



All Quiet on the Northern Front? Russian Media Coverage of Russia-China Arctic Cooperation

Natalia Moen-Larsen and Wrenn Yennie Lindgren

Brief Summary

- This research paper explores the extent and focus of China's engagement in the Russian Arctic from one key Russian official media outlet, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, and highlights how the daily's coverage provides further context for understanding Russia's approach to China in the Arctic.
- Russia's official newspaper predominantly focuses on domestic issues in the Arctic and not on international affairs. However, when international affairs are part of the coverage, China in the Arctic is mentioned often compared to Arctic Council member states. We find that the only member that is mentioned more often than China is the United States. Furthermore, in 2023 China received more coverage than the United States in terms of number of articles.
- When China is mentioned, the focus of the coverage primarily concerns cooperation within the Arctic oil and gas sector and on interests in the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR).
- China is described as a partner in oil and gas projects in the Russian Arctic and the Arctic is in general represented as an area of interest for the Chinese energy sector.
- The NSR is addressed not only in relation to it being a passage that allows for increased trade (including energy) and more general connectivity between the two countries that will benefit both sides, but also as a geostrategically significant route that can be used as an alternative route between Asia and Europe should there be security issues or blockages in other passages.
- Overall, the limited Russian official press coverage of a Russian-Chinese convergence in the Arctic suggests that it is not presented to the Russian public as a priority for the administration and that how and if the declaration of a no-limits partnership applies in the Arctic remains to be determined.

Introduction

Currently much media attention is being paid to developments in the relationship between Russia and China in the Arctic.¹ The declaration of a no-limits partnership on the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine put the ongoing deepening of Russia-China state-level and private sector cooperation in a new light. Western responses to the invasion of Ukraine and the establishment of the sanctions regime also resulted in the bilateral relationship gaining importance relatively, as relations with other actors evaporated.

The significance of Russia-China relations in the Arctic is debated. Some analysts claim that China and Russia are forming a great power alliance in the Arctic (Spohr 2023)², noting declarations for enhanced cooperation in strategically significant areas for both countries and the Arctic more broadly (i.e. coast guard cooperation, Northern Sea Route, joint naval exercises in the Bering Sea). Others note that Beijing has delayed support for infrastructure projects and reduced shipping along the Russian coast signaling hesitation about enhancing cooperation in the Russian Arctic (Myklebost & Lanteigne 2024).³ The potential Sino-Russian convergence of interests garners media attention in the West. Titles such as 'Arctic Chill: Western Nations Fear China and Russia Will Exploit Regional Tensions' (*Financial Times*, 5 June 2023), 'Putin and Xi Discuss Further Deepening of Arctic Partnership' (*High North News*, 23 March 2023), 'Are Russia and China Teaming Up to Control the Arctic?' (*Scientific American*, 3 January 2024), 'A China-Russian Arctic Alliance? Not So Fast' (*The Diplomat*, 21 February 2024), 'China Is Gaining Long-Coveted Role in Arctic, as Russia Yields' (*Wall Street Journal*, 2 October 2023) have been common in Western press.

What does media coverage look like from the Russian side? While we would need to look elsewhere to understand or impute how Russian political or expert milieus understand this relationship, the Russian official press gives us an important understanding of how the Russian elite seeks to present this relationship to a domestic audience. Interestingly, we find little focus on China in the context of the Arctic in Russia's official press. When China is mentioned, the focus of the news stories primarily concerns the partnership with China within the Arctic oil and gas sector, and on Chinese interests in the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). This research paper explores how one key Russian official media outlet covers the topic of China's engagement in the Russian Arctic, highlighting how Russia's approach to China in the Arctic is communicated to Russian newspaper readers before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Official Russian Newspaper's Coverage of the Arctic

Rossiiskaya gazeta (RG) is the official daily newspaper of the government of the Russian Federation. In addition to regular journalistic pieces, it publishes documents of the state bodies, official statements and decrees. In February 2024, the newspaper was ranked the fourth most-cited among newspapers in Russia.⁴ In this research paper, RG serves as a source of official views on the Arctic that are disseminated to the Russian public. While coverage in RG does not necessarily imply that the topic is a policy priority for the administration, the daily has a strong online presence, and many Russians view the newspaper as a serious and authoritative mainstream narrator and opinion leader. More than half of the articles mentioning the Arctic in RG between 2008 and 2023 were

1 This policy brief is partly based on the 2023 NUPI research paper 'Changing or frozen narratives? The Arctic in Russian media and expert commentary, 2021–2022' written by Natalia Moen-Larsen and Kristian Lundby Gjerde.

