

China, Russia, and the U.S. in the Bering Sea: Military Exercises and Great Power Politics

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This article discusses the increase of military exercise activity in, and related statements and attention given to, the Bering Sea and Strait geographical spaces before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Using Chinese, Russian, and U.S. sources, we will argue that growing militarization in the Pacific Arctic, including the proliferation of Russo-Chinese military and paramilitary activities, warrants a reevaluation of the strategic importance of Beringia within the context of great power politics in the Arctic and the Pacific. Theoretically, the article turns to signaling theories. The article uses a mix of official policies and statements, media reports, and expert analyses from Chinese, Russian, and U.S. sources to provide an overview of the increased activity in this space. In doing so, the article also discusses the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the North Pacific in light of great power competition between the U.S., China, and Russia. By examining key events such as the joint Russian Chinese bomber exercise off the coast of Alaska, the entry of the Chinese Coast Guard into the Arctic Ocean via the Bering Strait, and joint Russo-Chinese naval exercises and patrols, we will discuss the motivations behind Russia and China's military activities near Alaska. We hope to contribute to timely discussions about Arctic military, security, and diplomacy and provide insights into the strategic objectives of major powers, namely the U.S., China, and Russia, in the Arctic writ large.

Introduction

The Arctic is traditionally treated as a single and unified geopolitical region. However, the question of whether the Arctic can be considered a distinct uniform region in terms of military security remains open among scholars and military experts, especially considering deliberate exclusion of military security concerns from the Arctic (Devyatkin, 2023; Østhagen, 2021). Scholars generally agree that security dynamics and risks are different in the North American and Nordic Arctic, and even increased militarization in the region is not driven by Arctic-specific conflicts (Regehr, 2020; Tunsjø, 2020). The security interests of non-Arctic states like China are also often understood in terms of global security dynamics, especially the relations between China and the United States (Deng, 2020, p. 233–234). For China, the polar regions, though marginal in China's overall policy, play a significant role as a stage for demonstrating its global great power status (Lamazhapov, 2025).

The Arctic is treated as a unified security region by policy-makers, despite the fact security concerns in different parts of the Arctic are driven by different regional security dynamics. As President Trump returned to the Oval Office in 2025, he pledged to be tough on the People's Republic of China (PRC), the only great power in the world capable of matching the US' naval power. In the Arctic, Trump claimed that the United States "need Greenland for our national security" because "you have China ships all over the place" (CNN, 2025). Russia, too, treats the Arctic as a security region where it seeks to counteract "the unfriendly states' policy aimed at militarization of the region" by "establishing a mutually beneficial cooperation with the non-Arctic states pursuing a constructive policy toward Russia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

In recent years, Russia and China have increased cooperation in the Arctic region, which has also included increased military and paramilitary cooperation (Hauksdóttir & Thorhallsson, 2025). For example, in 2024, Russian and Chinese bombers were identified off the coast of Alaska, the Russian and Chinese Coast Guards entered the Arctic Ocean via the Bering Strait, and the Russian and Chinese Navy conducted joint exercises in the Bering Sea. Still, this increase in military activity did not take place across the Arctic "region", but it rather materialized in one specific Arctic subregion, the Bering Strait/Sea geographic space. How can the increased scope of Russo-Chinese activity in the Bering Sea region be understood?

This article argues that joint Russo-Chinese exercises in the Bering Sea region serve not only material but also symbolic goals. On the material side, they help to improve each military's dependent combat proficiency and experience, enhance interoperability and joint planning, allow both sides to absorb operational lessons, create opportunities to showcase and sell weapons to each other and third parties, experiment with and integrate advanced capabilities (UAVs, EW, AI, cyber, space, hypersonic, missile-warning and possibly nuclear systems), and test and expand their shared logistics and global power-projection infrastructure (ports, bases, and long-range deployments) (Weitz, 2021). In addition, they serve symbolic goals, the chief of which is signaling. Signaling is the strategic act of conveying intentions, commitments, or warnings to influence the behavior of other states or actors, often through actions or communications designed to be intentional, public and costly (Plagemann, 2024). Military exercises are often considered foreign policy signals demonstrating a state's credible commitment to the region. Signals are often understood as a piece of information that the signaler intentionally seeks to convey to the receiver (Quek, 2016). However, signals are often ambiguous, with unclear consequences and effectiveness (Plagemann, 2024). Sometimes, the signal intended by the sender is nothing more than a reminder of the existence of the sender's navy (Cable, 1989). Indeed, naval power "has proven to be particularly suitable for subtle political signaling" (Åtland et al., 2022).

