



Incompatible Strategic Cultures Limit Russian- Chinese Strategic Cooperation in the Arctic

JØRGEN STAUN 

CAMILLA T. N. SØRENSEN 

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to concern about the implications for Arctic governance and stability. The Arctic Council has been temporarily suspended and the security tension between Russia and the seven other Western Arctic states has intensified. A more isolated Russia under Western sanctions leans even more towards the East, where China, especially, figures as an attractive strategic partner. In this article, we set out to examine the prospects for Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic. We introduce a social constructivist perspective highlighting how strategic culture may serve as a lens through which to analyse developments in states' strategies – specifically their ends, ways and means. Applying our culturally applicable ends-ways-means (EWM) model, we show how Russian and Chinese strategic cultures set distinct limits to their strategic cooperation in the Arctic. The two states' identity-driven urge to secure and display their great power position will increasingly collide. It is therefore our prediction that Russia and China will eventually act in ways that will gradually come to undermine their strategic cooperation in the region.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Camilla T. N. Sørensen, Ph.D

Associate Professor, Royal
Danish Defence College, DK

caso@fak.dk

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How far will Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation go in the Arctic? This question has become only more pertinent following Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The neorealists dominate the theoretical debate on U.S.-China-Russia great power competition. Analysts such as John Mearsheimer (2019, p. 48) argue that the principal question in international politics going forward is whether Russia will align with China or the U.S. His own expectation derived from balance-of-threat logic is that although Russia is now more aligned with China, "it is likely to switch sides over time and ally with the U.S., simply because an increasingly powerful China is the greater threat to Russia, given their geographical proximity". In contrast, other neorealists with a departure point in balance-of-power logic expect Russia and China to further strengthen their alignment to balance the dominant position of the U.S. (see, for example, Blank, 2019; Lo, 2023).

In this article, we put forward a social constructivist perspective highlighting the importance of strategic culture. We argue that strategic culture offers an extra level of explanatory power supplementing and further expanding the neorealist balance-of-threat argument regarding the limitations of Russian-Chinese alignment. More specifically, our key argument is that Russian and Chinese strategic cultures imply distinct limits to their strategic cooperation in the Arctic. Russia's overall end is to regain a great power position in a multipolar international system and to retain its dominant role in the Arctic. This will, in the long run, clash with China's overall end of ensuring its position as a leading great power equal to the U.S. with global presence and influence, applicable also in the Arctic, where China sees itself as a "polar great power". Drawing on strategic culture theory, we hence present a culturally applicable ends-ways-means (EWM) model to examine Russian and Chinese strategic approaches in the Arctic, and to further discuss how compatible these strategic approaches are.

The scholarly focus on Arctic security is growing (see, for example, Gjørnv et al., 2020; Heininen & Exner-Pirot, 2020). Nevertheless, the evolving strategic cooperation between China and Russia in the region, encompassing the expansion of collaboration in energy and infrastructure, in science and technology, and in the political and military realm, remains understudied. Studies have been conducted on, for example, the integration of the Chinese "Polar Silk Road" design and the Russian plan for the Northern Sea Route (NSR), Russian-Chinese research cooperation on dual civilian-military use technologies such as hydroacoustics, and on the deepening dialogue between the two militaries with implications for the Arctic (see Kobzeva, 2020; Jüris, 2022; Brady, 2019). These studies are policy-oriented and predominantly descriptive, however, and tend to have a narrow focus on one or two aspects of the strategic cooperation or to predominantly take either a Russian or a Chinese perspective. What is missing in the literature is research focusing on identifying the aims and dynamics both driving and limiting the Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation, applying a comparative approach (that is, considering both the Russian and the Chinese perspective), and employing a well-defined analytical framework. We set out here to offer such an approach and framework. As underlined above, with regard to the dominant neorealist take, we highlight that there are more deep-seated identity-driven forces at work in and between the two states that shape the nature and content of their strategic cooperation in the Arctic.

Our article focuses on the Arctic for two reasons. Firstly, we foresee a serious strategic culture clash between Russia's quest for great power status and a more confident and assertive China in this region. The Arctic is closely connected to great power identity in Russian strategic culture, a fact that, in the long run, makes the region the most difficult for Russia to accommodate China as the leading great power. China is, however, likely to continue to seek to increase its presence and influence in the Arctic in the coming years. And we suspect that, as Chinese power grows, Beijing will become less concerned about reassuring and respecting Moscow. Thus, the risk to Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic is that the two states' identity-driven urges to ensure and demonstrate their great power position will increasingly clash.

The second – and policy-relevant – reason for our Arctic focus is that the manner in which the relationship between Russia and China evolves in the region will be directly consequential for Danish and Nordic security. If increased, Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation will elicit strong U.S. countermeasures, which will most likely further raise the security tension in the Arctic, leading to even stronger demands on Danish and Nordic defence capacity in the region.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we present our analytical framework. In the analysis following that, we identify the ends driving China's great power quest before foregrounding the objectives behind the evolving Chinese engagement in the Arctic. We then discuss how China's ways and means to promote its "Arctic stakeholder" position will likely change with Beijing seeking to increase its influence on governance in the Arctic and gradually establish a military presence in the region. In the second part of the analysis, we examine how the Arctic plays into Russia's quest for great power status and discuss Moscow's strategic approach in the region in the context of intensifying great power competition. In the third part of the analysis, we compare the expected developments in Chinese and Russian ends, ways and means – and discuss the implications for Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic. In the conclusion, we give an overall assessment of how one might expect the Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic to further develop and assess the policy implications.

