

# Looking Beyond China: Non-Western Actors in the Russian Arctic after February 2022

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*This article examines Russia's changing approach regarding the role and place of non-western actors in the Arctic. The outbreak of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has exacerbated political and economic tensions between Moscow and its Western counterparts, seriously undermining Arctic cooperation. Consequently, Russia has looked for alternatives to Western partners in the Arctic. China occupies a special place, but Beijing's economic might and growing military ambitions preclude Moscow from considering China its only partner in the Arctic. Accordingly, Russia is actively trying to engage other partners from BRICS and G-20 platforms – such as India, Brazil, South Korea, and Singapore – who, in addition to foreign direct investment, could contribute expertise and unique competences to regional development. Yet, cooperation with these partners, while lucrative and promising in theory, cannot replace what Russia has lost by destroying its traditional ties with other Arctic nations. While some actors (such as Brazil) have only limited interest in the Arctic, others (such as India, South Korea, and Singapore) will likely abstain from comprehensive cooperation because of the economic and geopolitical risks posed by Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine and the prospect of secondary sanctions.*

## Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, the Arctic region – once largely isolated – has become increasingly integrated into global economic, transportation, and geopolitical systems. Consequently, Arctic and non-Arctic states have elevated the region to a higher priority and integrated it into broader efforts to advance economic and security agendas. This also means that states have worked to define the Arctic in terms favourable to their interests.

Geographically, the Russian Federation is the largest Arctic state with a vast Arctic territory covering approximately 9 million square kilometers. Its Arctic coastline stretches over 24,150 kilometres,

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extending more than halfway around the Circumpolar North. More than 2.5 million Russians live in the Arctic, representing nearly half of the global population living in the circumpolar North – but less than 2 percent of the Russian population resides there. Activity within the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation generates between 12–15 percent of the country’s GDP and, before the West introduced expanded economic sanctions in 2022, represented one-quarter of Russia’s total exports (Kozlov, 2019). Accordingly, sustainable development of the region is amongst Russia’s foremost national priorities, which also include “the use of the Arctic region as a strategic resource base” for socio-economic development, the “preservation of the Arctic as an area of peace and cooperation,” protection of Arctic ecosystems, and the promotion of the Northern Sea Route as a major transportation artery (Arctic Council, 2022).

Russia has laid out a comprehensive strategic plan for the Arctic region in a series of documents released since March 2020.<sup>2</sup> They are rooted in a Russian national perspective on the idea of Arctic exceptionalism, emphasizing specific characteristics that demand “special approaches to its socio-economic development” in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) and to “ensure national security in the Arctic.” This lays the foundation for Russia to build its case for why the AZRF is important for socio-economic development and national security, with a deliberate emphasis on oil and gas resources (both terrestrial and on the continental shelf), expectations of heightened demand for the NSR “as a transport corridor of global importance,” climate change effects on the environment and security, the presence of Indigenous peoples, and Russia’s positioning of strategic deterrent forces in the region (President of the Russian Federation, 2020). The external-facing dimensions of Russia’s strategy articulate core objectives to foster international cooperation, as well as those intended to bolster defence, security, and border protection. Specific language promises to implement “multi-vector foreign policy activities aimed at preserving the Arctic as a territory of peace, stability, and mutually beneficial cooperation.” External priorities also include asserting control over foreign activities in the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and reducing the impact of foreign sanctions (Sukhankin, 2020c).

Russia’s intensifying war on Ukraine since February 2022 has forced the Kremlin to recalibrate its approach to circumpolar affairs and the partnerships that it needs to achieve its domestic and regional goals. An insightful study by Marina Lomaeva and Fujio Ohnishi (2022) on how Russian experts assessed their country’s isolation from Arctic governance fora in the domestic, government-controlled media from March-October 2022 indicates how Russian experts perceived the decision by the other seven Arctic states to “pause” their engagement with Russia through the Arctic Council as a threat to the existing Arctic governance structure and the privileged position of the Arctic states in the region. This has generated debate about whether Russia should divert its energy to other international Arctic fora to advance its regional agenda. It has also led Russia to invite non-Arctic states, such as China and India, to partner with Russian companies to develop the AZRF (Arctic: Territory of Dialogue, 2022a). For example, Putin’s advisor Anton Kobayakov stated in July 2022 that “Russia is interested in international cooperation and joint work within the framework of major infrastructure projects in the Arctic ..., but we are faced with the unwillingness of various countries to cooperate in projects of mutual interest. In this regard, the Russian side is ready to cooperate with non-Arctic countries in

projects of any scale. Only the joint work of all interested countries can help strengthen mutual trust and reduce security risks in the Arctic” (Arctic: Territory of Dialogue, 2022b).

This article critically examines Russia’s recent pivot to seeking partnerships with non-Western, non-Arctic states to advance regional cooperation. While significant academic attention is dedicated to the Sino-Russian relationship,<sup>2</sup> there has been less discussion about Russia’s interest in attracting other foreign actors. We begin with an overview of Russia’s strategic shift towards non-Western partners, its perception of how the Arctic might serve to break Russia’s West-imposed international isolation, and Russian concerns and constraints with respect to this pivot. We then look specifically at Russia’s interests in cooperating with four particular states: India, South Korea, Singapore, and Brazil. While some of this interest predated February 2022 (Sukhankin, 2020a, 2020b), we analyze how the War in Ukraine has served as a driver for Russia to diversify its partnerships, a cause for caution or withdrawal on the part of some prospective partners, or a catalyst for new relationships as Moscow is driven to seek new markets, new sources of investment, new scientific partners, and new legitimacy as an Arctic actor that is largely isolated from its Arctic state peers.

