysis on two dimensions: Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic and its environmental dimension.

In 2020, Russia released its most recent strategic document on the Arctic, titled 'The Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2035'. The document

aims at protection “the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic” (2.1). Touching upon all aspects of Russia’s national security – military, political, economic, technological, environmental, and that of resources – the document presents the Arctic as a sphere that has traditionally been in Moscow’s “special interest” (2.3), as the latter feels special responsibility for the region (2.4).

In light of growing tension with the West and a stagnation economy, the Arctic has only taken up a more central place in Russia’s security discourse, as Russia’s influence in the region remains unquestioned. With a large amount of untapped mineral resources that will become more easily accessible given the melting ice-caps, the region remains vital for the country’s economic security – accounting for over 10% of all investment in the country (2.6). In a plenary session of the International Arctic Forum in April 2019, Putin asserted that he is “convinced that the importance of the Arctic factor in the Russian economy will only grow further” (2.6). Assuming presidency over the Arctic Council in May this year, it should therefore not come as a surprise that the development of the Arctic’s resources has been labelled as Russia’s main goal for the Council in the next three years to come. It is important to note, however, that this ambitious plan was announced at a time when prices for oil and LNG reached an all-time low last time,³²⁷ showing the risk for an economy to predominantly rely on energy exports. At the same time, it questions the feasibility and cost-benefit equation of resource development in the Russian Arctic, making it more difficult for Russia to secure much needed investments. Hence, while Putin may wish for the Arctic to boost the Russian economy, the level of profit resulting from this involvement cannot be estimated at this stage.

A deeper look into Russia’s official discourse on the Arctic reveals an identity of ‘a traditional Great Arctic power under constraint’ seeking to restore great power status. The following two sections dive deeper into the construction of Russia’s identity and the subsequent securitization discourses that are used to overcome the existential threats this constructed identity faces.

6.2.1 Russia’s Identity

Russia’s discourse on the Arctic seems rather conflicting at first glance. On the one hand, Moscow seeks to reiterate its undeniable status as the largest Arctic power, showing concern

³²⁷ Ekaterina, Klimenko, “Russia’s New Arctic Policy Document Signals Continuity Rather Than Change.” *SIPRI*, April 6, 2020.

over outside power's interest in gaining influence in its neighbourhood. On the other hand, when reading between the lines, Russia's discourse on the Arctic seems revealing the attitude of a declining great power longing for the power it once used to have in the Soviet era and looking at the growing potential of the Arctic as an opportunity to restore its status. Making references in its Arctic discourse to heroic Soviet figures like Otto Schmidt, the first man to cover the 'legendary' Northern Sea Route in 1932 (2.7), Russia seeks to remind the international community of its Arctic legacy. However, economic constraints renders the country unable to fulfil its current-day Arctic ambitions in isolation from the rest of the world. Especially over the past few years, Moscow has adopted a more welcoming attitude towards cooperation with non-Arctic states, listing "active involvement of Arctic and extra-regional states to mutually beneficial economic cooperation in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation" (2.7) as one of its goals in its latest Arctic policy document. These two lines of discourses on the Arctic can be summed up in the identification of the Russian Self as 'a traditional Great Arctic power under constraint'.

Referring back to the three analytical lenses of *spatiality*, *temporality* and *ethicality*, Russia's reiteration of itself as a traditional Arctic power can be understood as the creation of a temporal identity construction of the Self against the temporal Other of its own past.³²⁸ With this, I mean that contemporary Russia is constituted against Russia's glorious Soviet past in the Arctic – the temporal Other - in its Arctic discourse. This can be traced in Russia's narratives of how heroic conquests and expeditions in the Arctic (2.7) have built and constructed the contemporary Self as the product of a glorious past. It thus emphasizes its legitimacy as a traditional Arctic power by referring to its previous accomplishments in the region. For example, during the fourth international forum of 'The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue' on 30 March 2017, Putin reminded the audience of a crucial date in Arctic history, namely the 80th anniversary of the Soviet drifting ice station named 'the North Pole' – a research station created on drifting ice in the deep-water part of the Arctic Ocean, crucial for the region's exploration at the time (2.7).

