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The Polar Silk Road: A Euro-Sino Economic, Political and Geo-strategic Challenge

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Introduction

While delivering a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, on September 7, 2013, the Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed an ‘economic belt along the Silk Road’ that, connecting China to Central Asia, would represent the biggest market in the world. The concept is inspired by the ancient Silk Road that witnessed hundreds of years of booming trade and cultural exchange on the Eurasian continent. Named ‘The Belt and Road initiative’ (BRI) – the BRI refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) – this strategy intends to bring countries in the world closer than ever, that is, to shorten the distance between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and other countries, and to facilitate trade in Chinese goods.¹

In March 2015, the Chinese government published the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China). In May 2017, the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was convened in Beijing. On June 20, 2017, the National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration released a document titled *Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*, to synchronize development plans and promote joint actions among countries along the MSR. Finally, in his report to the 19th National Congress Communist Party of China (CPC), delivered on October 18, 2017, the general secretary of the CPC Central Committee announced that Beijing wanted to assume a global leadership role (Xi 2017).

This work aims to investigate the impact of the ‘Polar Silk Road’ (PSR), also known as the ‘Ice Silk Road’ (ISR), framed within the MSR as part of the broader Chinese maritime geo-strategy, over the European solidarity and security.

The Strategic Impact of the Maritime Silk Road

Maritime policies play an important role in support of that strategy of making China a global leader. Today, Beijing is seeking to project sophisticated power globally (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2021; Krumm & Nicholson 2021; Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021) particularly

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¹ For a timely update on the BRI, see: Information Office of the State Council Of the People's Republic of China (SCIO), *Belt and Road*, <http://english.scio.gov.cn/beltandroad/index.htm>.

in areas with heavy BRI activity – the plan for greater connectivity for China across both land and sea through a new Silk Road.

A report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Duchâtel & Sheldon Duplaix 2018) concludes that the Maritime Silk Road affects Europe in five main areas: maritime trade; shipbuilding; emerging growth niches in the blue economy; the global presence of the Chinese navy; the competition for international influence. The report states that has been calculated that the MSR creates more competition than cooperation opportunities in Europe-China relations. There are founded concerns that this business relation can create economic dependency and limitate the European strategic autonomy (Martin 2021). Indeed, the *EU-China Strategic Outlook* released in 2019 by the European Commission (EC) and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) highlights that the European Union (EU) and China are in mutual business relationship, with that latter that is the EU's second largest trading partner and the Union's that is Beijing's biggest trading partner, with an average trade over €1 billion a day. On these grounds, there are founded concerns that this business relation can create economic dependency and limitate the European strategic autonomy (Martin 2021).

The sea lanes of communication from China to Europe through the Malacca-Suez route are among the busiest in the world – where European interests are more immediate and bigger than on the nascent 'Ice Silk Road' (Duchâtel & Sheldon Duplaix 2018). With the BRI, China aims to decrease its dependency on the Strait of Malacca (Forough 2021). Has been calculated that the China-Europe maritime trade is three times larger than trade by air freight and Eurasian railways, while the last alternative – the Northern Sea Route (NSR) through the Arctic Ocean, that China dubs the 'Ice Silk Road' – is only just starting to develop (Duchâtel & Sheldon Duplaix 2018). By navigating through the shipping lanes at high-latitudes the distance is one third shorter in comparison with the so-called standard route from Rotterdam–Yokohama via the Indian Ocean, and the duration of the route is reduced from 33 to 20 days. The fuel savings reach 800 tonnes for an average vessel (Rosatom 2020). Economic reasons make the ISR of strategic importance.

The Arctic Highways

There are several Arctic maritime (or shipping) routes: the Northeast Passage (NEP); the Northwest Passage (or NWP, going through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and the coast of Alaska); the Transpolar Route (or TSR, going through the North Pole); the Arctic Bridge Route (or Arctic Sea Bridge). So far, because of permafrost, these routes were not accessible. Due to climate change and global warming the Polar ice cap is melting, and this opens up the possibility for an Arctic route to be accessible for at least part of the year. The Northeast Passage is the overall route on Russia's side of the Arctic between North Cape and the Bering Strait; it traverses (from west to east) the Barents Sea, Kara Sea, Laptev Sea, East Siberian Sea, and Chukchi Sea, and it includes the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The Northern Sea Route is a portion of the NEP that lies in Arctic waters and within Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (Buixadé Farré 2014). The Northern Sea Route Administration, a Federal state institution established in 2013, organizes navigation in the water area² that is under the legal regime of internal maritime waters, territorial

