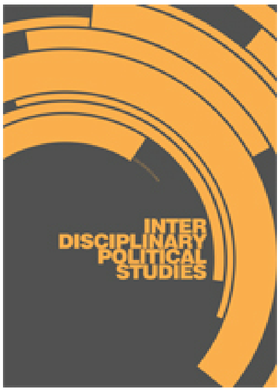

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond the 'Win-Win' Rhetoric: Drivers and Limits of the Sino-Russian Partnership in the Arctic

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ABSTRACT

The article seeks to shed light on a peculiar and generally overlooked dimension of China and Russia's increasingly intimate strategic partnership, through the assessment of their allegedly cooperative ties in the Arctic region. Accordingly, the exploration untangles the rationale of Sino-Russian interactions within the ranks of the Arctic Council, the current outlook of their joint efforts in the exploitation of Arctic resources, and the ongoing attempts to shape a shared vision for the infrastructural development of the Northern Sea Route. With the notable exception of energy cooperation in the Russian far north, this case study seems to suggest that the growing embrace between Moscow and Beijing is ultimately rooted in pragmatic, instrumental and largely opportunistic considerations, which stand at odds with the 'win-win' rhetoric endorsed on both sides during high-level summits.

KEYWORDS: China; Russia; Arctic; Cooperation; Partnership.

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1. China-Russia ties under Xi and Putin: a pragmatic partnership in the making?[1]

In 2014, at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, there was a general consensus that the confrontation would be quickly solved. However, as soon as the West took into consideration the possibility to introduce sanctions against Moscow, the Russian government started a series of internal consultations in order to evaluate to what extent they would impact the national economy. It appeared immediately clear that similar retaliatory measures could unleash dramatic effects due to the Russian almost total dependence on Western markets in pivotal export sectors, the most prominent being represented by the hydrocarbons industry. The only possibility Moscow had was to turn its attention towards alternative partners: the ideal candidate was identified in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which had already distanced itself from the sanctions regime that was about to be introduced. As a result, in May 2014 the Putin administration launched what has been frequently indicated as the 'Russian eastward pivot', in order to break international isolation by strengthening political and economic relations both with the PRC and other East Asian countries, as potential alternatives to China's growing influence (Mankoff 2015; Korolev 2016a, 2016b). The ill-concealed hope was, in fact, that Beijing could become an important buyer of hydrocarbons, so that Chinese companies would in turn invest in the Russian market and assuage its thirst for foreign capitals, while also contributing to a progressive revamp of Moscow's obsolescent Eurasian infrastructures.

From its point of view, China abstained from any comment regarding the Ukrainian crisis, in accordance with its deep-rooted principle of non-interference: most likely, Beijing welcomed similar developments under a favourable light, glimpsing a chance to satisfy its commercial necessities and, above all, to further distance the Kremlin from Europe. Yet, this backfire between the two actors was

[1] This article reflects the joint outcome of the efforts of both authors. In practice, though, AP wrote the paragraphs 2, 4, and 5, while AF wrote the paragraphs 1 and 3.

seen, almost unanimously, with profound scepticism. Reciprocal mistrust, territorial disputes, historical controversies, and economic disproportions would make any cooperation almost impossible. In spite of such a problematic legacy, however, the reaction of NATO countries in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis might have convinced Moscow to overcome its reticence in establishing closer relations with the PRC, even in delicate areas such as the provision of advanced military equipment and the drafting of infrastructural projects (Kashin 2016). In a similar fashion, it is also possible to suppose that Moscow has accepted to act as China's 'junior partner' within a growingly asymmetric game, characterized by Beijing's upper hand in having access to Russia's geopolitical backyard for its own strategic purposes. This 'barter' has thus allowed Beijing to access new markets which are extremely abundant in natural resources, as for the cases of Central Asia and the Arctic, in exchange for its mounting role of 'lender of last resort' *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin (Gabuev 2016). Likewise, with the lowering of formal and informal barriers that had been previously imposed on Chinese investments, the aforementioned diplomatic shift away from Europe has spreaded out its effects also on Russia's Arctic policy, whilst paving the way for an increasingly intimate cooperation between the two Eurasian powers.

As it could be expected, the outbreak of the Ukrainian conundrum and the impact of sanctions have led to the cancellation of several cooperative projects in the Arctic formerly arranged between Russian and European companies such as ExxonMobil and British Petroleum, pushing the Kremlin to look for effective alternatives.[2] On top of that, the almost simultaneous drop of oil and gas prices has called into question the viability and future profitability of Moscow's designs in the far north, which are currently pursued by the Russian government in a quite assertive way. Numerous Western countries, for example, have recently voiced their alle-

[2] A clear example of this course was brought about in early 2018 by the cancellation of the joint-venture between Exxon Mobil and the State-run Rosneft, which was originally aimed at the exploration of the Arctic seabed through a shared cumulative investment worth $3.2 billion. For a detailed account, see Krauss (2018).

gations against Russia for the alleged build-up of military forces in its northern territories, both in term of conventional contingents and nuclear capabilities. Informed by its proverbial pragmatism, China has thus reaped the benefits of this window of opportunity to project its State-owned companies at the forefront of significant bilateral initiatives in the Arctic, as epitomized by the joint-venture for the realization of the Yamal gas plant. The Russian side, instead, seems characterized by a much more ambivalent attitude with regards to Beijing's ongoing 'race' to the Arctic, caught between the imperative of rebuffing the economic pressures unleashed by NATO countries and the risk of dilapidating its long-standing primacy in the far north. Similar zigzags, unsurprisingly, have produced important repercussions on the scope and extent of the Sino-Russian convergence in the Arctic, especially in terms of the ability in framing a shared agenda in areas such as institutional, energy, and infrastructural cooperation.