2 Spohr, K. (2023). 'Russia and China are opening a new anti-western front in the Arctic'. *Financial Times*, 9 November. <https://www.ft.com/content/c4ee46c5-a2e3-464e-ab63-d7f481e7502d>

3 Myklenost, K. A., & Lanteigne, M. (2024). 'A Sino-Russian Arctic alliance?' *The Barents Observer*, 6 February. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/research-partner-contents/2024/02/sino-russian-arctic-alliance>

4 Medialogiya. (March 2024). <https://www.mlg.ru/ratings/>

about domestic issues and did not give any attention to international affairs. Therefore, it is to be expected that the focus on Russia and China relations in the Arctic is limited in the daily. How China’s involvement in the Arctic is communicated to the Russian public is, however, of interest. For instance, what is the focus of the coverage and what themes are given less attention or not mentioned at all?

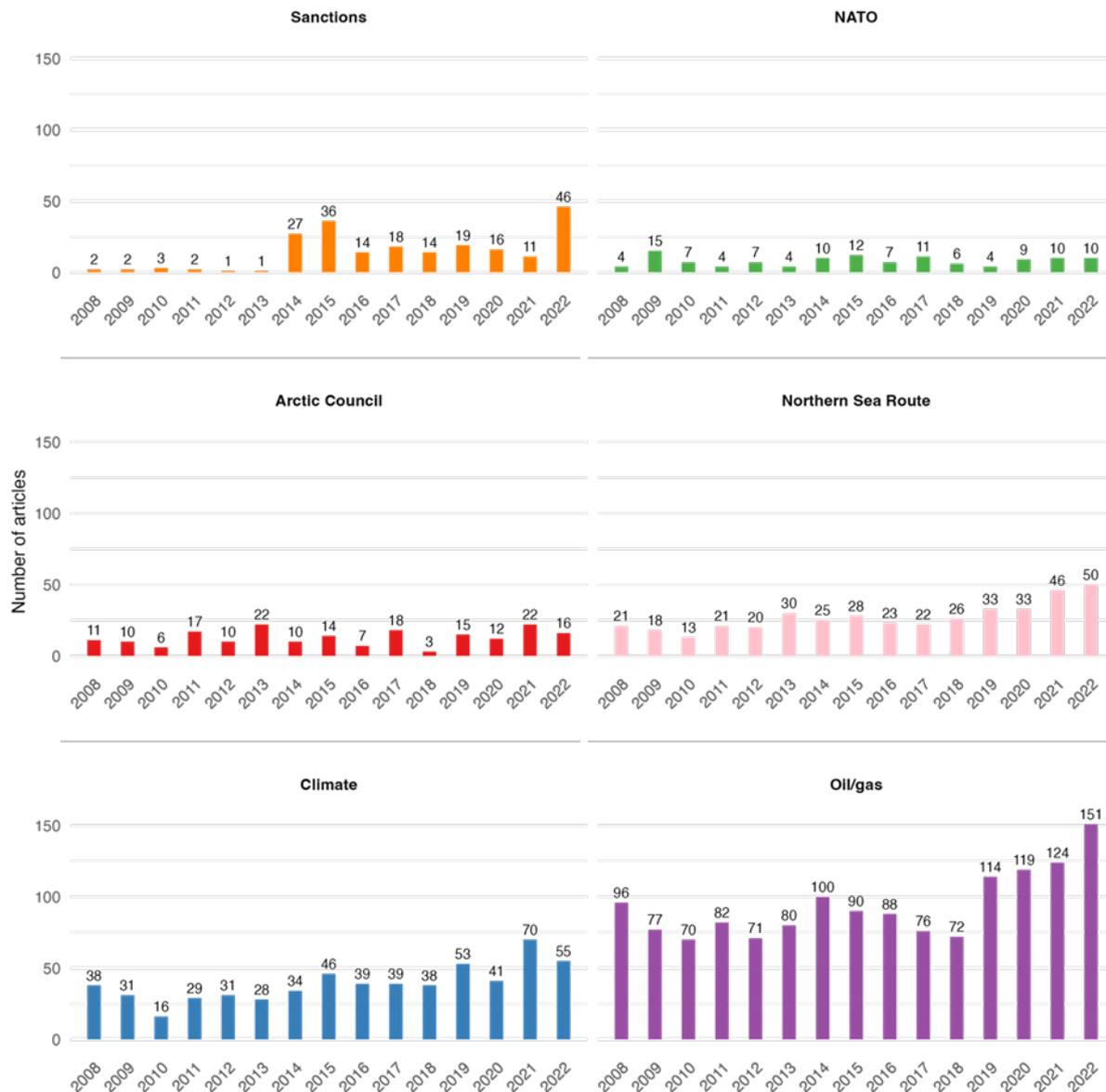


Figure 1: Themes in Rossiiskaya gazeta’s Arctic coverage (First published in NUPI Research Paper 2/2023)

