



NIAS-Europe Studies Brief

Russia's Position in the Arctic: New challenges

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In 2015,^{*} then Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin called the Arctic the “Mecca” for Russia,¹ which is one of the biggest stakeholders in the region. With its Northern Sea Route (NSR), Russia has the edge over other Arctic countries as this historical sea route dating back to the 18th century, connected European Russia to the Far East.² Global interest in the region has caught the attention of the Kremlin and the Russian strategic community. The region's potential to emerge as the next geopolitical theatre of competition and a deteriorating relationship with the West is driving Russia to upgrade its militarisation and accelerate its energy activities. The Ukraine crisis since 2014 has helped the Kremlin to put its plan for the region into action, marked by an increasingly assertive policy for the Arctic. The Arctic has been significant for Russia since the 11th century. During the Cold War, militarisation was accelerated to dangerous levels, and the Soviet Union developed its Arctic regions building full-scale industrial facilities, infrastructure, and large permanent settlements.³ Russia's engagement in its Arctic zone has witnessed phases of concentration and negligence during the Soviet Union and immediate post-Soviet periods. During the Soviet era, Moscow established a strong industrial presence in the Arctic zone, and its scale of economic activity surpassed the activities of other circumpolar countries. The Arctic gained significance during that period; however, due to other domestic and external problems, the Kremlin could no longer sustain its focus on the region strategically, militarily, or economically. Under Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet Union radically reduced the level of military confrontation in the area. He said, “Let the North of the globe, the Arctic, become a zone of peace. Let the North Pole be a pole of peace.” During the Murmansk speech in 1987, he suggested that all the states interested in the region should initiate talks on the limitation and scaling down of military activity in the North as a whole and in both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres.⁴ He declared during the Murmansk meeting that if a nuclear free-zone in the Northern Europe proposal was adopted, including by the US, the Soviet Union was ready to become the

* The essay is based on a presentation made at the first "NIAS-KAS Annual Conclave on Europe," organised by NIAS Europe Studies in collaboration with the Delhi office of KAS. Views expressed in the brief are author's own and do not represent any institute.

1. Douglas C. Nord, “The Challenges of Arctic Governance,” <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/into-the-arctic/the-challenge-of-arctic-governance/>.

2. “Inexplicable and absurd” – Russia blasts Norway's overreaction on official Svalbard visit”, *RT*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/russia/251209-russia-rogozin-svalbard-ministry>.

3. Barbora Padrtová, “Russian Military Build-up in the Arctic: Strategic Shift in the Balance of Power or Bellicose Rhetoric Only?” *Arctic Yearbook*, 2014, pg. 2. https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2014/Scholarly_Papers/22.Padrtova.pdf.

4. Mikhail Gorbachev's Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star to the city of Murmansk, 1 October 1987. https://www.barentsinfo.fi/docs/gorbachev_speech.pdf, pg.4.

guarantor. He was ready to “go so far as to remove submarines equipped with ballistic missiles from the Soviet Baltic Fleet.”⁵ Soviet Union had already “unilaterally dismantled launchers of medium-range missiles in the Kola Peninsula and the greater part of launchers of such missiles on the remaining territory of the Leningrad and Baltic military areas. A considerable number of shorter-range missiles were removed from those districts. The holding of military exercises was restricted in areas close to the borders of Scandinavian countries.”⁶ Therefore, Gorbachev was optimistic that additional opportunities for military detente in the region could open up after the conclusion of the agreement on “global double zero.”⁷ On the naval front, Gorbachev proposed consultations between the Warsaw Treaty Organization and NATO on restricting military activity and scaling down naval and air force activities in the Baltic, Northern, Norwegian and Greenland Seas and on the extension of confidence-building measures to these areas.⁸ His vision towards creating a peaceful Arctic potentially stemmed from his awareness of the security concerns of Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, which did not possess nuclear weapons. He also knew of their concern over the Russian nuclear testing site in Novaya Zemlya. Though he wanted to resolve these issues, he was constrained by the massive amount of money invested in these projects and the lack of guarantee from the US to stop their nuclear tests or even reduce their number and yield to the minimum.⁹ His speech signalled the peaceful and cooperative foreign policy view of the Soviet Union (now Russia), for the Arctic and the world, including the opening of the Northern Sea Route to connect Europe to the Far East to the Pacific Ocean. These pacifist policies might have been due to the imminent dissolution of the Soviet Union, which kept both defence and economic activities in the region on hold. The arms treaties between Soviet Union and the US at that time, including the one on the Arctic, helped reduce the tension. However, under President Vladimir Putin, there has been renewed interest in the region. The region represents 20 per cent of the Russian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 22 per cent of its national exports.