Building upon this puzzling scenario, the present article seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of both Beijing and Moscow's agendas for the far north, in order to untangle the scope, rationale, and degree of coordination displayed by their Arctic strategies, which can be either depicted as a 'win-win relation', or as an episodic, temporary, and overtly rhetorical embrace (Røseth 2019). In such perspective, the scrutiny of the tactical and zero-sum calculations ingrained in the recent strengthening of Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic can shed an additional light on the overall outlook and future direction of Beijing and Moscow's mutual bonds, which have increasingly polarized the scholarly debate on two opposite camps: those who foresee their alleged 'alliance in the making' against the US (Allison 2018), and the proponents of more sceptical views, centred on the idea of Russia and China as 'partners of consequence' (Lo 2008; Duchâtel & Godement 2016; Yu 2016; Wishnick 2017a). Against this backdrop, the case of the Arctic thus stands out as a truly paradigmatic one in the overall and multifarious outlook of Sino-Russian ties, inasmuch as it mirrors a series of key features in the bilateral relation that have been observed also in other 'contested areas' of Moscow's backyard. These encompass the power imbalance between the two actors, their reciprocal sense of deep-rooted distrust, the visible gap between the rhetoric of official meetings and a general lack of tangible breakthroughs in their cooperative initiatives, the different emphasis attached to specific geopolitical domains, and the equally divergent cost-benefit analysis put forward by the two counterparts when considering their investment opportunities in frontier-regions like the far north.

In such a highly lucrative Arctic 'great game', characterized by enormous stakes and competing influences amongst several great powers, Moscow and Beijing are therefore required to forge a strong complementarity of interests and a profound degree of policy coordination, in spite of a series of tangible asymmetries. These entail their different proximity, geopolitical clout, and past interactions with the Arctic region, as well as the divergent emphasis and sense of urgency attached by Chinese and Russian policymakers to the Arctic region, with the former committed to a more business-minded approach and the latter still devoted to portray the colonization of the far north as a 'national cause'. Consequently, in order to uncover the presence (or lack of) prescriptive elements that should be presumably entrenched in the Sino-Russian partnership, the following pages unpack both the Arctic agenda of the two Eurasian giants, and the prospects for convergence or divergence amongst them, though the analysis of three paramount dimensions, namely institutional coordination in regional governance, energy cooperation, and infrastructural development. These three facets of China-Russia ties in the Arctic have been carefully selected with a strong eye on the two countries' official statements and political blueprints for the region, such as Beijing's first-ever Arctic With Paper inked in 2018, which looks at China's active participation in the governance and economic development of Arctic commons as its key 'policy goals' in the far north, while also envisioning the realization of a 'Polar Silk road' between Europe and East Asia (State Council of the PRC 2018). By the same token, the overarching manifesto of the bilateral partnership between the two Eurasian powers contained in the 2015 'Joint Statement on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of

Coordination and Advocating Win-Win Cooperation' echoes a similar view, by emphasizing the role of institutional, energy, and infrastructural cooperation as key counterchecks to the American influence in China and Russia's geopolitical backyards (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, p. 1). Accordingly, after having recalled the historical evolution of the Russian and Chinese presence in the Arctic, the focus shifts on the scrutiny of the main drivers and obstacles behind the Sino-Russian cooperation in the far north, both within the ranks of the Arctic Council and in the framework of the joint development of new energy provisions and infrastructural corridors along the 'Northern Sea Route' (NSR). To this end, the subsequent sections provide a careful review and assessment of the existing gap between the ambitious goals put forward in the aforementioned official documents, and the concrete breakthroughs achieved by the China-Russia partnership in the Arctic.

2. Russia's history and ambitions in the Arctic

In Russia, the colonization of the Arctic started to acquire a major geopolitical relevance in the early 1880s with the first official expeditions commissioned by Tsar Nicholas II, and, since then, Russian rulers have invariably felt entitled to exercise a special status over the country's far north. Similar aspirations have been generally motivated in terms of geographical proximity and historical legacies: in fact, more than 20 per cent of Russia's national territory lies beyond the Arctic Circle, and its 3.5 million square kilometres of Arctic landmass are second only to Canada's (Josephson 2014, p. 1). In addition, the far north has been traditionally regarded by a distinctive strain of Russian nationalism as a mythic cradle inhabited by the early Slavs, which 'belongs' to Russia as a promised land full of riches (Honneland 2016, pp. 63-64). In the Soviet era, economic and security considerations began to loom increasingly large over identity motives: accordingly, Moscow kick-started a vast program aimed at modernizing and industrializing its northern regions, such as the Arkhangelsk province, the Kola peninsula, and Karelia. In 1926, the USSR also formalized for the first time its vast territorial claims over the northern territories, which are still considered as the baseline of Moscow's Arctic policy. The proclamation encompassed all the lands and islands stretching between the Kola Peninsula, the Bering Strait, and the North Pole, as well as the adjacent waters along the Kara, Laptev, and East Siberian Seas.

Similar moves also reflected Stalin's mounting interests towards the enormous commercial potential of a Northern Sea Route (NSR) capable of cutting through the Kara Sea and the Siberian coastline to reach the Pacific Ocean via the Bering Strait. The NSR had been firstly traversed in a single navigation in the summer of 1932 by the Russian icebreaker Sibiriakov, and, during the same decade, Moscow achieved remarkable results also in the field of scientific research and in the extraction of natural resources, as epitomized by the opening of the Vorkuta and Norilsk coal mines in 1931 and 1939, respectively. Another key turning point was reached in 1968 in the field of hydrocarbons exploration, with the discovery of an extremely conspicuous oil deposit near the Samotlor Lake in Western Siberia, which still stands out as Russia's biggest oil field.