This article also does not discuss various other non-Western states that have demonstrated their interest in the economic, science, and research-related potential of the Russian Arctic. Given the amount of recent academic and public commentary on China and its evolving relationship with Russia, we have deliberately chosen to exclude the Sino-Russian Arctic relationship from our analysis – except where it influences relationships with other prospective non-Western partners in the region. Russia also views the Republic of South Africa as a potential partner in Arctic affairs. Although this interest is reciprocated, South Africa focuses primarily on its own (domestic) issues and has, at least for now, limited capabilities in expanding its presence or collaboration with Russia in the Arctic. The strained Russo-Japanese relationship is substantively different from Russia’s ties with the actors that fall within the scope of this article – and has profoundly worsened since February 2022. The Kremlin immediately branded Japan, alongside Ukraine and members of the Trans-Atlantic alliance, as an “unfriendly” country. For its part, Tokyo was one of the first countries to introduce anti-Russian sanctions on February 25. This voided any remaining prospect of Russo-Japanese cooperation in the Arctic. Accordingly, we have focused on other actors who represent more interesting cases of Russian interest and partnership aspirations.

## **The strategic shift in Russia’s perception of cooperation in the Arctic**

### **Away from the West, toward the non-Western world**

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, followed by next-to-complete collapse of ties between Moscow and its Western counterparts, marked a decisive turning point in the Kremlin’s strategic re-orientation toward the non-Western world. This turn was somewhat expected: powerful conservative politician Yevgey Primakov championed these ideas in the early 1990s, which were reflected in the Concept of the National Security of the Russian Federation adopted in 1997 (President of the Russian Federation, 1997). Over time, a pool of Russian conservative and anti-Western thinkers expanded alongside the Kremlin’s growing frustration with the West, which Russia accused of predatory foreign policies and blamed for Russia’s domestic failures. Former liberal-turned-

conservative intellectual Sergey Karaganov exemplified the influential proponents of strategic re-orientation away from West, outlining these arguments in a book published in 2001 arguing that Russia should exploit its abundant natural resources in Siberia, the Far East, and the Arctic region as a bridge to the rapidly growing economies of Asia (Leksin & Shvetsov, 2001).

In an article published in December 1999, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin supported these ideas and shared (albeit cautiously) similar thoughts. Over the next several years, Putin's rhetoric about the need to change the vector of Russia's economic, cultural, and "civilizational development" became more pronounced and increasingly anti-Western. Prior to the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, Putin publicly expressed these ideas on at least six major occasions:

- In 2005, during the thousand-year celebration of Kazan (President of the Russian Federation, 2005).
- In 2007, during celebration of 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bashkiria's accession to Russia (President of the Russian Federation, 2007).
- In 2012, during his inaugural address (President of the Russian Federation, 2012).
- In 2013, during his speech at the Valdai discussion club (President of the Russian Federation, 2013).
- In 2017, during his visit to Beijing, where he referred to "Big Eurasia" – with Russia in its heart – as a "civilizational forward-looking project" (President of the Russian Federation, 2017).
- In 2018, in his telegram to the Institute of Eastern Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Science, where he emphasised the need to study history, culture, and traditions of the Orient – factors that have a special meaning for Russia "as a great Eurasian power" (President of the Russian Federation, 2018).

Accordingly, the foundations of Russia's strategic re-orientation from the West to the non-Western world – with Russia's North-Eastern territories serving as the key enabler – were laid well before 2022 (Paderina, 2019). Despite previous moves in this direction, however, completing and legitimizing this full turn required a powerful impetus: Russian launching its large-scale war on Ukraine and the concomitant (nearly complete) breakdown in economic, political, and diplomatic ties between Russia and its Western counterparts.

### **The Kremlin's perceived role of the Arctic region since 2022**

Unlike the Western sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014, those introduced in 2022 were robust and cannot be discussed as merely symbolic. Within months of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia found itself increasingly isolated by the West and its allies and partners. In its struggle to break the looming isolation, Russia could only rely on the following competitive advantages: its size (critical for transportation and logistics); its abundant natural resources (essential for economic growth and production of products in both developed and rising economies); its indispensability in certain scientific research (such as climate change); and an integrated global economy, enabled by 1990s reforms that made Russia a significant actor in international business and trade as well as an integral part of global supply chain networks.

Russia's ability to capitalize on all these factors simultaneously are inseparable from its plans for the Arctic region, Siberia, and the Far East, which Moscow seeks to use to overcome its international isolation. President Putin clearly articulated this intent in a 13 April 2022 speech during "consultations on the development of the Arctic Zone" (President of the Russian Federation, 2022), when he appealed to Russia's foreign partners – which he characterized as "responsible" and "friendly countries" – to explore opportunities in the Russia Arctic and replace those who chose to abandon the country after February 2022. To break West-imposed isolation, the Kremlin intends to use the Arctic region and its resources in three main ways.