Rationale behind Russia's refocus

The reasons behind Russia’s re-focus and renewed interest in the region can be attributed to many geo-political developments such as the Russian failure to ‘reset’ its relationship with the US, the side-lining of Russia by the US during the Iraq and Libyan wars, the applications of Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership precipitating the Georgian and Ukrainian crises in 2008, the Crimean war in 2014, and the Syrian crisis. The undercurrent that defines the complication between Russia and the West led by the US and the trust deficit is the non-inclusion of Russia in the European security architecture and the equal partner treatment to Moscow. These challenges have made Russia rethink its relationship with the West and realise that the West would never respect Russia (that it deserved) as a major power and an equal partner in ending the Cold War. These issues and US hegemony resulted in Russia developing a strong dislike for the Western liberal world order. It has also aggravated security concerns in the Kremlin. The US security doctrine, where Russia is seen as an adversary, has not helped in diffusing tensions and instead increased the tension between the two, which is reflected in the Arctic.

In addition to the US, Russia also faces problems from other Arctic members. The five members of the Arctic Council are also members of NATO, whose charter commits member states to collective self-defence. Finland and Sweden becoming NATO members has added to

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

Russia's discomfort. Finland, Norway, and Sweden had good relationships with Russia; however, the Ukrainian crisis has added to the baggage of Soviet history that has deteriorated their relationship in the current times. In addition to the worsening of the tension between Russia and the US, along with other Arctic states, China's growing interests and rising influence in the region (Polar Silk Road), Japan (an ally of the West and an adversary of Russia with territorial disputes), and other issues do not give the Kremlin a reason to not focus on the Arctic. The Kremlin's thoughts are reflected in the country's official doctrines, including security and military documents. However, the language in these documents has not been openly confrontational, and the tone has been comparatively soft compared to the 2022 statements.

Traditional Challenges

In 2020, Russia released its second 'Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Zone Until 2035' (Basic Principles 2035). The document identifies the Arctic as vital to Russia's economic and strategic interests, including developing the NSR as a globally competitive and viable transport corridor and promoting the prosperity and well-being of people living there. It also talks about maintaining the operational capability and readiness of the armed forces to deter aggression against Russia in the Arctic and further developing its Border Guard and Coast Guard forces in the Arctic. Russia mentions more than just upgrading its military equipment in the region. However, at the same time, it has attempted to assuage the fears of other member countries of the Arctic Council and signal interested countries, particularly China. In 2019, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov clarified that Russia was rebuilding its military capabilities to ensure sufficient defence capabilities given the political and military situation at its borders and not to pose a threat to anyone. He further said that the country will always be ready to defend its security interests and territorial integrity; Russia's readiness to defend its territory is not new, even though it had not been militarising the region till 2014. Still, it has been working on expanding its territorial claims and signalling its military capabilities by stationing sophisticated defence systems and conducting military exercises; in 2019, Russia conducted its strategic command staff exercises code named Tsentr-2019 in the Arctic.

Over the last decade and a half, Russia's activities in the Arctic have sparked responses from other regional states with a corresponding increase in military presence in the region. To understand the future of geo-strategic dynamics in the Arctic region, one must understand the prevailing dynamics between Russia and the West/NATO along its borders in Europe.