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS: ENDS, WAYS AND MEANS SEEN THROUGH A STRATEGIC CULTURE LENS

In this article, we define strategic culture as "leading discourses regarding strategy, which exist across central power elites in a given country" (Poulsen & Staun, 2021, pp. 66–69; Libel, 2018; Lock, 2018). We operationalize strategic culture by combining it with Yarger's ends, ways and means (EWM) model. Yarger (2006, p. 6) defines *ends* as "what is to be accomplished"; *ways*, seen as courses of action, are defined as "how the ends are to be accomplished", while *means* are defined as "what specific resources are to be used to accomplish the ends". Our framework suggests that the formulation of ends and the choice of ways and means to attain them are shaped by the strategic culture and self-understanding of the country in question. Thus, strategy is to a large extent contingent on – and grounded in – the prevailing strategic culture of the country in question. Strategic culture therefore influences the creation and content of strategy at all levels: ends, ways and means. As an implication of the use of a strategic culture lens, ends emerge as broader narratives or discourses that take their departure in assessments made by central power elites of structures and dynamics, those both existing and desired, in the international system. This is why we argue below that analysis should begin by focusing on the broader worldviews of Beijing and Moscow before then turning to the Arctic.

With this culturally applicable EWM-model in hand, we set out to study the central drivers and trajectories of Chinese and Russian strategic approaches in the Arctic (that is, the expected developments in Chinese and Russian ends, ways and means) by employing a social constructivist reading of significant documents and political statements from central power elites in China and Russia. These are key texts that reflect the Chinese and Russian rationale and thinking behind their global engagement and, in particular, their Arctic engagement. Such official strategies and publications reflect debates and compromises between state elites: the most persuasive or dominant state narrative or discourse on a particular issue or question. Consequently, we look for discourses on what ends are to be accomplished in which ways and with which means. The applied methodology assumes that a certain set of central assumptions – or worldviews – set both the overall ends for China and Russia, respectively, and the boundaries for what is considered a legitimate and viable course of action to achieve these ends. To specify these worldviews and what they imply with regard to expected developments in China's and Russia's strategic approach in the Arctic, our reading strategy consists of the following questions.

Firstly, how do China and Russia respectively describe their role in the world, and especially in the Arctic? Who, or what, is threatening that role? These questions, concerning ends, follow from a general social constructivist reading of strategy, according to which the analyst looks for collective notions of the "self" – that is, Chinese/Russian notions of what China/Russia is and should be – and so-called conceptual constructions of "them versus us", on which most discourses are founded (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Wæver, 1993).

Secondly, regarding ways and means, how do China and Russia plan to pursue these ends? And, relatedly, which role do they ascribe to one another and their Arctic alignment?

Both sets of questions are essentially open; rather than presuming a priori ends, ways and means, we determine them along the way. A study focusing on policy documents and public speeches has its limits, of course, in the sense that we do not know whether what is said in

public is true, or whether there is another agenda concealed behind the public discourse. But by comparing what is said with any contemporaneous pattern of behaviour, we try to go beyond this reliance on public discourse. In order to further supplement our findings and assessments, we draw also on secondary material such as analyses by other scholars.

For this inquiry, regarding strategy, the principal Chinese documents are the various white papers on national defence and military strategy, and speeches by Chinese leaders on China's role and ambitions in the international system (e.g., [State Council, 2019](#); [Xi, 2014](#); [Xi, 2021b](#); [Yang, 2013](#); [Yang, 2019](#)). Concerning China's aims in the Arctic, the white paper on China's Arctic policy published in January 2018 ([State Council, 2018](#)) is central, among other authoritative Chinese strategic documents that touch on the country's evolving engagement in the Arctic (see, for example, [Xinhua, 2015](#); [Xinhua, 2017](#)). Our analysis on China focuses on the ways in which we might expect China's strategy in the Arctic to further develop; here we also have to project developments based both on trends that we see in China's strategy in other areas, such as the South China Sea, and on developments in Chinese overall strategic discourse and military modernization.

Russia's central strategic documents are the National Security Strategy, Military Doctrine, and the Foreign Policy Concept in their various versions over the years (see, for example, [President of the Russian Federation, 2021](#); [President of the Russian Federation, 2014](#); [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016, 2023](#)), and the records and laws that translate these into policy. When it comes more specifically to Russia's policies in the Arctic, we consult the Russian Arctic strategies, which are characterized – even more so than the overall strategic documents – by extensive compromises between a large number of ministries and governing bodies, parliamentarians, and so on, with the Presidential Administration and the Security Council as the most important institutions (see, for example, [President of the Russian Federation, 2020](#)). The Russian security elite's feeling of insecurity is explored by supplementing the above-mentioned speeches and documents with extracts from scholarly debates.

ANALYSIS: ROOM FOR BOTH RUSSIA AND CHINA AS GREAT POWERS IN THE ARCTIC?

In the first section below, structured around the EWM-model and following the reading strategy, we analyse and discuss developments expected in China's strategic approach in the Arctic. As argued above, we start the analysis focusing on central assumptions – worldviews – and overall ends, and then proceed to the Arctic ends, since we may consider these theatre-specific ends derived from the overall ends. The same goes for ways and means. This is repeated in the second section focusing on Russia. In the third section we pick up the main points from the previous two sections assessing the implications for the trajectory of Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic.

CHINA'S EVOLVING STRATEGIC APPROACH IN THE ARCTIC

Ends: How does China describe its role in the world and in the Arctic?