Russia's references to the past also convey a certain nostalgia to the great power status the country enjoyed during the Soviet era, a status it wishes to restore. The increasing importance of the Arctic and its location in the Russian backyard made it the perfect place to restore its status. However, this resurgence path is not an easy one. In its latest state policy

³²⁸ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 44.

document on the Arctic, Russia lists “low rates of development of domestic technologies required for the development of the Arctic” as one of the six main threats to its national security in the region (2.1). Combined with its stagnation economy and worsening relations with the West, this underscores Russia’s current national inability to conduct ‘grand’ explorations similar to those conducted 80 years ago today, hence remaining with not many options other than to look for partners to jointly fulfil its current ambitions in the region.

This realization can be traced back in a change in Russia’s Arctic discourse, showing a more open-minded attitude towards working with different kinds of partners over time. This is visible in Russia’s identity construction in its discourse on the Arctic of the Russian national Self against the international Other, the most predominant Self to be identified in the country’s Arctic discourse. Back in April 2014, Putin emphasized the need for Russia to take additional measures in order to not “fall behind our partners, to maintain Russia’s influence in the region and maybe, in some areas, to be ahead of our partners” (2.3). Putin is making a clear distinction between Russia’s national space and the developments taking place within it and the outside world, thereby attempt to construct a *spatial identity*. At the same time, this quote also exposes an attempt to construct a *temporal identity* as it refers to two temporal themes: the wish for continuity in maintaining its influence and a desire to reach a higher level of progress compared to those outside its national borders. While back in 2014 Russia showed more hesitance to cooperate with others, it did admit to be aware of the growing interest in the region shown by non-Arctic states (2.3), to eventually express later a more welcoming stance towards the Other in a speech Putin delivered at the international forum of ‘The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue’ in March 2017: “We believe that all countries have the right to work in this region. We only need to coordinate our work there and reach agreements on this... We are interested in using their resources and capability” (2.7).

This does not mean that Russia has stopped prioritizing the protection of the national Self to embrace international cooperation. This attitude shows that Moscow has understood it needs to cooperate for the survival of the Self. In its most recent state policy on the Arctic, Russia immediately states its overall aim to protect its national interests in the Arctic (2.1). An interesting development to note is that while its previous state policy on the Arctic listed the necessity for Russia to activate mutually beneficial cooperation with other Arctic states, thereby excluding non-Arctic states, its current policy includes the possibility of such cooperation with ‘extra-regional states’ (2.1). This again demonstrates the expansion of Russia’s scope in terms of who it seeks to partner with in the Arctic region. It also introduces another binary relevant

for the study of Russia's identity, namely that of Arctic regional states and 'extra' Arctic regional states, meaning states that fall outside of the Arctic region. Hence, while still predominantly focusing on cooperation with states inside the region, the country's main goal for its upcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2.6), Russia is now also looking beyond the Arctic region. Moscow also reinforces the spatial identification of Russia as an Arctic state as relationally constituted against non-Arctic states.

Nevertheless, Russia wishes to maintain the upper hand when it comes to establishing cooperation partnerships in the Arctic. This becomes clear in a meeting on the efficient and safe development of the Arctic in 2014, where Putin states: "we should give priority to those who are honestly working for a good cause rather than exploiting environmental issues, making them a subject of trade, personal promotion of business" (2.4). Here, it is evoking a binary between those who work 'for a good cause' and those who show interest in the region out of mere self-interest, thus enacting an *ethical identity* construction. This binary further reinforced by Putin during a plenary session of the International Arctic Forum 'Territory Dialogue' in April 2019, who stated the following:

"Whenever our US partners and friends can benefit from something, they make whatever it is happen. If they find it is not lucrative, then they tend to tighten the screws. But only if they do not find it lucrative for themselves. They have not been paying much attention to the interest of other countries" (2.6)

The construction of an ethical identity is strongly present in Russia's discourse on the Arctic in various forms. The country labels the protection of the environment and nature management in the Arctic as one of its major national priorities in the region (2.1), particularly considering the Arctic's fragile ecosystem and the indigenous people living there (2.2). Russia thus legitimizes its policy on the Arctic as in the 'national interest' for the country, articulating a certain sense of responsibility toward the national body politics - 'the responsible Self'.³²⁹ While this may seem to override any potential claim to an 'international responsibility', Russia has been increasingly seeking to transcend the protection of the Arctic environment beyond its national borders, most vocally to a regional level, if not the international level: "this part of the globe (the Arctic) largely determines the environmental wellbeing of the entire planet, of our shared home" (2.4). By calling the planet 'a shared home', it actively calls for collective action to protect this home by securitizing the environment in the Arctic, thus evoking an international

³²⁹ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 45.

sense of responsibility.

