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Russia's Arctic Policy Shift: Asia's Growing Engagement, Opportunities for Mongolia

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Abstract: *This paper examines Russia's evolving Arctic policy amid shifting global dynamics, emphasizing its strategic pivot toward Asia's growing influence and the resulting regional transformations. As Western sanctions and NATO tensions isolate Moscow, Russia has intensified the development of the Northern Sea Route, energy projects, and Arctic infrastructure while deepening partnerships with Asian states such as China and India. Using a qualitative policy and document analysis informed by geoeconomics and resource nationalism, the study explores how these collaborations, exemplified by projects like Yamal LNG, reflect Asia's expanding role in Arctic governance and resource development. It highlights the contradictions between sovereignty and dependency in Russia's Arctic strategy and considers potential opportunities for Mongolia's engagement, including possible observer status in the Arctic Council. The paper argues that the Arctic is shifting from a region dominated by coastal states to one increasingly shaped by Asian economic and strategic interests.*

Keywords: *Russia, Arctic, foreign policy, Asia, geoeconomics, Mongolia*

Introduction

The Arctic, stretching across the polar ocean and the territories that border it, has long been one of the world's most resource-rich and strategically significant regions. Beneath its ice and tundra lie vast reserves of oil, gas, and minerals, while the melting of sea ice is gradually revealing new maritime corridors for trade and transport. This combination of economic promise and environmental fragility makes the Arctic a place where global interests converge. Early exploration between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, led by powers such as Russia and Great Britain, reflected imperial curiosity and ambition. Yet true geopolitical competition over the Arctic began in the twentieth century, when the United States and the Soviet Union transformed it into a Cold

Received: 01 October, 2025; Accepted: 07 November, 2025

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War frontier of surveillance, nuclear deterrence, and strategic positioning.

In the twenty-first century, the Arctic's importance has grown dramatically. Climate change has accelerated the retreat of polar ice, opening new routes for navigation and making natural resources more accessible. The region now includes territories governed by eight states, including Canada, Denmark (through Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation, and the United States (through Alaska), altogether collectively known as the Arctic States. Their collaboration within the Arctic Council forms the core of regional governance and dialogue. Among these countries, Russia holds the largest share of Arctic territory, controlling nearly half of the Arctic coastline. The Arctic has become central not only to Russia's economic strategy but also to its geopolitical identity, linking national development goals with broader ambitions for influence across Eurasia.

Recent years, however, have seen notable strategic shifts in how the Arctic is approached and contested. Russia's efforts to consolidate its position in the north, through energy development, control of the Northern Sea Route, and expanded military infrastructure have coincided with the growing engagement of Asian powers. China, India, Japan, and South Korea now view the Arctic not as a remote periphery, but as a region with direct implications for energy security, shipping diversification, scientific research, and global governance. These developments mark a widening of the Arctic's geopolitical map: once dominated by Euro-Atlantic actors, it is increasingly influenced by the economic and strategic interests of Asia.

This eastward engagement is not merely symbolic. For Russia, partnerships with Asian states provide crucial investment, technology, and markets amid continuing sanctions and isolation from Western economies. For Asian countries, cooperation with Russia in the Arctic offers both opportunities and challenges, meaning access to new resources and routes on one hand, and exposure to geopolitical risk on the other. For Mongolia, a country which is historically absent from polar discourse, these transformations present a chance to expand its diplomatic and scientific footprint. Although Mongolia has not formally pursued observer status in the Arctic Council, its background in environmental and climate-related research, together with its balanced and multipillared foreign policy, provides a basis for potential engagement in Arctic cooperation. This paper analyzes Russia's Arctic policy and the growing engagement of Asian states, focusing on the strategic shifts that link the Arctic to wider regional transformations. Using the theoretical lenses of geoeconomics and resource nationalism, it explores how Russia's Arctic ambitions have evolved under Western isolation, how cooperation with Asian partners has become a central component of its policy, and what opportunities these trends may hold for Mongolia.

The academic discussion on Arctic affairs has expanded rapidly in the past two decades, reflecting the region's transformation into a focal point of global economic and strategic interests. Within Mongolia, academic interest to the Arctic remains nascent. The study by

Ganbat and Chuluundorj, marked the first systematic Mongolian study of Arctic geopolitics, emphasizing great power rivalry and regional security concerns (Nyamdag & Sundui, 2025). Building on that foundation, this paper offers a complementary perspective by focusing on Russia's Arctic strategy, the increasing involvement of Asian partners, and the implications these developments hold for Mongolia's foreign policy. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, combining policy and document analysis with theoretical insights from geoeconomics and resource nationalism. The analysis draws on Russian strategic documents, secondary literature, and Arctic Council materials to assess how Russia's Arctic policy has developed in response to Western sanctions and changing global power structures, and how partnerships with Asian states, particularly China and India, have reshaped the geoeconomic and governance dynamics of the region. It further explores the strategic and policy opportunities these transformations may hold for Mongolia's prospective engagement in Arctic affairs. By articulating these guiding questions, the paper links Russia's Arctic reorientation to broader regional transformations and situates Mongolia within the emerging configuration of Eurasian and Arctic geopolitics

I. Theoretical Background

In the context of the Arctic, *geoeconomics* refers to the intersection of economic power and geopolitics, where control and exploitation of resources, such as oil, gas, and minerals are not merely economic activities but also critical instruments of national strategy (Luttwak, 1990) (Scholvin & Wigell, 2020). Within this logic, Russia's Arctic policy can be effectively analyzed through the lens of resource nationalism, a concept that posits that states increasingly perceive natural resources as strategic assets to be tightly controlled and utilized to assert national power and influence (Victor, Hults, & Thurber, 2012). As the largest Arctic nation, Russia has long emphasized the region's vast potential for energy extraction and resource transportation. The Arctic is estimated to hold approximately 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30% of its untapped natural gas resources (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2012), making it a region of immense economic and geopolitical significance. Given Russia's heavy dependence on energy exports as a major component of its GDP, the Arctic represents not only a prospective source of economic growth but also a crucial geostrategic asset.