First, Russia sees the exploitation of the Arctic as a source of geoeconomic power. Aside from its vast natural resources, the NSR offers secure maritime passage from Asia to Europe. Given ongoing instability in the Middle East (Sukhankin, 2024a), Russia has been urging its foreign partners to choose the NSR as a safer, shorter, and cheaper alternative. In effect, Russia's top-level politicians perceive the NSR as a way to redraw the transportation map of Eurasia, allowing Russia to bridge Asia and Europe and become indispensable for both (Radio Sputnik, 2024). Towards this end, Russia has adopted legislative amendments and infrastructural initiatives to attract foreign investors in the Arctic. The Federation Council (the upper house of the Federal Assembly of Russia) approved a law incorporating two municipalities of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District – Yugra into the AZRF ("Sovfed prinyal zakon" 2024), extending its administrative borders and Free Economic Zone (FEZ) preferences granted in the Arctic region ("V Sankt-Peterburge sostoyalsya XII Mezhdunarodnyy Forum", 2022) to attract foreign investors (Ria Novosti, 2024a). To bolster the attractiveness of the region, Russia is considering refurbishing or building new intra-Arctic railroad transportation arteries within the macro-region to strengthen economic ties. One example is the "Northern Latitudinal Railway" (*Severnyy Shorotnyy Khod*) (Arctic Russia, 2023) in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District, a resource-rich region that has one of the weakest transportation networks in Russia (Ofitsyalny sayt polnomochnogo predstavatelya Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Uralskom federalnom okruge, 2024).

Second, Russia promotes research and scientific activities with "friendly countries" in the Arctic region, with a specific emphasis on the BRICS (a cooperation platform for emerging economies comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). This represents a new and interesting turn in Russia's approach to cooperation with foreign actors in the Arctic, which used to be rather China-centric. This idea was clearly emphasised by Nikolay Korchunov, the Russian Foreign Ministry Ambassador at Large for International Cooperation in the Arctic and Senior Arctic Official at the Arctic Council, during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in 2023 (TASS, 2023c). Within the realm of Arctic research, climate change is particularly appealing to nearly all members of the BRICS (and G-20 countries). For instance, during the BRICS Johannesburg summit in August 2023, the final declaration explicitly stated the need for BRICS+ members (including Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Ethiopia) to strengthen cooperation in sustainable development, combat climate change, and preserve biodiversity (Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, 2023). Prior to this, Russian authorities had already claimed that its BRICS partners found climate change and Arctic research to be key points of interest (TASS, 2023c).

Third, Russia envisages the Arctic region as a platform for tightening political cooperation with non-Western countries, primarily from the BRICS and G-20 blocs. Prior to February 2022 and the seven like-minded Arctic states' pause on Arctic Council participation, Russian political and intellectual elites adopted a reserved stance on granting more weight to non-Arctic nations in that forum. Russia's approach has changed saliently, as the amended version of the "Foundations of the Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035" (adopted in 2020) revealed. The amended Point 16, which discusses "main goals in the domain of the development of international cooperation" in the Arctic, no longer includes a reference to "strengthening friendly neighbourly relations with Arctic states." Instead, it emphasizes "the development of ties with foreign nations [no specification provided] on the grounds of bilateral ties in the framework of multilateral structures and mechanisms" (President of the Russian Federation, 2023). Russian sources clearly indicate that these primarily include BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (a Eurasian political, economic, security, and defence organization established by China and Russia in 2001) whose members "are starting to showcase much greater rate of participation" in Arctic-related problems and affairs (Matveyev, 2024).

Discussions in Russia about the possibility of either completely abandoning the Arctic Council or creating an alternative structure comprised of so-called "friendly countries," with Russia playing a more central role, reveal how the country is seeking to use the Arctic region to advance its geopolitical objectives. While mainstream Russian intellectuals and politicians have been cautious about breaking from the status quo (Sukhankin and Lackenbauer, 2023), voices championing the idea of creating a regional organization in the Arctic "with BRICS office" (based either in Russia or on the territory of a friendly country) are becoming more audible in Russia's intellectual discourse (Zhuravel & Medvedev, 2023).

### **The Arctic region and Russia's strategic shift: concerns and constraints**

While the overwhelming majority of mainstream Russian intellectuals, policymakers, and politicians ardently support the idea of using the Arctic region and its resources as a means to diversify the country's economic, cultural, and scientific ties, some prominent Russian experts caution that this approach may have serious limitations and should not be seen as a panacea. Three main factors, both external and intrinsic to Russia's way of thinking, could seriously strain Russia's plans to use the Arctic as a platform to strategically re-orient toward non-Western partners.

First, Russia's growing strategic overreliance on China is a source of persistent concern. Prominent Russian experts such as Anatoly Torkunov warn about the dangers associated with this emerging reality and argue for a more balanced approach in dealing with foreign partners. To avoid imbalance, they suggest Russia should dramatically increase its profile in the "Big Eurasia" by playing a greater role in major infrastructure projects in the India-Pacific macro-region, thus becoming a strategic nexus between all parties. At the same time, they propose that Russia should increase its presence in such regional platforms, forums, and organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and ASEAN+Russia. Russian experts also urge Russian political leaders to take a more active role in forming multilateral linkages (such as Moscow-Beijing-Seoul; Moscow-Beijing-Seoul-Pyongyang; Tokyo-Moscow-Seoul; Moscow-Hanoi-

Beijing; or Moscow-Hanoi-Delhi) which would amplify Russia's political opportunities beyond bilateral engagement (Streltsov & Torkunov, 2023).

Second, Russian experts worry about a lack of sustainable, long-term interest among Russia's non-Western partners. They observe that these partners have expressed little commitment to strategic economic projects in the Arctic given, in addition to geopolitical instability, the relatively high start up and annual operational fixed costs associated with developing Arctic-based projects. Consequently, Russia "is rarely mentioned [in strategic documents] as the key partner" (Regnum, 2023). While Russia's Arctic resource base is immense and attractive to many countries, the actual amount of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) is extremely modest given economic sanctions, general uncertainty, and threat of secondary sanctions. This makes it inadequate to propel any major endeavours. Some Russian experts state that, while the country's Arctic-based natural resources are extensive, there are simply not enough new export markets or investors to make many of the development opportunities economically sustainable (Nikolayev, 2024). Furthermore, despite Russia's continuous official touting about growing Arctic scientific interest amongst Russia's non-Western partners, foreign experts point out that Russia's BRICS partners had not carried out a single large scientific project in the AZRF as of 2023 (Yasin, 2023).