6.2.2 Threats to the Self and securitization acts

As previously seen, the act of securitization comes along with the articulation of threats to the constructed Self. Such securitization acts are rather easily identifiable in Russia's discursive representation of the Arctic and the construction of the Russian Self as a 'Traditional Great Arctic Power' that is under constraint, especially given that in its newest Arctic policy, Russia clearly lists the main threats it faces in the Arctic region. As a traditional Arctic power, its main focus lies on maintaining the power it holds over this region, if not bolstering its power on the international stage through its Arctic presence. It therefore takes on a predominantly protective attitude when it comes to the region, ambiguous about the extent to which it feels comfortable letting in others – something it desperately needs to do if it wishes to fulfil its Arctic ambitions. Russia thus has to choose between the lesser of the two evils: either refraining from letting in others and therefore being limited in the extent it can develop the Arctic and subsequently boost its national economy, or welcoming foreign powers to jointly develop the region while risking to lose its autonomy and significant power it holds in the region. These are hence two existential threats to the Russian Self, as both scenarios could be detrimental to its role as a traditional Arctic power. The former scenario would result in Russia becoming an Arctic power incapable of getting the most of the region due to lacking domestic economic and technological means. The latter, on the contrary, would cause Russia to become an important Arctic state that - together with the help of others - has the available means to bear the fruits of Arctic development but at the cost of its national autonomy in the region, thus negatively affecting its traditional power status. Russia's current discourse on the Arctic is ambiguous regarding which scenario will choose, aiming to continue floating between both options for as long as possible.

Drawing on the first scenario, Russia has securitized its Arctic territory and national borders in response to the melting icecaps of the Arctic and the potential arrival of new players, constituting a threat to the national Self. Back in April 2014, Putin mentioned in a Security Council meeting on the Arctic that the legal formalisation of the outer boundary of Russia's continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean is "a pressing issue that requires careful work" (2.3). Backing up his statement, he provides a successful example of this by referring to the Sea of Okhotsk in the western Pacific Ocean, where Russia managed to secure its legal right to this

area in a session of the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf held in March the same year. Putin then concludes with the following:

“Our experts should act in the exact same way while conducting bilateral and multilateral consultations with governments of the Arctic nations; they should hold on to every area of the Arctic continental shelf of Russia and its marine basins.” (2.3)

Hence, we can witness the securitization of Russia’s Arctic territory to bolster Russia’s sovereignty in the region. Given the melting of the icecaps and the subsequent opening up of the Arctic Ocean, such border questions will only become more pertinent in the near future. Ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity have therefore also been listed as top national interests for Russia in the Arctic in its most recent Arctic state policy in 2020.

Seeking to delimitate its continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean, Russia exposes its underlying fear of potential conflict in the Arctic, another threat to the Russian Self in its Arctic discourse. While in March 2017 Putin stated that “Russia believes that there is no potential for conflict in the Arctic”, arguing that international law clearly specifies the rights of littoral and other states in the Arctic (2.7), Moscow’s latest Arctic policy conversely mentions that the potential for conflict in the Arctic is increasing (2.1). As the latter document is only available in Russian, this could indicate that Russia is downgrading its fear for conflict to the outside world, as Putin’s statement in 2017 was made in an international forum on the Arctic. By doing so, Russia can present itself as a strong and confident Arctic power, although its actual state policy reveals otherwise. Hence, a discrepancy exists between the way Russia conveys the threats to the Self to its national and international public.

Continuing with the Arctic’s state policy, a rising likelihood of conflict in the Arctic region and the securitization thereof justifies its remilitarization of the Arctic and a strengthening of its Arctic borders. Prioritizing efforts “to ensure the military security of Russia” in its state policy, it seeks to do so for the sake of “protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity” (2.1). To ensure military security, Russia plans to increase combat capabilities in the Arctic at a level sufficient enough to repel aggression from other states and to modernize its military infrastructure capabilities. As for strengthening its borders, it seeks to improve the quality of its border administration and border infrastructure in the Arctic, to implement better technologies to monitor the situations taking place in the Arctic Ocean, and to build up an intelligence system to control Russia’s Arctic airspace (2.1). Hence, Russia’s Arctic policy places a significant amount of emphasis on ensuring its national security by

securitizing the protection of its Arctic space, justifying both the strengthening of its Arctic borders and its remilitarization in the region.