The country's aspiring control over Arctic energy resources is integral to its political sovereignty and geopolitical leverage. By reinforcing its sovereign rights over Arctic territories and increasing militarization, Russia aims to secure dominance over the Northern Sea Route (NSR), a strategic shipping corridor connecting Europe and Asia. The NSR reduces shipping distances significantly, enhancing Russia's access to Asian markets and facilitating exports of liquified natural gas (LNG) from fields such as the Yamal Peninsula (Arctic Russia, 2022).

This approach reflects how economic statecraft and energy diplomacy work hand in hand within Russia's geoeconomic strategy.

Historically, Western countries, especially the United States, Canada, and the Nordic states have played leading roles in Arctic governance and offshore exploration, while Russia has maintained the largest territorial presence and resource base. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the imposition of Western sanctions, the country began to pivot toward Asian partners for investment, technology, and infrastructure cooperation. This shift illustrates how resource nationalism drives Russia's engagement with non-Arctic states, transforming control over natural resources into a diplomatic and strategic tool. China's involvement in the Yamal LNG project and India's participation in Arctic LNG-2 and the Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor show how energy cooperation and maritime development have become key pillars of Russia's evolving Arctic partnerships (The Arctic Institute, 2024) (Sharma, 2025).

Nonetheless, Russia's pursuit of resource control in the Arctic faces growing challenges. Climate change increases access to northern resources but also sharpens competition among Arctic and non-Arctic actors. Canada, Norway, and the United States expand their activities, while China, India, Japan, and South Korea cooperate with Russia on energy, Northern Sea Route infrastructure, and scientific projects. These partnerships signal a more multipolar Arctic where unilateral dominance is difficult to sustain. Sanctions further constrain Moscow's ambitions by limiting technology transfer and investment (Conley, H. A., & Melino, M., 2020).

In this context, resource nationalism serves as both an asset and a liability in Russia's Arctic policy. It reinforces Moscow's claims to geopolitical primacy yet exposes tensions between sovereignty and dependence. Russia's ability to reconcile these competing forces through linking economic ambition, national security, and foreign partnerships, forms the core of its strategic vision for the Arctic, examined in the following section.

II. Analysis on Russia's Strategic Vvision and Policy Frameworks in the Arctic Region

Today, the Arctic plays a crucial role in Russia's economic development, accounting for approximately 10% of the country's GDP, 20% of its total exports, and 10% of its domestic investments. Although the Arctic is home to only 0.07% of the global population, which is about 5.5 million people, 10% of them are indigenous peoples. Russia occupies 40% of the total Arctic territory, with 2.4 million residents, roughly 44% of the entire Arctic population (Centre for High North Logistics, 2024).

In addition, the Arctic is critical for ensuring Russia's energy security, and there is also potential for the development of renewable energy in the region. It plays an exceptional role in national defense and security: the Northern Fleet, Russia's largest naval fleet, is stationed there, along with strategic nuclear submarines and nuclear

weapon storage facilities located on the Kola Peninsula.

To understand how the Arctic became a consistent priority in Russia's foreign policy, it is necessary to trace its evolution across several key strategic documents, beginning with the National Security Strategy, continuing through the Foreign policy concepts (see table 1). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Arctic's position in Russia's strategic foreign policy planning has grown, as reflected in relevant official documents.

Table 1. Comparison of regional priorities in Russia's foreign policy concepts

№ / Year	1993 Concept	2000 Concept	2008 Concept	2013 Concept	2016 Concept	2023 Concept
1.	CIS	CIS, Russia-Belarus Union	CIS (CSTO, EAEU, SCO)	CIS (CSTO, EAEU, SCO)	CIS (CSTO, EAEU, SCO)	Immediate Neighboring Countries
2.	USA	Europe: EU, OSCE, Council of Europe	Europe: **Barents/Euro-Atlantic and Arctic regions** together, Central, Eastern Europe, and the Baltic States	Euro-Atlantic region: EU, OSCE, Council of Europe	Euro-Atlantic region: EU, OSCE, Council of Europe	**Arctic**
3.	Europe: Western, Eastern Europe, Baltic States, OSCE	NATO	NATO	NATO	NATO	Eurasia: China, India
4.	Asia-Pacific Region	USA	USA	**Barents/Euro-Arctic and the entire Arctic region**	USA	Asia-Pacific
5.	South and West Asia	Asia-Pacific (in the context of developing Siberia and the Russian Far East)	Asia-Pacific (in the context of developing Siberia and the Russian Far East)	Southeastern Europe, Balkan Region	**Arctic Region: Arctic Council, Barents/Euro-Arctic Council, Northern Sea Route**	Islamic World
6.	Middle East	Southeast Asia	Southeast Asia (ASEAN)	USA	Antarctica	Africa
7.	Africa	Middle East	Middle East	Arctic Region: Arctic Council, Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Northern Sea Route	Asia-Pacific: ASEAN, SCO, APEC, China, India, Mongolia, Australia, New Zealand	Latin America, Caribbean States
8.	Latin America	Africa	Africa	Antarctica	Middle East, North Africa, Islamic World: Arab League	Europe
9.	UN and other international organizations	Central and South America	Latin America, Caribbean States	Asia-Pacific: Southeast Asia (ASEAN), Russia-China-India trilateral cooperation, Mongolia	Latin America, Caribbean States: BRICS	USA and other Anglo-Saxon countries

10.	-	-	Middle East, North Africa, Islamic World: Arab League	-	Antarctica	-
11.	-	-	Latin America, Caribbean States: BRICS	-	-	-

Note: This table is based on Russia's official foreign policy concepts, with regions listed in the order they appear in the original texts. The Arctic region is marked in blue.