Regarding China's overall ends, in recent years Beijing has begun to assume the role of a great power. Whereas official documents and speeches have previously shown Chinese leaders focused on reassurances regarding the benign nature of Chinese intentions, and have generally gone to great lengths to emphasize how China is still a developing country, they are now increasingly emphasizing the country's arrival as a great power. This development in the discourse among Chinese leaders and top-diplomats is led by General Secretary and President Xi Jinping, who, most forcefully in his report to the 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in 2017, has underlined the profound changes visible in China's position and role in the international system. Regarding the overall ends, Xi (2017) stressed that the aim is for China to become “a global leader in terms of comprehensive national strength and international influence” by the “middle of the 21st century”. This is the core content of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴) – a notion or concept absolutely key to the CCP's narrative on the development of China's role in the international system ([Xi, 2012](#); [Xi, 2014](#); [Yang, 2013](#); [Yang, 2019](#)). It is the U. S. and its allies, especially Japan and, increasingly, Australia, which are the hostile “other” seeking to prevent the realization of China's national rejuvenation. Interestingly, Russia does not fill such a role, even though Imperial Russia was actually involved in the later

parts of the Opium War, being both an ally of Britain, France, and the U.S. and a negotiator with the elites of the Qing dynasty (see, for example, [Paine, 1996](#)).

In official statements and speeches, there is often a strong emphasis on ensuring international respect for China as a great power. The strongest example of this is Xi's ([2021a](#)) speech at the CCP's 100th anniversary celebrations in Beijing in July 2021 in which he stated: "We will never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate China. Anyone who dares try to do that will have their heads bashed bloody against the Great Wall of Steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people". Such a statement demonstrates how the Chinese consider the process of rejuvenation to be an inevitable restoration of fairness rather than as the gaining of advantages over others ([Qin, 2010](#)). Xi's speeches and statements further highlight how China increasingly wants to shape the international system – to increasingly become a "rule-maker" rather than a "rule-taker" (see, for example, [Xi, 2021b](#)). This reflects the development of a more confident China trying to take the initiative. This plays out differently in Chinese strategic approaches in the various regions, including in the Arctic, as discussed further below.

Regarding China's Arctic ends, Beijing increasingly stresses the need to be respected and included in the Arctic as an important stakeholder. This is reflected in a number of policy paper and speeches by high-ranked Chinese decision makers. In late January 2018, China released its first Arctic Policy White Paper ([State Council, 2018](#)). It represents the development of a more confident, proactive and sophisticated Chinese diplomacy in the region over the last decade. The white paper states that "China is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs. Geographically, China is a 'Near-Arctic State', one of the continental States that are closest to the Arctic Circle" ([State Council, 2018](#)). Such an assertive Chinese posture in the Arctic is not an entirely recent phenomenon. In 2014, Xi Jinping had already openly characterized China as a "polar great power" and directly linked Chinese ambitions in the polar regions to the nation's goal of becoming a maritime great power ([Brady, 2017, pp. 3, 109; Martinson, 2019](#)).

China's main argument for why it is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs is that, since climate change in the Arctic has global implications, it is, therefore, not up to the Arctic states alone to establish the rules and norms for the future development of and access to the region and its resources. Non-Arctic states like China also have a role to play. It is noteworthy how the Chinese specifically highlight non-Arctic specific agreements and regulations:

China will participate in regulating and managing the affairs and activities relating to the Arctic on the basis of rules and mechanisms. Internationally, China is committed to the existing framework of international law including the UN Charter, UNCLOS [the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea], treaties on climate change and the environment, and relevant rules of the International Maritime Organization ([State Council, 2018](#)).

In relation to our focus on Chinese-Russian strategic cooperation in the Arctic, given that Moscow insists on Arctic governance being a matter for Arctic states, Chinese ambitions to participate in Arctic governance and to promote "general international law" ([State Council, 2018](#)), so challenging Arctic-specific governance, are a particular cause of potential tension. Furthermore, Moscow is likely to be concerned by the way that Beijing defines the Arctic and the Antarctic, together with the seabed and outer space, as "new strategic frontiers" (战略新疆) crucial for advancing Chinese innovation and technology ([Xinhua, 2015](#)). In recent years, Beijing has made it clear through key strategic documents and policies that it aims to raise the level of its technological capabilities in the Arctic. With clear intentions for these capabilities to be dual use, i.e., for civilian and military purposes, it thus links up with Beijing's ambition to develop a world-class military by 2049 ([Sørensen & Hsiung, 2021](#)).

Ways and means: How does China pursue its ends, in the world and in the Arctic?

Beijing principally employs three kinds of ways and means. The relative weight of each is adjusted to the particular state or region in question.

Firstly, the Chinese use their now-stronger economy to offer investments and attractive trade deals. Secondly, the now-stronger Chinese military is used in a more active way, both to project an image of China as a responsible and constructive great power (participation in UN missions or in anti-piracy operations, for example), and to deter and intimidate other states from

challenging its interests (the comprehensive Chinese military exercises around Taiwan following the August 2022 visit of Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, for example). Thirdly, the Chinese have – as part of the focus on being a “rule-maker” instead of a “rule-taker” – increased their so-called lawfare activities, where they more directly question and challenge the legality and effectiveness of existing legal and institutional frameworks. This is evident on particular issues, such as non-proliferation, or in relation to the regulation of access and activities in specific regions such as the Arctic (as discussed further below). China endeavours to promote legal and institutional frameworks that better reflect its views and ensure its interests. As the nation’s political and diplomatic weight grows, it is easier for Beijing to win support for its suggestions and interpretations in institutions such as the bodies of the United Nations (see [Carty & Gu, 2021](#); [Gill, 2022](#), pp. 135–161).