Third, Russian thinking about the Arctic is heavily influenced by zero-sum logic and the prism of geopolitical competition. Many Russian experts, especially those with military-political backgrounds (whose profile has grown exponentially since 2022), perceive the macro-region as a theatre of expanding "hybrid confrontation" with the US and its NATO allies. For instance, Aleksandr Bartosh, the corresponding member of the Academy of Military Sciences and Experts of the League of Military Diplomats, portrays the Arctic as a sphere of confrontation between "three circles" of adversaries. The "first circle" is composed of the coastal Arctic states. The "second circle" of rivals also encompasses sub-Arctic countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Iceland. The last "circle" is composed of countries such as China, Japan, India, Singapore, South Korea, and Australia – actors that do not have direct access to the Arctic but express increasingly explicit interest in the macro-region and its resources (Bartosh, 2023).

Russia's continuous official rhetoric about the Arctic being a "territory of peace and dialogue" is contradicted by Russian military actions and ideas generated in powerful military-political circles that construct the region as a new geopolitical playground. This means that foreign investors, including those in what Russia perceives as "friendly countries," are unlikely to commit to large, expensive projects in an unstable, insecure region. Consequently, some experts anticipate that the local resource base and commercial transportation routes will not receive the strategic foreign investments that the Kremlin promotes in its messaging.

## **Russia: Looking beyond China**

### **India: a cautious Elephant in the Arctic**

Among all non-Western countries, India is Russia's second most significant political and economic partner (after China). Russia is one of just five countries with which India has a 2+2 dialogue mechanism, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Putin have met twenty times since 2014. The

India-Russia Strategic Partnership was elevated to the level of a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership in 2010 (the only Indian example of this type of partnership). On January 26, 2024, Putin stated that Russia cherishes its privileged strategic relationships with New Delhi, which chooses to conduct independent and pragmatic foreign policy (Izvestia, 2024). The Russian side also trumpets that, despite economic sanctions imposed by the West, the level of the Russo-Indian bi-lateral trade hit a record \$50 billion in 2023 (Izvestia, 2023). Accordingly, Russia is receptive to India having adopted an Arctic policy titled “India and the Arctic: building a partnership for sustainable development” on March 17, 2022 (Government of India, 2022) and welcomes its growing interest in the region. Russian experts applaud the Indian document for its “neutral, politically correct [language] that avoids any confrontation such as the concept of the ‘near Arctic state’ promulgated by China” (Brod, 2023). Specifically, the Kremlin seeks to attract India’s attention and engage its as a “friendly country” in Arctic affairs in three primary areas.

First, Russia seeks to expand its energy exports to India. Prior to 2022, Russo-Indian cooperation in the Arctic was driven primarily by import-export ties in oil, natural gas, coal, and ferrous metallurgy. Indian corporations such as ONGC Videsh acquired shares in Sakhalin-1 and Vankorneft (Interfax, 2020), with Russian sources stating that cumulative Indian investments in Russia’s oil and gas sector stood at \$15 billion in 2021 (Neftegazovaya Vertikal, 2021). The two countries reportedly worked on developing a road map to strengthen trade and partnerships under the auspices of the India Energy Office (IEO) in Moscow which opened in 2021 (INGC Videsh Ltd., 2021). Strategically, Russia anticipates that it can help India meet its rising demand for oil and natural gas owing to the growing number of vehicles users in the country (expected to reach 300 million users by 2040) (Sukhag, 2022) and India’s unhappiness with EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (Dhoot, 2023).

Second, tighter Russo-Indian transportation and logistical ties are premised on three main hopes. On the other hand, Russian commentators expect that the construction of the Vladivostok-Chennai transportation corridor, agreed on in 2019 during the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, would foster a “logistical alliance” between Russia (with its access to the Arctic resources) and India (with access to East African resources) (Kupriyanov & Korolev, 2019). All talks on the project ceased after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, although Russian sources claimed that they would be renewed in 2013 (TASS, 2023e). It appears that New Delhi is not rushing to commit to this project while secondary economic sanctions remain a factor. Conversely, Russia seeks to capitalize on the strenuous ties between India and China. Given high security risks in bilateral relations between Beijing and New Delhi, Russian experts assume that India might be interested in investing in alternative trade and transportation routes through the Russian Arctic in case China blocks transportation through the Malacca Strait. According to this logic, intensified competition between India and China – including in Arctic projects – could benefit Russia (Kortunov, A., Saymon, T. et al., 2024), providing Moscow with additional room to politically manoeuvre and effectively transform it into a peacebreaker between two Eurasian giants. Ultimately, Russia pins growing hope on the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-kilometer-long ship, rail, and road route for moving freight between India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Central Asia. This corridor could provide the Kremlin with a means to reassert its influence over regional transit and trade by reducing the time to transport goods from Russia to India by 10–15 days compared with the Suez Canal. Although there has been meagre



development of infrastructure along the INSTC to date, Russia's pivot from the West and its prospective integration with the Indo-Pacific region could provide Moscow with a significant competitive advantage if it can control larger parts of north-south transit routes (Sukhankin, 2024b).

Third, India has enhanced its cooperation with Russia in scientific research and development surrounding climate change, which is of existential concern to India given its reliance on agriculture to feed a rapidly growing population (Shyrgazina, 2022). Russia is interested in integrating India into its Yamal (Snowflake station) (Nilsen, 2023) and prospective Svalbard-based Arctic projects (TASS, 2023d).