When comparing Russia's foreign policy concepts adopted in 1993, 2000, 2008, 2013, 2016, and 2023, we see that there was no specific mention of the Arctic region in documents prior to 2008.

Although in 1993, under President Boris Yeltsin, Russia participated in the establishment of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (based on the Kirkenes Declaration) together with Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the European Commission, the Arctic was not separately addressed in the foreign policy concept.

Only in the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, during President Vladimir Putin's second term, was the Arctic included as part of Russia's cooperation within the same council. Fundamentally, Russia's increased focus on the Arctic can be linked to:

- President Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he openly criticized NATO and the West.
- NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit, where U.S. President George W.Bush expressed support for Ukraine and Georgia's NATO membership, prompting Russia's opposition.

Just three months later, Russia adopted a new foreign policy concept that included the following language:

"Russia opposes NATO's military and defense infrastructure coming closer to its borders..."

This shift reflected Russia's growing determination to protect its sphere of influence and redirect its foreign policy orientation from the West toward the East. And one year after, in 2009, Russia's second National Security Strategy, adopted amongst growing global energy competition, was the first to define the Arctic as a strategic resource base for Russia's future development. It emphasized the need to secure access to Arctic hydrocarbons and transport routes, framing the region largely through an economic and technological lens. At that stage, the country's Arctic ambitions were couched in the language of modernization and international cooperation.

In the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, major changes were made regarding the Arctic. Section 73 stated: *"Russia actively supports international cooperation in the Arctic, adheres to legal frameworks in resolving regional issues through dialogue, and prioritizes cooperation with institutions such as the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. It remains open to mutually beneficial cooperation with other countries in the region. The development of the Northern Sea Route is of strategic importance for the region."*

Following the end of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, Vladimir Putin's return to power in 2012 marked a renewed emphasis on northern development and strategic sovereignty. That same year, he established the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic and approved the "Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation until 2020." From this point onward, Russia's foreign policy began to pivot more visibly away from Euro-Atlanticism and toward Asia.

This shift was further consolidated in the 2015 National Security Strategy, adopted in the aftermath of Crimea's annexation and the subsequent collapse of relations with the West. The document adopted a markedly more assertive tone, defining the Arctic as a zone of "strategic stability" that demanded enhanced defense capacity and protection from external threats. It elevated the military dimension of Arctic policy, emphasizing the need for a continuous presence and readiness to safeguard Russia's northern borders and key maritime routes. These changes in strategic posture were later reflected in the subsequent Foreign Policy Concept, which integrated the Arctic more directly into Russia's vision of sovereignty, security, and Eurasian cooperation.

In the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, Arctic-related content appeared in Sections 75–76. This document revived language from the 2008 concept regarding bilateral cooperation with Canada. It also expanded on the 2013 concept by stating:

"Russia firmly opposes any attempts to bring elements of confrontation into regional cooperation in the Arctic."

This addition is linked to the period following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the resulting Western sanctions. Furthermore, the document emphasized:

"The development of the Northern Sea Route as a national transportation link in Russia's Arctic, and as a transit corridor between Europe and Asia, is of strategic importance for the region."

Most recently, a significant shift in the Arctic's role within Russia's foreign policy was formalized in the new Foreign Policy Concept adopted on March 31, 2023, a year after the war in Ukraine began. The document is shaped by Western sanctions and confrontation, places greater emphasis on Russia's cooperation with non-Western partners, particularly China, India, and other Asian states, and framing the Arctic as part of a broader multipolar world order by listing it as a top regional priority, second only to its immediate neighbors – the CIS countries.

By ranking the Arctic this high in its foreign policy priorities, Russia is signaling two things:

1. Its geopolitical interest in securing access to maritime routes;
2. Its intention to declare the Arctic an official sphere of influence.

Therefore, this can be interpreted as a formal declaration of strategic intent regarding the Arctic region.

In connection with the documents mentioned above, the domestic-foreign policy convergence is further reflected in the Maritime Doctrines. The 2001 Maritime doctrine presented the Arctic mainly as an economic and transport space, stressing the importance of navigation safety, research, and resource use in cooperation with other Arctic

states. The 2015 doctrine, adopted during heightened tensions with the West, expanded these priorities to include defense and sovereignty, identifying the Arctic as a "core national interest zone" requiring military and civilian infrastructure development. Finally, the 2022 doctrine formalized this shift by defining the Arctic Ocean and the Northern Sea Route as regions under "direct state protection". It emphasized naval modernization, control over maritime logistics, and protection of subsea infrastructure, which is effectively transforming the Arctic into a combined economic and security theater. And the latest Arctic Development Strategy 2035, adopted in 2020, completes this trajectory. It abandons the cooperative tone of earlier versions, emphasizing full sovereignty, year-round navigation, and deeper engagement with non-Western partners. But in correlation with the ongoing war in Ukraine, possible amendments to the document are currently in discussion.