At the dawn of the Gorbachev's era (1985–91), Siberia was home to approximately 80 per cent of the USSR's total oil reserves and it also covered 90 per cent of its gas and coal potential, even though the system of state subsidies started to spiral out of control and soon became unsustainable (Reisser 2017, pp. 8-11). The state of economic disarray and the vast austerity measures that characterized the Russian economy in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, moreover, forced Moscow to further scale-down its financial commitment and development programs devoted to the Arctic. The disappearance of material incentives for local settlers and indigenous industries made the population drain even more acute, and Russia's scientific research was left in shambles for more than a decade. At the turn of the century, the emergence of an unprecedented scramble for the Arctic put a definitive end to the Kremlin's historical primacy over these commons, which were luring the growing interest of regional stakeholders like Canada, Norway, Denmark, and the US. As a result, with Putin's advent the resurgence of Russia's influence in the far north became a relevant political issue in the national discourse. Under the new leadership, Moscow stepped-up its endeavours to re-energize the special relation with the Arctic both from a judicial standpoint and within the ranks of the freshly-formed Arctic Council. In 2001, the Russian Federation submitted a formal claim to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) aimed at demonstrating that two vast underwater features – the Lomonosov Ridge and the Mendeleev Ridge – were natural extensions of its continental shelf, and therefore subject to Russia's exclusive economic rights.

Seeking to provide further evidences to such claims, in 2007 the explorer and member of the Duma Artur Chilingarov spearheaded the re-launch of Russia's submarine expeditions in the far north, in a much-publicized mission that planted a tricolour flag on the seabed of the North Pole. The operation generated harsh criticism among the other Arctic states, which discarded it as mere muscle-flexing. During the following year, the Kremlin drafted a revised normative framework in the hydrocarbons sector that allowed the government to by-pass the normal bidding process in the distribution of oil and gas licenses, so as to lure key energy players like Gazprom and Lukoil into the Arctic. Moscow's military presence in the Arctic region also underwent a visible revamp, as the Northern Fleet was finally equipped with a new class of nuclear icebreakers, strategic submarines, and improved air assets. In 2014, moreover, Russia established the 'Arctic Strategic Command' and put it on par with the already existing military districts (East, West, South, Centre), while also making provisions for the reactivation of several Arctic bases of the Soviet era. Since then, the number of patrols, military drills, and alleged provocations *vis-à-vis* adjacent states has grown significantly, pushing other claimants to follow suit (Osborn 2017).

On certain occasions, however, Moscow has propended for a cooperative approach with regional stakeholders on a selected range of issues, as exemplified by the settlement reached in 2010 with Norway over the delimitation of their maritime borders in the Barents Sea. In fact, the key driver of Russia's Arctic strategy since its very resurgence in the early 2000s has been inherently economic in its nature, and largely concentrated around two overarching themes: the exploitation of natural resources and the launch of the northern maritime route, especially in light of the transformations brought about by the melting of the polar ice cap. The first imperative is intimately intertwined with the growing importance assigned to the hydrocarbons sector by the Putin presidency, which has significantly struggled to cope with Western sanctions and plunging oil prices. In this perspective, the Arctic portion of the Russian Federation is expected to provide more than 30 per cent of the country's overall oil production by 2050, thanks also to the recent development of onshore and offshore hydrocarbons plants in the Yamal Peninsula (Alexeeva & Lasserre 2018, p. 271).

In a similar fashion, Russia's recent efforts concerning the NSR have sought to divert a larger share of financial resources towards the modernization of transport and shipping infrastructures in the region, in order to advance its claim to an exclusive jurisdiction along the route and rebuff Washington's official view based on the principle of free navigation. As for energy cooperation, these endeavours have largely relied on the possibility of luring China in as the main financer and user of the northern passage, through the framing of a common vision on the commercialization of the route. In 2017, most notably, an all-time high of 9.74 million tons of goods crossed the NSR, and 11 of the 27 vessels that made it through were heading to (or departed from) a Chinese port (Pezard 2018, pp. 2-6). In parallel, the Putin government has shown a much more rigid and uncompromising attitude in its legal quest for the jurisdiction of the northern passage, through the re-submission to the CLCS of the territorial claims that had been previously rebuffed for a lack of scientific evidences.

3. China's history and ambitions in the Arctic

If compared to Russia, China's interest in the Arctic is undoubtedly more recent: the Beiyang government (1911–1928), in fact, signed the Spitsbergen Treaty in 1925, engaging in fishing and commercial activities in the Svalbard archipelago, although its involvement remained limited, given the lack of budgetary resources and technical equipment and the greater priority that was reserved to the Antarctic (Conley 2018). In addition, the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War the following year brought the country to an almost total international isolation, that hindered any form of cooperation between Chinese and Western scientists in the field of polar research. In the subsequent decades, however, China's interest in the Arctic became manifest through the publication of several reports, which highlighted its strategic location at the intersection of American and Soviet nuclear missiles trajectories, the vastly unexplored mineral resources deposited under the Arctic seabed, the impact of global warming, and also the large abundance of fish (Lasserre et al., pp. 31-33). Despite this growing attention, neither the signing of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991 nor the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996 – two major turning points in the governance of the far north – were reported by major Chinese newspapers. The approach adopted by the PRC's state-owned media was probably a signal that these issues had not entered Beijing's political agenda yet, thus persuading its government to observe under-the-radar Arctic developments. Shortly thereafter, Beijing's scientific agenda in the region became gradually clearer: in 1995, a group of Chinese scientists and journalists travelled to the North Pole to conduct research and, in the following year, the PRC joined the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC), a non-governmental organization whose main purpose was to coordinate regional scientific research activities.[3]

At the turn of the millennium China's interest in the Arctic acquired even more significance, giving way to what has been often defined as Beijing's 'great leap' in the region (Brady 2017). In 2004, the PRC built the Arctic Yellow River Station (*Huánghé Zhàn*), operated by the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration, to-

[3] For a more exhaustive analysis of Chinese embryonic scientific actions in the Arctic, see Jakobson's 2010 pioneering piece.

gether with another facility in Svalbard's Ny-Ålesund (Wishnick 2017b, p. 1). As described in the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), the government also decided to increase the budget allocated to the Arctic, in order to reclaim its role as a 'near Arctic' country (Bertelsen & Gallucci 2016, p. 3). Significantly, as in many other initiatives launched by the PRC in that period, these economic efforts materialized in concomitance with a sharp decline in the spending of several long-standing Arctic players, which were forced to cope with the constraints generated by the global financial crisis. Beijing, on the other side, started to raise its stakes by upgrading the *Xue Long*, its first icebreaking research vessel that was originally built in 1993.[4] The ship has since been on several Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, becoming a symbol for China's scientific interests towards the polar commons (Lanteigne 2014, p. 13). Simultaneously, the Chinese Academy of Science approved its official Arctic research program, further involving the PRC in regional affairs through scientific missions.