While these plans appear promising on the surface, the expansion of the Russo-Ukrainian war and uncertainty posed by economic sanctions and the political isolation of Russia by the West make them less attractive for three general reasons. First is the nature of trade and economic cooperation between the two countries. As Russian officials have indicated, Russo-Indian trade relations have surged since February 2022, stimulated primarily by India's purchases of discounted Russian oil (Sukhankin, 2024a). Nevertheless, Indian investors have not indicated any substantive interest in Russia's major oil and natural gas projects in the Arctic: the Vostok Oil mega-project (Sukhankin, 2024c) or Arctic LNG-2 project which, after US sanctions, has lost foreign investors (Sukhankin, 2024d). Paradoxically, the sheer volume of bilateral trade and Russia's overwhelming trade surplus with India has become a matter of concern in Russian circles. Mikhail Zadornov, chairman of the management board of Otkritie FC Bank, noted that Russia does "not have any goods that we can import from China and especially India compared to the volumes of oil, gas and oil products destined for these countries" (RBC, 2023). Russian experts note that the use of the Indian rupee (which has lost more than 10 percent against the US dollar and 25 percent against the ruble in value) in bilateral trade poses a major strategic challenge for Russia in terms of how it will deal with the oversupply of rupees that it receives for its raw materials, particularly given the trade imbalance (Komrakov, 2022).

In the late 2023/early 2024, Russian sources reported shifts in the trajectory of the Russo-Indian economic cooperation in the Arctic that might indicate a change in the nature of bilateral collaboration. The Russian side claims that Indian businesses are considering opening local operations on the Kola Peninsula (MKRU Murmansk, 2023) and building an India-owned pharmaceuticals complex in Murmansk oblast by 2027 (RIA Novosti, 2023). Open-source searches did not yield any specific financial details or concrete plans regarding the realization of these plans and projects. Thus, Russo-Indian economic ties remain heavily oriented toward situational trade in discounted natural resources and lack strategic coherence (Sukhankin, 2023). Furthermore, Indian Oil Corporation Limited (India's largest oil and gas company under the ownership of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas) has stated its intent to dramatically reduce the amount of oil it purchases from Russia (ProFinance, 2024). While similar rumours have circulated since 2022 (Yermakova, 2022), the tightening EU and US sanctions regime against Russia might encourage the Indians to follow through, thus weakening the only substantive pillar in the Russo-Indian economic partnership. According to Russian private sector experts (Moscow Times, 2024c) and public officials (such as VTB head Andrey Kostin) (Moscow Times, 2024b), US and EU sanctions have led banks from countries "friendly" to Russia to cancel payment deals with their Russian counterparts for fear of Western reprisals. Nonetheless, Russia keeps

exporting commodities, resulting in “every fourth USD [earned through Russian exports] not reaching Russia.” This hits Russia’s oil and oil products sector particularly hard (Moscow Times, 2024a).

Second, India’s model of cooperation and system of partnerships in the Arctic is rather selective – and not always aligned with Russia’s expectations. India’s Arctic Policy strategic document, released in 2022, conveys that India has clear national interests in the Arctic and considers the macro-region to be the global heritage of humankind. Its emphasis on ecological sustainability as a key pillar of Arctic governance does not resonate with Russian interests and objectives, which prioritize commercial exploitation, re-militarization, and the idea of the region as an emerging geopolitical battleground (Staalesen, 2023). It is revealing that India decided to publish the document after the seven other Arctic states paused their participation in the Arctic Council under Russia’s chairship, effectively placing the primary multilateral regional forum on hold. Furthermore, India has never explicitly stated, or even implied, that Russia is its only partner in the Arctic region. Senior Indian officials argue that while Russia is “one big partner,” it also cooperates with other countries that Russia considers “unfriendly,” such as Norway and Iceland (Chandran & Viakhireva, 2024). Moreover, during the 2nd CII (Confederation of Indian Industries) India Nordic-Baltic Business Conclave in 2023, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar highlighted that India is interested in strategic collaboration on innovative projects with countries in Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region (TASS, 2023f). In developing scientific ties with Arctic players, India has devoted more attention to Norway than Russia (Zaykov & Bhagvat, 2022). This is unsurprising in light of declining Russian scientific research spending (proportional to GDP) (RBC, 2024).

Akin to Russia reacting with concern or disfavour when its partners cooperate with “unfriendly countries” in the Arctic, India’s approach reveals a similar tendency. For example, senior Indian officials and experts frequently refer to China-related geopolitical strains when referring to Arctic-related developments (Reddy, Sah & Viakhireva, 2024). Russia’s active courting of China in the Arctic, coupled with official discourse about China representing Russia’s most critical partner, may irritate India’s political and diplomatic leadership.<sup>3</sup> The director of Carnegie India, Raja Mohan, has noted concerns about inconsistencies in Russian policies toward other countries, and insisted that India will not be a “younger brother” or a “pawn” in Russian political games. He also suggested that Indian ruling elites are unsure about Russia’s relationship priorities when it comes to Delhi and Beijing, recalling the bitter experience of the Indian-Chinese war of 1962 and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev once calling India a “friend” and China a “brother” (Kupriyanov, 2016).