Over the last decade, China has employed ways and means in a more “reward-and-punish” manner. Such a coercive turn is, however, presented by Beijing in terms of a defensive response to hostile U.S. or U.S.-led actions ([Qin, 2023](#)). China sees itself on the right side of history in restoring its position in the international system. A key point here is that the combination of a sense of rightfulness and growing confidence is likely to result in a decrease in both China’s willingness to compromise and in its focus on restraint and reassurance, which have so far been central as a precondition for developing Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic.

Regarding Arctic ways and means, Beijing is keenly aware that, not having Arctic territory, it is necessary that the Arctic states see benefits in having China involved. Its key focus is thus to establish strong and comprehensive relationships with the Arctic states and stakeholders, and to gradually increase China’s presence and influence in Arctic legal institutions and regulatory mechanisms. In the Arctic, Beijing has therefore prioritized employing its economic weight, including offers of access to Chinese scientific knowledge and technological advances, and lawfare activities ([Sørensen, 2021](#)). China thus seeks to gradually “knit” itself into the region on multiple levels by proposing benefits to the Arctic states and stakeholders.

In order to ameliorate concern among the Arctic states of an overly assertive Chinese approach, Beijing has so far been careful to balance proactiveness and reassurance. If the careful knitting tactics do not prove sufficiently successful, China is likely to become less patient and to adopt a more assertive line, as seen developing in the South China Sea in recent years ([Mastro, 2021](#)). Again, Beijing sees itself as a legitimate and important Arctic stakeholder.

A more confident and assertive Chinese approach to Arctic engagement is already discernible in its lawfare activities. China generally considers the Arctic governance regime to be provisional and unsettled, with opportunities for non-Arctic great powers such as itself to shape both its further development and the institutionalization of the rules and regulations in the region (see, for example, [Pan, 2019](#); [Zhang, 2019](#); [Li et al., 2017](#)). As stated in the Arctic white paper: “The governance of the Arctic requires the participation and contribution of all stakeholders” ([State Council, 2018](#)). Implicit here is a Chinese effort to promote legal and institutional frameworks in the region that would give non-Arctic states more influence. Beijing could arguably do this directly, using its role as an observer in the Arctic Council, for example, to obstruct from within by questioning the competence of the Arctic Council. It could also be done indirectly by supporting other groups with similar interests, such as Arctic Indigenous people or groups that also want a bigger say. There is a lively debate in China on the attractiveness of such tactics, and Chinese Arctic scholars often question the Arctic governance system, calling for revisions.

The current temporarily suspension of the Arctic Council – or Western boycott of Russia’s chairmanship following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 could give the Chinese more ammunition for their argument that the council, and the current legal and institutional framework privileging Arctic states generally, is not sufficient to deal with the challenges developing in the region. We have not, so far, seen Beijing use this pretext to openly challenge the Arctic Council – in contrast to Svalbard, where Chinese representatives have openly challenged Norwegian authority, for example during an exchange at the Svalbard Science Forum in 2019 ([Hanger, 2019](#)). Chinese Arctic scholars and experts often point out that Norwegian sovereignty on Svalbard is limited due to the principle of non-discrimination, stating that signatory states, China among them, are entitled to the right of residence on the archipelago, and to fish, hunt or undertake any kind of maritime, industrial, mining or trade-related activity ([Lu, 2019](#)). If this is solely directed at Norwegian sovereignty, it is full in accordance with Russia’s position on Svalbard, who has also been questioning Norway’s sovereignty rights. If this, on the other hand,

is the start of a broader Chinese challenge to Arctic governance, it will meet strong resistance among the Arctic states, including Russia.

Regarding Chinese military ways and means, there is no doubt that the Chinese military is seeking to gain more knowledge and experience of Arctic, or rather polar-specific, operations (Martinson, 2019). We are already seeing signs of how Chinese research facilities and activities in the Arctic play an important role in building knowledge and experience of navigating in the region, something also significant for the Chinese Navy. The Chinese research facilities in the Arctic also play a part in the rollout of China's BeiDou-2 (北斗-2) navigation satellite system, and its space science programme and weather forecasting systems. These facilities, systems and programs evidently have dual-use character. While we have not, so far, seen any deployment of Chinese military capabilities in the region, the development of a world-class military by 2049 is a key component of Xi's "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". Involving the development of capabilities allowing the Chinese military to project power beyond the nation's borders and coastlines, this will also likely play a role in the development of Chinese military presence in the Arctic.

China's evolving strategic approach in the Arctic – summary

China sees itself as a great power. This includes in the Arctic. Beijing wants great power respect, status and influence, and sees the U.S. as increasingly hostile and not willing to accept it as an equal. It is thus the U.S. – with its allies and partners – that threatens the fulfilment of China's great power ambitions. In the context of intensifying tension with the U.S, and a generally more critical assessment of China in the other Arctic states, China's strategic cooperation with Russia in the Arctic will be increasingly important for Beijing. It is therefore likely that Beijing will continue to seek to advance Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic in the years to come. The question, then, is how such efforts will be met on the Russian side, especially as Russia begins to note China increasingly challenging Arctic governance through lawfare activities and both the extension of its economic, scientific and technological interests and the use of its dual-use facilities.

RUSSIA'S EVOLVING STRATEGIC APPROACH IN THE ARCTIC

Ends: How does Russia describe its role in the world and in the Arctic?