Still, Arctic states appeared quite suspicious and hesitant of China's growing interest in the far north, as they believed that Beijing's designs could entail way more than scientific research. As a result, the PRC has tried to elucidate its own position on several occasions in the last few years, in order to reassure those nations about the Chinese willingness to support institutions like the Arctic Council as well as the sovereignty rights and jurisdiction enjoyed by regional states. On top of that, in 2007 the PRC also joined the ranks of the Arctic Council, even though as an *ad hoc* observer. Its application for a permanent observer status, however, was turned down both in 2009 and 2011, due also to the visible recalcitrance of the Russian Federation (Røseth 2017). The green light has finally come in 2013, under the framework of the Council's enlargement to countries such as Japan, South Korea, India and Singapore. Once Beijing was notified its accreditation as a permanent observer, the Foreign Minister spokesman Hong Lei not only reiterated the adherence

[4] The *Xue Long 2*, the first domestically-built Chinese icebreaker, was launched on September 10, 2018.

to the Council's revised criteria for admitting observers, the most sensitive of which is the recognition of Arctic states' sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the region, but also China's utmost respect for the '*values, interests, cultures and tradition of the indigenous people*' (MFA PRC 2013). In the last two Five-Year Plans (2011–2015 and 2016–2020) China has therefore reconfirmed its growing presence along Arctic commons and the need to safeguard an increasingly diversified array of national interests located in the far north, mostly through an active engagement and lobbying in regional fora (Wu 2016). Against this backdrop, the release in January 2018 of China's first-ever formalized strategy for the region – contained in the White Paper *China's Arctic Policy* – has further systematized the country's position on a series of prominent issues, while emphasizing the prospects of 'win-win' cooperation amongst the various stakeholders involved. The long-awaited document, most notably, represents a sort of compendium of two important speeches that had previously clarified the framework of China's Arctic blueprint: vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming's remarks at the China Country Session of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly in 2015, in which the concept of China as a 'near-Arctic state' was firstly coined, and Xi Jinping's January 2017 speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where the President laid out his idea of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) as a historic opportunity for Beijing to take a leadership role in world affairs, especially in terms of global economic governance. Concerning the Arctic, the White Paper therefore reflects China's shift away from the traditional, low-profile attitude that paved the way for its acceptance to the Arctic Council in 2013. Furthermore, the strategy clearly emphasizes that the '*Arctic should not be regarded as a demarcated region*', but as one with '*global implications and international impacts*', so as to imply that it is not solely the Arctic states' responsibility to establish rules and norms for the future development of (and access to) regional commons (State Council of the PRC 2018). By the same token, it also stresses that China's increasing involvement in areas such as Arctic research, resource extraction, fishery, cabling, and piping must be pursued in line with international provisions, by means of a 'win-win' approach capable of benefitting all those involved.

China's freshly-inked White Paper on the Arctic thus reflects the most visible and paradigmatic by-product of Beijing's increasingly complex and diversified regional agenda. The strategy still assigns to scientific research, and especially to climatology, geology and oceanography, a pivotal role in shaping the course of its regional initiatives, due also to the vast implications of climate change. Yet, the document also acknowledges another crucial driver that is increasingly informing the Chinese race to the Arctic, namely energy provisions. This imperative is intimately intertwined with the paramount importance attached by Chinese decision-makers to the consolidation of a stable, variegated, and sustainable network of hydrocarbons supplies, which could potentially foster a condition of energy security and nurture the country's prosperity goals. The mantra of diversification has therefore persuaded the PRC to compete on a truly global scale for energy resources that are held by other states, through the consolidation of old relations, the opening of new ones, and the active exploration of untapped frontiers such as the Arctic that may concur in satisfying its voracious appetite. In this perspective, China cannot turn its eyes away from the far north and its enormous oil and gas potential, covering up to 30 per cent of the world's undiscovered gas deposits and 13 per cent of unexplored oil reserves (Gautier et al. 2009). These resources, however, beyond presenting obvious technical challenges in terms of possible exploration, are largely located in the sovereign territories and continental shelves of Arctic littoral states, leaving the 'newcomers' as the PRC with limited possibilities of direct involvement in extractive activities. Consequently, the inability to pursue a more unilateral energy agenda has further convinced the PRC to assume a friendly and constructive stance with its Arctic counterparts, which has paved the way for the drafting of a host of bilateral mining and energy agreements with countries like Canada, Greenland, the United States, and Russia.

With Moscow, as emphasized in the pages ahead, the most significant breakthrough has been brought about with the inking of the Sino-Russian joint-venture for the realization of the Yamal liquified natural gas (LNG) project in northwest Siberia. Other initiatives, however, have not been as successful as the one in Yamal: in January 2018, for example, the Chinese oil company CNOOC with-drew from what seemed to be a very ambitious oil exploration project in the waters off Iceland, due to a large extent to a revised cost-benefits analysis stemming from plummeting oil and gas prices on global markets (Pelaudeix 2019, p. 3). By the same token, another significant catalyst related to Beijing's Arctic strategy revolves around the development of alternative shipping routes to the ones frequented today by Chinese companies, which largely rely on politically unstable regions like the Middle East and geopolitical bottlenecks such as the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal. Accordingly, the PRC has voiced in numerous occasions its interest towards the commercialization of the NSR, especially as a potential complement to its flag-ship blueprint for Eurasian connectivity centred on the BRI. The prospects of a more intimate cooperation with Russia for a complete overhaul of the logistical and infrastructural potential of the northern passage have become more apparent with the launch of Putin's pivot to Asia, which has sought to extensively court the PRC and its conspicuous FDIs. Still, the Chinese aspiration to play a more active role in the future management of the NSR (for example through a preferential treatment in terms of transit fees) has been met with a certain scepticism by the Kremlin, thus impairing the prospects of a Sino-Russian condominium over the northern passage.

