



# **Partners, Competitors, or a Little of Both?**

**Russia and China in the Arctic**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	<b>Executive Summary</b>
02	<b>Introduction</b>
03	<b>Back to the Future: The Origins of Great-Power Competition in the Arctic</b>
06	<b>Russian and Chinese Priorities in the Arctic and Prospects for Their Cooperation</b>
11	<b>Security Implications of Russia-China Cooperation in the Arctic</b>
12	<b>Recommendations for Addressing the Security Implications of Russia-China Cooperation in the Arctic</b>
14	<b>Conclusion</b>

## Executive Summary

The Arctic's melting ice caps are changing more than the geography of the region. The diminishing sea ice and declining snow cover have allowed for new shipping lanes and growing access to natural resources, increasing geopolitical competition in the region. A defining feature of this competition is the growing interest and activity of Russia and China in the Arctic. Not only have the two countries increased their presence in the region, but coordination between them is growing.

Political observers in Washington and beyond understand well the challenges that Russia and China each pose to the United States. But little thought has been given to how their interests and actions will combine and the challenges that such alignment will pose for the United States and its allies and partners. Previous CNAS research has highlighted the risks that greater Russia-China cooperation creates. This research argues that the growing partnership between Moscow and Beijing is amplifying the challenges that both actors pose.

In the Arctic, Russia and China's interests are converging around resource extraction projects, the

expansion of the Northern Sea Route, and the enhancement of operational awareness and security cooperation. The increasing synergy in the Arctic will be most consequential for the United States on two fronts: First, Beijing is working with Moscow to improve its military capabilities. Second, Russia is increasing its economic reliance on China in the Arctic in ways that may raise Moscow's willingness to back Beijing's priorities in other regions and on other issues to avoid jeopardizing its economic ties with Beijing.

*Increasing military cooperation:* Through joint research and, to a lesser extent, its joint military exercises with Russia, China is enhancing its military knowledge of and insight into the Arctic. Though China's actual military presence in the Arctic is minimal, the two countries' cooperation is enhancing Chinese insight into Russian dual-use technology, which Beijing can use to build its military capabilities. China can learn from Russia's dual-use and hybrid capability development in the Arctic, accelerating its efforts to erode U.S. military advantages and posing a greater threat in the

event of military conflict. Russia and China may also strengthen their military relationship in the Arctic in the future, including by expanding the scope of their joint exercises in the region. Ultimately, sustained or deepening Russia-China military cooperation may threaten America's ability to deter Chinese and Russian aggression in the region.

Moreover, increased Chinese-Russian military cooperation in the Arctic risks sparking an arms race with the other Arctic powers and NATO and accelerating militarization of the region. The atmosphere of great-power competition and lack of mechanisms for addressing the trend toward militarization raise the risk of conflict.

*Increasing Russian economic dependence on China:* Russia's economic reliance on China in the Arctic has increased significantly since 2014, when Western sanctions on Russia as a result of its illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of Eastern Ukraine limited Kremlin access to Western capital. Russia's reliance on China's investments in the Arctic could increase

Russia's willingness to toe the Chinese Communist Party's line in other areas. If Russia's economic dependence on China continues to grow, it will be increasingly difficult for Moscow to chart a course

independent from Beijing, for fear that doing so would jeopardize the economic ties that Russian President Vladimir Putin needs to sustain his economy and the stability of his regime.

Looking forward, Russia-China synergy is unlikely to abate given that the primary factors driving their cooperation are set to persist. Yet there are significant differences between Russian and Chinese goals in and approaches to the Arctic that could be leveraged in an effort to limit the depth of their broader cooperation. In particular, the Arctic is simply more important to Russia than it is to China. Russia's determination to protect its traditionally dominant position in the region could create tension over Arctic governance, including management of the Northern Sea Route. Russia is also more likely to rely on military force to protect its claims, which could contribute to instability that threatens China's economic interests in the Arctic.

The United States should prepare for and address the most significant threats the Russia-China partnership poses to American interests and values while laying the

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groundwork for the natural fissures in the relationship to grow over the longer term. First, the United States should work with allies and partners in the Arctic to strengthen deterrence, especially by increasing allied military presence in the region. Second, the United States should seek to work the seams in the Russia-China partnership. In particular, it should support Russia's interest in minimizing China's role there. China is not an Arctic nation, and it is in the U.S. interest to limit China's influence. At the same time, the United States can work alongside China to push back on Russia's territorial claims in the Arctic and uphold the line established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Finally, the United States should seek to change Russia's calculus so that Moscow views some cooperation with the United States as possible and preferable to its growing reliance on China. The Arctic provides a venue for small steps toward these objectives. In particular, the United States and its Arctic partners should engage Russia on confidence-building measures, climate-related cooperation, the establishment of "rules of the road" for military presence and operations in the Arctic, as well as restart the Arctic Chiefs of Defense forum to create a platform for directly addressing the growing militarization in the Arctic.

Great-power competition in the Arctic is on the rise. But as the United States engages in this competition, Washington must be mindful to avoid unnecessarily escalating regional tensions and actions that would push Moscow and Beijing even closer together. Concurrently, the United States and its partners must also explore opportunities to disrupt Russia-China cooperation. This policy brief provides analysis and recommendations to guide such an approach.

## Introduction

The Arctic's melting ice caps are changing more than the geography of the region. The diminishing sea ice, declining snow cover, and melting ice sheets have allowed for new shipping lanes and growing access to natural resources that have increased the geopolitical importance of the region. Along with these changes has come a growing sense of geopolitical competition—a dynamic that is front and center in the U.S. Department of Defense's 2019 Arctic strategy. A defining feature of this competition is the growing interest and activity of Russia and, to a relatively lesser extent, China in the Arctic. Not only have Moscow and Beijing both assigned growing importance to the Arctic, but they are increasing their cooperation in the region. Russian and Chinese

interests in the Arctic are not fully aligned, yet the two countries are navigating their differences and deepening their partnership. Russia and China are working together to expand Arctic infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route, facilitate resource extraction, and increase their maritime domain awareness, through methods including joint military exercises and research centers that could inform future economic development efforts.