In terms of Russia's overall goals, the dominant objective, constant under the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, is to ensure that Russia is a leading great power in the international system. The great power discourse can be seen in all major Russian strategy papers over the years; in Putin's reign, it has evolved from being somewhat more than a "regional great power" to be "a leading world power" and "one of the sovereign centres of world". Thus, in Russia's foreign policy concept from 2000, Russia is referred to as a "great power, as one of the most influential centers in the modern world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000). The 2008 foreign policy concept states that Russia's "increased role" in international affairs and "increased responsibility for global developments" make it necessary to "rethink the priorities of Russian foreign policy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). This rethink is visible in the 2009 National Security Strategy, where Russia is referred to as a "world power" (*mirovaya derzhava*) (President of the Russian Federation, 2009b). The 2015 National Security Strategy states that Russia strives to be "a leading world power" (President of the Russian Federation, 2015). In the 2021 National Security Strategy, the leading world power notion has been replaced by the role of "one of the influential centers of the modern world" (President of the Russian Federation, 2021, p. 10). In the Foreign Policy Concept from 2023 Russia is labelled "one of the sovereign centres of the world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

The great power discourse is also present in many of Putin's speeches, and in speeches by other top figures in Moscow's elite such as Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (Putin, 1999; Putin, 2007; Putin, 2014; Shoigu, 2018; Lavrov, 2016; Patrushev, 2014; Patrushev, 2015).

The great power discourse includes a whole set of perceptions of what the world looks like and how international relations should be understood. Thus, the Russian elite essentially has a "Hobbesian view of the world," as Robert Legvold (2007) puts it: it regards the world as a dangerous place and the international system as anarchic, with each state having to take care

of itself or otherwise perish. A great power position is thus the best way to secure survival of the state. Russia has been strongly critical of the unipolar world order led by the U.S., and even though Moscow argues that power is shifting towards the East – and they themselves have made an official pivot to the East – they do not regard the world as shifting towards bipolarity between the U.S. and China. Rather, they see the world as already being multipolar, with Russia as one of the poles or centres (President of the Russian Federation, 2009b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013, 2016, 2023).

Another central feature of Russia's strategic culture is its basic feeling of vulnerability and insecurity. Thus, in the Russian political and military leadership, according to Stephen R. Covington (2016, p. 16), there is a basic sense of geostrategic and technological vulnerability. The vast Russian territory – over 17 million square km, a land border of just under 20,000 km and a coastline of over 37,000 km, much of it in the Arctic – is, from the vantage of Russian strategic culture, basically impossible to defend, anywhere, at any one time. The sense of vulnerability is probably also a result of historical lessons learned from the two wars of existential significance in modern times in which Russia, including the Soviet Union, was involved. In both cases, the enemy came from the west across the Ukrainian and Belarusian plains: the armies of Napoleon between 1803 and 1815 and Hitler between 1941 and 1945. During the Cold War, the dominant threat came also from the West. An overarching Russian end is thus to seek to reduce its inherent feeling of vulnerability and insecurity by securing a sphere of “privileged interests” in its Eurasian neighbourhood, especially in its “near abroad”-facing west. Moscow thus essentially perceived Ukraine's drift toward the West as a major threat both to its security interests and its great power status.

To focus on the Arctic, it is clear that the region is central to Russia's great power vision, not only because Russia actually stands as the largest power in the region, measured in both the extent of its territory and the size of its military and economic presence (Grajewski, 2017, p. 142), but also because the Arctic continues to play a historically significant role in Russian identity. Whereas Greenland is geographically separated from Denmark, as Alaska is from the contiguous U.S., the Arctic is an integral part of Siberia and an integral part of Russian politics and worldview. Just as the discovery and conquest of Siberia have played a central role in Russian (and Soviet) identity over the centuries, so have the great voyages of discovery in the Arctic. As Marlene Laruelle argues, the elite-driven narrative of the Russian Arctic “cultivates the national imagery of regeneration of great Russian power through a kind of Arctic rebirth” (see Grajewski 2017, p. 146). In the best heroic style, the Russian press regularly reports on Arctic expeditions, on the development of new military bases in the Arctic, or the testing of new weapons systems specifically developed for the difficult Arctic conditions (see, for example, Karnozov, 2020). The essence of these debates is that the Arctic plays a special identity role for Russia in two ways.

Firstly, the Arctic is seen as the place where Russia can recover from the derailment and humiliation of the 1990s, securing its greatness by exploiting the enormous resources expected to be found underground, essentially establishing the Russian Arctic as a means to retain or regain its great power status. Thus, in Russia's Arctic Strategies from 2008 (President of the Russian Federation, 2009a) and 2013 (President of the Russian Federation, 2013) Russia's interests in the Arctic are boiled down to using “the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation as a strategic resource base”. First of all, this concerns oil and gas exploration. Since most of the known reserves are located within Russia's 200-nautical mile limit, Russia has a marked interest in securing the stability of the application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which gives it the sole right to exploit these fields. Russia is a strong supporter of the UNCLOS rules (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023) and interprets it in the same way as the other Arctic coast states, arguing that it is a region, unlike Antarctica, where coastal states have an exclusive right to use resources under the seabed and the water column to the 200 sea mile limit – the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Although it has not yet been an issue of great importance, in essence this is an area where China and Russia have divergent interests.