² The Northern Sea Route Administration was established according to the Order of the Government of Russian Federation No. 358 of 15 March 2013 and to Art. 5.1 of the Federal Law No. 81 of 30 April 1999.

sea and contiguous zone of the Russian Federation.³ While the Northeast Passage includes all the East Arctic Seas and connects the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean, the NSR does not include the Barents Sea, and it therefore does not reach the Atlantic (Buixadé Farré 2014). The Northeast Passage is, from the European and northern Atlantic point of view, the shipping route to the Pacific Ocean, along the Arctic coasts of Norway and Russia (Buixadé Farré 2014). The Arctic Bridge Route (ABR) is a seasonal route, enabled by the retreat of ice, from Murmansk to Churchill Manitoba, in Hudson Bay, linking Russia to Canada (Rodrigue 2017). Currently, the route is only easily navigable about four months a year. If developed (along with the NWP) it could serve as a major trade route between Eurasia and North America (Humpert & Rasputnik 2012).

The governance of the NEP is complex and is based on different pillars: the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS),⁴ the Arctic Council (AC), the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the domestic legislation of the Russian Federation (RF) that follows a pragmatic line and pursues its territorial claims in compliance with international law (Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021).

The Polar Silk Road

On January 26, 2018, the State Council Information Office of the PRC (SCIO) published a white paper titled *China's Arctic Policy* to promote a 'Polar Silk Road'. This Arctic strategy claims the PRC to be a 'near-Arctic state', yet the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles – indeed, the US contested this claim (Vergun 2020). In 2018 China and Russia began talks in Beijing about the joint development of NSR (Xi 2018).⁵ At the 24th regular meeting of Russian and Chinese heads of government, held in St. Petersburg in September 2019, the Russian government announced plans to connect the NSR with the MSR – part of the BRI strategy – which would develop a new shipping channel from Asia to northern Europe, while the two countries are cooperating in developing hydrocarbon resources in the Arctic (Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021). Meanwhile, China is already developing shipping lanes in the Arctic Ocean (Pompeo 2019).

During his participation in the BRICS Summit – an international relations conference attended by the heads of state or heads of government of the five member states Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – held in Xiamen in September 2017, the Russian president Vladimir Putin discussed the possibility of cooperation on the NSR. Taking part in the first roundtable discussion at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in April 2019, Putin paid particular attention to the development of the Northern Route and considered the opportunity to link it to the Maritime Silk Road to 'create a global and competitive route that will connect Northeast Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia with Europe'.

Finally, in June 2021, Russia and China confirmed their will to strengthen cooperation on the use of the NSR. However, the RF could be more interested than the PRC in developing the NSR; indeed, without external financing Russia is currently unable to develop key areas such as infrastructure that do not seem to be in China's focus interest (Sun 2018; Mekhdev et al. 2021).