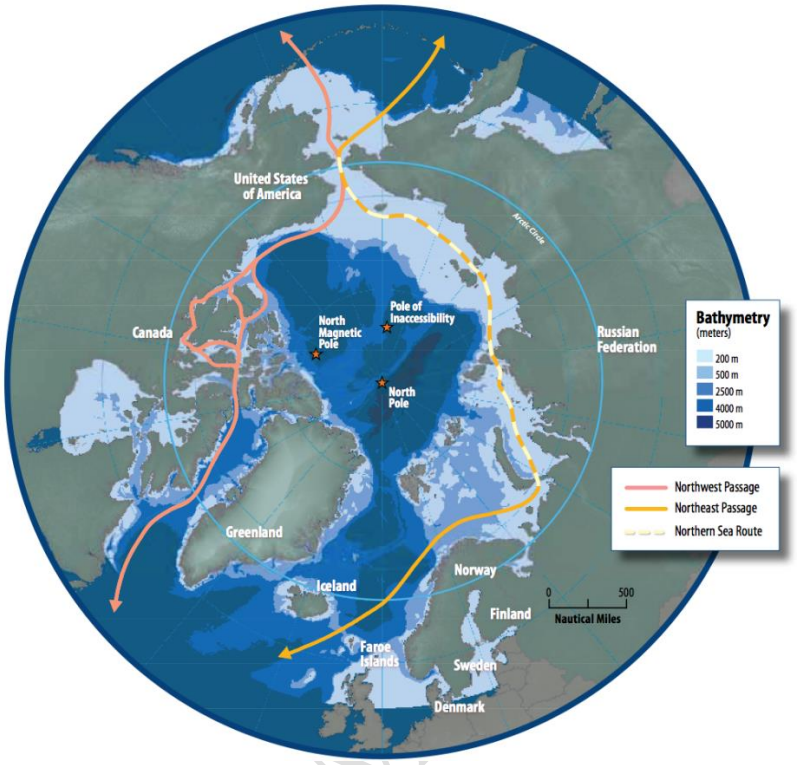
Thus, in Russia's foreign policy discourse, the Arctic serves as both a symbol of great-power continuity and a testing ground for multipolar diplomacy. It allows the country to assert sovereignty, demonstrate technological capability, and maintain influence across Eurasia even amongst isolation from Western institutions. Through the Arctic region, Russia projects an image of resilience and adaptation, using the region as a diplomatic and strategic bridge to non-Western partners, particularly in Asia.

III. Policy Implementation, Challenges and Trends

a. The Northern Sea Route

Russian scientists and researchers have long emphasized the importance of granting Russia access to the sea via the Arctic Ocean. For example, in 1755, Russian scientist M.V.Lomonosov proposed the idea of the "Northern Sea Route," arguing that developing the Northern Sea Route would strengthen Russia's economy, scientific capacity, and defense capability. At that time, he wrote about a northern route through the Siberian Sea to reach East India (Lomonosov, 1847), though he failed to gain state support. In 1763, he continued his Arctic research, studying the movement and currents of the Arctic Sea ice, and defined the region as strategically significant – a notion that has been preserved in Russia's current geopolitical doctrine. Throughout the 20th century, the Soviet Union and, later, the Russian Federation continued their Northern Sea Route policy, formulating plans and implementing actions to develop this route (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Northern Sea Route



Source: Arctic Council (2009), *Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment (AMSA) 2009 Report* (2nd print). Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME). Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20141101021336/http://www.arctic.noaa.gov/detect/documents/AMSA_2009_Report_2nd_print.pdf

Russia's Northern Sea Route is a strategically important transportation corridor along the northern coast of Eurasia and constitutes a core component of the country's Arctic policy. Stretching from the Barents Sea to the Bering Strait, the route is considered one of the shortest and most feasible paths connecting Asia and Europe. Therefore, Russia places special emphasis on its development and aims to make it a competitive international transport route.

In 2022, Russia adopted the "Northern Sea Route Development Program", which outlines a plan through 2035. The plan includes key objectives such as modernizing port infrastructure, expanding the icebreaker fleet, and improving transport and logistics networks. Additionally, it focuses on ensuring coastal security, developing a monitoring system, and expanding international cooperation, particularly with China, India, and other Asian countries, to transform the Northern Sea Route into a significant regional and global trade route (Government of the Russian Federation, 2022). In terms of cargo transport, the strategy sets a target of transporting approximately 220 million tons

of cargo via the Northern Sea Route by 2035. According to Rosatom, total cargo along the Northern Sea Route reached 37.9 million tons as of 2024, including over 3 million tons of international transit shipments (Rosatom, 2024). The government further aims to expand the nuclear icebreaker fleet to around 20–22 vessels by 2035, up from about 8 in operation and several under construction, while continuing to reopen and modernize military and civilian facilities along the Arctic coast (Ruksha, 2022). These quantitative indicators highlight steady, though uneven, progress toward Russia's long-term Arctic transport and security ambitions, underscoring the gap between declared objectives and current performance.

A major structural obstacle to international transit along the Northern Sea Route is the high and uncertain cost of icebreaker support, a service monopolized by the state-owned Rosatomflot. Since the Federal Tariff Service introduced a zone-based pricing system in 2014, tariffs for icebreaking assistance have remained steep, estimated at around US $1.57 million (roughly US $9.2 per ton) for a full-length winter voyage by a 170000-ton Arc-7 LNG carrier. These specialized vessels, designed for independent navigation in thick Arctic ice of up to 2.1 meters, form the backbone of Russia's Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2 projects. Their advanced design allows limited operation without nuclear icebreaker escort, enabling operators such as Novatek to reduce dependence on costly state services. Nonetheless, the fact that such autonomy is required to remain economically viable underscores the contradiction within Russia's Arctic model: while Moscow seeks to maintain sovereign control over critical infrastructure, high state-set tariffs and monopoly pricing discourage broader international participation. The icebreaker regime thus encapsulates the logic of resource nationalism, which is about prioritizing sovereignty and control over competitiveness, even at the expense of the Northern Sea Route's global appeal.