Secondly, sovereignty has become a priority for Russian central elites in discussions of the Arctic, where the risk of losing control of the region is considered nothing less than the risk of the loss of a central part of Russia and of Russian identity. The establishment of control over the Russian Arctic is thus an important end in itself. This is reflected in Russia's Arctic Strategy from

2020, where the question of sovereignty was moved to the forefront. This further connects with the growing Russian emphasis on ensuring military superiority in the Russian part of the Arctic, including an intact second strike capability. The focus on national interests and sovereignty gained additional weight in March 2023 when Russia amended its 2020 Arctic strategy. In the 2023 amended version of the strategy, the focus on strengthening cooperation within Arctic multilateral fora such as the Arctic Council (formerly termed the “leading regional association”), the Coastal Arctic Five and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, was thus replaced by a focus on “development of relations with foreign states on a bilateral basis” ... “taking into account the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic” (President of the Russian Federation, 2023). The same position can be seen in the new version of the Foreign Policy Concept (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Taken together, these propositions underline the need to increase cooperation with China in the Arctic, while simultaneously setting limits as to how much, and under what terms, Russia can enjoy such cooperation.

Ways and means: How does Russia pursue its ends in the world and in the Arctic?

In order to fulfil its great power status aspirations, Russia has pursued a policy of internal balancing (Waltz, 1979, p. 168). In other words, it has been building up its military. After the war in Georgia in 2008, which Russia won but which showcased a number of fallacies within the Russian armed forces, Russia started a comprehensive military reform and rebuilt and modernized its military capabilities. In several respects Russia has for some years now been seen as a match for NATO, at least on European soil. A view which is being challenged by Russia’s lacklustre performance in Ukraine since 2022. Much of this build-up is a result of Russia’s sense of vulnerability and due to the Hobbesian world view of the elite. Therefore, Russia places great importance on spheres of influence and on establishing buffer zones, – which some scholars use to explain Russia’s war in Georgia and Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014; Götz & Staun, 2022), and Russia’s enduring emphasis on securing control over Belarus. However, the buffer zone emphasis also plays a role in Russia’s policy in the Arctic including when it comes to its views on a growing Chinese presence and influence in the region.

In order to develop the Arctic as a resource base for oil and gas extraction, Russia has to invest heavily – or attract investment from the outside – in infrastructure in the area, so that the oil and gas can be processed and transported to consumers. This is politically most visible in the ambition to enhance the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Putin in 2018 publicly set a goal of increasing the commercial traffic ten-fold to 80 million tons before 2025 (Putin 2018). Later it was enhanced to 130 million tons before 2030 (Staalesen, 2023).

The notion of the ‘Arctic as a resource base’ gives Russia a strong interest in securing the Arctic as an area where it can trade in peace and harmony and where access to subsoil resources flows UNCLOS rules. Resource extraction in the Arctic requires long-term investment and this requires certainty about financing. In addition, a number of known fields are located in areas offshore which are difficult to access. As a result, Russia initially invited Western energy companies to participate in the development of the fields as can be seen in the Arctic strategy from 2013 (President of the Russian Federation, 2013). However, following the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, which prompted Western sanctions, there have been restrictions on what Western companies can participate in, and many of the previous cooperation agreements have been scrapped. Instead, Russia for a long time sought to replace Western companies with Chinese energy companies and companies from other Asian countries. Russian cooperation with China on resource extraction and infrastructure development in the Russian Arctic plays a critical role for Russia in these efforts. Chinese companies have been able to purchase stakes in the two LNG projects on the Yamal Peninsula and cooperate with Russia on several other related projects (Wishnick, 2021). However, Russia has also sought to promote stronger relations and involvement in resource extraction and infrastructure development in the Russian Arctic from other Asian countries such as India, Japan and especially South Korea.

In this respect Russia’s sense of vulnerability sets distinct limits to the level of cooperation with other states in the Arctic, including China. Thus, the idea that Russia is best protected if it is surrounded by friendly states (under political control) or military buffer zones has profoundly influenced Russia’s military build-up in the Arctic. Moscow has been reopening old Soviet bases

and building new ones with military runways, as well as short-, medium- and long range air defence systems along parts of the northern shores. Furthermore, Russia has been deploying long-range missile systems on land and on navy vessels – primarily corvettes and frigates – rendering the Northern Fleet, which nowadays is basically a coastal fleet, more long range and offensive. This is mainly directed at the U.S. and NATO, but if China at some point wants to deploy for example nuclear submarines to Arctic waters, this will also concern them. The essence of this is that Russia wants to be in control of whom travels the NSR (and adjacent waters) and with what purpose. Therefore, Russia wants parts of the NSR – straits like the Kara Gate, and the Vilkitskii, Dmitry Laptev and Sannikov straits – to be internationally recognized as “internal waters” partly so the Russian state can better tax it, but mainly so Russia can better legitimately control who uses the shipping route (Overfield 2021). Something which, incidentally, the U.S. is strongly opposed to and says it will challenge at some point (United States Department of Defense, 2019). Russia has introduced a law requiring ships to give 45 days’ notice and accept a Russian pilot on board for passage along the NSR (Staalesen, 2019). So far there has been no strong reaction or clear position from China on this issue, but as Chinese interests in using the NSR increase in the long term, it is likely that China will also come to question this position.

Russia’s evolving strategic approach in the Arctic – summary

Russia wants to be a leading power in a multipolar international system and to be the leading power in the Arctic. To support this, the Russian government wants to use the Russian Arctic as a resource base for its economy and to exploit the vast resources of oil, gas, minerals and fish. Here Russia has common interests with China and has, to some extent, become dependent on Chinese support because of Western sanctions. Russia has a general interest in promoting partnerships with non-Western (including Chinese) energy companies and financial institutions to develop the Russian Arctic. In addition, Russia has promoted transnational shipping in the Arctic with a view to developing the NSR commercially to support energy extraction policies.