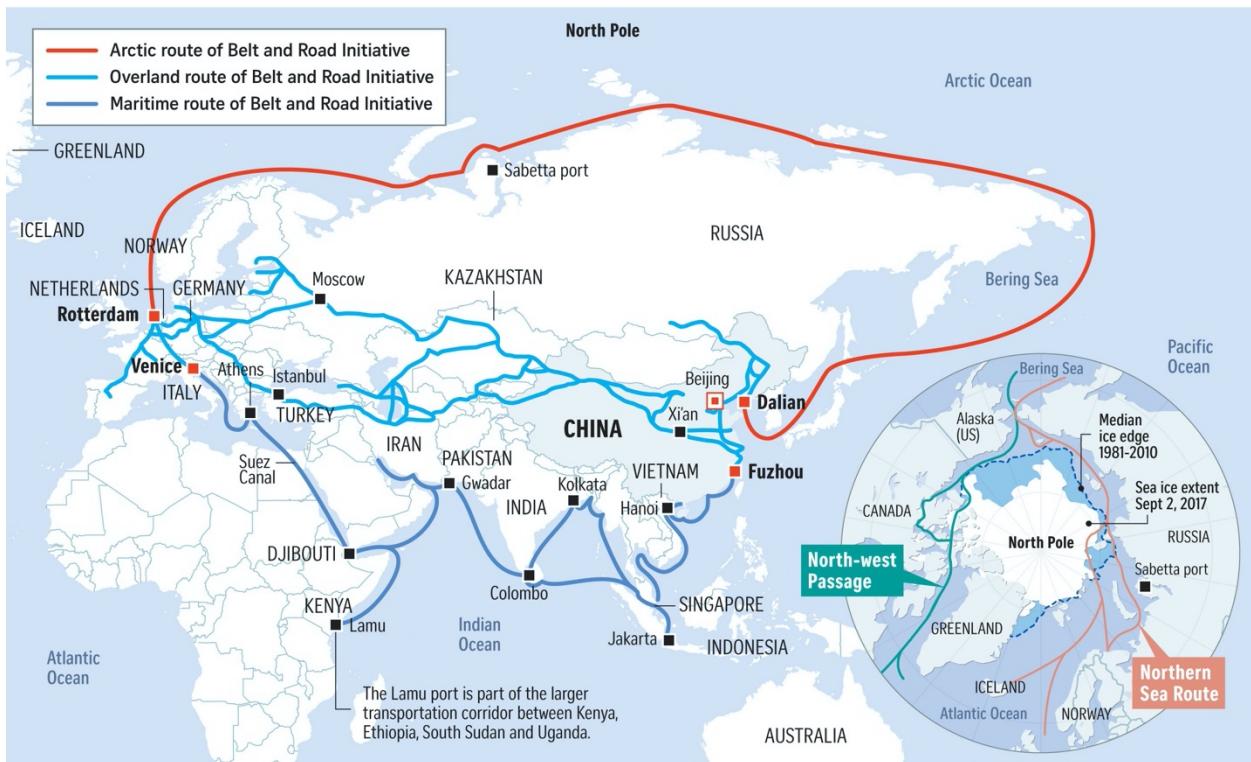
³ The jurisdiction of the NSR and the navigation of the NEP are regulated, *inter alia*, by Federal Law of July 31, 1998, N 155-FZ, Federal Law of July 28, 2012, N 132-FZ, and the Merchant Shipping Code of the Russian Federation (Code of Laws of the Russian Federation, 1999, N 18).

⁴ UNCLOS, formally known as the Third United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS III, is also called the Law of the Sea Convention (LASC) or the Law of the Sea Treaty (LOST).

⁵ For a discussion, see: Barnes et al. 2021.

The Sino-Russian cooperation on the Arctic seems like a ‘mith’ motivated primarily by political and strategic considerations rather than practical economic ones (Sun 2018). The Asian Development Bank (ADP, 2017) estimates that Asia faces a US\$26 trillion infrastructure gap until 2030 in order to sustain current levels of growth. The PRC is interested in the NSR as substitute/alternative to traditional shipping routes that is still far to be realized (Sun 2018).

Figure 1: China's Polar Extension to Silk Road (Straits Times 2018)