Another predominant theme present in its Arctic discourse is Russia's securitization of developing the Arctic, mostly in economic terms, touching upon both scenarios indicated at the beginning of this section. Wishing to remain as autonomous as possible in the region, Russia repeatedly emphasizes the importance to gain domestic technological and scientific capacities to develop the Arctic (2.1), in line with the first scenario of keeping others out: "We have to develop *our own* scientific and technological capacities to develop the North" (2.4).³³⁰ A well-developed Arctic would boost Russia's economy, and would thus mitigate the economic threat the Russian Self faces as a global power. Failure to do so would thus be detrimental. However, the fact that Russia is not able to develop the Arctic completely by itself jeopardizes the proper development of the Arctic, thereby equally representing a direct threat to the Self.

The latter brings us to the consideration of the second scenario, namely that of welcoming foreign powers to jointly develop the Arctic in protection of the Russian Self. In 2019, Putin highlighted the importance of building infrastructure to attract investment and business initiatives (2.6), demonstrating its need for such investments to achieve its goals in the Arctic. Particular emphasis is placed on the NSR with the potential to boost Russia's economy, wishing to make the route competitive in the world market by attracting more international transportation of goods (2.1). It strikingly portrays Russia's attempt to float between the two scenarios, as the policy states that it seeks to attract private investors for investment projects on the Arctic shelf while maintaining "state control over their implementation", referring particularly to infrastructure development of mineral resources that are logistically connected to the NSR (2.1). It thus welcomes foreign investments on the important condition that it can still maintain a significant control over the implementation of Arctic projects. The question, however, is for how long Russia is able to continue such a conduct of action in the Arctic, exposing a level of uncertainty as to what is the best way to protect the Russian Self in the Arctic.

³³⁰ Emphasis added.

6.3 *ASSESSING THE COMPATIBILITY OF CHINA AND RUSSIA'S ARCTIC DISCOURSES*

Assessing the complementarity of Russia and China discourses on the Arctic is important to understand if they are compatible and how they can help decoding the complexity of these two countries' relations in the Arctic and beyond. This thesis argues that a PDA of China and Russia's Arctic discourses reveals common identity constructions and similar views on how to conduct foreign relations, allowing both country's to share a number of security interests in the Arctic that will most likely outweigh any diverging ones for the future to come.

First of all, it is important to underscore their differing status in the Arctic region and on the international stage. In the case of Russia, its traditional great power status has significantly shrieked over the past two decades. The country does however continue to hold a traditional great power status in the Arctic region. China, on the other hand, has come to be considered as a great global power. Yet the Arctic is a region where it holds no territorial claim, and thus limited power. Hence, while Russia is a regional power in the Arctic, China is a great power that wishes to include the Arctic under its sphere of influence. Whereas China sees the Arctic as a region where it can solidify its status as a global power, to Russia, the Arctic is a region crucial to maintain its power. This discrepancy is generally reflected in their Arctic discourses: while China primarily places the focus on its ethical identity of a benevolent power with international responsibility, thereby showing a more assertive attitude towards the Arctic region by labelling itself a 'near-Arctic state', Russia conversely demonstrates a protective attitude towards the region, predominantly focusing on protecting its traditional national security interests.

Based on these conclusions, cooperation between the two countries in the Arctic region is meaningful for both. While China provides the means necessary for Russia to develop the Arctic, and thus secure, if not reaffirm, its power status, the former has found a way to be present in the region. This would thus equate a win-win type of cooperation in the Arctic. China's Self as a benevolent great power brings its more inward-looking Self – its self-proclaimed identity as a 'near-Arctic great power' – to the background as a way to reassure Arctic states like Russia of its peaceful intentions. Even though the identity construction of a friendly power that promotes mutually beneficial cooperation might be driven by mere national interests, it nevertheless has to now uphold this identity to not damage its international reputation.