On the other hand, an inherent sense of vulnerability is ingrained in Russia’s strategic culture. To counter this insecurity and to underpin its great power role in the face of growing great power competition, Russia has been placing more emphasis on sovereignty. First of all, Russia wants to secure its sea-based nuclear second strike capability in the Arctic. To this end, it has built what is essentially a buffer zone along parts of its northern shores. Moscow also wants to have parts of the NSR recognized as “internal waters” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, #50,3) thus securing control over it. In particular, it wants to keep the inner parts of the Barents Sea – where most of Russia’s surface vessels and submarines with nuclear weapons are based – free of foreign naval vessels, including Chinese vessels. This could eventually clash with China’s desire to become a maritime great power, including in the Arctic. Another point of contention with China is Russia’s deliberate use – along with the other Arctic coastal states – of UNCLOS rules as the main international framework for Arctic governance, to keep influence from non-Arctic countries to a minimum.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRAJECTORY FOR RUSSIAN-CHINESE STRATEGIC COOPERATION IN THE ARCTIC

While they share the overall focus on confronting what both Moscow and Beijing see as a hostile and threatening U.S., Russia and China have conflicting ends when it comes to their views on their respective roles in the future international system. Russia wants to be a leading great power but realize that role will become increasingly difficult if the world moves towards a bipolar standoff between China and the U.S. Even if China officially adheres to multipolarity, it increasingly measures and positions itself solely in relation to the U.S. China thus assesses its strategic cooperation with Russia in terms of the benefits this cooperation brings in China’s confrontation with the U.S. As the power asymmetry continues to grow to China’s advantage, it is highly likely that a more confident Beijing will increasingly feel entitled to set the tone in the strategic partnership with Russia and will push for emphasis on Chinese concepts and ideas – on the development of the future international order, for example. We are already seeing strong signs of this, most recently in the 2022 Joint Statement, in which Beijing expressed support for the Russian critique of NATO enlargement for the first time. When it came to describing the preferred international development, however, Chinese concepts and ideas were clearly

dominant (President of Russia, 2022). To leave the dominant role and the initiative to China does not come easily for Russia, being incompatible with Russian great power identity. The Russian reservation shines through in some of the formulations of its official statements:

The Russian side notes the significance of the concept of constructing a “community of common destiny for mankind” proposed by the Chinese side to ensure greater solidarity of the international community and consolidation of efforts in responding to common challenges (President of Russia, 2022).

According to Lukin (2021, p. 166), Beijing’s intensified effort to push Chinese concepts and official statements on various issues and thus to shape the narrative of joint declarations and treaties provokes a growing discontent in Russia. As seen in the 2022 Joint Statement, Russia has accepted the Chinese concept of “community of common destiny” as well as “the new era of Sino-Russian relations” – but not without internal dissent (see Denisov & Lukin, 2021, pp. 545–546). Such internal dissent in Russia is likely to grow with the increase in Chinese confidence and assertiveness.

As China develops its goal of becoming a world class military power and a maritime great power, Russia’s deeply ingrained insecurity and feeling of vulnerability will also grow. As demonstrated above, it will be particularly so in the Arctic, given that Russia’s great power identity is closely connected to the region. Moscow will therefore find it extremely difficult to make room for and to accommodate China as the leading great power there. In other words: while Russia and China have expanded their strategic cooperation in the Arctic in recent years, there are serious stumbling blocks to further expansion.

Russia wants to retain its position as the leading power in the Arctic and to preserve the privileges of the Arctic states in relation to Arctic governance. Such ends will increasingly be challenged by a more assertive China insisting on being respected and included in the region as a great power, and on gaining a decisive role and influence on the region’s governance regime. As mentioned above, China shows a preference for non-Arctic specific agreements and regulations, which until now has been met with strong resistance in Russia. Here it is worth noting the statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Special Envoy to the Arctic, Nikolay Korchunov that

it is impossible to disagree with U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo’s statement made in May 2019 that there are two groups of countries — Arctic and non-Arctic ... He said so in relation to China, which positioned itself as a near-Arctic state. We disagree with this (quoted in Wishnick, 2021)

In this one sentence, Korchunov says that China, in Russia’s view, is not an Arctic state and therefore should not enjoy comparable rights. Arctic governance, in other words, is for Arctic states. It should be remembered that Russia initially opposed China’s observer status in the Arctic Council until China agreed to recognize the privileges and rights of the Arctic states (Wishnick, 2020, p. 6). However, Beijing has since gradually moved and is increasingly challenging Russia’s – and the other Arctic states’ – position in line with its overall ambition of becoming “rule-maker” instead of “rule-taker”. Increasing Chinese lawfare activities, especially, are to meet strong resistance in Russia.

Seen from Moscow, it is crucial to maintain and demonstrate Russian sovereignty in the Russian Arctic. Moscow, in other words, will not allow serious questions or challenges to its economic sovereignty or to its security, its military dominance, in the Russian Arctic. Such challenges are not unthinkable, however, should the Chinese military, through dual-use activities and facilities, increase its presence in the region, or if Chinese companies (large state-owned shipping, infrastructure construction or resource-extraction companies, for example) or banks gain a dominant stake in projects in the Russian Arctic. Indeed, following Western sanctions associated with the war in Ukraine, such scenarios have become more likely. It is not only a question of the Russian side losing control over the projects and missing out on actual profit or other material gains, but also the potential for the area to be decreasingly recognized as Russian territory, a vital constituent of the Russian sphere of influence and, hence, a pillar of Russian great power status. If Moscow is no longer able to uphold the picture of Russia as *the* Arctic great power, it will cost it the recognition and respect more generally of it being a great power.