### **The Republic of Korea (ROK) in the Arctic: middle power diplomacy in action**

The ROK’s involvement in the Arctic dates to 1987, when the government created its Polar Research Center (PRC) under the umbrella of the Korea Ocean Research & Development Institute (KORDI). The country appeared dormant in its Arctic endeavours until 2004, when the Korean Antarctic Research Program was transformed into the Korean Polar Research Program (covering both poles) that identified six priority areas: climate change in polar zones and their global consequences; biodiversity; tectonic changes in polar zones; studies of meteors and deepwater drilling; “activation of polar studies by Asian countries that are not adjacent to polar zones”; and economic activities and transportation in the polar regions (Tolstokulakov, 2015). The ROK has become a world leader in

producing Arctic-class vessels, with the first “Araon” type icebreaker built by Hanjin Heavy Industries in 2009. This expertise in enabling commercial transportation in the Arctic had made South Korea a key shipbuilding partner for Russia.

The nature of South Korea’s interest in the Arctic conforms with a “middle power” approach – that of a country acknowledging that it occupies a middle-level position in the international power spectrum (Baç, 2024). Its interests are primarily related to narrow economic and scientific research issues, and it harbors no grand ambitions and aspirations for the region akin to the so-called “great powers” (Akimova, 2021). Following a constructivist approach, the ROK’s behavior in the Arctic region might be defined as “role-oriented bridging diplomacy.” According to Korean experts, unlike issue-oriented actors (such as Canada or Australia), the ROK could be viewed as an astute intermediary bridging conflicting viewpoints on Arctic affairs (Suzuka, 2015). Some Korean intellectuals have even suggested that the country could serve a connecting function between Asian observers and member states in the Arctic Council, emulating the role that it plays in the G-20 as an intermediary between the G-7 and BRICS (Seryun, 2017).

Analysis of the ROK’s strategic documents pertaining to the Arctic region before 2022 reveals Seoul’s keen interest in developing and proliferating ties with Russia in various dimensions of Arctic cooperation (So, Pak & Chistov, 2021). For its part, Russia sees various benefits in cooperating with the ROK in the region. South Korea boasts one of the world’s most innovative and fastest growing economies, is strategically dependent on imported natural resources (Minsu & Marchenkov, 2019), and seeks new export markets. Furthermore, its lack of geopolitical ambitions in the circumpolar north means that it neither threatens nor jeopardises Russia’s standing in the macro-region. The Russians also appreciate that, unlike other non-Arctic states (such as Japan), South Korea does not involve its Ministry of Defence in Arctic-related issues. In theory, this makes it an attractive regional partner for Russia.

Nonetheless, there are visible constraints on the prospects of an expanded ROK-Russia partnership in the Arctic – some (but not all) of which relate to post-2022 developments and the Russo-Ukrainian war. One core limitation is Russia’s traditional incredulity and apprehensiveness about foreign actors operating in its self-defined areas of exclusive interest. Thus, while Russia’s stance on South Korea’s Arctic involvement has been traditionally positive, Moscow perceives Seoul’s scientific studies of the NSR as a risk. Given that Russia would consider any push to internationalize waters that the Kremlin considers falling under its control as a national security threat, one Russian commentator characterized ROK interests as “a camouflaged threat to Russia’s national security.” He recommended that Russia not “allow [Koreans] to conduct independent scientific activities in the Arctic,” and to only admit their scientists if their areas of research were not a threat – and to “constantly and meticulously monitor” them all the same (Tolstokulakov, 2018).

The cautious and reserved approach of the ROK and the private sector to committing financial resources to Arctic cooperation also inhibits the country’s relationship with Russia. Despite strong South Korean demand for natural resources (especially oil and gas), companies from that country have never gone further than reaching memorandum-type agreements on cooperation (none of which yielded concrete results) in the realm of hydrocarbons. A case in point is the agreement between

NOVATEK and Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS) signed in 2018 (Afanasiev, 2018). Instead, the ROK imports 79 percent of its LNG from five countries: Qatar, Australia, the US, Malaysia, and Oman (Leksytina, 2021). Given growing scepticism amongst foreign investors about Russia's major oil and natural gas projects in the Arctic (Dyatel, 2023), it is highly unlikely that South Koreans will drastically change their stance on energy cooperation in the short-to-mid-term. Although the ROK speaks of the Russian Arctic as a critical transportation artery (Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea, n.d.), South Korean businesses have not made any substantive commitments to enhance Russian seaport infrastructure in the Far East or the Arctic. Instead, the ROK is prioritizing development of its own seaports to make Busan, Ulsan, and Gwangyang its gateways to Arctic maritime routes, relegating Russian ports to a marginal position in bilateral trade and transportation (Leksytina, 2021).

Although the ROK did not follow the lead of its Western partners in imposing a full suite of sanctions against the regime in Moscow, sanctions inhibit deeper Korean-Russian collaboration in the Arctic. For example, South Korean shipbuilding companies faced difficulties in receiving payments from Russian clients after many Russian banks were switched off the SWIFT system, leading South Korean shipyard Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering (now part of Hanwha Ocean) to terminate its contract with Sovcomflot. Given that a lack of Arctic-class Arc7 tankers is seriously constraining the Arctic LNG-2 project, and that contracts for Russian-built tankers have been delayed, securing the twenty Arc7 tankers commissioned from South Korean shipyards is critical to Russian plans as it is unlikely to find sufficient numbers on the secondary market (Parshynova, 2023). Russia's growing military cooperation with the ROK's strategic adversary North Korea (Shin, 2024) also fosters distrust, making the prospect of deeper ROK-Russian cooperation increasingly unlikely.