4. Drivers and obstacles to Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic

Overall, the current conformation of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic can be unpacked and scrutinized by looking at three paramount pillars, which currently sit at the very helm of both Moscow and Beijing's regional agenda. Against this back-drop, a first dimension that must be necessarily taken into account when examining the scope, directions, and rationale of the cooperative efforts put in place by the two Asian giants in the far north revolves around China and Russia's multilateral agenda in the Arctic Council. In fact, the degree of coordination displayed by the two sides in the most relevant political forum for regional affairs tells a lot about the ultimate nature of their mutual embrace, which can be either depicted as a pragmatic, temporary and instrumental partnership or in terms of a normative one, rooted in a common set of values and win-win solutions (Røseth 2014, pp. 842-844). Secondarily, the ongoing convergence of interests between Moscow and Beijing in the Arctic region needs to be assessed from the energy standpoint, marked by the success-story of the Sino-Russian joint venture in the development of the Yamal natural gas project. In this perspective, China's financial assistance and active involvement in the opening of Yamal has proved absolutely pivotal to circumvent Western sanctions against Russia, while allowing the PRC to raise its standing and know-how as a newcomer in the Arctic 'great game'. Finally, infrastructures are another pivotal domain that will profoundly shape Sino-Russian relations in the foreseeable future. Here, the crux of the matter lies in the ability (and political willingness) of both sides to sketch-out a truly shared vision for Eurasian connectivity, capable of knitting together China's BRI and Moscow's NSR.

4.1. The Arctic Council

Since the very inauguration of the Arctic Council in 1996, the Russian Federation has traditionally showcased a quite conservative approach to regional governance, aimed at safeguarding the special status enjoyed by the eight 'founding fathers' (the US, Russia, Denmark, Canada, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland) against possible outsiders. For this reason, the Kremlin had long retained a very sceptical position concerning the Council's enlargement to non-Arctic actors such as China and the EU, which was progressively revised in the early 2010s with the onset of Putin's 'pivot to Asia' (Lanteigne 2018, p. 3). Moscow's change of mind, ultimately aimed at stepping-up Sino-Russian ties in the midst of the escalation of tensions with Western countries, has thus allowed the PRC to finally find both a recognition of its self-proclaimed status as 'near-Arctic' state and a place inside the Arctic Council. Yet, the imperative of acknowledging and even supporting China's growing stance in terms of regional governance has been pursued with a certain reluctance by Russian decision-makers, who still maintain a cautious attitude towards Beijing's diplomatic proactiveness in the Arctic. According to Tom Røseth (2014, p. 845), the re-orientation of Russia's posture in the Arctic Council regarding the Chinese membership has been informed by a set of pragmatic considerations, so that the Kremlin could ultimately have a say in the framing of China's Arctic strategy. By the same token, Moscow's openings have been also linked to a clear request of reassurances to the Chinese side, aimed at assuaging Russian concerns. In particular, the Putin administration has invited in multiple occasions the PRC to reiterate its respect of the larger stakes and special prerogatives assigned to regional coastal states, together with the exclusive jurisdiction exercised by the 'Arctic Eight' over the deliberations and procedures adopted in the Council, and the general provisions provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, pp. 37-38).

The PRC has therefore accepted to limit its multilateral standing in the region as a 'norm-taker' of Arctic politics, while also recognising Moscow's deep-rooted role as regional 'norm-maker'. This does not mean, however, that the two governments endorse exactly the same views about the regulatory framework that should guide the Arctic Council in the definition of new rules. In such regard, the 'elephant in the room' resides in China's tacit promotion of freedom of navigation across Arctic waterways, which stands significantly at odds with the Kremlin's official definition of the route as a domestic sea-lane of communication. Still, it must be noted that Beijing's contribution to the ongoing debate on the legal status of the NSR has been quite vague and hesitant, also in light of the controversial interpretation of the Law of the Sea embraced by Chinese authorities in the framework of the South China Sea dispute. On top of that, Beijing's involvement in the Council has also served the purpose of diplomatic diversification, in order to extend the network of regional partnerships well beyond the Russian Federation. Accordingly, the PRC has remarkably elevated the level of its ties especially with Scandinavian countries like Iceland, Finland, and Sweden, seeking to find a more equidistant position between Moscow and the Western bloc (Guschin 2015). All in all, the general trends entailed in the Russian and Chinese postures within the Arctic Council thus suggest an instrumental, episodic, and overtly pragmatic approach to multilateral cooperation between the two sides. Russia, for its part, has come to terms with Beijing's increasing involvement in regional governance, even though the Kremlin still attaches great importance to its traditional model of tight regionalism based on the 'Arctic Eight'. On the other hand, China has reaped the benefits of Putin's eastward pivot to strengthen its diplomatic clout in the far north and voice an interest towards the economic exploitation of the Arctic. Nevertheless, this process has led the PRC to frame a quite independent and autonomous agenda within the Council's ranks, as epitomized by Beijing's non-aligned position on the legal status of the NSR and also in the framework of its growing efforts to reach out to alternative interlocutors.