Consequently, it is likely that Russia and China, sharing complementary interests and a perception of a hostile U.S., should remain committed to further developing their strategic cooperation in the Arctic in the near term. They will thus seek to manage the sources of concern and tension. And due to its dire economic position as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, Russia will most likely be able and willing to accept more than it otherwise would. We may be partly seeing the framework for this being set in the new Foreign Policy Concept from 2023, where it is stated that Russia in the Arctic will give priority to “establishing mutually beneficial cooperation with non-Arctic states pursuing a constructive policy towards Russia and interested in carrying out international activities in the Arctic, including the infrastructural development of the Northern Sea Route” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). In our view, this is mainly addressed to China. Taken together with Russia’s new borne reservations vis-à-vis the Arctic Council and other multilateral Arctic fora and prioritisation of “relations with foreign states on a bilateral basis”, as stated in the amendments to its 2020 Arctic strategy (2023), it points towards more Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic in the near future and possibly also further alignment of Russian interests with Chinese wishes.

In the long run, however, we argue that widespread accommodation to China is not sustainable, as Russia will not accept its relatively declining position and excessive dependence on China. Besides being incompatible with the Russian great power identity, with time it will also come to restrict Russia’s policy options and force unwelcomed concessions. The Chinese side, employing its ways and means more assertively, will come to be less diligent in its reassurances and respect concerning Russia’s need for great power recognition.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have propounded a social constructivist perspective emphasizing how strategic culture offers an extra level of explanatory power supplementing and further expanding the neorealist balance-of-threat argument regarding the limitations on Russian-Chinese alignment. Our core assertion is that strategic culture works as a lens through which to analyse developments in states’ strategies – specifically their ends, ways and means. Applying the culturally applicable ends-ways-means (EWM) model to examine Russian and Chinese strategic approaches in the Arctic, we have shown how Russian and Chinese strategic cultures set distinct limits to their strategic cooperation in the Arctic. Russia’s overall end is to regain a great power position in a multipolar international system and to retain its dominant role in the Arctic. This will in the long run clash with China’s overall end of guaranteeing its position as a leading great power equal to the U.S. in global presence and influence. For a country that sees itself as a “polar great power,” this includes the Arctic. China is set to enhance its economic, political and military power vis-à-vis the stalling Russian economy. This will further encourage China’s confidence and sense of entitlement. We contend that, over time, China will have less of a focus on reassuring Russia and a more narrow focus on securing what it considers its interests and rights in the region, thus employing its ways and means, including lawfare and military, in a more assertive manner. This will increasingly clash with Russia’s intrinsic sense of vulnerability, stressing its great power identity and leading to more insecure and restrictive Russian behaviour towards China. Both China and Russia, in other words, are expected to act in ways that will gradually undermine their strategic cooperation in the region.

Above, we have focused on developments in, and dynamics between, the Russian and Chinese strategic approach in the Arctic. An important factor, however, is the development in both Russian and Chinese perceptions of the U.S. How Washington’s strategy and actions are seen in Moscow and Beijing play a significant role in shaping the contours of the Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic (see [Wishnick, 2021](#); [Boulégué, 2022](#)). It is clear that changes in U.S. policy toward one or both states, such as the removal of sanctions on Russia or an easing on trade restrictions on China, could have an impact. An improvement in the U.S.-Russia relationship (albeit rather unlikely in the short term, given the renewed Russian war in Ukraine) could lead Russia to actively acknowledge the long-term implications of its strategic cooperation with China in the Arctic. Today, Moscow sees the most acute security threat coming from the U.S. and NATO, which necessitates more room for Russian-China strategic cooperation. Furthermore, regarding Chinese perceptions of U.S. strategy and actions, it is likely that any further worsening of relations could result in Beijing being careful to continue to reassure Russia.

That there are limits to the strategic cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic is, at first glance, good news for Arctic stability and security. As we highlight in the introduction, strengthened Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation in the Arctic will provoke strong countermeasures from the U.S., most likely to further raise the security tension in the region and result in even stronger demands on Danish and Nordic defence capacity. It is, however, likely that in the short- to mid-term, with Moscow facing intensifying conflicts with the U.S. and NATO and directing its focus on the war in Ukraine, Russia and China will continue to develop their strategic cooperation in the Arctic in a pragmatic way. Open attempts to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing would be met with a high level of suspicion by both and would be more likely to consolidate their strategic partnership than damage it. The other Arctic states should, rather, focus on potential points of friction and mistrust between Russia and China and seek to exploit those. As also pointed out by Boulégué (2022), it will require better coordination and unity between the other Arctic states.

With Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the following Western constraints and sanctions on cooperation and trade, including the temporarily suspension of the Arctic Council, Arctic governance is stalled creating a dangerous vacuum. As argued above, it could result in better conditions for Chinese lawfare activities pushing for an internationalization of Arctic governance or presenting a competing format to the Arctic Council that would leave more influence to non-Arctic states such as China. The pausing of the Arctic Council, that is, could ultimately give China better ammunition for its long-standing argument against any Arctic exceptionalism and the special privileges of Arctic states. As also stressed in the analysis above, this presents a clear point of friction between China and Russia, since Russia is a strong supporter of the UNCLOS regime, and the issue of preserving Arctic governance could be a way to gradually restart dialogue with Russia in an Arctic context. The strength of Russia's position for negotiations with China, including on Arctic issues, has weakened in recent years. This could have strong negative implications for Arctic governance and, thus, stability in the long run.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Jørgen Staub, Ph.D.  orcid.org/0000-0003-2142-5123
Associate Professor, Royal Danish Defence College, DK

Camilla T. N. Sørensen, Ph.D.  orcid.org/0000-0002-4488-0404
Associate Professor, Royal Danish Defence College, DK

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