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The bear and the dragon in the North: Russia-China cooperation in the Arctic



Rashmi B.R.

Updated : September 24, 2022, 8:16 PM

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China and Russia are often projected as allies in the Arctic. But their relation comes with a caution.

The war in Ukraine has once again raised questions on the future of the Arctic, a region that witnessed serious efforts for cooperation and peace in the post-Cold War years, despite the geopolitical rumblings between the great powers and the Crimean annexation in 2014. With Russia now isolated in the Arctic Council and the region at large, it is possible for more close cooperation with China on the economic front, however, there is an element of caution in their relations.

IMPORTANCE OF THE ARCTIC

Russia is by far the superpower in the Arctic, by the virtue of geography, with its territory covering nearly 50% of the region, its longest coastline with the Arctic Ocean explaining its strong intent to strengthen its position in the region. Russia's current moves to develop the Northern Sea Route, tap both off-shore and on-shore resources and the much-debated military build-up is not a newfound interest, rather a historical ambition that can be traced back to Novgorod city-state that established an Arctic outpost in Kola Peninsula as early as 12th century. The Arctic dominance continued through centuries and reached a high during the Soviet era.

China on the contrary is geographically distant from the Arctic and has a new found interest, primarily economics, connected to its 21st century global ambitions. It is a manufacturing hub that heavily depends on resources for domestic use and shipping, and is at the same time, a revisionist state that has great power ambitions. The Arctic offers resources (many still inaccessible) and a partial solution to the Malacca Dilemma

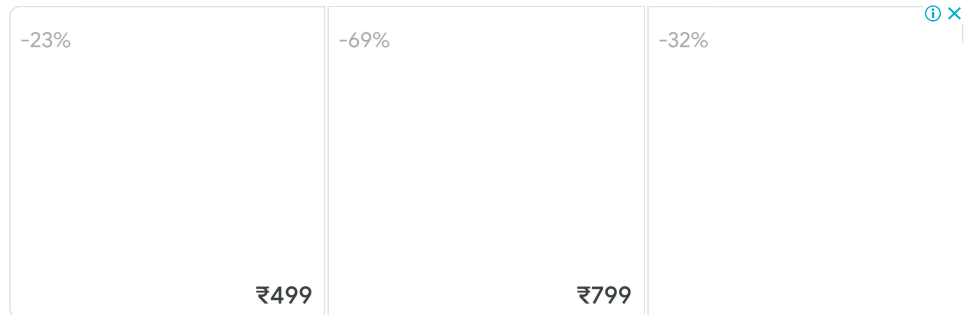
tourism.



THE COOPERATION

Talking about the increased Chinese factor, in 2012, Russian President Putin has said that he is “convinced that China’s economic growth is by no means a threat...We should seek...China’s potential—judiciously, of course—in order to develop the economy of Siberia and the Russian Far East.” The sanctions post-Crimean annexation in 2014, pushed Russia further into China’s hands. Russia heavily depended on Chinese investment in the Yamal LNG project, which began as a joint venture in 2013, between Novatek and China National Petroleum Corporation. CNPC’s current stake in the project is nearly 30%, which initially was 20%.

In 2015, Russia’s Ministry for Development of the Russian Far East and China’s National Development and Reform Commission signed an agreement for the cooperation on the NSR. In 2017, Putin and Xi Jinping agreed to build an “Ice Silk Road”, following the latter’s visit to Moscow. This was cemented in the Arctic Policy of 2018, when China announced to build the “Polar Silk Road”, an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Route.



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While there is significant Chinese investment in the NSR, the Polar Silk Road is more of a grand rhetoric, a political statement and positioning in the wake of dwindling Russia-West relations.

The war in Ukraine and the sanctions have pushed an already struggling Russian economy downward. It is therefore natural, if it sees China as a main market for its Arctic oil and gas alongside India. It is also a step towards being independent of the European energy market, the base for which was laid in 2014.

THE CAUTION

China and Russia are often projected as allies in the Arctic. Contrary to popular perception, there is no possibility of going further than economics, despite Russia’s political isolation in the North. Their relation comes with a caution.

China understands that partnerships are crucial for entering the Arctic, a closed group of eight countries. Russia is its main partner, but it has refrained from over-dependence and has diversified by investing in other

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Regarding shipping, Russia is developing the NSR rapidly, prioritizing as its plan for the next decade. NSR is an opportunity for Russia to emerge as a maritime power, probably for the first time in its history. The Polar Silk Road is a larger transport-infrastructure corridor that subsumes the NSR, the very identity of Russian Arctic, and this could be a bone of contention in the future. Legally, the NSR is in the Russian territorial waters and UNCLOS cannot guarantee freedom of navigation to China even if the Polar Silk Road becomes a reality. Clearly, Russia has the upper hand in deciding on the vessels that can navigate. It is also seeking partners like India, with which it has agreed on the Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor, in its attempt to develop the Far East region.

Politically, Russia is a strong Arctic state and intolerant towards any attempts to challenge its sovereignty and dominance in the Arctic. It keeps the political issues out of reach of the Observers. Russia and Canada also had reservations on China's application to become an Observer at the Council but agreed in 2013 and created a counterbalance by bringing four other Asian states.

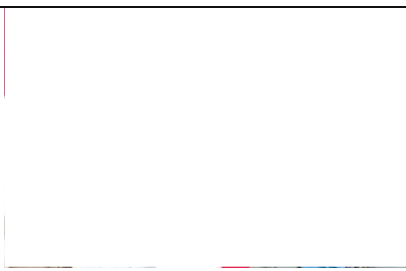
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Russia and China, therefore, will come closer for trade, pushed by the impacts of the war, but will ensure to keep the political issues of the Arctic away. The Arctic states are wary of external powers gaining control and they juggle between economic necessities and insecurity, treading the path of cautious cooperation. Sino-Russian relations in the North follow this model and is a defining case of a "Global Arctic" in the making.

Rashmi B.R. is a doctoral student, National Institute of Advanced Studies; Visiting Researcher, The Arctic Centre, University of Lapland.



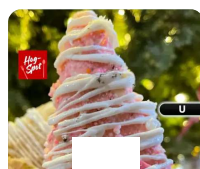
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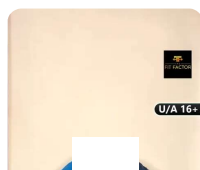
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