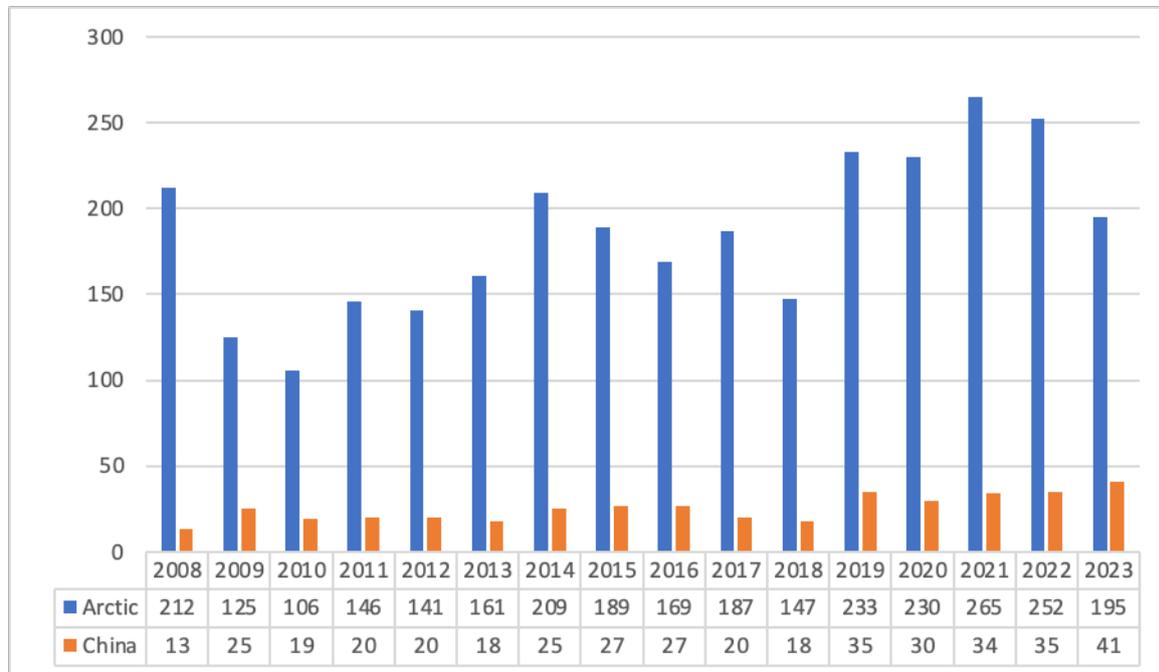


Figure 2: China and the Arctic in Rossiiskaya gazeta's Arctic coverage, 2008–2023

Between 2008 and 2023, RG published 2967 texts that mentioned the Arctic. As illustrated in Figure 1, during this time span, oil and gas stand out as the most frequently mentioned topic (mentioned in 1410 articles), with climate being the second most frequently mentioned (mentioned in 588 articles). Coverage of sanctions first emerged in 2014, in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, and reached new heights in 2022, at onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (212 articles in total and 46 in 2022). Furthermore, the daily's coverage of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) steadily increased throughout the 15-year period (409 articles in total). Figure 1 also illustrates a consistently low number of references to NATO (120 articles in total), while the Arctic Council comparatively receives more coverage (193 articles in total).

Figure 2 illustrates the number of RG articles that mention both China (orange) and the Arctic (blue) in the period between 2008 and 2023. China was present in the daily's coverage throughout the entire fifteen-year timeframe and, though the attention to China is still modest, it has steadily been growing and reached its highest number in 2023 with 41 articles mentioning China. Comparing these relatively low numbers to the number of times other states have been mentioned in RG's Arctic coverage in the last fifteen years, we find attention to China to be high. Figure 3 illustrates the number of articles that mention the states in the Arctic Council (minus Russia) and China per year between 2008 and 2023 and Table 1 illustrates the total number of articles that mention each of these countries in the fifteen-year period. We find that the only country that is mentioned in more articles than China (407 times) is the United States (576 times). Furthermore, in 2023 China received more coverage than the United States in terms of number of articles (see Figure 3).