Growing Sino-Russian cooperation is not limited to the Arctic. Instead, in key regions—including areas such as Central Asia and the Balkans, where on paper Russia and China should theoretically be at odds—the two countries are increasingly aligned. Functionally, ties across virtually every dimension of their partnership are growing, including the military, diplomatic, economic, and technological realms. Previous CNAS research has highlighted the risks that greater Russia-China cooperation

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presents for the United States and its democratic allies and partners.<sup>1</sup> This research argues that the growing alignment between Moscow and Beijing is amplifying the challenges that both actors pose. As the two countries' cooperation increases, they create a more potent force working against the United States and its interests, goals, and values. For example, China could harness dual-use research with Russia to enhance its military capabilities. And although this level of cooperation is unlikely today, Russia and China could theoretically jointly deploy military assets like their nuclear-powered icebreakers, submarines, and space-based assets in ways that would require military planners to take new threat scenarios into account.

The United States and its allies and partners must navigate the challenges that Russia and China pose, including those in the Arctic—the focus of this policy brief. Much has been written on what Russia and China are doing separately in the Arctic, but there has been less analysis of how their efforts might combine and amplify the challenges they pose. This brief summarizes Russia and China's presence in the Arctic, recounts the history and current state of the Arctic competition, and identifies the drivers most likely to shape the evolution of the

Russia-China partnership over the next five years. It also examines those areas where their cooperation would be most damaging to U.S. security and foreign policy interest and identifies recommendations for ways the United States and its allies and partners should address the two countries in the region. Crucially, this brief and its recommendations place Sino-Russian relations in the Arctic within the context of their broader, deepening partnership. It recognizes that Beijing and Moscow's interactions in the Arctic are tied to their overall partnership and create challenges—such as the dual-use nature of their technology ventures—as well as opportunities for engagement that might limit the depth of the broader Russia-China alignment.

Great-power competition in the Arctic is on the rise. But as the United States engages in this competition, Washington must be mindful to avoid unnecessarily escalating regional tensions and actions that would push Russia and China even closer together. Concurrently, the United States and its partners must explore opportunities in the Arctic that could help them disrupt Russia-China cooperation more broadly. This policy brief provides analysis and recommendations to guide such an approach.

## **Back to the Future: The Origins of Great-Power Competition in the Arctic**

The story of today's great-power competition in the Arctic began in the 20th century, when violent upheavals put the Arctic on the map of people other than the explorers, miners, and hunters indigenous to the Arctic. Concerns about the Arctic today are an updated version of the concerns felt in years past by the major Arctic powers, who had fears—whether misplaced or not—that adversaries could use the Arctic to threaten their security or steal their resources. In the 21st century, the impact of global climate change in the Arctic has amplified the stakes of this 20th-century story of conflict and competition and added a new player: China.

### **1939–1945: The Role of the Arctic in World War II**

Until World War II, the Arctic did not feature prominently in U.S. military planning. Previously, the Arctic for Americans meant mining, hunting, and fishing in the wilds of the Alaska territory, not military operations. But when two islands in the Aleutian Island chain—Attu and Kiska—were occupied by Japanese forces in 1942, the image of Alaska merely as America's last frontier was

shaken forever. When the Aleutians were retaken by U.S. and Canadian forces in 1943 after tough fighting in harsh conditions, the Arctic was officially on military maps.

In addition to the Alaskan Arctic, another Arctic appeared on U.S. military maps during World War II when the United States entered into the European theater of operations: the European Arctic, which stretches from Greenland east across the Arctic Ocean,

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the Nordic nations, and across Russia to the Bering Strait. In 1941, during an ostensible period of U.S. neutrality, the United States sent forces to Iceland (with the permission of the Icelandic government) to free up British troops who had invaded and occupied Iceland to keep the strategic island out of German hands. After the United States entered the war, U.S. merchant mariners escorted by the U.S. Navy fought their way across the North Atlantic and into the European Arctic to deliver arms and supplies to Soviet Union forces via the Russian port at Murmansk, high in the Russian Arctic. Both Germany and the United States established weather stations in Greenland, sending vital meteorological data to their mission planners on both sides of the Atlantic. Most famously, the United States sent such information to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, informing his critical decision on when to launch D-Day. To this day, U.S. bombers and other aircraft from World War II litter the Greenland ice cap, having crash-landed after experiencing mechanical trouble en route to the Soviet Union.

After World War II ended, the immense U.S. military machine was quickly dismantled, and the Arctic once again faded from relevance. But it quickly became apparent that the Soviet Union and the United States did not share the same vision for postwar Europe, and as the Cold War began, the Arctic again became a theater of operations.

### **1949–1989: The Role of the Arctic in the Cold War**

The Arctic had a new and vital role to play in the Cold War because of the leap in military technology. After

World War II, there was a greater threat of attack on the U.S. homeland—including with nuclear weapons. During the early days of the Cold War, the threat was from long-range Soviet bombers flying from Russia over the North Pole and then down into North America. In the 1960s, there was a new threat—Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) flying the same route over the Pole. The Soviet ICBM threat was later joined by submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), which gave the Soviet Navy the capability to launch nuclear weapons off the Atlantic Coast and hit Washington, D.C., in 30 minutes. The submarines, as well as a large surface fleet and aviation assets, originated from the formidable Soviet bastion at the Kola Peninsula in the Russian Arctic, home of the Northern Fleet, headquartered at Severomorsk. To reach the North Atlantic and threaten the U.S. homeland and reinforcement routes to Europe, the Soviet navy had to sail through one of the most strategic choke points of the Cold War: the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap (GIUK gap), the gateway between the Russian Arctic and the North Atlantic.

To address the new threat from the Arctic, the United States and Canada poured billions of dollars into upgrading North American air defenses. In Canada, early warning radars made up the North Warning System in place across the top of the Canadian Arctic; further south in Alaska and the Canadian interior, the United States and Canada

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built the Distant Early Warning (DEW) line of radars, communications nodes, and airbases to intercept any Soviet bombers coming across the Pole that the radars detected. To tie these sensors and aircraft together in an air defense net, the United States and Canada collaborated to develop and man the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) in Colorado.

In the European Arctic, the United States and NATO allies also poured billions into air defense and anti-submarine warfare to track Soviet submarines, ships, and aircraft of the Soviet Union's Northern Fleet. The U.S. military had now returned to the European Arctic, except this time the Navy was not delivering war material to the Soviets. On Greenland, the United

States established two air bases, Sondrestrom and Thule, with Thule eventually hosting a sophisticated Ballistic Missile Early Warning system (BMEWS) radar to detect Russian missile launches. Radars also dotted southern Greenland, monitoring aircraft flying westward toward the United States. Iceland, the gatekeeper of the GIUK gap, bristled with U.S. and NATO radar and aircraft of all types on Naval Air Station Keflavik, a NATO and U.S. base. There, allied anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft and crews honed their considerable skills working with Norway and other allies to track Soviet submarines in the North Atlantic and Norwegian Sea. The Arctic Sea, part of the Russian bastion defense, also became a potential Arctic battleground as U.S. and Soviet submarines shadowed each other under the ice in a dangerous game of cat and mouse.