Amongst geopolitical shifts, Russia's partnerships with India and China are intensifying. The CHNL reports that transit traffic along the NSR in 2024 reached 3.07 million tons, carried across 97 voyages, with Russia-to-China routes dominating (Centre for High North Logistics, 2024). And India has been expressing its interest in cooperating with Russia as well. On July 8-9, 2024, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Russia, which was his first visit since 2019. During the visit, the two countries signed nine memorandums of understanding, including agreements on "India-Russia economic cooperation, India-Russia collaboration in the Russian Far East, trade, and investment," and the "Program of India-Russia cooperation in trade, economic and investment spheres in the Russian Far East for the period from 2024 to 2029 as well as of cooperation principles in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation" (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2024). The two sides also discussed in detail the future prospects and roadmap for the development of the Northern Sea Route and Russia's Arctic region. The reason lies, on one hand, in the fact that infrastructure development in Russia's Arctic territories is underdeveloped, and specifically, there is a lack of infrastructure connecting ports and regions to Russia's industrial and commercial centers, meaning Russia needs partners. On

the other hand, India and China, being major importers of Russian energy, view the development and use of the Northern Sea Route along the Arctic coast as beneficial. Nevertheless, major trading countries lack icebreaker fleets, and the port infrastructure, central to the Northern Sea Route is missing from Russia's Arctic region (Yermakov & Yermakova, 2021). These evolving partnerships signal that the Northern Sea Route is no longer a purely national project but part of a broader realignment in which Asian states play an increasingly active role.

b. Security and military infrastructure

Building on its economic ambitions, Russia increasingly frames the Arctic not only as an economic frontier but as a strategic military arena. Since 2008, Moscow has reactivated Soviet-era installations across its Arctic coastline, built new radar stations, and established Arctic-capable brigades under the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command. The modernization of the Northern Fleet, historically Russia's most powerful naval formation, has included the deployment of ice-class submarines, upgraded missile systems, and advanced air-defense platforms on Arctic islands such as Franz Josef Land and Novaya Zemlya (Baev, 2012). These deployments are designed to secure Russia's sovereignty claims, protect its energy infrastructure, and guarantee access to the Northern Sea Route. Regular exercises, including the high-profile, large-scale Arctic military exercises, known as "Umka" drills (Wong, 2022), first held in 2021 involving nuclear submarines surfacing simultaneously through polar ice showcase Russia's ability to operate under extreme conditions and signal its readiness to defend Arctic sovereignty. As of 2022, Russia has reopened more than 50 Soviet military bases in the Arctic which includes 13 airbases, 10 radar stations and 20 border outposts (Raju, 2024). This militarization of the Arctic transforms the region from a cooperative frontier into a contested strategic arena, where Russia seeks to balance Western pressure and deepen ties with Asian partners.

The dual-use nature of Arctic infrastructure is central to this strategy. Investments in ports, airfields, and logistics hubs are presented as facilitating both resource extraction and military readiness - a fusion that allows Russia to justify military investment as civilian necessity. In practice, this allows the country to blur the line between civilian and defense projects, justifying costly infrastructure under the banner of economic necessity while ensuring they can serve as strategic assets in times of crisis. Such a posture reinforces the country's narrative that sovereignty over the Arctic requires not only legal claims but also physical presence and operational capability. However, Russia's militarization also reflects an element of political performance. Deploying submarines under polar ice or building radar stations in remote archipelagos dramatizes Russia's technological prowess and resilience, reinforcing its image as the dominant Arctic power. This performative dimension aligns with the logic of resource nationalism: demonstrating control over space and resources even when the economic return is uncertain. Yet symbolism comes at a

price. The Arctic remains one of the most expensive environments in the world for sustaining military infrastructure. Permafrost thaw and harsh climatic conditions make bases costly to maintain, while Western sanctions restrict access to high-tech components critical for modern naval and aerospace systems (Boulègue, 2019).

Equally important, militarization has provoked countermeasures that undermine Russia's stated goal of securing stability. What Moscow frames as defensive posturing has been interpreted by NATO and Arctic neighbors as escalation. Since 2014, and especially after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO has intensified its focus on the High North. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2024) has effectively transformed the Arctic into a NATO-dominated space, leaving Russia as the sole outsider. Joint NATO exercises, increased surveillance flights, and the strengthening of Arctic capabilities in Norway and North America illustrate how Russia's buildup has triggered a classic security dilemma: each move to enhance security produces countermeasures that make the environment less secure (Pettersen, 2024).

Thus, the strategic consequences are significant. Russia has sought to turn the Arctic into a zone of sovereignty and strategic depth, yet its militarization has accelerated its isolation within the Arctic Council, justified the expansion of NATO into the region, and diverted resources from already strained economic projects. This contradiction highlights a broader paradox: while militarization is intended to safeguard Russia's economic ambitions in the Arctic, it simultaneously undermines the cooperative environment and international legitimacy required to realize those ambitions.

Seen through the lens of geoeconomics and resource nationalism, this militarization underscores the fragility of Russia's Arctic project. It seeks to secure sovereignty through force projection and deterrence, yet the outcome may be the reverse: escalating costs, international mistrust, and an Arctic increasingly defined not by Russian dominance but by confrontation with a NATO-led bloc.

c. Arctic economic zone and industrial development projects

Another key instrument of Russia's Arctic strategy is the creation of special economic zones (SEZ) and state-backed industrial megaprojects. The 2020 Arctic Zone Law of Russia introduced sweeping tax incentives, customs benefits, and simplified regulations for firms operating north of the Arctic Circle, formally designating the Arctic as Russia's largest SEZ by area (Government of the Russian Federation, 2020). Empirical studies of this "preferential regime" show that, while more than 600 registered companies have pledged roughly 800 billion rubles in investment and 24,000 new jobs, early results reveal wide regional disparities and limited spill-over effects, especially in remote Arctic districts (Volkov, et al., 2024). This legal framework underpins flagship extractive ventures such as Yamal LNG, Arctic LNG-2, and Vostok Oil, involving state corporations like Novatek and Rosneft as well as foreign partners from China, France, and Japan. For

instance, 20 percent of the Yamal project's total funding comes from China's National Petroleum Corporation, and 9.9 percent from the Silk Road Fund (Reuters, 2016) (Belt and Road Portal, 2017).