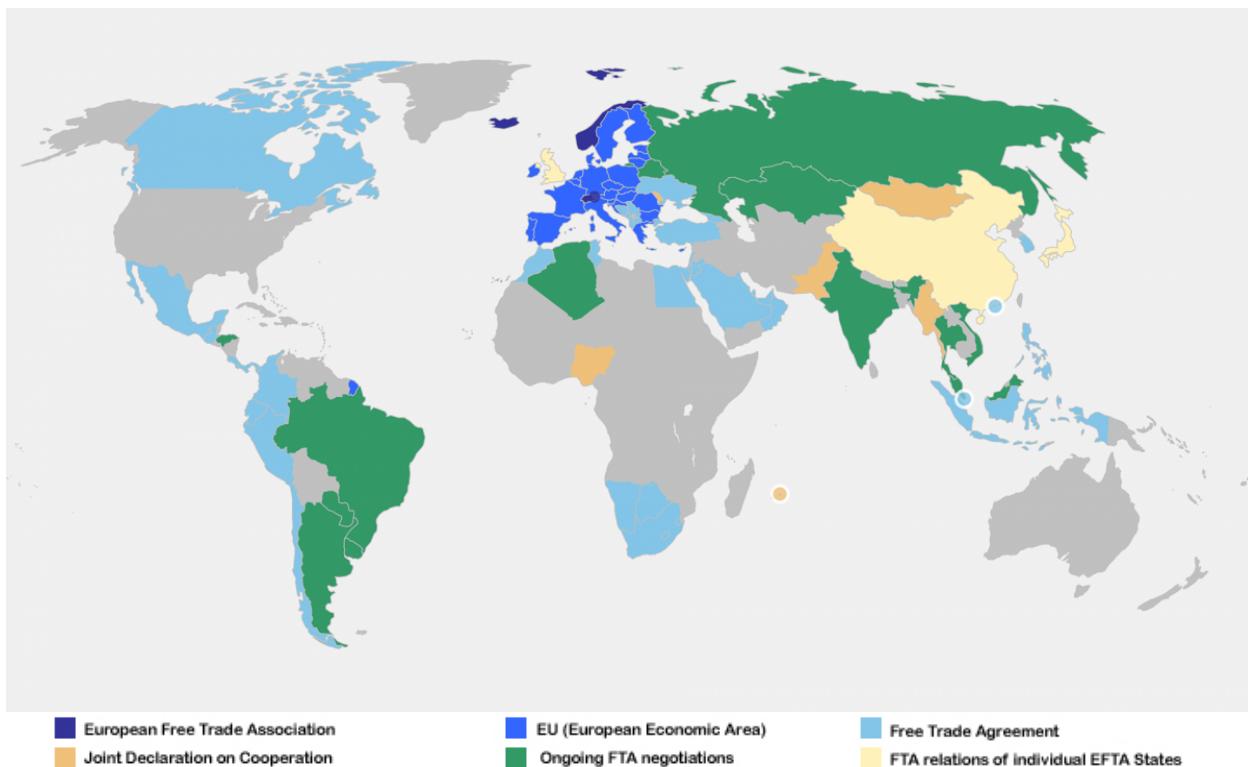
The weight of the Sino-Russian seaborne freight handled in European ports is significant. Statistical data on freight handling and vessels traffic in ports in the EU and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries Iceland and Norway show that Russia was the EU's largest maritime transport partner in the 1st quarter of 2021, with 13.8 percent of the total extra-EU maritime transport (Eurostat 2022). The statistical office of the European Union (2022) reports that the main maritime trade flow from Russia concerned inward movements of large containers from and to China, which increased substantially by 18.1 percent in the same period. In 2020 the inward flows of goods from Russia and China amounted respectively to 6 percent and 3.1 percent of the total extra-EU seaborne transport, with the outward flow to China (3 percent).

The Economic Relevance of the Sino-European Partnership

Since March 2019, the EU has referred to China as a ‘systemic rival’. A European Union External Action Service’s background paper (2020) states that ‘for the EU, China is simultaneously (in different policy areas) a cooperation partner, a negotiation partner, an economic

competitor and a systemic rival'. But the European Economic Area (EEA) is larger than the EU: includes EU Member States (MS) and three EFTA countries — Liechtenstein, Iceland, Norway (the last two are Arctic states) — in a single market, referred to as the 'Internal Market' (or Common Market). The EEA Agreement, which entered into force on January 1, 1994, guarantees equal rights and obligations within the Internal Market for individuals and economic operators. It provides for the inclusion of EU legislation covering the four freedoms — the free movement of goods, services, persons and capital — throughout the 30 EEA Member States. The EEA Agreement does not cover, *inter alia*, the following EU policies: the Customs Union, the Common Commercial Policy (or EU Trade Policy) and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Figure 2: Free Trade Map (EFTA Secretariat 2014)



The EU solidarity,⁶ which should support the Union's integration process, requires distribution of responsibilities through supranational policies that are jeopardized by the Chinese strategy. So far, the posture of the EU towards China undermines the European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) – military, industrial and (geo)political – that is aimed to foster the integration project among Member States (Borrel 2020).