## **1990–2008: The Post-Cold War “New World Order” in the Arctic**

As the Cold War gave way to the “new world order” in the early 1990s, the NATO allies and Russia began to dismantle much of their Cold War military structure. The early 1990s saw the closure of U.S. military facilities in the Arctic, including the DEW line, leaving only the North Warning System, NORAD, and Thule Air Base intact. In 2006, U.S. forces left Iceland and U.S. Navy submarines reduced operations under the Arctic ice. To top it off, the NATO strategic command in Norfolk, Virginia, charged with securing the Atlantic sea lanes from the Soviet Northern Fleet, Supreme Allied Command Atlantic (SACLANT), was overhauled and renamed Allied Command Transformation to help transform NATO forces from a Cold War to a peacetime posture.

Russian forces underwent a similar transformation. The country's political and economic turbulence in the wake of the Cold War meant that much of its Arctic military infrastructure fell into disarray. The mighty Northern Fleet bastion remained, but many of its submarines and ships were abandoned and deteriorating pier side, worrying Nordic neighbors that radioactive cores dumped into the harbor could deteriorate and pollute the Arctic waters. “Loose nukes” and unguarded radioactive materials—easy pickings for terrorist groups intent on building radioactive dirty bombs—were also a concern. The former Soviet military facilities that once stood watch in the Russian Arctic, guarding polar approaches to Russia and the Northern Fleet, were abandoned, and the provocative flights by Soviet Bear and Backfire bombers down the Norwegian coast or off of Alaska became rare.

## 2008–2014: Climate Change, Deteriorating Relations Between Russia and the West, and Enter China

The 1990s optimism for a Europe “whole and free” slowly withered with the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> Tensions between Russia and the United States and NATO increased after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. Greater Russian wealth resulting from high oil prices allowed an ambitious and assertive Vladimir Putin to rebuild the Russian military, which had demonstrated its shortcoming during the war with Georgia. A significant increase in investment in Russia’s armed forces produced, among other things, new classes of submarines, surface vessels, and combat aircraft; a new tank; and more sophisticated, large-scale training and exercises for the Russian military. Russia upgraded its nuclear capability, including the SSC-8/9M729 cruise missile, which breached the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Russian leadership also updated its approach to warfare, placing greater emphasis on contesting U.S. dominance while avoiding the risks and costs associated with direct military confrontation with the United States and NATO. Russia

therefore began adapting its approaches and tools, preferring what is often referred to as war in the gray zone, hybrid war, or political warfare: designed to undermine NATO while not rising to the level of inciting a military response from NATO.

While the Russian military grew and modernized, the U.S. military and its allies remained focused on fighting the post-9/11 “endless wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan, including a new conflict with ISIS. There was an increasing concern about a rising China and the need to increase U.S. military capability in Asia to deter Chinese adventurism, especially after China began to build military facilities on reefs in the South China Sea. In the United States, budget sequestration added to the military burden by making automatic annual cuts in the U.S. defense budget. These cuts, combined with the wear and tear on the U.S. military since 9/11, meant that the United States entered this new era of tension with near-peer competitors in a weakened military position. Adding to the military burden was the impact of global warming in the Arctic, which put the region back on military maps.

Global warming caused by climate change was having an outsized impact in the Arctic compared with the rest

of the globe. Melting Arctic ice meant that over time Arctic resources could be exploited more efficiently, creating new opportunities for economic growth for the Arctic states, especially Russia. The melting ice also began opening up a new maritime shipping channel, the Northern Sea Route—above Russia in the European Arctic between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Russia quickly claimed control over the Northern Sea Route, which has the potential to drastically cut transit time between Asia and Europe, saving exporters, such as China, significantly on shipping costs. Moscow asserted that this sea route passed through Russian territorial waters; however, the Kremlin was virtually alone in this belief, with the United States rejecting it outright.

Moscow quickly grasped that the opportunities presented by climate change meant it would need to protect its claims in the Arctic, and as early as 2007, it was clear that Putin had reprioritized the region. That year, the Kremlin dispatched a nuclear-powered icebreaker and two submarines to plant the Russian flag on the seabed

at the North Pole—a clear sign of Putin’s intent to restore Russia’s role in the Arctic. In addition to economic opportunity, climate change is also creating new

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security vulnerabilities for Russia as melting ice erodes the natural barrier protecting Russia’s long Arctic coast. Putin moved to remake the Russian command structure and place the Russian Arctic under a Russian military commander. In 2014, Russia stood up the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command to focus military attention on the Arctic; its responsibility stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific.

To reestablish its dominance over the Russian Arctic and the disputed sea route, Moscow began to reopen formerly shuttered Soviet facilities and build new ones to ensure it could monitor and control its Arctic territory. It also enlarged the Russian icebreaker fleet—needed to keep the future passage clear of ice and to escort ships through the still ice-choked and dangerous waterway—to become one of the largest and most modern fleets.

Russia’s forays into the Arctic did not escape the attention of the United States and NATO. Norway and other Nordic partners continually rang the alarm, urging NATO to pay attention to what was happening in their Arctic neighborhood. As early as 2012, the U.S. Department of Defense began to study the implications of Russian military activity in the Arctic and consider

what it should do in response—a matter complicated by Russia’s increased geopolitical aggression.

Meanwhile, as Russia was working to reestablish its military presence, China also grasped the economic opportunities that the melting Arctic ice presented. China’s powerful industrial economy made it dependent on imports of energy and raw materials, as well as exports of finished goods shipped globally. Although China is not an Arctic nation, the melting Arctic ice presented Beijing with an opportunity to gain new access to Arctic mineral and energy assets, as well as fish stocks. Moreover, the Northern Sea Route offered a shorter and therefore cheaper way to ship its goods to Europe. But to achieve its goals, China would need to partner with Russia to exploit Arctic resources and transform the Northern Sea Route into a safe and efficient shipping route.

### **Post-2014: Great-Power Competition Returns to the Arctic**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014 led NATO members to view Russia as an imminent threat for the first time since the Cold War ended, creating a new prism through which the United States and Europe viewed Russia’s actions in the Arctic. NATO scrambled to rebuild its conventional deterrence in Europe, and the United States rotated troops back to Europe and pre-positioned military equipment there. NATO also deployed enhanced forward presence forces to Poland and the Baltics to act as trip wires and deter any further Russian movements west. Norway and its Nordic neighbors were no longer alone in their worries about Russian military activity in the Arctic.