These megaprojects are tightly bound to supporting infrastructure, including ports, pipelines, railways, and power grids, especially in the Yamal-Nenets and Krasnoyarsk regions. On paper, such measures are intended to unlock immense natural wealth and fold the Arctic firmly into Russia's national and global economic strategy. Researchers with the Business Index North (BIN) project have investigated Russia's Arctic investments. According to the report, they have found that Russia accounts for 50-60% of all Arctic investments (Business Index North, 2024). Yet many of these projects remain dependent on state subsidies and foreign capital, and their dual-use character means that economic and strategic goals are increasingly entangled.

And the economic geography of these projects reveals deep structural vulnerabilities. First, they rely on international financing and advanced technology, particularly in offshore drilling and liquefied natural gas shipping. Western sanctions imposed after 2014 and intensified in 2022 have sharply constrained this access, leaving Russia dependent on Chinese capital and equipment, a reliance that contradicts the sovereignty-oriented logic of resource nationalism. Second, the costs of developing infrastructure in the Arctic far outweigh those in temperate zones, requiring long-term state subsidies that strain an already sanction-battered economy. SEZ incentives may attract investment on paper, but the high-risk environment and Russia's unpredictable regulatory climate deter many potential investors.

Climate change further complicates the picture. Melting sea ice and permafrost thaw open new areas for exploitation but simultaneously destabilize the very infrastructure meant to support development. Pipelines, housing, and industrial installations in permafrost zones face mounting structural risks, while increased coastal erosion threatens port facilities. These environmental dynamics inject volatility into projects premised on long-term stability.

From a geoeconomic perspective, the SEZs and industrial megaprojects function less as rational engines of profit than as instruments of economic statecraft and political signaling. Their symbolic value lies in demonstrating Russia's ability to command the High North and mobilize resources at scale. But the contradiction is stark: projects designed to assert sovereign control may entrench economic dependence and ecological vulnerability. In this sense, Russia's Arctic SEZs exemplify the broader paradox of its Arctic policy - they reflect ambition to integrate the Arctic into national strategy, yet risk producing a fragile and costly model of development that could undermine the very power they are meant to secure.

d. Russia's participation and position in the Arctic Council

Russia has long been an active participant in the Arctic Council, with full membership status, the ability to chair the Council on a rotating basis, and involvement in working groups on environmental protection, scientific research, and sustainable

development. Yet recent geopolitical tensions, above all, the war in Ukraine have sharply curtailed this role. Although Russia assumed the rotating chairmanship in 2021, its invasion of Ukraine led other member states to suspend cooperation, effectively isolating the country. By 2023, Russia had lost the chairmanship in practice, signaling its exclusion from the most important regional governance forum.

The growing interest of non-Arctic countries in the region has further complicated Russia's position. The country has consistently adopted a cautious stance toward external involvement, reflecting its desire to preserve the existing balance of power and prevent dilution of its authority. For instance, it opposed granting the European Union observer status in the Council and criticized the EU's 2021 Arctic Strategy as hostile to Russian interests (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024). Russia has generally argued that observer status is sufficient for non-Arctic countries, resisting efforts to broaden their influence.

Nonetheless, shifts in the Council's composition and activity have occurred, particularly through the rising participation of Asian states. Between 2013 and 2015, several Asian states were granted observer status in the Arctic Council: China, Japan, India, South Korea, and Singapore were approved in May 2013, while others such as Switzerland joined later. This marked the institutional recognition of Asia's growing Arctic engagement and expanded the Council's scope beyond the traditional Arctic Eight. And South Korea released its Master Plan for Arctic Policy in 2013, Japan adopted its Arctic Strategy in 2015, China issued its White Paper on Arctic Policy in 2018, and India followed with its own Arctic Strategy in 2022. These developments reflect how the locus of Arctic governance attention has partly moved from European to Asian actors. Asian strategies converge on two key points: resource access and maritime transport, especially the Northern Sea Route. The overlap between Asian geoeconomic interests and Russia's own priorities helps explain Moscow's ambivalence - it welcomes investment and markets, yet fears long-term erosion of control.

Since 2022, however, Russia's isolation from Western-led Arctic governance has forced a strategic reorientation. As mentioned before, excluded from normal Council cooperation and confronted by a bloc of NATO members that now encompasses every other Arctic state, Russia increasingly views the Arctic not as a zone of cooperation but as a potential arena of confrontation. This shift has also prompted greater reliance on partnerships with non-Arctic Asian states. The paradox is clear: Russia's suspicion of outsiders once led it to limit their influence, but its own isolation has now made such partnerships essential to sustaining its Arctic ambitions.

Overall, Russia's Arctic policy reveals deep internal contradictions. Its pursuit of sovereignty and development is constrained by sanctions, technological dependence, and growing isolation. The overlap of military and civilian priorities further blurs its strategic focus, exposing the gap between ambition and capacity. These underlying challenges are summarized below (see Table 2

Table 2. Challenges in the implementation of Russia's Arctic strategy (made by author)

Policy goal	Intended strategy	Key challenges / contradictions
Develop the Northern Sea Route (NSR)	Expand cargo volumes to 100 million tons by 2035 through port construction, icebreaker expansion, and logistics hubs	Insufficient infrastructure; sanctions on shipping and navigation technology; limited global shipping demand; seasonal accessibility
Secure sovereignty in the Arctic	Modernize Northern Fleet, expand military bases, deploy radar stations and Arctic brigades	NATO enlargement (Finland, Sweden), heightened security dilemma, escalating costs of maintaining remote installations, ecological fragility
Attract investment into Arctic industries	2020 *Arctic Zone Law*; creation of SEZs with tax breaks and regulatory simplification	Sanctions restrict Western capital; investor risk aversion; heavy reliance on Chinese and Indian partners; uncertainty of long-term returns
Unlock hydrocarbon and mineral wealth	Flagship projects: *Yamal LNG*, *Arctic LNG-2*, *Vostok Oil*	Dependence on foreign technology and finance; volatility of hydrocarbon markets; global energy transition; permafrost thaw and climate instability