Drawing on official policies, statements, media reports, and expert analyses from Chinese, Russian, and U.S. sources, this article will briefly evaluate the costs, intent, and audiences of strategic signals. In doing so, the article will argue that these activities are not only one-off signaling maneuvers meant to irk Washington but instead represent that the Beringian Arctic is increasingly emerging as part of the security dynamics in the Pacific, in turn leading to the constitution of a North Pacific security subregion, or, if linked to the Arctic, an Arctic security subregion that must be better understood.

Beringia

The Bering Sea is named after Vitus Jonassen Bering, a Danish explorer in the service of the Russian Navy, who set out to explore the maritime region towards the Bering Strait in 1728. It connects to the Arctic Ocean through the Bering Strait, a narrow passage that separates the Chukchi Peninsula of Russia from the Seward Peninsula of Alaska. The region is termed 'Beringia', (i.e. the areas off the coast of Alaska in the Bering Sea) and lies at the intersection of the Arctic region and the Northern parts of the Pacific.

In 1990, the USSR and the USA agreed to settle the rather extensive maritime boundary in the Bering Sea/Strait; this was known as the Baker–Shevardnadze agreement (United States–Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1990; Verville, 1993). This agreement stretched through the Bering Strait between Alaska and Russia and extended into the Arctic Ocean to the north, and the Bering Sea to the south. The US Congress ratified the agreement in 1990; however, after the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991, the new Russian Duma never ratified it. Although this boundary treaty is not in force, both sides have formally respected its terms consistent with an exchange of notes between them (Schofield, 2015; Smith, 1994; Verville, 1993, p. 454). At times, Russian politicians and fishermen have criticised the agreement, arguing that it disfavours Russian fishing interests in the Bering Sea and that Russia ceded more of the formerly disputed area than the USA (Kaczynski, 2007, p. 3).

Despite the political tensions between Russia and the USA – especially after 2014 – there is a history of collaboration over fisheries management, environmental protection, and maritime safety in this region. The Bering Sea is significant for both countries economically, especially in terms of fishing.¹ In the period 2021–2023, total pollock catches were in the region of 1.7–1.8 million tonnes, making it the largest single-stock fishery in the world; 66–78 % was taken in the US EEZ, the rest in the Russian EEZ (NOAA, 2024). Consequently, there have been forms of cooperation between Russian and US authorities, especially on the practical level between the US Coast Guard and the FSB Border Guard, even after 2014 (Østhagen, 2016).

For example, from around the 2010s, the USA placed emphasis on developing a well-functioning cooperative relationship with the Russian Coast Guard, as traffic in the Arctic was, and is, on the rise. Most of the traffic increase in these waters derives from Arctic shipping, or shipping to destinations in the Arctic itself, as a means of resupplying isolated coastal communities or for bringing natural resources to markets further south. Based on the desire to implement the multilateral agreements signed under the auspices of the Arctic Council in 2011 and 2013, the regional US Coast Guard authority from District 17, Juneau, Alaska, regularly met with their Russian counterparts in Vladivostok. This continued despite Russia's annexation of Crimea and initiating of conflict in Ukraine in 2014, but contact and interaction have been scaled back, and – after 2022 – limited to only ad hoc contact as needed.

Although both countries have continued operating emergency services in the Bering Strait, and emergency cooperation has continued, an increased Russian military presence and shifting stocks due to climate change have worried some US fishers. Alaska's lucrative snow crab harvest was cancelled in 2023 for the first time ever due to stock collapse, which scientists warn will become increasingly common with climate change. As many species seek cooler, deeper waters, they are likely to migrate beyond historical boundaries, with Russia already exploiting new fishing locations

within its EEZ. This is likely to put further pressures on efforts to reduce overfishing, or even lead to poaching and IUU fisheries (Wenger, 2022).

In terms of security dynamics, the level of activity in this part of the Arctic (or subarctic, since the Arctic Circle crosses just north of the Bering Strait) has been lower than the security developments seen in the Barents Sea domain. Although the USA has maintained a force presence in Alaska, it is only in recent years that the state has attracted considerable attention related to security threats. The slither of the Pacific dividing Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula and Alaskan houses is where Russia's easternmost and closest permanent naval base to Arctic waters is located. It is home to the Pacific Fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, in addition to some surface ships. Tensions have been on the rise since 2020, when Russian military activity in this maritime domain increased, with American fishers being expelled from their fishing grounds in the U.S. exclusive economic zone, causing outcry and concern in Alaska. Russian military exercises interfering with Alaskan fishers have caused concern over the violation of US rights, as well as the fear of escalation between the fishers and the Russian Navy (Baker, 2020; The Associated Press, 2020).