In this sense, China's claim to be present in the Arctic while respecting Russia's traditional claims in the region can be considered as reliable in the eyes of Russia. Thus, the former's identity construction of a benevolent power in the Arctic is actively making an effort to accommodate the latter's concerns regarding the growing presence of foreign actors in the Arctic region. At the same time, Russia's evocation of its ethical identity, including a sense of international responsibility, starts to resemble China's vision of the planet as 'a shared community for mankind' (1.10) more closely, particularly with its statement of calling the planet 'a shared home' (2.4). Using such language despite its fear of losing power in the Arctic, this can equally be considered as accommodating and showing openness to non-Arctic states like China. This reveals a certain level of adaptation towards one another.

Most of all, both countries have like-minded goals in the Arctic, further encouraging their cooperation to achieve those. The most important overlapping goal is that of developing the Arctic, be it economically or socially, representing an issue which both nations securitize in their Arctic discourses. Although driven by different threats to the Self, given that for China sustained economic growth is crucial to *maintain* its power status while for Russia it needs to stimulate economic growth to *restore* its power, what matters is that both countries nevertheless end up securitization the development of the Arctic. Yet some pitfalls can be, and have already been, encountered in their joint cooperation to do so. While both countries highlight the importance of the NSR as a crucial part in developing the region, particularly for economic gains, this is eventually more important to Russia than it is for China. Whereas the NSR is attractive in the long-run for China to diversify its options for global transportation routes, for Russia, the route is essential in the short-run to stimulate its economy. Hence, the two countries have diverging senses of urgency when it comes to the NSR.

This can be considered as a potential stumble block when it comes to cooperating in the Arctic, especially given that Russia is walking a fine line in the Arctic, shifting between opening up for outside Arctic states and bolstering its military to secure its national Arctic borders. Wishing to follow this route for as long as possible, it might end up undermining cooperation with China. With this, I refer back to Russia's comment stating it wishes to attract private investors for investment projects on the Arctic shelf while maintaining "state control over their implementation" (2.1). It is questionable whether China would agree to such investments deals, having only a minimal say in the implementation phase of the project. Given its current leverage of being able to provide Russia with cash in contrast to the West, it can take as much time as needed in the negotiation of Arctic investment projects to get what it wants. As shown in chapter

5, this has already been the case in the Yamal LNG project, for which China demanded to be more involved in the projects that it funds, thereby pursuing tough and long-lasting negotiations. Given its lower sense of urgency in the Arctic region, it is in a comfortable position to do so.

Another potential stumble block that can be traced in Russia and China's discourse on the Arctic is that of diverging views on Arctic governance. While China wishes to make Arctic governance more inclusive for non-Arctic states, thereby reshaping Arctic governance, Russia demonstrates great reluctance towards this, seeking to preserve the status quo to make sure Arctic states hold on to their privileged positions in the Arctic. This can be traced back in Russia's ongoing usage of binary language to emphasize this privileged position, referring to Arctic versus non-Arctic states, and regional and extra-regional states. However, the fact that Russia eventually accepted China as an observer state in the Arctic council in 2013 after having been reluctant to do so shows that Russia's opinion can be subject to change over time. At the same time, China seems rather content with the observer status it gained. It thus looks like Russia can continue walking a fine line for just a little longer, but the question is for how long.

Taking all these points in consideration, the Arctic discourse of Russia and China seems to be predominantly complementary in their common goals, most notably in their wish to maintain stability and peace in the High North and develop the region. Their discourse shows adaptation and tolerance towards one another, paving the way for intensifying their cooperation in the Arctic. This thesis therefore argues that Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic might prove to be fruitful for both, allowing for close coordination on shared issues, although not able to eliminate all forms of obstacles and hazards. Demonstrating different senses of urgency when it comes to their goals in the Arctic, Russia, for whom the threats to the Self are more acute than for China, is in a more vulnerable position in its cooperation with China in the Arctic. Yet, having both adopted a discourse that encourages mutually beneficial cooperation that shelves each other's differences, these hurdles are outweighed by the potential benefit their cooperation will bring about.

The melting icecaps in the Arctic has led to consolidating interests in the region, triggering sensational headlines and the conduct of traditional realist studies to assess the developing security scene in the region. Particularly China's growing presence in the region, together with its steady rise as a great power, has led to concern in the international and Arctic community. At the crossroads of this lies Russia, a traditional Arctic power seeking to find a fine balance between letting foreign powers in and preserving the privileged status of Arctic states at the same time. As the largest Arctic state, Russia is undoubtedly China's major gateway to the Arctic. Hence, their cooperation in this region has taken on a determining role in the overall relationship between the two states, representing a region where the potential as well as contention for the relationship exists simultaneously.