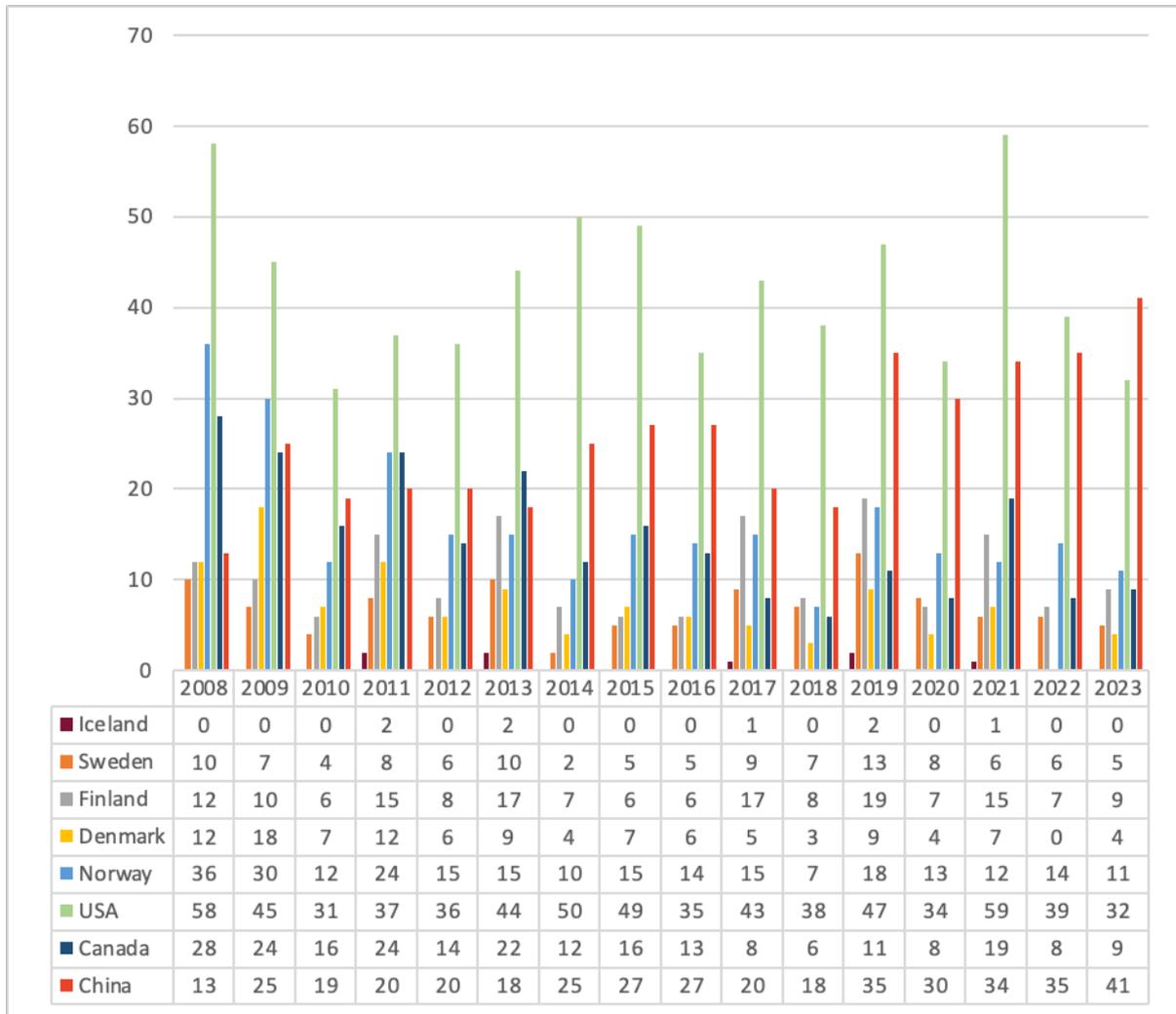


Figure 3: Arctic states and China in Rossiiskaya gazeta's Arctic coverage, 2008–2023