Although you can walk across the ice between Russia and the U.S. in wintertime from Little Diomed Island (U.S.) to Big Diomed Island (Russia), it is not the geographic proximity between the two countries that is driving great power rivalry in recent years. Rather, it is Russia's budding closeness to China that is fueling this rivalry. China sought to assert itself as a "near-Arctic state", causing much resistance in the US (Lanteigne, 2021, p. 380). Increasingly, naval operations in the Bering Strait and the Chukchi Sea from the Pacific Fleet are becoming common, adding to Russia's Arctic presence alongside the Northern Fleet located in the European Arctic. Both in 2021 and 2022, the U.S. Coast Guard encountered Chinese and Russian warships operating jointly off the coast of the Aleutian Islands (Bye, 2022; Mahadzir, 2023). After a 2023 Russian-Chinese naval exercise near Alaska, U.S. news outlets like NBC highlighted concern of the event, calling it an 'aggressive maneuver' and a 'close call' (Armbruster, 2023). Suddenly Alaskan security issues received countrywide attention.

Moreover, in the summer of 2024, Chinese and Russian bombers conducted joint operations in the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone for the first time, albeit not violating US airspace (Williams et al., 2024). In September 2024, coast guard vessels from both countries conducted joint operations in the same region (J. Xiao, 2024). On 19 October 2024, the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer remarked that "Sino-Russia [sic] mission underscores the growing and concerning cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, also in the Arctic" and "has a clear military aspect to it" (Bauer, 2024).

The question, however, is to what extent this increase in military activity highlights underlying shifts in the strategic importance of this geographical space? Or, is this increase a sign of other trends, like an increased emphasis placed on signaling operations by Chinese officials to counter U.S. presence close to China, and/or an increasing confluence of Russian and Chinese interests in this part of the world?

Russo-Chinese exercises in the North Pacific and the Arctic

Although China attaches strategic significance to the Bering, Okhotsk, and the Chukchi Seas, the level of Chinese activities has, until recently, remained modest. China's Military Strategy, released in May 2015, focused on maritime warfare, and the People's Liberation Army Navy's "offshore

waters defense” (近海设计) was expanded to include “open seas protection” (远海防卫), expanding their areas of interest beyond near seas to include distant seas (State Council, 2015). It is therefore logical that Chinese military vessels appeared in the Arctic for the first time in 2015, following a joint exercise with Russia.

At the time, this was surprising given Russia’s skepticism to Chinese naval activities. When four Chinese vessels passed the Tsugaru Strait and circled Japan for the first time in October 2008, Russia was concerned about China’s possible advance into the Arctic Ocean. In 2010, the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy admiral Vysotsky warned that Russia should closely watch China, which is “advancing their interest very intensively, in every possible way” in the Arctic (Sun, 2018). In 2013, the Chinese research ship Xue Long attempted to enter the Sea of Okhotsk without the courtesy of notifying Russia beforehand, which resulted in a warning shot being fired at her (Kato, 2013).

Russia and China have held Joint Sea naval exercises yearly since 2012. In August 2015, Russia and China held the second phase of the Joint Sea 2015 exercise in the Sea of Japan (East Sea) off the coast of Vladivostok, which comprised more than 20 ships from the Russian Navy and the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Following the naval exercise, five Chinese vessels appeared in the Bering Sea off the coast of Alaska. Some interpreted this as a signal, especially given that President Obama was visiting Alaska at the time (Kossa, 2024, p. 77). According to Chinese military commentator Du Wenlong, this was useful to test PLAN’s far sea operational capabilities (Hua, 2015). According to Chinese military commentator and Defense University professor Li Li, China’s goals with the operation were not reaching the United States or the Bering Strait, but rather to prepare for future navigational security and strategic presence in the Arctic, especially to familiarize with the unfamiliar sea conditions there (Hua, 2015).

It is significant that China’s first operation in the Arctic was done following a naval exercise with Russia. This indicated a tacit Russian acceptance of Chinese presence. Chinese ships in 2015 did not create waves in the Russian media. Russians also interpreted this as primarily a political symbol. As the Russian State Duma member observed, “Chinese ships visiting Alaska and US Pacific military bases” was meant to “send very specific political signals” to the US and to “demonstrate military might” (*Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, 2015). Other Russian observers gloated that “the Americans” cannot claim that they “rule the Pacific Ocean... when the Chinese are demonstratively sailing near Alaska” and that “the Russian Federation [is] the only player capable of keeping China within China’s borders” (*Strategiya Rossii*, 2015, p. 21).

The second Chinese operation in the Arctic also followed a joint Russo-Chinese naval exercise. Joint Sea 2017 was held in the sub-Arctic areas of the Sea of Okhotsk, where Russia again invited Chinese participation. This was the first time Russia invited China into the sub-Arctic and to a Sea that is almost exclusively Russian EEZ and strategically important for nuclear deterrence. During the exercise, PLAN docked their LR7 deep-submergence rescue vehicle to a Russian submarine, demonstrating their ability to perform a complex operation in a different operational environment (Wei, 2017).