Against this backdrop of heightened concern about Russian aggression, the United States and NATO began to make amends for their benign neglect of the Arctic. In 2016, the United States began again flying ASW aircraft out of the now-Icelandic base at Keflavik, trying to rebuild U.S. ASW capability in the frigid waters of the Norwegian Sea, an expertise that had atrophied since the end of the Cold War. Norway and the United Kingdom upgraded their ASW fleets with the modern P-8 maritime patrol aircraft to be more interoperable with U.S. ASW operations. The United States also signed a number of bilateral defense agreements with the Nordic nations to increase defense cooperation and help build a regional deterrent to warn off the Russians. The new tensions with Russia began to look like a throwback to the Cold War as the United States began to plan for the reinforcement of Europe, complete with convoys and naval escorts to protect U.S. reinforcements from the Russian Northern Fleet.

To protect the convoys, NATO returned to its Cold War roots and created Joint Forces Command Norfolk, an operational-level NATO headquarters that looked like the old SACLANT. The U.S. Navy reestablished the U.S. Second Fleet in Norfolk to once again protect U.S. and Canadian reinforcements to Europe, as well as take on a new responsibility for operations in the European Arctic. In 2018, NATO nations staged one of the alliance’s largest exercises, Trident Juncture, off Norway and with an Arctic focus. There were 65 ships, 250 aircraft, and 50,000 personnel involved; the operation was the first to rival the large exercise program the Russians hold in the region. Lessons learned from that exercise included the realization of a need to improve allied ability to operate in the Arctic.

## **The Arctic is now an even greater prize than before, especially for Russia and for one new player in the region—China.**

The actions taken by Russia and the corresponding reactions by the United States and NATO have opened a new, 21st-century chapter in great-power competition in the Arctic. While there is some similarity between the Arctic competition of today and that of the last century, the Arctic is now an even greater prize than before, especially for Russia and for one new player in the region—China. Russia-China cooperation adds a new geopolitical twist to great-power competition in the region. How significant a twist is yet to be seen, but their alignment has the potential to complicate U.S. and European efforts to protect their interests in the Arctic.

### **Russian and Chinese Priorities in the Arctic and Prospects for Their Cooperation**

Russia and China have stepped up their interest and activities in the Arctic. As they have done so, clear areas of overlap in their interests have emerged. For one, Russia and China share an interest in energy extraction. Western sanctions have deprived Moscow of access to capital for greater investment in its energy sector, while China’s growing energy demand has made Russia more attractive as a major supplier, especially given Beijing’s desire to diversify its energy sources. Likewise, both countries seek to expand Arctic infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route—an endeavor that benefits

them both economically. But even as some Russian and Chinese objectives in the Arctic align, there are important differences in their goals and the methods they use to advance them. Understanding these fissures can highlight opportunities for the United States to more effectively manage and mitigate Russia and China's broader alignment. This section identifies Russian and Chinese goals in the Arctic and the factors most likely to shape their future relationship in the region—both those that facilitate and those that constrain their Arctic engagement.

### Russia

The Arctic is critical for Russia both economically and from a security perspective, as outlined in Russia's October 2020 Arctic strategy.<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin views the Arctic, including the Northern Sea Route, as being firmly within its so-called sphere of influence—it is central to its core national security concerns and an important pillar of its economy and future development. Given these views, the Kremlin is committed to protecting its position in the region and would almost certainly react strongly to any efforts it perceived as threatening that position. To protect and advance its interests in the Arctic, Russia is pursuing the following lines of action:

- **Exploiting the region's resources and geography to drive economic growth.** Russian actions in the Arctic are, in part, driven by its intention to exploit the region's hydrocarbon reserves and strategic minerals and to develop the Northern Sea Route. Russia views the Arctic as a strategic resource basin; roughly 30 percent of Russia's GDP depends on the Arctic.<sup>4</sup> It is the source of 80 percent of Russian gas; it is rich in nickel, diamonds, and rare earth metals; and one-third of Russia's fish are caught there.<sup>5</sup> The Kremlin seeks to promote and protect its claims to continental shelf territories beyond the 200-nautical-mile economic exclusion zone provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in order to exploit the natural resources located there.<sup>6</sup> The Kremlin is making a bet on being able to exploit the region's energy resources, despite questions about the sustainability of such an approach given accelerating efforts to move away from such carbon-intensive energy sources. Over time, Russia also seeks to develop its Arctic territory. For Putin, developing the Arctic—including improving living conditions and infrastructure across the region—is a priority.

A large part of developing the Arctic will hinge on the viability of the Northern Sea Route. The Kremlin is intent on establishing its control over the route,

partly because access to the route stands to benefit Russia directly. Russia collects fees for transit rights as well as for its icebreakers, which provide escort.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, as part of his national goals, Putin set a target of quadrupling the annual cargo volume on the Northern Sea Route, underscoring the importance the Kremlin places on developing the route.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, the Kremlin is sustaining its efforts to solidify its control over the route. In 2019, for example, Russia announced new rules for the passage of foreign ships through the Northern Sea Route, including requiring ships to register requests to transit, contrary to international law.<sup>9</sup>

For Russia, maintaining stability in the Arctic is critical to facilitating the economic development and foreign investment that Moscow needs to support the Kremlin's economic objectives there. These economic objectives include not just national growth but also opportunities for advancing the interests of some Russian elites who have economic stakes in the region.

- **Restoring and expanding military infrastructure.** The Arctic is essential to Russian security and defense. As diminishing seasonal sea ice erodes the natural line of defense that protects Russia's northern coast, the Kremlin's concerns about encirclement have grown. Russia has therefore created a dedicated northern command for the region to ensure that the country can monitor and control its Arctic territory; has set up two Arctic brigades; and is substantially increasing its icebreaker fleet, which is already by far the largest in the world. The Russian Arctic is also vital to Russian security because it is home to the Northern Fleet, a crucial part of the country's nuclear deterrent, containing more than two-thirds of its sea-based nuclear warheads.

For these reasons, Russia has invested heavily in revitalizing Cold War-era basing in the Arctic and in building new bases.<sup>10</sup> According to a report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Russia has reopened previously closed Soviet-era military facilities and refurbished 13 air bases, 10 radar stations, 20 border outposts and 10 emergency rescue stations.<sup>11</sup> Much of the new and upgraded Russian military presence is in the western part of the Russian Arctic, where it protects the Russian Northern Fleet and facilities on the Kola Peninsula. In remote locations, such as Alexandra Land, the military upgrade of air defense radars, missiles, and aircraft has formed a multilayered anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) barrier in the Kola Peninsula/Barents Sea area to protect not just the

Northern Fleet, but also Russia's nuclear arsenal and second-strike capability. An A2/AD barrier presents complications for U.S. and NATO planners, who will find it difficult to confront the Northern Fleet in a conflict, and at the same time makes it easier for Russia to stage offensive operations from the protection of their bastion.