The objective of the Treaty of Rome, which in 1957 gave birth to the European Economic Community (EEC), was to establish a customs union with common arrangements for imports from other countries, a common market in which goods, people, services and capital could move freely (EC DG COMM 2014). The Common commercial policy is therefore based on a common external tariff uniformly applied to all MS. The EU Customs Union — one of the largest trading bloc in the world, alongside the United States and China — which provides a common tariff of customs

⁶ For a discussion on EU solidarity, see: Vignon, J 2011.

duties and is used on imports from outside the EU and strips customs duties at the borders between EU countries, is essential for the proper functioning of the single market. Through the Trade Policy, set up by Art. 107 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the EU manages its trade and investment relations with third countries and negotiates and concludes international agreements. According to the DG Taxation and Customs Union and Eurostat, the amount of customs duties collected in 2020 reached €24.8 billion. The value of the EU trade with other countries amounted to €3.7 trillion, with four countries accountable for half of EU external trade: China, the U.S., the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

How did Brussels misunderstand the relationship with Beijing? How did European leaders not realize what was going on? The EU was much focused on the business opportunities coming from Chinese investment in Europe and was too much confident about the willingness of the Chinese leadership about the adoption of policies in compliance with EU standards and regulations. Indeed, the EU underestimated the continuous violations of fundamental human rights, *inter alia*: the use of death penalty; the use of forced labour; the presence of state owned enterprises and the disrespect of market and trade policies – e.g., dumped goods and the commitments within the World Trade Organization regarding the notification of subsidies. Lastly, the EC did welcome the BRI as a new business opportunity for the European companies, although, as a sourcing destination, China attracts accounts for 8 percent of the international sourcing of business functions of EU companies (Sunjka & Papadopoulos 2019). It's likely that the European leaders, interested in opening up the Chinese market for their national goods, put aside the European values and trusted too much in the compliance of the PRC with such values.

Despite the publication of a white book on Human Rights (SCIO 1991) and the declarations on commitment for complying with international standards on fundamental human rights, seems that China has not made relevant progress in this field. On the contrary, there are repeated allegations of violation of these rights, including forced labour (European Parliament 2020, 2021; U.S. Department of State 2020, 2021), whose respect must be at the centre of EU-China relations, according the EU's aims and values laid out in Art. 2 and 3 of the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights proclaimed in 2012 by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. The EU Strategy on China, adopted in July 2016, reflects these fundamental values: the promotion of democracy; the rule of law; human rights; respect for the principles of the UN Charter and international law, including the promotion of international peace and security (EC 2017). Being aware of such burning issues, on the last day of 2020, after seven years of negotiations, the EC concluded a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China.

The impact and the challenges of China over the EU policies have been addressed by the *Global Gateway*, the new European strategy set out in December 2021 by the EC, that will mobilise up to €300 billion of investments to develop infrastructures abroad, especially in Asia and Africa, between 2021 and 2027. Notwithstanding it does not mention explicitly the RBI, the EU strategy is clearly aimed at China, which has massive interests on EU market. The Global Gateway refers to the 'Build Back Better World' initiative discussed in previous June by U.S. President Biden with G7 leaders (The White House 2021). In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance released in March 2021, President Biden had ensured that 'U.S. companies would not have sacrificed American values in doing business in China and that his administration would stand up for democracy, human rights, and human dignity with like-minded allies and partners such as the EU and its MS.

Political-Economic Impact of the Polar Silk Road over EU Solidarity: Opportunities and Challenges

The MSR route to Europe interests ports in Greece, Italy, France, Spain and leads Europe to consider adapting the infrastructure to changing conditions. There are extensive intra-European infrastructure projects in place to adapt trade flows to current needs. Experimental attempts are also being made to organize the movement of goods from China to Europe via the Northeast Passage through the Polar Sea.

The Arctic shipping route opens up for a competition among European ports: hubs in Iceland; Kirkenes in Norway; Klaipeda in Lithuania; Hamburg in Germany; Antwerp in Belgium; EU largest port, Rotterdam in the Netherlands (Duchâtel & Sheldon Duplaix 2018; Putten 2019) – the last three, top three maritime cargo ports, are all on the North Sea coast with five out of the top 10 freight ports in the EU located on the North Sea.

Figure 3: Top 10 EU freight ports, 2018 (Eurostat 2020). Data source: mar_mg_aa_pwhd.