Having delved into a wide body of literature that predominantly points out the ways in which the relationship between China and Russia will not work, or if it does, only for a very short period of time, this thesis took on a post-positive stance by seeking to understand the ways in which the two countries conversely *can* and *will* make their relations work. It identified that the literature on general Sino-Russian relations predominantly focuses on the future trajectory of the relationship, most commonly referring to the balance of power theory, drawing an overall negative picture of the relationship in which Russia will not concede to a junior position role to China. Yet this fails to explain why their relationship has only been deepening over the past few years. It demonstrated that studies building on traditional notions of security offer a limited picture of what state interactions resemble in practice. While it may be useful to predict and ex post facto assess calamitous clashes in the Arctic region and beyond, it fails to make up for the current Sino-Russian relationship beyond a zero-sum continuum. What is interesting to assess is how the two have identified a clear interest in consolidating and expanding their cooperation *despite* their differences and growing imbalance. By adding a poststructuralist voice to the principally (neo)realist body of literature, this thesis sought to therefore answer the following question:

To what extent do the security discourses of Russia and China on the Arctic explain the compatibility of their cooperation in this region?

To answer this question, this thesis first delved into the scholarly literature on Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic. This allowed for the assessment of the similarities and discrepancies between the literature on the general Sino-Russian relations. It concluded that the literature on the Arctic points towards a more balanced relationship between the two powers, one in which their overlapping interests outweigh any diverging ones. While the material gaps between the two powers are indeed widening, of which the economic gap is the most acute after Russia became increasingly reliant on China since the installation of tough Western sanctions, China undoubtedly needs Russia on its side if it wishes to further its presence in the Arctic. In this sense, despite its diminishing political and economic power, Russia retains leverage over China as the largest Arctic state in the High North, especially given that China's ambitions in the Arctic are only bound to grow with the ice caps melting further. At the same time, Russia needs China to develop its Arctic resources and NSR, representing not only the key investor but also the key consumer market.

Going beyond the existing literature available on the topic, this thesis created a research design and analytical framework to conduct a PDA to assess the security discourse of China and Russia in the Arctic to build on the pre-existing knowledge. Adopting a poststructuralist lens, this section of the thesis allowed for the assessment of the 'unobservable' and 'immeasurable' contexts of the Sino-Russian relationship in the form of discourse that, as this thesis argues, to a great extent guide and direct the relationship despite its observable growing power disparity. It brought to the foreground the underlying dynamics at play in the Sino-Russian relationship in a region of increasing importance for the two. The PDA asked which threats, values and identities are being invoked by both China and Russia to understand their intensified cooperation in the Arctic region, while offering a framework that considers domestic-level-factors that influence bilateral affairs – factors that have so far been understudied in the existing literature.

This demonstrated and verified several insights that could already be drawn from the literature review, as well as added new conclusions. The PDA identified adaptation, tolerance, and complementarity towards one another in the two countries's discourses. With adaptation, the thesis identifies the way in which both countries have altered their discourse to reassure and accommodate each other's needs. In the case of Russia, it slowly but surely adopted China's discourse in considering the planet as a 'shared community for mankind'. As for China, it downplays its growing power and intentions in the region, building on the importance of mutually beneficial cooperation. This developed can be explained by the fact that both countries

know that they can significantly mean something to one another in the region, with China providing the means necessary for Russia to develop the Arctic, and thus secure, if not reaffirm, its power status, while the former has found a way to be present in the region. This would thus equate to a win-win type of cooperation in the Arctic.

In relation to the existing literature, the PDA demonstrates that the diverging interests between the two countries as indicated in the literature are the result of diverging threats to the Self: while for China sustained economic growth is crucial to *maintain* its power status, Russia needs to stimulate economic growth to *restore* its power. Yet by unpacking their security discourses, this thesis shows that what eventually matters is that both countries nevertheless end up securitizing the same issues in the Arctic, despite differing underlying perceived threats to the Self. In the case of the example of economic growth, both countries securitize economic development in the Arctic, in which they can cooperate and help each other out despite these underlying differences. In the end, they have the same overall goal, yet driven by different motives. This is in line with Trenin's identification of Sino-Russian relations as "never against each other, not always with each other."³³¹ The two countries carefully shelve their differences and work on topics on which they share a similar interest.