It is not a coincidence that the scale of the Russo-Chinese exercises increased dramatically following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Typically, China engages in four types of activities in the North Pacific: Russian-led exercises with Chinese involvement, joint Russo-Chinese bilateral exercises, Chinese-led exercises with Russian participation, and Russo-

Chinese coast guard operations. The Chinese-led exercises and coast guard activities are the newest developments that have not been seen before.

Russian-led exercises with Chinese involvement

First, there are the exercises organized by Russia, where China is invited. For example, in September 2022, the Chinese Navy returned to the Sea of Okhotsk when it participated in the Russian exercise Vostok 2022 for the first time. Vostok 2022 was also the first exercise where China deployed its army, navy, and air force simultaneously in a foreign exercise (Mei et al., 2023). China used this opportunity to showcase its new Navy flagship, the *Nanchang*, which was constructed in January 2020, in the Sea of Okhotsk. It was joined by the frigate *Yancheng* and the supply ship *Dongpinghu*.

Another example is the recent “Ocean-2024” exercise conducted in early September 2024, which became the largest naval exercise in post-Soviet Russia. These exercises took place in the Pacific and Arctic Oceans, the Mediterranean Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Baltic Sea. In the East, the exercise areas included the Sea of Japan (East Sea) and the Sea of Okhotsk. Russia sought to demonstrate its nuclear capabilities, including in the Arctic. China participated in the exercises, but the exercises were presented primarily as a Russian affair in Chinese media.

Joint Russo-Chinese bilateral exercises

The second type of activities is the joint exercises and patrols. Joint Patrols generally take place in the vicinity of Japan, but in recent years the scope has been extended to the North Pacific. These are often conducted after joint exercises. After the conclusion of the Vostok 2022 exercise in September that year, Russian and Chinese navies conducted the second joint patrol (联合巡航) in the Pacific Ocean (the first one being in the Sea of Japan in 2021), where *Nanchang* visited the Bering Sea and “sailed more than 100,000 nautical miles and crossed more than 40 degrees of latitude” (Yu & Sun, 2024). Chinese and Russian warships patrolled the North Pacific, which was monitored by the US Coast Guard (Kongtian liliang, 2023). During the Russian-China Joint Patrol in 2023, Russian and Chinese navy vessels passed the Sea of Japan (East Sea), La Pérouse Strait, the Sea of Okhotsk, and Kamchatka Strait, sailing by Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, which triggered US security concerns (Mahadzir, 2023; Murkowski, 2023).

In 2024, the Chinese and Russian navies participated in the “Joint Sea-2024” exercises in July 2024, which included joint anti-submarine, air defense, and anti-missile drills. The exercise mainly took place in the South China Sea, but far from disputed areas. After the exercises concluded, the naval fleets again conducted the fourth joint patrol in the Pacific Ocean, setting sail from the waters near the south of Jeju Island, crossed the Osumi Strait, sailed south through the western Pacific Ocean, and entered the South China Sea from the Balintang Strait.

In 2024, China and Russia conducted their eighth joint aerial strategic patrol, which for the first time took place over the Bering Sea on July 25, 2024. Previous joint aerial patrols took place around Japan. The patrol involved Russian Tu-95MS strategic bombers and Chinese H-6K bombers. The aerial patrol entered the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone, triggering US sensitivities. The timing of the aerial patrol coincided with the publication of the 2024 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy, which Chinese military commentator and Defense University Prof. Li Li meant represented “a call for the US to militarize the Arctic” with the goal to “exclude more major powers and spheres of influence, aiming for dominance and monopolization of the region” (J. Sun, 2024,

04:53). According to her, a major message China wishes to send is that China does not wish to be excluded from the region.

Chinese-led exercises with Russian participation

A third and a completely new type of activity are China's own exercises in the North Pacific. In July 2023, China held the first North/Joint-2023 (北部 • 联合-2023) exercise. Unlike the previous exercises organized jointly or by Russia, this was an exercise organized by the PLA Northern Theatre, where Russia was invited to participate. The exercise was explicitly themed around "Maintaining the Security of Strategic Maritime Channels" (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 2023) – traditionally a coast guard area of responsibility. For China, the emphasis was that it could demonstrate "actual combat capabilities in far seas and remote areas" (Qian & Ren, 2023).

In late September, China again organized the North/Joint-2024 (北部 • 联合-2024) exercise. This time, the exercise was much longer (nearly two weeks, in contrast to four days in 2023). In addition, the level was more ambitious, including formation air defense and joint anti-submarine drills. The exercise was much more advanced in terms of the composition of vessels, including a Type 055 destroyer *Wuxi* and aircraft carrier *Liaoning*. Russia, too, attached high importance to the exercise taking out elite warships and relatively new warships. According to military commentator Prof. Shao Yonglin, "a significant reason for this exercise is that it will be conducted in unfamiliar waters, such as the Sea of Okhotsk." (Zhang & Huang, 2024, 10:50).