### **Singapore: the Arctic novice with growing ambitions**

Singapore, a tiny city-state with a population close to six million people, is resource scarce but one of the world's most economically and technologically advanced nations (IMD, 2024). It became an accredited observer to the Arctic Council in 2013, with its Arctic interests boiling down to three core variables: shipping, energy resources, and climate change (Singapore MFA, 2018). Like the ROK, Singapore has never articulated any geopolitical interests or agendas in the macro-region. After securing Arctic Council observer status, it "sought to make up for lost time by engaging in several areas of Arctic diplomacy, including on the Track II, sub-governmental level via various organisations and conferences," Lanteigne (2017) explained. In forging an Arctic identity, Singapore still "had much ground to cover. The country is not yet a signatory to the 1920 Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty, has had limited exposure to Arctic scientific endeavours, and unlike Japan and South Korea has yet to publish a comprehensive Arctic governmental white paper" (Lanteigne, 2017).

Singapore has understandable interests in climate change, given that rising sea levels owing to melting ice would have disastrous consequences for the maritime city-state. According to the Third National Climate Change Study released by the Centre for Climate Research Singapore in January 2024, sea level rise would have major implications for the country's water resources, biodiversity, public health, and food security (CCRS, 2024). Further development of the NSR also poses a potential challenge to Singapore's role as a global shipping hub for maritime cargo from Eastern to Western markets, with 70 to 80 percent of all oil bound for China and Japan passing through the Strait of Malacca (Arctic

Institute, 2024). Accordingly, Singapore's business sector closely observes what is happening in Arctic transportation networks. Recognizing the need to diversify both its portfolio and the geographic scope of its investments, Singapore looks at potential megaprojects around the world – and the Arctic region is no exception (Bennett, 2018).

Prior to February 2022, Russian sources identified three main directions of collaboration with Singapore in the Arctic (Yeranosyan, 2021). First, Singapore was a potential source of financing and technology to develop Russian seaport infrastructure in the Arctic and the Far East. The Russian side was particularly interested in cooperating with engineering companies Keppel Corporation and Semcorp Marine. It also looked to potential collaboration in hi-tech industries, including drilling, navigation systems, and monitoring, with Russian sources identifying up to 5,000 companies in Singapore working in these sectors. Furthermore, Singapore is a world leader in freight and cargo insurance, and Russian sources indicated that Singapore-based companies were interested in providing insurance to facilitate cargo transportation in the Arctic.

Deals between Trafigura and Norilsk Nickel in 2008 (Trader Trafigura, 2010) and between Trafigura and Russia's Rosneft in 2013 (Afanasiev, 2020) bode well for commercial cooperation between the two countries. In 2016, during a high-profile trip to Singapore, Russian delegation member Artur Chilingarov (a polar explorer, corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and a Hero of the Soviet Union) communicated that Moscow eagerly sought joint projects and collaboration with Singapore in the Arctic, especially to facilitate drilling on the Russian continental shelf. He also applauded Singapore's abstention from Arctic geopolitics and its concentration on economic and commercial opportunities (Ria Novosti, 2016). Practical achievements were limited, however. Following Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Trafigura froze its investments in Russia (Trafigura zamorozila investicii, 2022) and later sold its 24.5 percent share in Nayara Energy Limited (an Indian oil downstream energy and petrochemicals company in which Rosneft holds a 49.13 percent indirect minority interest) (Hara Capital Sarl, 2023).

More generally, Singapore either paused or slowed down its international collaborations in the Arctic after February 2022. Its participation in the Arctic Council has been limited to modest projects, such as a Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working group project in which Singapore's National Parks Board tracks Arctic migratory birds that overwinter in Singapore (Begum, 2024). Russian academic experts hold out hope that Moscow will attract Singaporean involvement in various Arctic projects and initiatives, which Singapore could use to showcase its infrastructure, communication, shipbuilding, and other innovative technologies. The experts also concede that uncertainty and geopolitical risks inhibit this prospect (Kazakov & Lystsev, 2023). When Pavel Volkov, Russia's deputy director for the development of the Far East and the Arctic, was asked about the possibility of Singaporean and other foreign non-Western investors in Russia's Arctic projects, he deflected the question to mention unspecified Chinese and Indian projects (Saprygina, 2024). The short-term opportunity space to revitalize the Russo-Singapore Arctic relationship appears non-existent.

### **Brazil: to the Arctic through the Antarctic**

Brazil, which is projected to be the world's ninth largest economy in 2024 (Forbes India, 2024) and is home to 203 million people (World Bank, 2024), appeared disinterested in either Arctic or Antarctic

affairs until 2013 when it released “Antarctic Science for Brazil: An action plan for the 2013–2022 period.” This plan contained a small passage on the Arctic, noting that “the Antarctic scientific community is interested in deepening cooperation with researchers from the Arctic region at the moment that evidence of connections between the two polar regions accumulate, such as the deep ocean circulation, climate variability processes and the Sun - Earth interaction with the atmosphere” (SEPED, 2013).

It took Brazil another decade to mention the Arctic region in another strategic document: the “Ten Year Plan for Antarctic Science in Brazil 2023–2032” (Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Inovação (MCTI), 2023). In this plan, the Arctic region was allocated a separate section as “a new frontier for Brazil’s polar science” (*Uma nova fronteira para a ciência polar brasileira*) that looked at the Arctic region as a key factor in global climate change. That year, Brazil sent its first scientific expedition to the Arctic, which Brazilian sources suggested “could initiate Brazil’s integration into [Arctic] studies considered strategic from a geopolitical point of view” (Lopes, 2023).

While Brazil’s fledgling interest in the Arctic region is primarily driven by interest in the adverse consequences of climate change for Brazil and its northern coast (Blue Amazon or *A Amazônia Azul*), the country is also seeking prestige. Brazilian experts note that theirs “is the only country among the 10 largest economies in the world to have no participation in issues related to the Arctic” and, “in the future, [Brazil] may also apply for an observer seat on the Arctic Council and sign the Arctic Treaty” (Rosa, 2023). There is no “Arctic Treaty,” of course, which is telling about the state of Brazil’s Arctic knowledge in its own right. Nevertheless, commentators suggest that participation in Arctic projects could enhance Brazil’s “role in BRICS and internationally” (Casella, Lagutina, & Giannattasio, 2020).

