

The Polar Silk Road and the U.S. strategy in the Arctic Ocean.

Alexander Drivas

(Security Analyst based in Athens, Greece)

**Copyright: @ 2023 Research Institute for European and American Studies
(www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 19 February 2023**

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

In 2018, China launched the "Polar Silk Road" which is a part of the notorious One Belt-One Road (also known as Belt and Road Initiative) which Beijing had already inaugurated just a few years before (2013). Businesspeople, politicians, and academics all over the world have different views on Belt and Road Initiative due to its relativity and its ambiguous goals from the Chinese side. However, the Belt and Road Initiative is a vast trade project and depicts Beijing's priority, which is to fortify for itself the role of a global trade powerhouse. Regarding the Arctic Circle, China sees an opportunity to carve out its own foothold in the geopolitical landscape by connecting the China Sea with the Polar region. On the other side, the U.S., the Russian Federation, and Canada have their own interests in the Arctic Circle.

Is the North Pole the new El Dorado?

Unfolding the new great geopolitical competition at the North Pole, it is important to mention the natural resources are under the seabed of the Arctic. Some of the ongoing research proves that between 2030 and 2050, the Arctic summer will be free of ice. In other words, the navigability of the sea passages of the Polar region will be increased. It is very interesting how the ecosystem can change global geopolitics. Regarding oil and gas, the situation is not as optimistic as numerous analysts think. Russia is the only country that could continue to extract effectively hydrocarbons in the Arctic. For the other stakeholders, the projection shows to us a decline, but the future promise of wealth drives the policies of the big powers at the North Pole. On the other hand, there are estimations that there is a vast amount of around 90 billion barrels of oil and 1.669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. However, the most serious challenge is that 84% of the expected hydrocarbons are located in offshore areas.

China's foothold at the North Pole

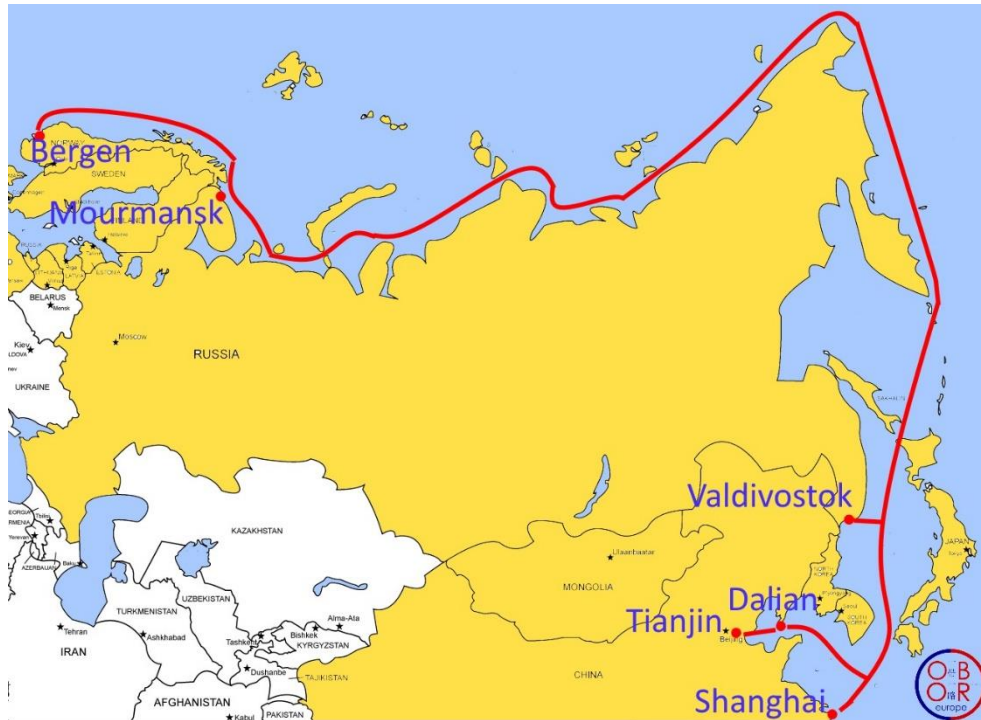
Without a single doubt, it is difficult to understand whether China is trying to subvert the western order and whether pursues just a beneficial plan for its interests. First and foremost, Beijing has already shown little interest in establishing military bases at the North Pole. Of course, there would be Russian opposition to such a Chinese aspiration. In 1999 China had already constructed a research station in Svalbard Islands. Decision makers in Beijing had chosen 24 years ago to augment China's economic influence in Iceland and Greenland. Today, it seems that China follows Russia to learn about the Arctic. China had been trying to be a permanent observer in the Arctic Council for years, but it was not sooner than 2014 that Russia lifted its suspicions about Chinese ambitions in the Arctic. Russians were robbed of their options because the western countries imposed sanctions against Moscow for annexing Crimea. Likewise, China is more confident that Russia will make further concessions in the Arctic and, in exchange, Moscow will acquire Chinese "neutrality" in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Thus, to unfold the current policy of Beijing in the Arctic, one could sum up the following:

A) China's main priority is to secure its energy security. There is an abundance of natural resources at the North Pole, thus, it is of Beijing's interest to desire an open Arctic Ocean for the Polar Silk Road. Chinese aspirations in the Arctic aim in achieving both commercial and geopolitical goals. Navigating from Dalian port in China to Rotterdam port in the Netherlands will be reduced by ten days if the Arctic is open for navigation. The other issue that drives Beijing to the Arctic comes from geopolitics. China aims to avoid hazardous chokepoints that are located in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The navigable Arctic will change once and for all the existing geopolitical calculations.