The Ukrainian war and the involvement of the European states, willingly or reluctantly, have dragged the tension of war to the borders of the Arctic. However, in 2021, when Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden met in Geneva, they both spoke of the Arctic as a region where the two countries might cooperate, despite their profound differences elsewhere. In his press conference, Biden also shared what Putin said earlier during his press conference about the Arctic, that there was a "need for us to be able to have some kind of modus operandi where we dealt with making sure the Arctic was, in fact, a free zone".¹⁰ The Ukrainian war has further complicated things between the two countries, including in the Arctic. However, if one carefully reviews the strategic and military reports from both sides, they reveal that both sides have been upgrading their defence capabilities (due to a mutual trust deficit) despite the heads of the states expressing the need to keep the

10. "Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference", *The White House*, June 16, 2021.
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-4/>

Arctic a free zone. In its 2021 Arctic strategy, *Regaining Arctic Dominance*, the US talks about securing its national interests, maintaining regional stability, projecting global power, and a possible avenue of attack in conflict.¹¹ The US sees Russia's Arctic strategies as geopolitical goals contrary to US interests. It understands that Russia seeks to consolidate its sovereign claims and control access to the region. As indicated in the US strategy, Russian military capabilities in "the region are by far the most advanced driver of great power competition".¹²

In the same document, the US acknowledges that "as the country with the largest amount of land above the Arctic Circle, Russia's first priority is defending its historic right to rule over the Far North, securing its territorial interests against those of NATO-aligned states". The Americans understand Russian keenness to build a 'protective dome' area within this context. The US also recognises that Russian advanced defence capabilities "in the Barents Sea highlight its ability to deny aerial, maritime, or land access to NATO or US forces".¹³ Against this backdrop, cooperation remains elusive in absolute terms from both sides. One can argue that with defence capabilities alone, tensions between adversaries could de-escalate; however, in reality, it is the other way around. On October 2022, the US released the second edition of its Arctic Strategy, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*, reiterating its goals and objectives laid down in the other Arctic strategy by the US Army.

Meanwhile, the EU's multifaceted policy in the Arctic is likely to shift from cooperation with Russia to non-cooperation. In its 2021 Joint Communication, the EU recognised the military build-up across the Arctic. For the EU, in addition to the increase in the security threat perception due to the militarisation in the region, the impact of climate change in and from the region is of major concern. The Northern Dimension is a common policy of the EU, Russia, Norway, and Iceland. The EU is working with Russia and other members on four specific areas under the policy, including the Nuclear Window of the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP). The Nuclear Window is a multilateral funding mechanism that addresses risks associated with the Soviet-era nuclear legacy in North-West Russia. The Barents Sea area has one of the world's largest accumulations of spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste. Contributors have provided 166.3 million euros to the Nuclear Window since 2002, and the EU has contributed EUR 40 million. The NDEP projects have dramatically improved the environmental condition of the Baltic Sea and reduced the danger of radiological contamination in Arctic waters¹⁴. Against this backdrop, the Russian threat to use nuclear weapons during the Ukrainian war created an atmosphere of mistrust among members of the Northern Dimension common policy. Further, Norway's complex relationship with Russia is unlikely to make things easier in the future due to the fallout from the Ukrainian war.

Sweden and Finland were the neutral countries in the region that have recently applied for

11. "Army announces release of Arctic Strategy", *U.S. Army Public Affairs*, March 16, 2021. https://www.army.mil/article/244261/army_announces_release_of_arctic_strategy.

12. *Regaining Arctic Dominance: The U.S. Army in the Arctic*, *Headquarters, Department of the Army 19 January 2021*, pp.15-16. <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/03/15/9944046e/regaining-arctic-dominance-us-army-in-the-arctic-19-january-2021-unclassified.pdf>.