Russo-Chinese coast guard activities

In April 2023, Russian and Chinese Coast Guards signed a cooperation agreement in the city of Murmansk, which is the hub of Russia's Northern Fleet, and China was invited to observe the Russian Arctic Patrol 2023 exercise (Shiryaev, 2023). For China, joint patrols in the Arctic were meant as a reciprocal response to increased US presence in the South China Sea and to demonstrate the resolve of the two countries "to prevent the West from using the Arctic to pose national defense threats to China and Russia, or from causing damage to Arctic shipping routes and natural ecology" (Kongtian lilian, 2023).

As a party to the Convention on the Conservation and Management of Fishery Resources in the High Seas of the North Pacific, China uses its Coast Guard in high seas law enforcement patrols in the North Pacific. Chinese and Russian coast guard ships conducted joint exercises and patrols in the North Pacific in September and October 2024, which was a direct consequence of the agreement signed in 2023 (TASS, 2024).

Notably, the Chinese coast guard ships entered the Arctic Ocean for the first time. This is a significant development, but the fact that it was the Coast Guard ships and not naval vessels that were chosen for this mission indicates that China sought to choose a softer tool to send a message. The Chinese Coast Guard is a paramilitary organ not formally integrated into the PLA. As such, China views the Coast Guard ships as a less strong signaling tool, albeit one that increasingly deploys in order to convey power and ability to operate. This is becoming evident in the South and East China Seas, where the Coast Guard upholds and reinforces disputed Chinese claims and positions over everything from reef-ownership to access to fisheries (Midford & Østhagen, 2024).

In the words of a Chinese military commentator Prof. Shao Yonglin, “the Coast Guard and the Navy are completely different” because “the Coast Guard patrols and enforces laws at sea” while “the navy plays a role from the perspective of national security” (Zhang & Huang, 2024). At the same time, Chinese media celebrated this as “not only break through your first island chain, but also sail thousands of nautical miles all the way to the Arctic Ocean after breaking through the island chain” (‘24 Xiaoshi’, 2024, p. 46). The last frame of that broadcast featured animation of two Chinese Coast Guard vessels with a modernized Chinese idiom, “if you can go [there], so can we go [there] as well” (你可往，我亦可往, Photo 1). This phrase references late 4th century BC history book *Zuo Zhuan*, where it is used to show that China’s “army possessed combat capabilities equals to those of the enemy” (‘Where the enemy can go, so can my army’, 2025). This also corroborates the conclusion that the exercise had a clear signaling value.



Photo: Chinese Central Television Channel 13 broadcast covering the first time China Coast Guard entering the Arctic Ocean. The caption reads: “If you can go [there], so can we go [there] as well” (‘24 Xiaoshi’, 2024, 46:06). Image © CCTV.

Following the 2023 MoU, the Chinese Coast Guard also met with the Russian Coast Guard in a second high-level meeting on October 21, 2024, where they pledged to deepen cooperation, “enhance the joint operations capabilities of the two countries’ coast guards in the far seas” as well as “build a community of shared future for the ocean” (China Coast Guard, 2024). Notably, the Arctic region was not mentioned in the communique. This could be attributed to the fact that Russia and China failed to reach an agreement. Given that no other regions were explicitly named, it is also possible that “the far seas” mentioned include the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean.

Mixed signals: what are Russia and China trying to signal?

These events and this increased activity come at a time when Russia is involved in its war in Ukraine, when China-U.S. relations are at a historic low, and when Russia is growing increasingly dependent on China. Joint military exercises have expanded in number, scale, and geographic scope since

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (von Essen, 2025). China is especially important for Russia as a market for its energy exports and a source of technology (von Essen, 2023), including sanctioned and dual-use items (Kalwasiński, 2025). Russia has grown more economically reliant on China, even in the Arctic region (Lamazhapov & Moe, 2024). Beyond that, China provides Russia with "political and diplomatic cover, if not always full-throated support, for its foreign policy moves" (Stallard & Rozman, 2024, p. 64). In the meantime, China, which used Russian arms for the modernization of the PLA, is increasingly self-sufficient in its military production and has decreased its dependence on Russian arms imports (von Essen, 2025). As a result, an increasingly "asymmetrical" relationship is taking shape (Lukonin, 2023; Rozman & Christoffersen, 2024). The increase in the scope of the Russo-Chinese activities in Beringia comes after the breakdown of cooperation between Russia and the rest of the Arctic countries following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

For Russia, these exercises serve as public displays of military capability and cooperation. Russia is an extremely status-sensitive state that seeks to demonstrate its great power status (Reshetnikov, 2024; Røren, 2023). Russia's war against Ukraine has incurred significant reputational costs for the Russian state (Asadzade & Izadi, 2022). Russia failed to meet some of its own military objectives in the early stages of its invasion of Ukraine, revealing shortcomings previously unknown to Western military analysts (Renz, 2024). This has led to reassessments of the country's military power, with some going so far as to question whether its armed forces were a "paper tiger" (Dalsjö et al., 2022). Even some Chinese experts perceived Russia's global influence as weakening and its war performance as poor (Sagild & Hsiung, 2024). Military exercises provide Russia with an opportunity to assert its military power.