The MSR and the debate on Chinese port activities are highly relevant for Europe's largest seaports. Chinese investments in European hubs have increased rapidly in recent years and have triggered a debate on how to deal with Beijing's influence in European ports and, more broadly, on the economic and geopolitical effects of rising PRC (Duchâtel & Sheldon Duplaix 2018; Putten 2019). This point is reached when the scale of one project in single country leads to excessive political influence, although this can also come about through the gradual establishment of a position of dominance which threatens fair competition (Duchâtel & Sheldon Duplaix 2018; Putten 2019).

Just to give an example, the PRC helped Iceland recover from their economic collapse in 2008 with a US\$480 million loan (Lin, Zhan & Cheung 2016; Sakuja 2011) that is a huge amount

compared to the Icelandic Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that was worth US\$21.71 billion in 2020, according to official data from the World Bank. Iceland has been seeking political and economic shelter provided by Beijing between 1995-2021, in particular in the aftermath of the economic collapse (Thorhallsson & Grimsdottir 2021). In the mid-2010s Reykjavik started a gradual deviation from shelter-seeking, that accelerated from 2017 onward after pressure from the U.S. government, in the light of the growing strategic importance of Iceland in the North Atlantic and the Arctic, ending up with the recent confrontational behaviour towards the PRC (Thorhallsson & Grimsdottir 2021). A survey conducted between November-December 2020 in Iceland shows that most of the Icelanders are concerned over China's increasing influence in the country and skeptic about the cooperation with Beijing (Omarsdottir 2021). The report, published by the Institute of International Affairs of the University of Iceland, provides an insight into the Icelandic people's attitudes towards security and foreign affairs and proves that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (68.6 percent) wish to protect the local economy from Chinese investments due to the potential economic influence of the PRC. The responses indicate a largely pragmatic view to economic cooperation, not necessarily challenging trading partners on political grounds when it might risk economic interests.

The challenge between European countries on which should play a dominant role in Sino-European maritime trade opens up for competition, not cooperation, that could jeopardize the EU cohesion – the EU claims to seek to maximise its internal cohesion in its dealings with China (EU 2017) – and increase the Chinese influence over the EU by weakening its common institutions. The increased BRI-related investments in key hubs in the MSR could create a considerable level of economic dependence and could compromise the local governments' strategic autonomy in international political and economic affairs (Putten 2019) thus further undermining the common European security and foreign policy.

Security Impact of the Ice Silk Road over the CFSP

The Arctic region has become an arena for power and competition (Lanteigne 2019; Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021) and Arctic nations must adapt to this new future. The Arctic holds the greatest concentration of the world's undiscovered oil and gas, uranium, gold, diamonds, rare earth minerals – phosphate, bauxite, iron ore, copper, and nickel (Westerlundand & Öhman 1992; Soltvedt et al. 2018) – and, last but not least, fish (Pompeo 2019). Offshore resources, that are said to include over 90 billion barrels of oil and an estimated trillion dollars' worth of rare earth metals (Todd Lopez 2020), are the subject of renewed competition; they should be considered common goods – international or global public goods.⁷

Icebreakers will be a game-changer in the scramble for the Arctic. With an estimate fleet of more than fifty icebreakers (U.S. Coast Guard 2017) Russia dominates the frozen seas. The Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom operates 6 nuclear icebreakers (one of them is a lighter aboard cargo ship) with three more under construction according to Project 22220, with the declared purpose of facilitating the trasportation of European and Asatic goods through the NSR's shipping lane, and in connection with the further development of hydrocarbon projects in

⁷ Common goods are goods that are rivalrous and non-excludable. This means that anyone has access to the good, but that the use of the good by one person reduces the ability of someone else to use it. A classic example of a common good are fish stocks in international waters; no one is excluded from fishing, but as people withdraw fish without limits being imposed, the stocks for later fishermen are potentially depleted.

the Arctic (Rosatom 2020). The new class of icebreakers built under Project 22220 are the most powerful icebreaking ships ever built in the world.