Country	Total nr of articles 2008–2023
United States	677
China	407
Norway	261
Canada	238
Finland	169
Denmark	113
Sweden	111
Iceland	8

Table 1: Arctic states and China in Russiiskaya gazeta's Arctic coverage

	2021	2022	2023	Total
AC	1	1	1	3
LNG/energy cooperation	3	7	1	11
Great power cooperation/competition	1	1	0	2
Research	1	1	0	2
NSR	1	3	7	11
Tourism	0	0	1	1
Total	7	13	10	30

Table 2: Themes related to China in Rossiiskaya gazeta’s Arctic coverage 2021–2023

China and the Arctic in the Russian Press 2021–2023

Zooming in on the period directly before and directly after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2021–2023), we find that 110 out of 712 (15,4%) articles that mention the Arctic also mention China and even fewer articles mention China in relation to issues concerning the Arctic. From this sample, we have identified 30 texts where China’s involvement in the Arctic is addressed – 7 articles in 2021, 13 in 2022 and 10 in 2022.⁵ This suggests that an even smaller number of articles discuss Russia-China cooperation directly (see Table 2).

Key Themes

Out of the relatively sparse coverage of the Russia-China relationship in the Arctic in *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, what does garner attention? As illustrated in Table 2, most ink is spilled on the coverage of energy cooperation (11 articles) and the NSR (11 articles). China’s involvement with the Arctic Council is only mentioned in three articles, even less frequently mentioned themes include China’s competition with the United States in the Arctic and Arctic research and Russian Arctic as an attractive area for Chinese tourism (five articles altogether). If we look at the development of the daily’s coverage over time, consistently throughout the three-year period from 2021–2023, China’s cooperation with Russia in the Arctic is addressed in connection to the extraction and export of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia to China. This is perhaps not surprising since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has turned to China as an alternative for energy import replacement in the context of Western sanctions and limited possibility for import from the US and Europe. From August 2022, the development of NSR as a shipping route of strategic interest for China also receives more coverage (see Table 2). Below we sketch out the coverage of the two main themes LNG /energy cooperation and NSR.

LNG and Energy cooperation

China is represented as a pragmatic actor following its own interests in the Arctic, but not as an opponent to Russia as the two countries do not have competing interests in the region. For Russia, China is described as a partner in oil and gas projects in the Russian Arctic and the Arctic is, in general, represented as an area of interest for the Chinese energy sector. Also, in the same vein, China is repeatedly mentioned as a recipient of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia. RG describes China and

5 Initially, we identified 47 texts where China and the Arctic are mentioned within the range of five sentences of each other. Second, by thoroughly examining the texts, we identified 17 as not relevant, as their focus was not on China’s activity in the Arctic.

Russia as having ‘formed a strong energy alliance’ and explains that ‘large-scale, long-term supplies of domestic hydrocarbons have been established. Since 2010, the Russian-Chinese oil pipeline has been successfully operating, in 2019 the Power of Siberia gas pipeline was launched’ (RG, 2021).

In 2022, as the year before, China’s role as a recipient of LNG from Russia was covered in the daily. Before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, RG wrote that Russia would have enough gas to export to China and to Europe. However, after the full-scale invasion, export of LNG to China was mentioned in the context of Western sanctions and as an alternative market that would replace the European one. The newspaper remained optimistic about the future of Chinese-Russian energy cooperation in the context of sanctions.

The Northern Sea Route and its Geostrategic Importance

Interestingly, in the selected texts, China’s strategic interest in the Northern Sea Route (NSR) was only addressed once in 2021, however, after August 2022 the NSR was the main topic when China was mentioned. RG described the NSR as a unique opportunity for the export of goods from Russia to India, China, and South Korea and as the shortest route for shipping goods from China to Europe. The development of the NSR was presented by RG journalists as an issue of geostrategic importance for China; several articles underlined the increased geopolitical tension in the South China Sea and the East China Sea and how this affects sea lines of communication while proposing the NSR as an alternative route for cargo from Asia to Europe. For example, in June 2023, one article noted that the NSR is of strategic importance for China against the backdrop of ‘rising tensions observed in the East China Sea due to the provocative actions of the United States and its allies, and due to the spread of military alliances and the US Navy’s Seventh Fleet in the Indo-Pacific pool’ (RG, 2023).