13. *Ibid*, pp17-18

14. Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic" *EUR-Lex*, October 13, 2021. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN:2021:27:FIN>

NATO membership. In April 2022, both countries took part, for the first time, in a scheduled NATO exercise in Arctic Norway known as "Cold Response."¹⁵ Their membership will mean surrounding Russia with NATO, even in the Arctic. NATO follows the old adage "Don't just do something. Stand there!" which is also used in the region. They had a hands-off approach; however, the recent formation of NATO's Arctic Command (ARCCOM) is a signal to Russia and the world how the North Pole is being prepared for the battle between Russia and the West. ARCCOM was set up to foster discussion and deterrence in the High North. Another purpose of ARCCOM is to ensure that the region does not become a flashpoint for international conflict.¹⁶ From Russia's perspective, the non-dismantling of NATO, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, makes the future bleak and dangerous in the Arctic. This is reflected in its doctrines and Putin's speeches since 2007.

Russia has given the Arctic much attention in its military and strategic doctrines, including the naval doctrines in 2015, 2017, and 2022. The 2022 doctrine is of particular interest as it was published in July 2022 at the height of the war with Ukraine; the US doctrine was released in October 2022 and highlighted the spillover effect of the Ukraine war in the Arctic. The Russian doctrine focuses on Russia's overall confrontation with the US and NATO. It emphasises a more central place for using force to defend Russian global interests and seek economic and strategic alternatives for the West in the developing world. The doctrine seems to project Russia as a country which tries to turn the international waters into a space for strategic competition and confrontation between the great powers. It reflects a re-orientation of Russian foreign policy towards the Global South, specifically, because of the war with Ukraine and the Arctic becoming the new profitable venture for the Russian economy.¹⁷

Given the dynamics in play, Russia's future in the Arctic will be challenging in the coming days. Russia's contentious relationship with the US and other Arctic members is evident. In addition, China's growing ambition in the Arctic will add to Russia's fear though both recognise each other as a close and comprehensive strategic partner. Due to the sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014, Russia was pushed to re-orient its vision towards Asia, including China. In international relations, one does not have permanent friends or foes, which is proven in the case of these two countries' growing relationship. Russia and China undoubtedly have come a long way from their historical adversarial relationship (which both sides regret), especially after the Crimean crisis in 2014. Before that, the two countries were closely working together on an equal footing. However, with the sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and the EU, including the recent ones, Russia has not only been pushed firmly into the arms of Beijing but also towards becoming a junior partner of China. It would take some time for Russia to regain the same footing as China, mainly because of the non-negotiable complications between Russia and the West. The entry of China into the Arctic could have opened a platform for Russia and the US to cooperate afresh, especially over the Arctic as they used to in the past. However, with the Ukrainian crisis, that chance looks remote, and the Kremlin is unlikely to defy China openly, given their marriage of convenience.

15. Robin Emmott, Essi Lehto and Simon Johnson, "Why Putin faces 'more NATO' in the Arctic after Ukraine invasion", *Reuters*, April 4, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-putin-faces-more-nato-arctic-after-ukraine-invasion-2022-04-04/>.

16. Lee Mottola, "NATO's Arctic Command: A Case for the Expansion of NATO's Mission in the High North", *The Arctic Institute*, January 17, 2023. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-command-case-expansion-nato-mission-high-north/>.

17. Daniel Rakov, "Russia's New Naval Doctrine: A 'Pivot to Asia'?" *The Diplomat*, August 19, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/russias-new-naval-doctrine-a-pivot-to-asia/>

For Russia, China has become the source of long-term financing and technology to aid the energy and infrastructure development in the Arctic. In addition, China is also helping Russia in areas ranging from multi-use ports and airfields to energy extraction. The two countries are also partnering in scientific research and sharing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data which are important and sensitive in some areas. Beijing's interest in the Arctic is more economical through its Polar Silk Road and less military.¹⁸ However, learning from the Chinese presence in Central Asia, it is evident that China initially brings in the economic angle, and the military aspect is slowly introduced under the guise of protecting Chinese strategic interests in the place of investment. One can foresee a similar model replicated in the Arctic through its Polar Silk Road.¹⁹