The new Russian facilities in the Arctic—those that are east of the Kola Peninsula, closer to the Bering Strait, and near Alaska—are not as militarized for combat. Instead, they are primarily focused on maritime domain awareness and provide surveillance, presence, and control. The CSIS report assesses that in the central Arctic region, Russia has also deployed air defense systems, such as the Bastion-P and Pantsir-S1 systems, on Kotelnny Island and Novaya Zemlya.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of these systems is to create a coastal defense arrangement that secures territory deeper into Russia's central Arctic. At the opening of the Northern Sea Route on the Pacific end, a smaller Russian facility stands watch on Wrangle Island using the Sopka-2 radar system to detect and monitor aircraft and ships entering the Northern Sea Route from the Bering Strait.<sup>13</sup>

Russia's militarization of the Arctic has taken place alongside the Kremlin's broader military reform and restructuring efforts. In other words, Russia's observed militarization has not been unique to the Arctic. Moreover, Russian military analysts often add additional context to the trend toward militarization by noting that Russia's Arctic capabilities remain largely below what they were during the Soviet era. Western observers should expect Russian militarization of the Arctic to continue. Projected declines in sea ice are likely to compel the Kremlin to sustain its efforts to protect its infrastructure and strategic assets, and to counter the increase in perceived threats to its sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Russia's northern shore will be more exposed, increasing its perceived vulnerability to potential attacks.<sup>15</sup> Although Russia portrays its actions as defensive, those actions are likely to complicate Western calculations; the Kremlin has a track record of using tools and tactics it develops or deploys for what it claims are defensive reasons to accomplish more offensive and threatening aims.

- **Building operational capabilities while testing Arctic rivals.** The Russians have done more to warn the West to stay out of the Russian Arctic than just reopen old facilities. They are also developing operational know-how in the region. In 2018, for example, the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that maritime

patrol, anti-submarine, and tactical reconnaissance aircraft flew more than 100 sorties above the Arctic Circle.<sup>16</sup> In the process, they are using intimidating tactics toward NATO members and partners, especially in the Nordic region and off of Alaska. Allied intercepts of Russian aircraft straying close to allied nations to probe NATO airspace have become common, as has Russian aircraft's harassment U.S. and other allied ships in the region. Russian military aircraft, for example, have recently conducted flights that breached Swedish airspace.<sup>17</sup> More alarming, Russian aircraft exercises have included flight profiles that seemingly target Norwegian radars and even Stockholm. Russian jamming of Norwegian and Finnish communications and other probes of allied communications and air and cyber defenses have become more frequent. Disinformation and cyber campaigns are a constant reminder that the Nordic area is under pressure from Russia. Russian live-fire exercises, including those involving SLBMs, keep the region on edge.

## China

Wanting to be seen as a global power, China seeks to project influence in the global commons and has focused on increasing both its authority in the Arctic and its access to trade routes and regional resources—from liquefied natural gas (LNG) to maritime protein. To this end, Beijing has increasingly portrayed itself as a nation with Arctic interests and is pursuing the following lines of action in the Arctic:

- **Gaining regional awareness and adding Arctic capabilities.** China is using scientific expeditions to build its maritime domain awareness and establish a toehold in the Arctic. China opened its own research station in the Arctic in 2004, has opened joint research stations with Iceland and Norway, and has conducted its own scientific expeditions, including a recent voyage by the state's first indigenous icebreaker, the *Xuelong 2*.<sup>18</sup> China's expeditions focus on mapping sea ice and creating nautical maps to inform future opportunities in trade and exploration.<sup>19</sup> It is also constructing additional icebreakers, including a nuclear-powered vessel.<sup>20</sup> Finally, although the country has not deployed significant military assets to the region, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has devoted resources to developing satellite and navigation technology tailored to the Arctic.<sup>21</sup>
- **Increasing influence over regional governance.** **China is seeking a diplomatic role in Arctic governance as a "near-Arctic state."** China has been an observer in the Arctic Council since 2013 and looks

for opportunities to strengthen its voice in Arctic governance. It has, for example, invested billions of dollars in projects in Iceland, Greenland, and Norway to increase its diplomatic presence, build influence, and gain access to those states' Arctic infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> China is also pushing the narrative of the Arctic as a global commons, in part to justify its greater role in the region, and emphasizes multilateral approaches and inclusive governance with Arctic stakeholders.<sup>23</sup>

### Drivers of Russia-China Cooperation in the Arctic

Cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic rapidly accelerated post-2014, when Western sanctions on Russia as a result of its illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of Eastern Ukraine limited Kremlin access to Western capital and technology. Moscow turned with some urgency to Beijing for the capital and technology necessary to develop its far northern territories. China, for its part, has found in Russia a more important partner, given China's mounting tensions with the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Moreover, as a non-Arctic state, China needs an Arctic state to advocate in the Arctic Council for its activities in the region.<sup>24</sup> So far, Russia has been a partner for China's activities in the Russian Arctic, but the Kremlin does not advocate for China's activities in the broader region. Russia is wary of China's efforts to extend its influence in the Arctic and defends an Arctic-states-centric view of Arctic governance. Nonetheless, China's mounting tensions with the West, along with Russia's status as an "Arctic superpower," have increased Russia's importance in the eyes of Beijing.

Going forward, the convergence of Russian and Chinese interests in the following areas is likely to continue to drive their cooperation in the Arctic:

- **Facilitating resource extraction projects.** In response to Western sanctions after the annexation of Crimea, Russia looked to China for greater investment.<sup>25</sup> The most prominent example of their economic partnership is the Yamal LNG project. The Russian company Novatek and the China National Petroleum Corporation partnered on Yamal in 2013.<sup>26</sup> In 2016, Chinese companies invested an additional \$13 billion in the project,<sup>27</sup> bringing Chinese entities' stake in the project up to roughly 30 percent.<sup>28</sup> Chinese companies have also funded and secured stakes in the second Yamal project.<sup>29</sup> In these ways, Russia's partnership with China allows the Kremlin to mitigate Western pressure, showing it is capable of replacing Western lenders and finding alternative access to the technology it needs to accomplish its goals.
- **Expanding Arctic infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route.** In addition to Russia's seeking Chinese investment in energy extraction, Moscow has looked to Beijing for the capital it needs to develop the Northern Sea Route. China, in turn, seeks to diversify its trade routes and increase its exports to Europe by cutting the shipping time and therefore the costs of transported goods.<sup>31</sup> Shipping routes through the Arctic offer Beijing the ability to bypass other widely used paths between China and Europe, including the Suez Canal, which have a much more significant U.S. presence.<sup>32</sup> In 2018, the Chinese government published a comprehensive white paper on Arctic policy in which it publicized the idea of the "Polar Silk Road," linking China's Arctic development goals with those of the Belt and Road Initiative. Already, Russia and China have pursued a number of joint projects, including the construction of a port at Zarubino, which will increase shipping capacity through the Northern Sea Route.<sup>33</sup> Chinese companies are also assisting with construction of the deep-water port at Arkhangelsk, and China's Poly Group Corporation has signaled its willingness to finance the Belkomur Railway project to connect Siberian rails to Arkhangelsk.<sup>34</sup> Through these and other efforts, Russia and China are likely to sustain, if not build on, their shared goal of developing the Northern Sea Route.
- **Enhancing Arctic operational awareness and security cooperation.** Through joint research and, to a lesser extent, its joint military exercises with Russia, China is enhancing its knowledge of and insight into the Arctic. Russia and China engaged in joint research initiatives in 2016 and 2018, a practice that they could regularize. In April 2019, the two countries signed an agreement to open a joint research center to forecast ice conditions along the Northern Sea Route and inform future economic development efforts.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, although China's military presence in the

Arctic remains minimal, the PLA is likely to seek out as many training experiences as it can to increase its crews' competence. Already, China and Russia have held joint exercises in the Barents Sea and in the North Sea in the last several years.<sup>36</sup> China also joined Russia in the 2018 Vostok exercises, which included large-scale drills throughout Eastern Siberia.<sup>37</sup>

### Key Fissures in Russia-China Partnership in the Arctic

Although cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic has grown, especially since 2014, meaningful differences in their goals and approaches to the region are likely to limit the depth of that cooperation. Notably, Russia-China cooperation has remained primarily economic in nature, with relatively little collaboration in the political sphere. So far, Beijing has been attuned to Moscow's desire to maintain its dominant political position and has not pushed for greater security or political cooperation with Moscow. The following factors, however, could produce tension in the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic:

- **Asymmetry of interest.** The Arctic is simply more important to Russia than it is to China. China has no territory in the Arctic. For Russia, in contrast, being an Arctic country is ingrained in the Russian psyche and is a unifying theme for Russians. Moreover, the Kremlin has made a strategic bet on the Arctic, viewing its investments in the region as a critical pillar of its security and economic development calculus. Although China has been increasingly active in promoting its interests and role in the region, the Arctic is still not a top priority in Chinese foreign policy. In some ways this asymmetry facilitates the relationship by allowing for a neat division of labor—Russia can adopt the role of the primary political and security player, while Beijing pursues economic influence. However, the importance that Russia places on the Arctic means that Moscow will be hesitant to allow Beijing a larger role in the region. In other words, even though Russia is now open to China's involvement in economic projects in the Arctic, the Kremlin is unlikely to welcome any significant increase in Chinese political influence. Russian reticence to engage politically, in turn, could irk Beijing.
  - **Russia is a status quo player, whereas China seeks to increase its own influence.** Moscow is intent on protecting its more dominant position in the Arctic. As Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie
- Moscow Center, has noted, “Russia is, in a word, a status quo power, while China is seeking to open up the region for the world and capitalize on that.”<sup>38</sup> This dynamic is most apparent in the Kremlin's efforts to maintain its prerogative on the Arctic Council, where it will serve as chair from May 2021 to 2023. Russia continues to be reluctant to allow non-Arctic states, especially China, to play a significant role in Arctic governance. Moscow seeks to maintain the current balance of power dynamics in the region, especially within the established Arctic legal and political institutions that ensure the rights and privileges of Arctic states. Beijing, in contrast, seeks to alter the status quo by advocating that China play a greater role in Arctic governance. Beijing is promoting the perception of the Arctic as a global common rather than a strictly a regional space, with the goal of generating support for its access and participation in decision-making.<sup>39</sup> Disagreements over Arctic governance, therefore, could create tension between the two states.
  - **Tension over the Northern Sea Route.** Russia and China have built on their shared interest in developing the Northern Sea Route, but they diverge in how they view the passageway. Russia considers the Northern Sea Route to be under its exclusive jurisdiction. So, while Russia welcomes China's investment in developing the route, Moscow is intent on maintaining control over it. This position may eventually create tensions with Beijing, which could balk at future Russian obstacles to China's free use of the route.<sup>40</sup> China continues to support the non-Russian interpretation of UNCLOS as part of its stance that routes opening up in the Arctic due to ice melt should be free to all as a global common. Therefore, China believes that Russia has no right to exert control over the Northern Sea Route, although it so far has not been particularly vocal about its views. This difference in perspective could cause increasing friction in the relationship.
  - **Differences in approach.** Both Russia and China benefit from stability in the Arctic and view stability as critical for facilitating their economic stakes in the region. However, for Russia, the Arctic is about much more than economic interests. Given the region's critical role in Russian security and the Kremlin's longstanding ties to the region, the Kremlin is much more likely to use military force or other potentially destabilizing measures to protect its interests in the region. Any Russian action that contributes to instability would threaten Chinese investments and access, creating a potential fissure in their relationship.

Russia and China are not entirely aligned on Arctic issues. Nevertheless, the two countries seek to downplay their differences and avoid conflicts on practical policy issues. As Trenin notes, “This conforms to the general pattern: China and Russia pragmatically engage in increasingly close cooperation on issues of common interest, while agreeing to amicably disagree where their positions do not align.”<sup>41</sup> Russia and China have so far managed to navigate their differences, but these fissures provide opportunities for Western policymakers looking to mitigate the depth of Russia-China alignment.