Later, in July 2023, the newspaper claimed that the NSR would lower the effect of sanctions on exports of oil from Russia down to a minimum. The first Russian oil tankers had already set off on this route from Primorsk and Ust-Luga through the North Sea and the Arctic on to China. Chinese companies were again depicted as pragmatic partners who invested in joint projects to expand the use of the NSR. According to the newspaper, in 2023, the Chinese company NewNew Shipping Line would allocate five ships to transport cargo along the NSR. The newspaper further emphasized that new, regular shipping routes had been opened between China and Russia along the NSR and that the development of Arctic LNG-2 – a crucial project for Russia in the LNG market that encountered difficulties due to US sanctions and that China holds a 20% investment stake in – would increase cargo traffic.

Key Takeaways

In summary, the Russia-China relationship in the context of the Arctic is covered less in Russia’s official newspaper than one might anticipate. This tallies with other findings showing that the full impact of Russia’s full-scale invasion in Ukraine on Arctic relations is largely undercommunicated in the Russian press and expert milieus (Moen-Larsen & Gjerde 2023).

Notably, when international affairs are part of *Rossiiskaya gazeta*’s Arctic coverage, China is mentioned comparatively often. Among Arctic Council member states, we find that the only member that is mentioned more often than China is the United States. Furthermore, in 2023, China received more coverage than the United States in terms of number of articles in RG.

As discussed here, RG's coverage of the bilateral Russia-China relationship in the Arctic is largely focused on energy cooperation and, in particular, growing opportunities for collaboration since the 2022 sanctions. In the articles analyzed, energy serves as a cross-cutting topic in that involves both references to joint operations on ongoing energy projects and the promise of the NSR for transport opportunities.

Relatedly, the daily's coverage of the NSR in relation to China has picked up pace over the past couple of years. The NSR is addressed not only as a passage that allows for increased trade (including energy) and more general connectivity between the two countries that will benefit both sides but also as a geostrategically significant route that can be used as an alternative route between Asia and Europe should flashpoints such as the East China Sea or South China Sea affect sea lines of communication.

When it comes to the topic of defense cooperation in the Arctic, there was little coverage in the studied texts. This concerns both more general reporting on NATO in the Arctic context as well as more specific reporting on bilateral collaboration.

In conclusion, we find that it is important not to take the Russia-China relationship out of context when it comes to their collaboration in the Arctic. While bilateral cooperation has become more essential in the energy domain, assessment here should also be tempered since Russia is diversifying its exports to and deepening relations with a number of other actors as well. On a general level, China is not only an important partner for Russia when it comes to responding to the economic ramifications and demand drop brought about by the sanctions in the energy domain, but also when it concerns maintaining a lifeline for prestige projects, such as Arctic LNG-2, which arguably also reinforce Russia's reputation as a major energy provider, including of clean energy supplies. Overall, RG's limited coverage of a Russian-Chinese convergence in the Arctic suggests that it is not presented to the Russian public as a priority for the administration and that how and if the declaration of a no-limits partnership applies in the Arctic remains to be determined.

Further reading

Congressional Research Service. (2024). Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>

Moen-Larsen, N., & Gjerde, K. L. (2023). Changing or frozen narratives? The Arctic in Russian media and expert commentary, 2021–2022. NUPI Research Paper, 2/2023. <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3106592>

Strider. (2024). Shifting Ice: Russia's Increasing Reliance on the Private Sector and the PRC in the Arctic. https://content.striderintel.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Strider_Shifting_Ice_Report.pdf

von Essen, H. (2023). Russia-China economic relations since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. NKK/SCEEUS Report No. 2. <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/russia-china-economic-relations-since-the-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine>

The research for this research paper was funded by the Arctic Pressures project.

About the authors

Natalia Moen-Larsen is a Senior Research Fellow in the Research Group on Russia, Asia and International Trade. Her research interests are culture and national identity, inter-ethnic tensions, migration, and nationalism. In addition, Moen-Larsen is interested in political communication, the use of traditional and digital media, and the spread of disinformation and misinformation in Russia. She holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Oslo.

Wrenn Yennie Lindgren is a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Center for Asian Research at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and an Associate Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). She specializes in international relations in East Asia, the politics and foreign policy of Japan, Asian states' interests in the Arctic, and traditional and non-traditional security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. She holds a PhD in International Relations from Stockholm University.

Photo credit: NTB/Scanpix



Norwegian Institute
of International
Affairs

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from shortterm applied research to more long-term basic research.

NUPI

C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PB 7024 St. Olavs Plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway
post@nupi.no | nupi.no