Non-traditional Challenges

Apart from these geostrategic threats from the US, China, and other Arctic members who are also NATO members, Russia also faces several non-traditional challenges. The melting of the Russian Arctic permafrost has significant consequences for Russia's Arctic cities. It is larger than Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and the Scandinavian countries. The Russian side of the Arctic has a significantly larger population, home to almost 2.5 million people²⁰. Heavy industrial facilities are also located in the region, including some of the world's largest metallurgical works, quarries, mining and processing enterprises, coalmines, nuclear weapons test sites, radioactive waste storages, and other environmentally hazardous facilities.²¹ The melting of the permafrost in these remote areas would cause significant damage to buildings and crucial infrastructure, including thousands of kilometres of oil and gas pipelines. Russia is one of the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases impacting its contribution to climate change goals. It was slow in adopting climate change mitigation measures and published its first relevant document, the *Climate Doctrine*, only in 2009. In 2013, a presidential decree was called to drastically cut greenhouse gases to 75% of 1990 levels; in 2020, another 30% cut on this level was announced through the decree.²² The warming of the Arctic will have far-reaching consequences on Russia's other parts of the province, such as on the 'bread-basket' of Stavropol and Rostov. This could impact food security and threaten Russia's primary export, wheat. The effect of climate change on the Russian economy will be significant. The 2019 fire in southern Siberia and the Republic of Sakha-Yakutiya, industrial pollution, and nuclear and military pollution are other challenges Russia faces and will increasingly face in the region with further developments. In turn, it would impact the health of the people residing there. Air pollution due to heavy industries and from the accumulated stable organic compounds and other substances like toxic components from chemical and radioactive waste storage sites is set to emerge as a big challenge. The study, *Climate Change Impact on Public Health in the Russian Arctic*, conducted by the UN Russian team, found that people in the region suffered predominantly from malignant tumours and immune system

18. John Grady, "China, Russia Quietly Expanding Arctic Partnership, Says Panel", *USNI News*, October 11, 2022. <https://news.usni.org/2022/10/11/china-russia-quietly-expanding-arctic-partnership-says-panel#:~:text=China%20is%20subtly%20installing%20a,Arctic%20security%20experts%20said%20Tuesday>.

19. China has not yet scheduled any commercial transit through the NSR for the time being. Ibid.

20. "Russia", *The Arctic Institute*, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/russia/>

21. "Climate Change Impact on Public Health in the Russian Arctic", *The United Nations in the Russian Federation*, pg. 4.

22. Richard Sakwa, "Russia's "Green Shift" and What It Means for Neighbouring Countries" in Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti (ed) *Environment in Times of War: Climate and Energy Challenges in the Post-Soviet Region*, ISPI, pg.29.

<https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/environment-in-times-of-war-climate-energy-challenges-post-soviet-region.pdf>.

disorders, and women faced high reproductive mortality rates. Mental health would be another area that would require attention due to the environmental hazards people face.²³

In addition, Russia might also face other challenges, such as climate refugees, due to the damage to housing. Already, the US and Canada have experienced climate change refugees. Russia already faces coastal degradation affecting the residents of Inupiat and the island of Sarichev.²⁴ Challenges in electricity transmission systems would be another area that Russia might have to address. Once the permafrost melts and thermokarst and other unstable soil conditions emerge subsequently, it would heighten the risk of transmitting power. High-voltage power lines would be susceptible to damage as upper soil layers thaw and re-freeze. In particular, the lines serving the Bilibino nuclear power plant on the Arctic coast and running from Chersk to Pevek would be significantly vulnerable.²⁵ There will be other challenges due to climate change. How much the government is equipped to handle is something that time will reveal. With sanctions on sophisticated technology, the immediate future looks bleak. Also, the understanding within Russia is that though these are environmental challenges, they are seen more from the prism of “the Western powers deliberately sought to undermine Russian interests in the region.”²⁶ The Kremlin believes that the imposition of environmental standards by the West is intentional and is designed to limit Russia's economic activities. Therefore, this is viewed as a national security threat.²⁷ Dialogue and cooperation on climate change could have been an area of working together between Russia and the other Arctic Council members; however, things do not look positive on this front due to the Ukrainian war.