4.2. Sino-Russian Arctic joint-ventures: the case of Yamal

In spite of the modest results produced in the institutional realm, the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic can also enlist few 'success stories', usually concentrated in the sector of energy and natural resources. Among them, the most renowned and publicized revolves around the mega-project aimed at developing the gas reserves located in the Yamal Peninsula, currently worth around $27 billion (Fox 2017). Originally operated by the Russian firm Novatek through a joint venture with the French energy powerhouse Total, in November 2013 the Yamal project came under the spotlight of international media with the inking of a deal that assigned a 20 per cent stake in the enterprise to the Chinese state-owned giant 'China National Petroleum Corporation' (CNPC). The agreement, most notably, represented the first concrete manifestation of Beijing's mounting interest towards the exploitation of the Arctic's energy potential, and it also included a clause for the provision of 3 million tons of LNG per annum to the PRC over a period of twenty years, which was expected to absorb approximately 18 per cent of the plant's total capacity (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, p. 32). Then, with the unravelling of the Ukrainian crisis and the launch of several rounds of Western sanctions, Novatek was forced to search once again for a fresh infusion of investments, even at the cost of reducing its stakes in the asset. As a result, during the second half of 2015 the Russian firm finalized two additional deals with its Chinese counterparts, ultimately targeted at erecting a powerful shelter against financial turbulences and plunging gas prices.

In September, a further 9.9 per cent share of the Yamal LNG project was thus sold to the Silk Road Fund for $1.2 billion, so as to allow Novatek to attract funds whilst retaining a 50.1 per cent stake in the joint venture. Less than three months later, the Chinese sovereign fund reciprocated the preferential treatment accorded by its Russian partners during previous negotiations with the disbursement of a 15-years loan worth around $823 million, and, in parallel, the Yamal project was also endowed with a staggering $12.2 billion liquidity injection from the Export-Import Bank of China and China Development Bank (Bierman & Mazneva 2016). According to the estimates of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Beijing has therefore committed to provide up to 60 per cent of the capital required for the realization of the Yamal facilities, which became eventually operational in December 2017 with the loading of the first cargos (Sørensen & Klimenko 2017, p. 33). The plant's opening ceremony was attended by President Putin and the Saudi energy minister, who saluted the arrival of the brand-new icebreaker tanker 'Christophe de Margerie' in the port of Sabetta. The Russian-made vessel, named after the former CEO of Total who died in Moscow three years before, made rounds once again in international media during the following summer, when it set a new all-time record by completing its delivery route from Norway to South Korea via the NSR in just 19 days. In the meantime, Yamal's extractive activities have reached their peak ahead of schedule at the end of 2018, thanks also to the realization of a second parallel plant that is expected to project Moscow's share of the global LNG market from 4 to 8 per cent (Tanas et al. 2019).

For all these reasons, it can be actually argued that the Yamal venture stands out as the most successful and effective example of 'win-win' cooperation implemented by Moscow and Beijing in the far north. From the Russian perspective, the influx of Chinese capital has de facto guaranteed the project's survival, while allowing the Kremlin to defy Western sanctions and overcome the recent drop in gas prices. In addition, the output production of the Yamal field has been significantly allocated towards the Asia-Pacific, rather than westward, adding substance to Putin's 'turn to the East' and also contributing to the overall diversification of Russia's hydrocarbons exports. As a result, the already mentioned deal for the provision of gas towards the PRC has been coupled by analogous agreements with countries like India and South Korea, and Japan is also expected to join in the foreseeable future thanks to the ongoing political rapprochement between President Putin and Prime Minister Abe. In this regard, it is worth noticing that according to the Russian energy strategy Moscow may be able to divert 30 per cent of its total LNG exports to East Asia by 2035, with an astounding increase from the current share sitting at 6 per cent (Buchanan 2018). If completed, such a visible reorientation in the geopolitics of Russian energy provisions would further entrench the Kremlin's ongoing divorce from Europe, whilst raising its credentials as a key energy player in the Far East.

Similarly, the successful completion of the Yamal project has embodied a remarkable milestone also in terms of China's presence and ambitions in the region. Well aware of Russia's thirst for fresh investments in its Arctic facilities amidst Western sanctions, the PRC has therefore negotiated a potential participation in the joint-venture from a vantage point, using its powerful financial leverage to secure a wide range of objectives. In fact, in the eyes of Chinese policymakers Yamal is way more than a mere overseas asset capable of further diversifying Beijing's energy in-take. Equally important, the participation in the project has also allowed China's engineering companies to substantially raise their technical know-how in the extraction industry, while profiting from the large amounts of orders and contracts related to plant's construction. According to the estimates, Chinese shipyards have realized up to 80 per cent of the necessary equipment for Yamal's facilities, and their involvement is expected to grow further in the foreseeable future with the opening of Novatek's third plant on the Gydan Peninsula (Gasper 2018). Yet, the complementarity of interests displayed by the two sides in the implementation of the Yamal field ultimately rests on the ability to convoy large provisions of LNG towards the East Asian markets at competitive prices. To meet this massive challenge, Moscow and Beijing are compelled to frame a shared blueprint for the commercial development and legal management of the NSR, thus overcoming their diverging views on the status of such a revolutionary and ground-breaking maritime route.

4.3. The NSR and China's 'Polar Silk Road'

Notwithstanding the importance of institutional and energy cooperation, the future outlook of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic region will be likely determined by another prominent issue that has risen to the very top of both Beijing and Moscow's foreign policy agendas, namely infrastructural development. Against this backdrop, the two sides are currently striving to synergize and synchronize their strategies for Eurasian connectivity, which currently encompass the China-sponsored BRI and Russia's twin projects based on the 'Eurasian Economic Union' (EAEU) and the NSR. In this perspective, the recent signing of the agreement for the establishment of a free-trade area between the PRC and the EAEU is certainly a step in the right direction, but the sector that truly holds the premise of reshaping the geography of trade and exchanges between Europe and East Asia revolves around the commercial exploitation of the NSR. Its ground-breaking potential, in particular, stems from the massive breakthroughs in terms of shipping times and voyage costs that the NSR may actually entail. In fact, compared to the traditional sea-lane of communication via the Suez Canal the northern passage can shorten the distance between major ports in the Atlantic and the Pacific up to 4,600 kilometres, and, during the optimal season, this translates into less fuel consumed and reduced emissions.