B) Russia cooperates with China in various fields, without losing its supremacy in the Arctic. Moscow is sharing intelligence with Beijing. Russians and the Chinese are building up an important partnership in the domain of satellite navigation systems. The wider cooperation between Russia and China has already been established in the exploitation of the Russian ports and airfields of Siberia.

C) China remains a distant and secondary stakeholder in the Arctic Ocean, but there is plenty of confidence in Beijing that Russia will be needier and needier for Chinese money at the North Pole, after the war in Ukraine and the sanctions that have been imposed to the Russian government by the western states. Of course, there is a critical dilemma for the CCP, which is to be punished with secondary sanctions from the West, in case it would cooperate with Russian companies. The critical issue here is that China can't boost an articulate plan toward the North Pole because it has no coastline there. To cut the long story short, China needs the Russian green light for everything about the Arctic

Ocean. Former representative of the permanent delegation of the U.S. in NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchinson stated that China is establishing itself as a "near-Arctic state" and wants to be a part of the wider decision-making that has to do with the region.



Map retrieved from oboreurope.com.

The U.S. policy towards the Arctic region: A Polar AUKUS in the making?

In October 2022, the White House released a paper that describes the new U.S. strategy towards the Arctic Ocean. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has provoked a domino effect in every aspect of U.S.-Russian relations. China, not only plays an important role regarding the unprovoked Russian invasion but also is one of the most valuable in-between factors of the U.S.-Russian relations. From the U.S. perspective, Sweden and Finland's candidacies in NATO, fortify two goals; First and foremost, a stronger resilience against Russian threats in Europe. Secondly, an American-friendly Scandinavian Peninsula which has sea and territorial proximity to the Arctic.

The U.S. policy towards the Arctic, however, it had existed (2013) before the White House's paper of 2022, could be commented that the Arctic region was not at the top of the U.S. priorities. During the Trump administration, the former American President announced that the U.S. was keen on buying Greenland from Denmark. Taken seriously or not, Trump's statement was an official entry of the U.S. into Arctic geopolitics. The current documentation of

the White House describes the U.S. vision towards the Arctic as "The United States seeks an Arctic region that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative". The 15-page paper refers to a lot of interesting policies that the U.S. has to conduct to achieve the goals of security, peace, and prosperity of the Arctic region. There are references to "Long- Lead Time Investments" (implying that there are factors that haven't been sustainable and long-term visions for the Arctic) but the most considerable policy that the paper proposes, is the regional cooperation that the U.S. should pursue with "Arctic Allies and partners". Those allies are Norway, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland and with American aid, they will establish rules, institutions, and norms in the Arctic region.

The Biden administration had already shown a new look at American foreign policy before the Russian incursion occurred. The alliance between the U.S., U.K., and Australia (AUKUS) was built to secure the South Pacific from Chinese aggression. Furthermore, there is another format of regional cooperation in which the U.S. has invested significant diplomatic capital. The Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, (known by the acronym QUAD) consists of a forum in which the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia, cooperate on a raft of issues, targeting to deter Chinese actions and influence in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. The National Strategy for the Arctic Region assesses that over the last decade, China has doubled its investments in the sectors of extraction of natural resources and scientific research. Moreover, the U.S. government claims that the sector of scientific research is used by China as a trojan horse, having as its main purpose augmenting its military and intelligence presence in the Arctic.

Countering China's expansion towards the Arctic.

Russian role in the Arctic is quite important even if Russia has become a pariah for the civilized international community. It is likely that Moscow will make concessions to China in the Arctic by opening the route to the North Pole. There are multiple reasons that call for such a strategy from the Kremlin. Putin is running out of money and he needs Chinese funding in the Arctic more than ever before. The war in Ukraine combined with the western sanctions that have been imposed against Moscow, brings unprecedented economic bleeding to Russia, even more, serious than the ruble crisis of 2014. The U.S. will probably use the most assertive source of American power, which is no other than the coordination between Washington and its allies. On a tactical level, the U.S. will try to avoid a joint (even a short-term) alliance between Beijing and Moscow in the Arctic. Despite the Chinese expansion in the Arctic, (even in the sector of construction of icebreakers) the critical disadvantage of China is that

could be barely described even as a "near Polar state". South Korea and Japan, as observers of the Arctic Council, would also be concerned about the Chinese aspirations for a Polar Silk Road, such an accomplished plan would encircle both. Moreover, substantial usage of NATO in the Arctic would also discourage China from further expanding in the Arctic.