In the Arctic, cooperative activities involving Russia in the Arctic Council were put on a temporary pause, while Russia left cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). Russia increasingly relied on China and India to support its Arctic economy (Lamazhapov & Moe, 2024). The Russian foreign policy concept adopted in 2023 claims the goal to counteract "the unfriendly states' policy" in the Arctic by pursuing "a mutually beneficial cooperation with the non-Arctic states pursuing a constructive policy toward Russia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). By increasing military activities and collaborating with China in the Arctic, Russia may signal its determination to be a central actor in the region's security landscape. This assertion targets Western powers, primarily the United States, projecting the message that Russia is both vigilant and proactive in safeguarding its interests and countering foreign influences in its perceived sphere of influence in the Arctic.

Russia traditionally used military exercises as a response to NATO presence in the Arctic, especially in the Norwegian and the Barents Sea (Åtland et al., 2022). For example, when the United States Coast Guard dispatched its icebreaker *Healy* to conduct an operation near the Russian Arctic in September 2023, Russia responded by mobilizing the Pacific Fleet to conduct a military exercise (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2023). Russia aims to remind Washington of its ability and willingness to protect its interests in the Arctic, such as discouraging the US from conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations on the Northern Sea Route. Since 2022, Russian exercises have taken place almost only in the Barents Sea and not in the Norwegian Sea, seemingly to bolster the Northern Fleet's Bastion defense (Åtland et al., 2024). This change may be attributed

to a combination of rebalancing political priorities and diminished capacity due to military losses in Ukraine (Åtland et al., 2024). Joint exercises with China give an opportunity to maintain signaling.

For China, the sub-Arctic and Arctic seas are distant seas and unfamiliar operational environments. China relies on Russia to play a significant role in these drills. In addition to military training, the drills serve as a signaling tool, allowing Beijing to demonstrate its power-projection capabilities while also supporting Moscow. The PLA textbook *Science of Military Strategy* focuses explicitly on the signaling effect of joint military exercises, noting that “through exercises, we [China] can demonstrate our [Chinese] military’s combat capabilities to the opponent, but also cause the opponent to doubt our intentions, cause psychological panic and produce a deterrent effect” (T. Xiao, 2022). Additionally, China is interested in a reciprocal response regarding the South China Sea, where the US conducts regular FONOPs. For instance, the sighting of PLAN vessels in the Bering Sea in 2015 was intended to serve as a signal, providing a reciprocal response to the US involvement in the South China Sea. Although the US reaction was calm, somewhat damping the intended signaling effect, China sees its operations in the Bering region as a tit-for-tat.

Chinese media military analysts continue to stress that areas like the Sea of Okhotsk are distant seas for China, and seas that China does not understand very well. As Weitz (2021) observes, Russia and China seem to take turns holding maritime exercises in regions where each of them seeks to project power, including the South China Sea, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the Baltic. Following this logic, Beringia is a region where Russia is more interested in power projection. What is common between the Joint Sea exercises is that they were always conducted in several theatres. According to the China Power China-Russia Joint Military Exercises database (CSIS, 2025), Joint Sea exercises have been conducted since 2012, not shying away from the areas with maritime disputes. However, Russia has been careful not to participate in exercises in disputed areas, and both Joint Sea exercises held in the South China Sea in 2016 and 2024 took place far from actual disputed areas. China, which is sensitive to global status, seeks to support Russia which is significantly reduced following its invasion of Ukraine.

Simultaneously, China is expanding its interests in Beringia, which has traditionally been the main area of Chinese activities in the Arctic (Kossa, 2024, p. 55, 77). China seeks to signal its status as a great power in the region (Lamazhapov, 2025) and does not wish to be excluded. Chinese strategists see island chains as a serious challenge to China’s maritime power (Erickson & Wuthnow, 2016). The US Island Chain strategy is a Cold War-era maritime containment plan that uses a series of allied island bases across the Western Pacific to restrict China’s ability to project power and secure US dominance in the region, though the exact scope of the island chains is extremely ambiguous both in Chinese and US strategic documents. China aims to demonstrate that the United States’ Island Chain strategy does not constrain it and can therefore extend its reach into the Bering Sea and even the Arctic Ocean. For example, the fact that *Nanchang* undertook voyages “beyond the island chain, sailed in the Bering Sea, and conducted combat patrols in the Pacific” is often brought up as a source of pride and a demonstration of China’s naval prowess (Liu et al., 2022; Song, 2023). Simply conducting exercises is not enough to break the US containment strategy, but the fact that Beijing has started organizing its own exercises in the region – the North/Joint exercises – is a significant change. China continues its capacity building in the Arctic, including construction of polar-capable research vessels and icebreakers, cultivating domestic shipbuilding technologies, and expanding maritime capabilities, including construction of yet another civilian icebreaker, which is