After a series of fuzzy and inconclusive remarks, Moscow and Beijing have therefore attempted to blend their visions for the NSR by co-sponsoring the idea of a 'polar Silk Road' (or 'Silk Road on ice'), which should ideally serve as a shared platform for the realization of both China and Russia's infrastructural designs for the Arctic (Eiterjord 2018). First enunciated in 2015 during a bilateral meeting between the two governments, the notion of 'polar Silk Road' has gained additional momentum in the subsequent years thanks to a series of highly emphatical remarks expressed by Xi and Putin, but the grandiose rhetoric utilized on the sidelines of high-level summits has failed to produce concrete progresses. Hence, the current state of the art of Sino-Russian cooperation on the NSR is limited to political declarations, preliminary consultations, and media speculations, often characterized by over-optimistic forecasts on the future potential of the northern passage. Arguably, this impasse is also symptomatic of the diverging sentiments and attitudes that animate the two sides when it comes to the drafting of a truly shared agenda for the infrastructural development of the NSR. The Kremlin, for its part, seems rather conflicted on the pros and cons of opening the doors of the NSR to Chinese stakeholders, especially if this means altering the current status quo on the jurisdiction of the route, whilst Beijing appears quite disappointed with Moscow's negotiation strategy and the scope of its potential concessions.

To a large extent, the dubious and ambivalent attitude displayed by Russian officials *vis-à-vis* their Chinese partners rests on their widely shared belief that the NSR is first and foremost a domestic waterway, stretching for 3500 nautical miles within Russia's Arctic Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ). As such, the northern passage was formally opened to international traffic only in 2009, when the Kremlin lifted all the residual restrictions inherited from the Soviet era. Yet, the choice of aligning with the UNCLOS and its provisions concerning the freedom of navigation has been pursued in a very prudent and hesitant fashion, so as to retain a significant control over the commercialization of the NSR. Accordingly, with the Federal Law introduced in 2012 Moscow has sought to dictate much of the rules related to the international exploitation of the northern passage, ranging from the issuing of transit authorizations, insurance requirements, and communication protocols, to the imposition of Russian escorts and auxiliary personnel on any foreign fleet that navigates through the NSR. In 2017, moreover, the Kremlin has further strengthened its legislative tools with a new bill banning the transport of domestic commodities and national resources trough the northern passage by non-Russian ships. Once again, similar moves seems to corroborate the idea that Moscow is still characterized by a zero-sum approach when it comes to the exploitation of the NSR, in what has been defined as a constant 'dilemma' between the priorities of a commercial use of the waterway and the push to its militarization (Sukhankin 2018).

At the same time, however, Moscow's ambition to rekindle the northern passage must be necessarily reconciled with the harsh reality that such a massive overhaul cannot be financially self-sustained. As in the case of energy cooperation, the Putin administration needs Beijing's investments and construction ability to substantially update land and maritime infrastructures in the far north, and, in the same vein, it also welcomes the ongoing ascendance of Chinese companies as main users of the NSR. In fact, the capitals and transit fees provided by Chinese operators – together with the extension of the navigation period caused by global warming – are regarded as quintessential elements in the attempt of boosting the overall volume of cargo traffic along the route to 80 million tons by 2025, as recently pledged by president Putin himself. Yet, regardless of its financial constraints and ongoing diplomatic isolation, the Kremlin seems also eager to safeguard its special prerogatives and historical claims by resisting any potential attempt to sketch-out a joint Sino-Russian condominium over the waterway, which could potentially dilute Moscow's long-standing dominance over the sea-lane. Arguably, this posture stands at odds with the 'win-win' rhetoric displayed by both sides to showcase the alleged normative elements entailed in their partnership, and Russia's audacious attempts aimed at luring Chinese partners in its Arctic ventures – while maintaining a strong grip over the administration of the northern passage – have ended up by further attenuating Beijing's tepid interest towards the initiative.

In fact, as brilliantly highlighted by the Chinese scholar Yun Sun, a careful scrutiny of Russia's agenda for the future development of the NSR displays very few analogies or common features with the vision endorsed in Beijing, thus revealing once again the transitory and instrumental character of the current convergence between the two leaderships (Sun 2018). In her eyes, the elaborate rhetoric utilized on both sides during political summits has been substantially contradicted by the lack of tangible developments on the ground, due mostly to the divergent interests, conflicting calculations, and largely irreconcilable cost-benefit analysis put forward in Moscow and Beijing. The PRC, most notably, feels entitled to a greater leverage and relative weight in bilateral negotiations over the route, especially when confronted by the Kremlin's deep-rooted reticence in sharing the long-term fruits of such an ambitious enterprise. In a similar fashion, the Chinese leadership is also conscious that its growing involvement in the NSR emerged from a precise request of the counterpart, which was de facto forced to invoke China's financial commitment due to the inability to self-fund the infrastructural revamp of the northern passage. Well aware of the humongous financial costs that the revitalization of Russia's infrastructures and logistical networks along the 'polar Silk Road' may actually entail, Beijing thus expects stronger compensations for its efforts as well as preferential fees dedicated to Chinese shipping companies that navigate the NSR. Hence, the case of the northern passage can be considered as a further example of the key obstacles and shortcomings pertaining to the Sino-Russian partnership that have been observed also in areas like Central Asia and the Russian Far East, as for the power asymmetry between the two actors, their lingering mutual distrust, and the significant gap between the grandiose rhetoric of high-level summits and the lack of tangible breakthroughs (Stronski & Ng 2018).

On top of that, it should be also pointed out that the distance between the two sides over the terms of bilateral negotiations underscores diverging evaluations about the future prospects and practical feasibility of Putin's designs for the NSR. In fact, if the Kremlin looks at the revamp of the northern passage as a vital imperative to overcome the country's economic decline and kick-start a new era of more sustainable growth, China's approach appears way more pragmatic, disenchanted, and business-minded. In this perspective, Beijing's scepticism regarding the extremely optimistic previsions of Russian officials on the future economic boom of the NSR stems primarily from practical considerations, related both to the state of backwardness of Russia's infrastructural network and to a series of natural constraints embedded in the topography of the region. At the moment, the Russian Federation has only 4 ports in the Arctic that benefit from direct linkages with the national railway, and many of them cannot accommodate large cargos (Sun 2018, p. 5). On top of that, the NSR is also punctuated by shallow straits that prevent the use of big vessels or container ships, and the additional limitations brought about by a navigation season of merely 2-4 months per year further impair the possibility of achieving competitive shipping costs by economies of scale (Pastusiak 2016, pp. 6-7). Accordingly, the growing perception of having the upper hand in bilateral discussions over the issue, the awareness of the gigantic financial commitment that should ideally rest on Chinese shoulders for the modernization of the NSR, and the competing pulls generated by the advancement of the BRI will likely inform Beijing's cautious approach towards the northern passage also in the foreseeable future, as prescribed by the opportunistic, episodic, and overtly rhetorical character of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic.