## Security Implications of Russia-China Cooperation in the Arctic

So far, China’s activities in the Arctic have focused on economic, research, governance, and navigation issues, and to a far lesser extent, on the military domain. This is in part because China doesn’t yet have the military capacity to operate significantly in the Arctic and because Beijing has sought to avoid antagonizing the Kremlin in the security realm. However, should future Russia-China Arctic military cooperation expand, it would generate security implications for the West. The United States and other Arctic powers are strengthening their deterrence against Russia, including measures in the Arctic, given Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Should Beijing increase the military component of its partnership with Moscow, however, it would complicate Western efforts to deter Russia in the Arctic. A deepening in Russia-China cooperation in the Arctic would produce the following implications:

- **Enhanced Chinese insight into Russian dual-use technology that Beijing could use to build its military capabilities.** Beijing is likely to carefully watch and take note of Russia’s dual-use and hybrid capability development. Although many of the two countries’ joint research projects focus on scientific and commercial pursuits that facilitate economic ventures, in recent years China has expanded its research programs in the Arctic to those with both civilian and military applications.<sup>42</sup>
- **Increased Russian dependence on Beijing.** Russia’s reliance on China’s investments in the Arctic could increase Russia’s willingness to toe the Chinese Communist Party’s line in other areas. Developing the Arctic is not just a priority for Putin—as well as a source of national pride and important for supporting the development of Russia’s stagnant economy—but

it also serves the interests of the elite involved in projects in the region. Yet the Arctic’s harsh environment and Western sanctions have limited the outside investment and commercial cooperation that Russia needs to meet its Arctic goals. In this context, the importance Moscow places on its relations with Beijing has increased, and Beijing, in turn, almost certainly intends for its economic investment to translate into political influence. If Russia’s economic dependence on Beijing continues to grow, it will be increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to chart a course independent from Beijing, for fear that doing so would jeopardize the economic ties that Putin needs to sustain his economy and the stability of his regime. Greater Russia-China alignment, even as a result of such transactional incentives, could increase the potency of forces working in opposition to the United States and its partners.

- **Combined military assets.** Russia and China could continue to strengthen their military relationship in the Arctic, by means including expanding the scope of their joint exercises in the region. China’s civilian research efforts in the area could eventually support a strengthened Chinese military presence in the Arctic Ocean, potentially including deployment of submarines to the region. Although this scenario is highly unlikely at present, current trends in Russia-China relations necessitate considering the implications of Russia and China’s cooperation, including the possibility that they might combine such military assets as submarines and space-based assets to control the avenues of approach to the United States in both the North Pacific and North Atlantic.<sup>43</sup>
- **Militarization of the Arctic.** The biggest risk of increased Chinese-Russian military cooperation in the Arctic is the sparking of an arms race with the other Arctic powers and NATO, increasing all parties’ presence, military capability, and readiness to fight in the Arctic. This buildup may be said to have already begun, given Russia’s renewed military presence in the region. Growing concerns about Russia-China alignment, however, have the potential to further stoke the sense of insecurity in the West that would accelerate the arms race dynamic. The current lack of mechanisms for addressing the trend toward militarization means that the security atmosphere is becoming ever riper for surprise, increasing the chance of conflict set off by miscalculation, misinterpretation, or accident.

## Recommendations for Addressing the Security Implications of Russia-China Cooperation in the Arctic

Although much analysis has recognized Russia and China's emerging entente, policymakers largely remain unclear as to how to address it. Overly simplified efforts to split China and Russia, or to lump them together and take them on concurrently across all domains of geostrategic rivalry, are likely to fail. Instead, the United States must, together with its democratic allies and partners, prepare for and tackle the most significant threats the Russia-China partnership poses to American interests and values

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while laying the groundwork for the natural fissures in the relationship to grow over the longer term. The Arctic provides an arena to advance these objectives. The following recommendations provide ideas for managing not just the growing geopolitical competition in the Arctic but also the deepening partnership between America's most important geopolitical competitors.

### Strengthen Deterrence

Except for the Nordic allies, the West has been slow to focus on the Arctic. Although Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine sparked a buildup in military capabilities in the West, much work remains to improve deterrence in Europe, especially in the Arctic. The first step in addressing the security implications of Russia-China cooperation in the Arctic is to strengthen deterrence there. The Russians in particular must know with certainty that the United States is both willing and able to act in the Arctic if U.S. national security interests are threatened. With a strong, credible deterrent to back up other tools of statecraft, such as diplomacy, there is a greater chance of successfully managing cooperation and competition in the Arctic.

In 2019, Donald Trump's administration produced a comprehensive strategy for Arctic engagement. The 2019 strategy identified the Department of Defense's desired end state for the Arctic: a secure and stable region in which U.S. national security interests are safeguarded, the U.S. homeland is defended, and nations work cooperatively to address shared challenges. As simple as it sounds, the United States has a lot of work to do just

to have better situational awareness in the Arctic and the trained personnel and assets needed to credibly safeguard its national security interests.<sup>44</sup> The defense strategy acknowledged these shortcomings, charging the department to develop the capability to quickly identify threats, respond promptly through building Arctic awareness, enhance Arctic operations, and strengthen the rules-based order in the Arctic. The new strategy also recognized the potential for U.S. deterrence efforts to fuel competition and conflict with adversaries in the Arctic. It recommended that the U.S. buildup be done without stimulating strategic competition and that the Department of Defense ensure that the United States is "postured and

prepared to deter strategic competitors from threatening our interests."

As a result of this new strategy, a greater U.S. military presence

is already felt in both the United States and European Arctic. In Alaska, once again, the U.S.-Canadian cooperative air defense system will be a centerpiece, with plans to upgrade sensors and communications for improved surveillance and modernizing air and missile defense. Alaska will boast more F-35s than any other state, along with F-22s and missile defense interceptors at Fort Greeley. Six new polar security cutters are on the books for the Coast Guard, and both the U.S. and European Arctic will see an increase in U.S. exercises and deployments, especially focused on cold weather training. Finally, U.S. cooperation with allies will be strengthened, in terms of consultations, military operations, and diplomacy on the Arctic Council. Opportunities to further strengthen deterrence include:

- Increase allied military presence.** Deterrence in the Arctic is not just a U.S. responsibility. Additional allied and NATO military engagement in the Arctic is also critical for deterrence. While NATO continues to develop its role in the Arctic, it could increase allied presence in and over the GIUK gap and in the Norwegian Sea by periodically deploying units from the NATO Standing Naval Forces to exercise there with the U.S. second fleet or by increasing air exercises in the GIUK gap featuring NATO aircraft deployed to Iceland as part of NATO air policing. Other allies such as the U.K., Germany, Canada, and France could send naval and air units to exercise with Nordic allies and partners in, over, and under the Norwegian and Arctic Seas. It is important that Russia and China see that they are opposed not just by the United States but by NATO and other nations as well.

- **Increase engagement with Asian allies.** Indo-Asian allies and partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and India could partner with NATO and European nations to help increase pressure on China in the Pacific. NATO and its Indo-Asian partners could develop military activities and exercises in the Pacific and in the South China Sea to increase military pressure in China's own backyard. This move could divert some of China's focus away from the Arctic and back home.