about to start in 2025 (Eiterjord, 2025). China's icebreaker fleet consists mainly of research icebreakers with limited military significance. The US concerns are about their dual-use purposes, but this is only an allegation. The PLA Navy also possesses several icebreakers, including 2 third generation type 272 icebreakers which were commissioned in 2016. PLAN needs these icebreakers for operations in the Yellow Sea, where there is thin first-year ice, and this generally has nothing to do with the Arctic.



Photo: An HC-130J Super Hercules airplane crew from Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak observes two Russian Border Guard ships and two Chinese Coast Guard ships approximately 440 miles southwest of St. Lawrence Island Sept. 28, 2024. This marked the northernmost location where Chinese Coast Guard vessels have been observed by the U.S. Coast Guard. (U.S. Coast Guard courtesy photo)

While military exercises are signals, what cannot be discounted is that the increased alignment between Russia and China has tangible military advantages, which is also the case with joint military exercises (Mastro, 2024). By inviting China closer to areas considered important for its defense and by increasing interoperability with China, Moscow aims to strengthen its relations with Beijing, while also assessing China's growing naval capabilities. China and Russia are continuing to make slow progress on increasing interoperability. Already in 2022, there were reports of Russian cadets learning Chinese in order to improve communication (Kimura, 2022). Furthermore, Russia and China understand that the two navies have "a win-win effect of making up for each other's weaknesses" (Zhang & Huang, 2024). Only regular training and large-scale exercises can help China acquire necessary skills (Kirchberger, 2015, p. 247–248). For example, Russian support bolsters China's air-maneuver capabilities, which some observers note are crucial in the case of a Taiwan contingency (Soong, 2025).

US response

In the summer of 2024, the Pentagon released its fourth Arctic strategy (the others came in 2013, 2016 and 2019), stating that the “Arctic serves as an avenue for power projection to Europe and is vital to the defense of Atlantic sea lines of communication between North America and Europe” (US Department of Defense, 2024, p. 2), and particularly focusing on the role of China and Russia.

US Arctic officials have increasingly named China (as well as China’s confluence with Russia) as security risks to the US in the Arctic (Lackenbauer et al., 2022). It is apparent that a shift in the US federal government’s Arctic security interest and engagement occurred in the period 2017-2018. Statements from top politicians, new strategies launched by various branches of the Armed Forces, and investments – albeit modest – in Arctic capabilities in Alaska all materialized around this time. This is in stark contrast to the decade before, where there was much discussion about the Arctic from environmental and resource perspectives, but limited engagement in terms of security initiatives and investments. Ergo, the US was dubbed a ‘reluctant Arctic actor’ (Huebert, 2013), probably in no small part due to the physical and ‘mental’ distance between the lower-48s and the State of Alaska.

Others warn about China’s long-term geoeconomic interests and actions, calling for a different way of conceptualizing ‘threats’ from China in the Arctic (Brady, 2017, p. 254–267; Doshi et al., 2021, p. 10–13; Sun, 2020). At the same time, China is increasingly attempting to gain influence in various branches of Arctic economic activity. From a US perspective, scholars recommended several pathways to dealing with China in the Arctic: cooperation with Russia, increased involvement in Greenland, and fostering local awareness of the sensitive nature of investments and involvement (Pezard et al., 2022, p. 85–92).

China’s increased engagement in the Arctic, and specifically the North Pacific/Bering Sea, due to its heightened global prominence and cooperation with Russia, has arguably been a primary factor in the US’s increased attention to the Arctic. It is perhaps telling that in the Pentagon’s Arctic Strategy from 2024, the first actor it focuses on in a separate heading is China, not Russia (US Department of Defense, 2024, p. 3). The US views China as a long-term strategic challenge in the Arctic, as in other parts of the world. China’s presence remains limited, but its growing interest in the Arctic, as signaled through activities with Russia, seems to have been received in Washington, resulting not only in increased Arctic security interests during the Biden administration but also at the start of the second Trump Presidency. China’s emerging maritime power has changed the strategic significance of the North Pacific, which is the only area of China’s military interests in the Arctic and sub-Arctic seas, and it is also increasingly drawing the Arctic into the Indo-Pacific story.

Chinese presence facilitated by an isolated Russia might complicate the wider Arctic security landscape in the longer term. The fact that you can walk between Russia and the USA, or between Asia and North America, at certain times of year while not sharing a border on land speaks to the need to manage neighbourly relations linked to everything from fisheries to maritime traffic. In this geographic domain, the two primary actors are undoubtedly Russia and the USA, although the involvement of China has changed in the last decade. This, in turn, draws more attention to the subregion from US decision-makers who would not otherwise be concerned with Alaskan security issues.