5. Concluding remarks

Over the course of the last years, the visible convergence of the external trajectories pursued by China and Russia has pushed numerous scholars to scrutinize the intimate nature of this mutual embrace, which is becoming particularly evident in key geopolitical domains such as Central Asia and the Arctic. The ensuing debate has been animated by those who contend that the Sino-Russian cooperation is ultimately a temporary and pragmatic 'marriage of convenience', and the proponents of substantially opposite arguments, centred on the alleged normative dimension of such a peculiar partnership (Nye 2015; Wishnick 2017a; Røseth 2019). Against this backdrop, the preliminary assessment conducted in the previous pages has analysed three major issues that currently sit at the top of both Beijing and Moscow's agendas for the far north, in order to untangle the scope, rationale, and degree of coordination displayed by their Arctic strategies. These paradigmatic domains encompass institutional cooperation within the ranks of the Arctic council, the joint development of energy and natural resources, as well as the ongoing efforts to frame a truly shared vision for the infrastructural modernization of Eurasian commons. At a first glance, the far north may appear as a perfect scenario for the consolidation of a powerful axis between China and Russia, due to the growing interdependences and apparent complementarities in their economic outlooks. On one hand, the Kremlin's mounting thirst for foreign investments amidst Western sanctions, plunging hydrocarbon prices, and negative growth prospects has in fact persuaded the Putin administration to turn towards the PRC as its paramount economic partner and lender of last resort. On the other, Beijing has sought to barter its financial assistance with Moscow's active support in the field of energy provisions, so as to enhance its diversification efforts and better penetrate resource-rich regions located in Russia's immediate vicinities such as Central Asia and the Arctic.

Yet, a more careful investigation of the history and current conformation of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic reveals all the constraints and inconsistencies that impair the materialization of this supposed 'win-win relation' and normative partnership between the two countries. Unsurprisingly, Moscow's posture on the advent of China as an 'Arctic newcomer' has experienced significant twists and turns, which seem to depict a rather ambivalent and opportunistic mindset. The most remarkable shift, most notably, has come with the unveiling of Putin's 'pivot to the East', pushing the Kremlin to town down its traditional recalcitrance on issues such as China's accession to the Arctic Council. Well aware of the instrumental character subsumed in Russia's recent overtures, the PRC has thus strived to make the most of the weaknesses exhibited by the Kremlin to advance its own interests in the far north, in accordance with a business-minded attitude that stand in contrast with Moscow's sensitivity for security matters and territorial claims over the Arctic commons. As a result, the two countries have formulated grandiose statements about the future outlook of their cooperative ties in the far north that largely failed to produce significant breakthroughs, due also to Russia's reticence in presenting proper compensations for its Chinese partners. By the same token, Moscow has carefully avoided the emergence of security and military spillovers from the ongoing dialogue over the Arctic with the PRC, due to its zero-sum approach in this particular domain. Hence, as brilliantly pointed out by Christopher W. Hsiung and Tom Røseth, the current outlook of Sino-Russian ties in the Arctic can be considered as the epitome of larger trends and features related to their bilateral relations as a whole, which have fueled a mutual convergence in the international arena based on pragmatic considerations (Hsiung & Røseth 2019).

On top of that, the patina of mutual diffidence that is currently jeopardizing the Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic has been also matched by the different degree of urgency and strategic relevance attached by the two sides to this specific region. If in the Russian case the development of Arctic resources is increasingly seen as a vital cause to restore the country's international standing and kick-start an unprecedented era of economic prosperity, Beijing's stance looks much more 'agnostic', inasmuch as it essentially considers the energy and infrastructural exploitation of the far north as a potentially attractive alternative to the already existing network of providers and supply routes. Accordingly, the three case-studies involved in the analysis have further corroborated the idea that the Sino-Russian embrace in the far north is ultimately forged by transitory contingencies, and largely animated by a mutually opportunistic logic endorsed both in Moscow and Beijing. Among them, the joint-venture for the realization of the Yamal project has emerged as an almost unique example of successful bilateral cooperation, rooted in a tangible complementarity of interests between the various stakeholders.

In this instance, Russia has in fact given up important concessions towards the counterpart, as epitomized by the pivotal role played by Chinese shipyards in the construction of the plant's facilities. Yamal's 'success story', however, has proven uncapable in setting the stage for a more synergic course in other dimensions of Sino-Russian relations. In the multilateral and institutional domain, for example, the various meetings of the Arctic Council have first showcased the Kremlin's half-hearted adhesion to the enlargement process that opened the doors to the PRC, to be then characterized by a visible lack of coordination between the two governments on the legal status of the NSR. The absence of a shared vision on the future evolution of the rules and regulations related to the Arctic commons, in particular, seems to suggest that the normative character of this bilateral partnership is still relatively weak and ultimately dominated to by a desire to challenge the Western-led international system, as opposed to the 'win-win' paradigm that is usually put on display during high-level summits. In a similar fashion, the much-publicized and highly rhetorical proposals of blending Moscow's blueprint for Eurasian connectivity with China's BRI have proved rather unsuccessful. Encumbered by a diverging calculus over the future returns of the NSR, mutual negotiations on the northern passage have thus resorted to a 'wait-and-see' approach that will be hardly reversed in the foreseeable future.

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