Other Challenges

Another challenge Russia faces is the legal framework of the Arctic region, which is not that strong. They have the Ilulissat Declaration of 2008 among Russia, the US, Canada, Norway, and Denmark. In addition, there is the UNCLOS, to which the US is not a party. Russia supports the UNCLOS, but the US not being a party to it makes it difficult for Russia, especially the US' non-fulfilment of the obligations set out in Article 76 of the Convention concerning delineating its own Arctic shelf creates discomfort for Russia and its interests in the region. Under President Putin, in 2001, Russia submitted the proposed outer limits of the continental shelf of the Russian Federation beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). However, it is still under review. Russia flagged its rights during Arktika 2007, but there was tension between Russia and the other members. In 2021, it submitted another set of documents to the United Nations claiming far more of the vast Arctic Ocean seafloor.²⁸ Putin, in December 2020, signed laws that take precedence of the Russian constitution over international agreements and decisions over international bodies.²⁹ The non-compliance of the US to the UNCLOS and Russia making national laws that take precedence over international laws

23. “Climate Change Impact on Public Health in the Russian Arctic”, *The United Nations in the Russian Federation*, pg. 5 and pg.7.

24. *Ibid*, pg.7.

25. *Russia: The Impact of Climate Change to 2030 A Commissioned Research Report*, Joint Global Change Research Institute and Battelle Memorial Institute, Pacific Northwest Division, 2009, pg. 20. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/climate2030_russia.pdf

26. *Ibid*, pg.34

27. *Ibid*, pg.34

28. “Putin discusses Russia’s claim to giant chunk of Arctic Ocean seabed”, *The Print*, January 27, 2023. <https://theprint.in/world/putin-discusses-russias-claim-to-giant-chunk-of-arctic-ocean-seabed/1338860/>

29. “Putin signs laws giving Russian constitution precedence over international law”, *TASS*, December 08, 2020. <https://tass.com/politics/1232603>

complicates the emerging tensions in the Arctic.

Russia has been discreet about its actions regarding its obligations to international laws in the Arctic. This became apparent in 2021 when it submitted further claims on the sea floor in the Arctic to the UN. However, the suspension of dialogue and cooperation with Russia by the Arctic Council members since 2022 does not auger well for the region. One can foresee legal and non-legal battles amongst the members over their claims on the Arctic. To further complicate the matters, a particular clause under the UNCLOS declares that all states, coastal or not, possess legitimate rights and interests regarding the high seas and the deep seabed in the Arctic and other oceans and are, therefore, able to participate in decision-making. This ensures that the thirteen observer members have an equal say in the matters that relate to the Arctic. Turkey is the latest country to apply to the Council to become an observer. The shifting of the tension from Europe to the Arctic in the near future is very likely with discreet and subtle bloc formations such as the West (NATO and EU countries excluding Turkey) and Eurasia (Russia and China).³⁰ Countries like India, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey may balance both sides as they are still trying to tread lightly in the region.

Overall, for the time being, the Arctic presents Russia with challenges rather than opportunities because of its relationship with the West. It remains to be seen how Russia can manoeuvre itself in the changing dynamics of world order impacting not only geo-strategies or geo-economic but global climate change. Russia's strategies would likely be assertive and confrontational, especially with the impact of the Ukrainian war on the region; Russia had already tried its coercive diplomacy in the region.³¹ Currently, apart from the US and China, from where Moscow faces its most significant threat, Russia is more powerful than the rest of the countries in the region, both economically and militarily. But a QUAD/AUKUS-like arrangement (without including India as it would not be interested in getting involved) might become a reality in the region, threatening Russian strategic and security interests.

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30. China benefits the most with this kind of situation in the Arctic.

31. Though Moscow is subtle with China because of the 'no limits' comprehensive strategic partnership.