Together, these challenges reveal following trends that Russia is likely to pursue continued Arctic expansion, but in a more fragmented, costly, and internationally contested environment. The interplay of sanctions, economic fragility, militarization, and environmental risk suggests that its Arctic policy will remain ambitious in rhetoric but constrained in practice. More importantly, this tension transforms the question of external partnerships from optional to indispensable. Where Russia once resisted the involvement of non-Arctic actors, it is now increasingly dependent on them to sustain both its economic projects and its political claims to Arctic preeminence.

In this context, the Arctic must be understood not only as a contested frontier between Russia and the West, but also as a region of growing relevance to Asian states. Their participation, whether as investors, consumers, technology suppliers, or observers within the Arctic Council is reshaping the parameters of Arctic governance and development. The following section therefore examines the evolving role of non-Arctic states, with particular emphasis on Asia, and considers how their involvement both complements and complicates Russia's ambitions in the High North.

IV. Asia's Growing Engagement, Opportunities for Mongolia

Aforementioned, Russia's growing isolation from Western institutions has elevated the importance of non-Arctic actors, particularly Asian states, in sustaining its Arctic ambitions. Where Russia once sought to limit outside involvement to observer status in the Arctic Council, sanctions and the withdrawal of Western capital have made Asian participation indispensable. This shift has made Russia's Arctic policy relevant for Asia, while simultaneously giving Asian states new leverage over the trajectory of Arctic development.

Energy cooperation remains the most visible point of intersection. As stated in the previous sections, China has now become the dominant external actor in Russian Arctic LNG projects, financing and purchasing capacity from Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2 through state-backed firms and long-term supply agreements. Recent reporting suggests Moscow intends to increase LNG exports to China despite sanctions, reinforcing Beijing's role as Russia's critical energy outlet. India has also deepened its engagement, with the *2022 Arctic Policy* emphasizing energy imports, Arctic science, and joint ventures with Russian firms. Japan and South Korea, though constrained by their alignment with Western sanctions, retain strategic interest in Arctic hydrocarbons, especially given their technological expertise in LNG carriers and ice-class shipping. For these states, Arctic resources represent not only commercial opportunities but hedges against instability in Middle Eastern supply routes (Puranen & Kopra, 2023). Yet this energy-centered cooperation also carries risks. Overdependence on Russian hydrocarbons exposes Asian states to reputational costs amongst the country's confrontation with the West, and the accelerating global energy transition raises doubts about the long-term viability of Arctic oil and gas.

Again, the Northern Sea Route illustrates similar dynamics of opportunity and uncertainty. China's 2018 White Paper on Arctic Policy identified the NSR as part of its "Polar Silk Road" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018), while Japan and South Korea have invested in feasibility studies, ice-class shipbuilding, and trial voyages. In theory, the NSR could shorten transit times between Asia and Europe by up to 40 percent, making it attractive as a diversification route. In practice, however, current shipping volumes remain dominated by Russian domestic cargo, and global interest is limited by seasonal ice variability, infrastructure gaps, and unpredictable regulations. Studies of Arctic traffic patterns confirm that the NSR is expanding, but still falls far short of rivalling the Suez Canal (Sander & Mikkelsen, 2025) (Hussen, Korte, Janse, Jong, & Bossche, 2020). For Asian states, participation in NSR projects therefore functions less as a purely commercial strategy and more as a geopolitical hedge - signaling presence, testing capabilities, and keeping options open should the route become viable in the long term.

Scientific and diplomatic cooperation provides another critical dimension. China operates the Yellow River Station in Svalbard, established in 2004 as part of its permanent Arctic research program on climate, glaciology, and marine ecosystems.

The base strengthens China's scientific legitimacy and presence within the Arctic Circle (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Japan and South Korea pursue similar goals through their national polar institutes, conducting joint expeditions and contributing to Arctic Council working groups such as Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment and the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (National Institute for Polar Research of Japan, n.d.). These activities enable Asian states to gain visibility and influence through science-driven participation rather than direct political engagement.

In this context, Mongolia represents an interesting opportunity. Although the country has not formally expressed interest in Arctic engagement, precedents suggest that such a step would be institutionally possible. Domestic agencies in Mongolia for instance, have expressed growing attention to Arctic-related environmental cooperation. In 2023, Mongolia participated for the first time as an observer in the "Safe Arctic 2023" interagency experimental research exercise held in Murmansk, Russia. Two cadets from the Fire Protection University of St. Petersburg represented Mongolia, joining over 3,500 Russian emergency specialists and 40 delegations from Eurasian, African, and Latin American countries. The exercise tested 16 response scenarios and conducted more than 120 experimental studies related to emergency management in Arctic conditions (National Emergency Management Agency of Mongolia, 2023). Mongolia's presence, though symbolic, demonstrated its interest in scientific and technical collaboration on Arctic safety and disaster response, which is an emerging area that could complement its expertise in climate and environmental risk management. Non-coastal states such as India, Singapore, and Switzerland have already secured observer status, showing that geography alone does not determine legitimacy. Were Mongolia to seek observer status, it could emphasize its contributions to environmental science, climate change monitoring, and permafrost research, which are the areas directly relevant to Arctic governance and aligned with its experience as a high-altitude, climate-sensitive country. Mongolia's reputation as a neutral actor with limited geopolitical circumstances could also allow it to present itself as a constructive partner, especially at a time when Arctic governance is increasingly strained by East-West confrontation. Thus, while speculative, Mongolia's possible bid illustrates how the aperture for Asian participation is widening beyond the major powers, reflecting the broader transformation of Arctic governance.