### Work the Seams of Russia-China Relations

China and Russia are increasingly aligned, but their interests are not identical, especially in the Arctic. Their differences provide an opportunity for the United States and Europe to work these seams in an effort to limit the depth of the Russia-China partnership. In the Arctic, this strategy means that the United States should support Russia's interest in minimizing China's role. China is not an Arctic nation, and it is in America's interest to limit China's influence. At the same time, the United States can work alongside China to push back on Russia's territorial claims in the Arctic and uphold the UNCLOS line.

### Change Russia's Calculus

While the United States seeks to work the seams of Russia-China relations, the overarching objective should be to work with Russia in ways that, over time, contribute to a reduction in U.S.-Russia tensions and advance a perception that some cooperation with the United States is both possible and preferable for Russia to its growing dependence on Beijing. In this way, U.S. policy could limit the depth of the Russia-China partnership. The Arctic provides a venue for small steps toward these objectives. While such cooperation could be seen as contradictory to the U.S./NATO policy of avoiding "business as usual" with Russia as a result of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the importance to national security of countering Chinese cooperation with Russia in the Arctic and of avoiding accidents and/or conflict with Russia given the changing security landscape should allow for an exception to that overall approach. The Arctic has long been insulated from geopolitical concerns, and it now provides one of the few domains where constructive engagement with Russia is possible, especially in the following ways:

- **Communicate publicly and privately the problems with an overreliance on China.** Already, there are growing concerns in Moscow that Russia is moving toward becoming China's junior partner—a position

at odds with Russia's longstanding desire to maintain its position as an independent and unaligned pole in an increasingly multipolar world. U.S. and European policymakers should be more vocal in highlighting the shortcomings of Russia's partnership with China. In the Arctic, this could include stressing Russia's need to diversify its sources of investment and increase access to the technology it needs to develop the region. Russia's investment needs are significant, and it is unlikely that Beijing's ability to supply the technology (including what's needed for seismic exploration in the Barents Sea) and the necessary capital will be sufficient.<sup>45</sup> Over time, less confrontational and hostile behavior from the Kremlin could create conditions more conducive for U.S. policymakers to be able to provide waivers for certain investments in the Arctic. Such rhetoric is unlikely to change Putin's calculus in the near term, but these messages can raise questions among the people surrounding Putin and the Russian people writ large about the wisdom of Putin's approach—and, ultimately, raise the chances that future leaders might seek to chart a more neutral course.

- **Engage on confidence-building measures.** More tactically, the United States, along with its allies and partners, could negotiate a number of confidence-building measures with Russia. Such efforts could not only help head off dangerous geopolitical competition but also provide a foundation for normalizing the broader U.S.-Russia relationship, thereby alleviating the urgency of Moscow's alliance with Beijing. Such non-military confidence-building measures include Arctic Council members' efforts to promote a multilateral approach to accident prevention and response, Arctic search and rescue, and maritime safety. The Arctic nations should also work together on wildfire management and other climate-related regional issues, discussed below.
- **Cooperate on climate.** Although climate change will produce some benefits for Russia (the opening of the Northern Sea Route, more arable land, etc.), on the whole climate experts expect the costs to outweigh the benefits. Russia is already having to address climate-related challenges, including wildfires; melting permafrost that is collapsing infrastructure including buildings, roads, and pipelines; and the release of anthrax, which triggered a deadly outbreak in northern Russia in 2016.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Russia remains the fourth-biggest greenhouse gas emitter. Rather than making climate a source of tension, the United States and Europe should develop an agenda for positive

climate cooperation. Such an agenda could include cooperation on scientific research in the Arctic and the creation of positive incentives in the form of Western support in the climate domain.<sup>47</sup> For example, Western governments could offer to allow Russian companies access to public and private funding for climate adaptation and environmental remediation programs if Russia changed certain behaviors or reached certain climate-related benchmarks. Western sanctions against Russia currently forbid such assistance, but the sanctions could be tweaked to exempt climate-related cooperation and environmental cleanups.<sup>48</sup>

- **Strengthen Arctic stability.** Climate change will increase human activity in the Arctic and increase the risk of accidents, both civilian and military. To manage further militarization and avoid surprise, miscalculation, or accident, the Arctic powers should develop “rules of the road” for military presence and operations in the Arctic. For instance, should any Arctic power significantly increase its military presence in the Arctic by deploying additional military assets or constructing new and significant military infrastructure, the other Arctic nations would be notified of the increase in presence and its intent. New rules of the road could be modeled on the U.S.-Soviet “Incidents at Sea Agreement,” which prevented accidents between naval vessels from sparking conflict during the Cold War.<sup>49</sup> The transparency and predictability provided by similar confidence-building measures could help manage great-power militarization of the Arctic and lower the risk of conflict resulting from accident or miscalculation.
- **Restart the Arctic Chiefs of Defense forum.** To increase transparency and communications about Arctic security, the Arctic nations should restart the Arctic Chiefs of Defense (CHODs) forum. The Arctic Council is the primary governing body for the Arctic, but its mandate does not include security and military issues, as described in the Ottawa Declaration. To fill this gap, the CHODs forum was established in 2012 under Canadian leadership as a mechanism to discuss security relationships among the Arctic eight.<sup>50</sup> The group’s annual meetings ended in 2014 as a result of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea. The growing urgency of addressing security issues, however, underscores the importance of restarting these engagements. They should begin again to build transparency and an understanding by Arctic nations of the intent and future plans of other Arctic nations’ increasing military activity in the Arctic. This arrangement could provide an opportunity to draft the much-needed military

“rules of the road” described above and a channel for nations to provide advance notice of military activities, such as exercises, deployments, or movements. The meeting should begin with consultations among lower level government officials with the understanding that if Russia engages productively the engagements will be elevated to the Chiefs of defense.

Successfully working with Russia and other Arctic powers in these areas would strengthen confidence and improve the cooperative atmosphere among the Arctic nations, and limit the extent to which Russia looks to cooperate with Beijing.

## Conclusion

Great-power competition has returned to the Arctic—this time with even greater stakes. If Sino-Russian cooperation were to increase significantly in the military sphere, it would complicate deterrence in the Arctic for the United States and its allies and partners. There is no time to waste. The United States and its allies must strengthen deterrence while also looking for ways both to manage great-power competition in the Arctic and to ensure stability there so that the Arctic does not become the trigger point for turning competition into conflict. Most important, all sides must avoid backing into conflict by overreacting to ill-thought-through military deployments that could unintentionally lead to a conflict spiral or arms race in an area that has thus far avoided conflict.

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