Building on this, this thesis emphasizes the special nature of Sino-Russian relations and calls for future studies to take this more into account when assessing their relationship. The two countries's model for cooperation allows for a reliable and flexible relationship that is unlike most modern-day bilateral relationships, and is therefore quite unique. Most of all, their relationship based on mutualism, respect, and flexibility may lay the groundwork for future partnerships to come in a post-Western world order. This does not mean that their relationship does not face obstacles and challenges along the way. As this thesis has identified, they will face plenty. In the case of the Arctic, this is primarily the result of different senses of urgency felt by the two powers. As for Russia, the threats to the Self in the Arctic are more acute than for China, it is particularly more vulnerable to risk during their cooperation in the Arctic. Yet, having both adopted a discourse that encourages mutually beneficial cooperation that shelves each other's differences, these hurdles are outweighed by the potential benefit their cooperation will bring about.

The Arctic discourses of Russia and China are predominantly complementary in their common goals, most notably in their wish to maintain stability and peace in the High North and

³³¹ Trenin, "How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World."

develop the region. This thesis therefore argues that Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic will prove to be fruitful for both, allowing for close coordination on shared issues. At the same time, given the increasing importance of the Arctic in the general relationship between Moscow and Beijing and the cooperative potential that is emerging in this region, there could be a possibility that, in the future, this supportive attitude will be extended to other areas and issues dominating the two nations mutual relationship.

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APPENDIX 1: SOURCES PDA

DOC #	ACTOR	DATE	TITLE	SOURCE
1.1	China	21/06/2017	China proposes 'blue economic passages' for maritime cooperation	http://english.scio.gov.cn/2017-06/21/content_41068108.htm
1.2	China	02/11/2014	China seeks pragmatic cooperation with Arctic countries	http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2014/11/02/content_281475004378060.htm
1.3	China	25/08/2017	China to further active engagement in Arctic affairs	http://english.www.gov.cn/state_council/ministries/2017/08/25/content_281475814288996.htm
1.4	China	20/06/2017	Full text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative	http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm
1.5	China	26/01/2018	SCIO briefing on China's policy on the Arctic	http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/2018-01/26/content_50814027.htm
1.6	China	20/05/2014	Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Vladimir Putin of Russia	https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1158516.shtml
1.7	China	20/03/2021	Xi leads China's grand reform of new era	http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2021-03/20/content_77330580.htm
1.8	China	02/11/2017	President Xi stresses commitment to good China-Russia relations	http://english.scio.gov.cn/2017-11/02/content_41833057.htm
1.9	China	05/06/2019	Xi's visit to open new prospects for China-Russia ties	http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2019-06/05/content_74855970.htm
1.10	China	26/01/2018	Full text: China's Arctic Policy	http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm
1.11	China	25/01/2021	Full Text: Special Address by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the World Economic Forum Virtual Event of the Davos Agenda	http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/25/c_139696610.htm
2.1	Russia	06/03/2020	Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035	https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2020/russias-new-arctic-policy-document-signals-continuity-rather-change#:~:text=The%20new%20policy%20document%20defines,the%20Arctic%20Council%20in%202021. And http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947

2.2	Russia	01/10/2019	Greetings on the opening of the 8th International Meeting of Representatives of Arctic Council Member States	http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61691
2.3	Russia	22/04/2014	Meeting of the Security Council on state policy in the Arctic	http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/deliberations/20845/photos
2.4	Russia	05/06/2014	Meeting on the efficient and safe development of the Arctic	http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45856
2.5	Russia	27/02/2012	Путин предлагает поймать "китайский ветер в паруса российской экономики" и помочь пострадавшей от кризиса Европе Translation: Putin offers to catch the "Chinese wind in the sails of the Russian economy" and help crisis-hit Europe	https://www.newsru.com/finance/27feb2012/putin_china.html
2.6	Russia	09/04/2019	Plenary session of the International Arctic Forum	http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/community_meetings/60250/photos
2.7	Russia	30/03/2017	The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue international forum	http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54149/photos
2.8	Russia	18/09/2008	Basics of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic - for the Period till 2020 and for a further perspective	http://www.arctisearch.com/Russian+Federation+Policy+for+the+Arctic+to+2020