Well aware of these sentiments, Russia has indicated a strong desire to strengthen ties with Brazil in the Arctic since February 2022. While Brasilia has indicated no interest in pursuing joint economic projects, Russia has sought to pull its Brazilian counterparts into scientific cooperation. For instance, in 2023 Nikolay Korchunov noted that Russia and Brazil were planning a joint seminar on collaboration in the Arctic. His statement highlighted that Russia “took a very positive stance on Brazil’s interest in the Arctic and international cooperation in the Arctic region,” noting that the bilateral partnership on food security “already has an Arctic dimension” and that Brazil’s interest in Indigenous issues “could also become another topic of partnership” (TASS, 2023b). The extent of actual Russo-Brazilian scientific cooperation in the Arctic may exceed either Russo-Chinese or Russo-Indian scientific collaboration in the region, with Brazil and Russia reported to be the most active participants in the BRICS working group “one ocean and polar studies” (Vyakhireva, 2023). Following Russo-Brazilian consultations on the polar regions held in the Republic Saha (Yakutia) in 2024, reports suggest that Russia and Brazil are planning to conduct a joint scientific expedition in the Arctic in 2025. (Shyshlo, 2024).

Russia also sees benefits in drawing a key BRICS partner into Arctic affairs and joint projects. In effect, Brazil can offer expertise and legitimacy on climate change, sustainable agriculture and food security, drilling technologies, development of green energy, and work with Indigenous and small numbered peoples (Roscongee, 2023) from which Russia could benefit. Russia also seeks to derive geopolitical dividends from increasing Brazil’s presence in the Arctic. When Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva returned as

President of Brazil in October 2022, Russian experts and policymakers rejoiced<sup>4</sup> and hoped that Brazil would once again become Russia's premier partner in South America. With Russia largely ostracized from Western circles after February 2022, cooperation with Brazil in the Arctic region could serve as a platform to strengthen more general political ties between Brasilia and Moscow. Helping Brazil to become an accredited Arctic Council observer could be an important step in this direction, as Brazil's Ambassador to Russia Rodrigo de Lima Baena Soares tacitly acknowledged in 2023 (TASS, 2023a).

## Conclusion

Russia's strategic shift towards non-Arctic state partners has been hastened by the pressure of growing isolation from the West after the Kremlin launched its unprovoked, full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Desperate in its search for new markets and new sources of foreign investment in the face of Western sanctions, Russia hopes that cooperation with non-Western partners can help to solve its key problem: commercializing its vast Arctic-based natural resources. Nevertheless, our study suggests that it remains unlikely that Russia's non-Western partners will be willing to commit to expensive, strategic projects in the AZRF – particularly while the war in Ukraine is ongoing. Novatek's announcement this year that it is downsizing its flagship Arctic LNG 2 development is a case in point, reflecting its lack of access to new icebreaking vessels (thus curtailing its ability to recapitalize and expand the tanker fleet) which are sitting in South Korean shipyards (Staalesen, 2024).

While speculation about the current and future status of the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic dominates a significant amount of recent academic and think tank discussion, this article has illustrated how Russia's interests extend to other non-Western, non-Arctic states as well. Points of tension in the Sino-Russian Arctic relationship – such as Russian sovereignty and control over the NSR, scientific research as an enabler for encroachment on Russian sovereign rights, and concerns about both limited and potentially exploitative investment (Lajeunesse et al, 2023) – are also present in Russian discussions about other prospective partners. In many cases, despite handshakes and rhetorical gestures promising enhanced cooperation, there has been little actual action apart from purchasing Russian energy resources. As Russia becomes more desperate for new forms of economic and political support, we will watch with interest to see if the Kremlin is able to convert its pivot to non-Western partnerships into practical outcomes that advance its agenda in the AZRF, the broader circumpolar north, and globally.

## Notes

1. In March 2020, President Putin signed the “The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic through 2035,” which outlines key goals and Moscow's Arctic agenda. "Президент утвердил основы государственной политики в Арктике" [The President approved the Principles of State Policy in the Arctic], администрация президента России, updated 5 March 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947>. Following this direction, the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic submitted a draft implementation strategy for the government's consideration in May 2020. "Минвостокразвития начало разработку новой госпрограммы развития Арктики," [The

- Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East begins the development of a new state program for the development of the Arctic], *TASS*, 13 May 2020, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/8464809>. The third document, released on 26 October, outlines the mechanisms to realize the ‘State Policy’ and ‘Socio-Economic Development’ plans in the Arctic. Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 26.10.2020 № 645, “О Стратегии развития Арктической зоны Российской Федерации и обеспечения национальной безопасности на период до 2035 года” [“Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035”], 26 October 2020, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202010260033>.
2. See, for example, Sørensen and Klimenko, 2017; Sun, 2018; Alexeeva and Lasserre, 2018; Hsiung and Røseth, 2019; Kobzeva, 2020; MacDonald, 2021; Cao, 2022; Yang and Guo, 2022; Nan and Guo, 2022; Juris, 2022, Lajeunesse et al 2023, Moe et al, 2023.
  3. One might recall Russia selling of S-400 surface-to-air missile complexes to China in 2017 before it sold them India, which generated negative reactions in India (Sukhankin, 2017).
  4. During da Silva’s previous tenure as president (2003-2010), he played the key role in initiating the Russo-Brazilian strategic partnership (Yakovlev, 2022).

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