Furthermore, with Donald Trump's return as US President in 2025, several signals emerged from the White House regarding the possibility of increased collaboration between the USA and Russia in the Bering Sea/Strait domain. These hinted at resuming dialogue on, for example, enabling shipping through the Strait, or finding other joint ventures in the Arctic, as – presumably – a carrot in negotiations trying to bring some form of ceasefire in Ukraine. A few months later, in August 2025, Trump and Putin met in Anchorage, Alaska, to discuss the war in Ukraine and ways to enable Arctic-specific collaboration going forward. The meeting did not lead to anything, but again signals not only the relevance of geographic proximity in US–Russia relations, but also the distinctness of these dynamics in contrast to those in other parts of the Arctic. While the two Presidents met, Chinese vessels were sailing North of the Bering Strait and Alaska, conducting China's largest Arctic Ocean expedition to date (Government of China, 2025).

Conclusion

The increased scope of Russo-Chinese military and coast guard cooperation in the Arctic underscores the two countries' resolve to deepen security cooperation, as well as the use of these exercises as a signaling tool in international relations. Regular training and military exercises are necessary to deepen military cooperation, given Sino-Russian cooperation in technology development, equipment production, and emerging technologies, including space and AI. Through these military exercises, both Russia and China seek to send deliberate, public signals to project power, deter adversaries, and assert their presence in the Arctic.

Using military exercises as signalling highlights the way actors utilize ambiguity in geopolitical communications. Though intentional and public, signals are not clear: they may carry implicit risks and unclear consequences, which is often the desired effect of military exercises. This ambiguity gives military exercises plausible deniability, which is necessary to avoid unwanted escalation. Indeed, China almost routinely emphasizes that the exercises “do not target third parties” (不针对第三方), like, for example, the joint aerial patrol in 2024 (Li, 2024). This ambiguity is an analytical challenge for interpreting the political message behind military exercises (Åtland et al., 2022).

By inviting an outside power into the region that it considers important, Russia seeks to signal its readiness to challenge the US, solidify alliances with non-Western states like China, and reaffirm its status as an Arctic great power. In turn, China signals its willingness to support Russia through its war in Ukraine.² Although the Arctic is considered a distant and unfamiliar operational environment for China, joint military exercises in the region underscore a strategic collaboration between China and Russia aimed at countering US influence in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's main intention is to signal its ability to overcome containment, breaking out of the island chains, and its willingness to counteract US activities in more familiar domains, such as the South China Sea.

In a pan-Arctic context, the primary security drivers are still what happens between Russia and the Nordic countries in Northern Europe. However, given that the US views China as a long-term strategic challenge, China's still-limited presence and growing interest in the Arctic were enough to elicit a reluctant-no-more US Arctic security strategy, at least when it comes to the Beringia-specific theatre of operations. China's emerging maritime power has connected the Arctic to the North Pacific in terms of security as well, making Beringia an area where the US-China Indo-Pacific rivalry spills over into the Arctic and sub-Arctic seas.

This brief examination of recent developments in the Beringia spatial domain has highlighted some dimensions of Arctic security and geopolitical developments in 2025. There is still a need to move away from conceptualizing security dynamics in the Arctic as if they were taking place within a singular, discrete Arctic region or space. The emergence of the Beringian Arctic as part of the North Pacific security subregion marks a critical departure in Arctic security, necessitating a nuanced understanding beyond viewing the Arctic as a monolithic security domain.

The strategic use of military exercises as signals of non-verbal interstate communications will likely persist. Understanding the role of these signals for evolving politics of the Arctic demands continuous scholarly analysis.

Notes

1. The Bering Sea is home to a number of marine species of significant economic value, such as cod, pollock, salmon, king and snow crab, seal, and whale. In the Bering Sea at large, and in the Donut Hole in particular, many of the fish stocks have been subject to overfishing, in particular the Alaskan pollock. In the 1980s, the expansion of overfishing prompted negotiations between the former USSR and the USA, and in 1988 an agreement on mutual fisheries relations was signed between the two parties. The agreement established a consultative committee on fisheries in the Bering Sea. Constituting the most lucrative fisheries in North America, the pollock stock was severely decimated in the early 1990s, after a decade of overfishing in the Donut Hole. An agreement on a temporary moratorium with stringent enforcement measures on pollock was reached between the various national stakeholders in 1994, including Japan, China, Poland, and South Korea.
2. According to the Vice-President of the European Commission Kaja Kallas, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that it is not in China's "interest that this war [in Ukraine] stops, because then America's attention will turn to China" (Rennie, 2025).

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