At the same time, the asymmetry of dependencies is striking. While Russia frames the Arctic as an arena of sovereign control, sanctions and technological barriers have left its development projects increasingly reliant on Asian partners. China supplies capital and markets, India offers diversification, and Japan and South Korea provide advanced maritime technology. This reliance gives Asian states bargaining power, but it also reveals the fragility of Russia's resource-nationalist narrative. RAND analyses describe China-Russian cooperation as a "marriage of convenience," highlighting mutual suspicion and warning that Beijing could diversify away from Russia if conditions change (Tingstad, Pezard, &

Shokh, 2024). India, likewise, pursues cooperation with Moscow but carefully hedges its commitments through multilateral Arctic engagements and partnerships with Western states. In effect, Asian actors are not mere clients of Russian Arctic development; they are co-architects of its trajectory, shaping projects through their participation while retaining the flexibility to withdraw.

The relevance of Russia's Arctic policy for Asian states therefore extends well beyond resource extraction or shipping shortcuts. It reflects a deeper structural transformation of Arctic governance. Russia's exclusion from Western-led cooperation has widened the aperture for non-Arctic participation, creating new opportunities for Asian actors to embed themselves in the region's political economy. Yet these opportunities are tempered by risks: reputational costs from entanglement with Russia's militarized strategy, exposure to volatile energy markets, and uncertainty tied to climate change. For Asia, the Arctic represents both a frontier of opportunity and a field of contestation, a space where energy, maritime strategy, science, and geopolitics converge.

In this sense, Asia's role in the Arctic is not a side issue but a central force shaping how the region's future will unfold. The Arctic can no longer be seen as a remote northern frontier managed only by the eight Arctic states; it is increasingly a strategic space where outside actors leave a real mark. Russia's growing reliance on Asian partners makes this shift obvious, but the consequences reach far beyond Moscow's own ambitions. The engagement of those countries shows that the Arctic's trajectory will be influenced as much by Asian priorities as by the interests of its coastal powers. Whether this leads to new forms of cooperation or sharper geopolitical fault lines is still unclear, but what is certain is that Asia's stake in the Arctic is no longer hypothetical. It is here, and it is shaping the region in tangible ways.

Conclusion

Russia's Arctic policy reveals the paradoxes of contemporary great-power strategy in a rapidly changing environment. On paper, the country has built a coherent framework that combines economic development, sovereignty protection, and strategic projection. Through the establishment of Special Economic Zones, the promotion of flagship industrial megaprojects such as Yamal LNG, and the modernization of the Northern Fleet, Russia portrays itself as both the dominant Arctic power and the architect of a new Eurasian gateway. Yet the reality of implementation is far less stable. Sanctions, technological dependencies, climate vulnerabilities, and the expansion of NATO into the High North have created conditions in which Russia's Arctic ambitions remain grandiose in rhetoric but precarious in practice.

Theoretical perspectives such as geoeconomics and resource nationalism help explain the logics underpinning Russia's Arctic turn, but they also highlight its contradictions. Geoeconomic reasoning frames Russia's projects as rational strategies of statecraft, yet their frequent inefficiency and symbolic emphasis reveal the

performative side of Arctic development. Resource nationalism captures Russia's insistence on sovereignty and exclusive control, but it cannot disguise the deep reliance on foreign capital and technology that undermines such claims. Climate change further complicates both lenses: while enabling new shipping routes, it simultaneously destabilizes infrastructure and increases ecological risk. Thus, Russia's Arctic policy is best understood not as a seamless strategy but as a balancing act between ambition and constraint, sovereignty and interdependence, performance and vulnerability.

These contradictions elevate the role of non-Arctic states, particularly those in Asia. Where Russia once resisted outside involvement in Arctic governance, it now increasingly depends on Asian partners for financing, technology, markets, and legitimacy. China's investments in LNG projects, India's cautious but growing energy cooperation, Japan and South Korea's technological contributions, and even Mongolia's potential observer bid demonstrate that the future of the Arctic cannot be separated from Asia's strategic calculus. For Asian states, Russia's Arctic turn offers opportunities to secure energy, diversify shipping routes, and expand scientific diplomacy. At the same time, it carries risks of entanglement in Russia's confrontation with the West, reputational costs amid sanctions, and uncertainty tied to global decarbonization.

The broader implication is that the Arctic is no longer an insulated northern frontier governed solely by the eight Arctic states. It has become a space where extra-regional actors influence both material development and institutional norms. Russia's isolation has accelerated this shift, forcing the country to accept a widening aperture of participation and exposing how global power transitions intersect with Arctic governance. Asian states are not passive beneficiaries of this transformation; they are co-shapers of the region's trajectory, capable of leveraging Russia's dependencies to advance their own strategic interests.

In conclusion, Russia's Arctic policy captures the contradictions of great-power ambition under conditions of sanctions, isolation, and accelerating climate change. Moscow continues to project the image of an Arctic superpower, yet the realization of its goals depends on actors and forces it cannot fully control. This dependency underscores that the Arctic can no longer be understood as an insulated northern frontier, but as part of the wider Eurasian and global order where external actors, especially Asian states are increasingly decisive. Their involvement transforms the region from a domain once defined by sovereignty and exclusivity into one shaped by interdependence and strategic bargaining. Whether this dynamic produces cooperative governance or intensifies global rivalry remains unresolved, but what is clear is that the trajectory of the Arctic will be determined not only by Russia and its Western rivals, but equally by the growing engagements of Asian states. The future of the Arctic, in short, lies at the intersection of Russia's ambitions and Asia's responses, making it a critical frontier of twenty-first century geopolitics.

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