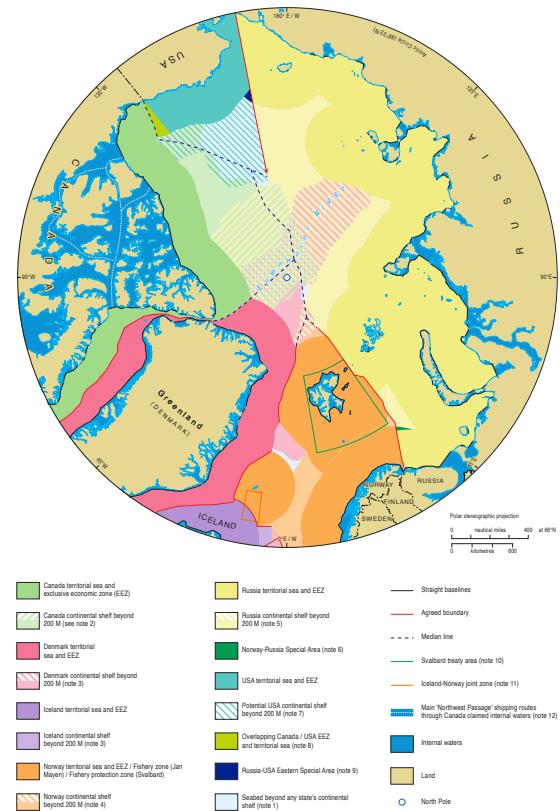
China, which currently operates two icebreakers, launched in 2018 its first homemade nuclear icebreaker *Xuelong 2*, or *Snow Dragon 2*, which into service in the first half of 2019 – *Xuelong*, bought from a Ukrainian company in 1993, was the only in service – and plans to build more icebreaking vessels to support its ambitions (SCIO 2018; Xinhua 2018). So far, the Chinese icebreakers, which someone consider to be ‘combat ships’ (Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021), have been officially deployed on research missions. Nevertheless, the Pentagon warned that China could use its civilian research presence in the Arctic to strengthen its military presence – including deployment of submarines to the region as a deterrent against nuclear attack (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2019).

China’s rising power, along with its growing geo-political and geo-economic ambitions, raises serious concerns among the transatlantic community, and is considered a main security threat (Martin 2021; Barnes et al. 2021). A report released by the German Council on Foreign Relations in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (Allers, Rácz & Sæther 2021) concludes that due to climate change and great-power rivalry, the Arctic is no longer a remote and exceptional place, but part of a complex security environment where geopolitical tension leads to militarization. There are warnings about a new Cold War (Martin 2021) with the Arctic Ocean to be transformed into ‘a new South China Sea’, militarized and with territorial claims (Huxley & Choong 2016; Krumm & Nicholson 2021; Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021). Notwithstanding the PRC seems to have no interest in changing the status for the Arctic Ocean rather than being bound by the current legal framework (Barnes et al. 2021; Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021). Beijing officially states that it is committed to maintaining peace and stability in the region and that it prefers international cooperation to competition or conflict (Heininen et al. 2020; Barnes et al. 2021). The Arctic as the potential battleground of a new Cold War seems the result of excessive alarmism (Allers, Rácz & Sæther 2021).

In the current state of the international law, no country possesses the North Pole and the region of the Arctic Ocean surrounding it. The five surrounding Arctic countries (Russia, US, Canada, Norway and Denmark) are limited to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles (370 km) adjacent to their coasts. However, the sovereignty of large parts of the Arctic region is contested and this could trigger conflicts (Gerhardt et al. 2017; Huebert & Lackenbauer 2021).

Upon ratification of the UNCLOS, a country has a ten-year period to make claims to an extended continental shelf which, if validated, gives it exclusive rights to resources on or below the seabed

Figure 4: Maritime jurisdiction and boundaries in the Arctic region (IBRU Centre for Borders Research at Durham University 2021)



of that extended shelf area. Norway (in 1996), Russia (in 1997), Canada (in 2003) and Denmark (in 2004) have ratified the Convention. The United States has signed it, but not yet ratified. The Convention serves as pretext for claiming a bigger slice of the frozen pie that is the Arctic region.

On December 20, 2001, the Russian Federation made an official submission into the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), pursuant to Art. 76(8) of the UNCLOS, asking to set new outer limits of the continental shelf of Russia beyond the previous 200 mile zone, but within the Russian Arctic sector (CLCS/32). The territory claimed by Russia in the submission is a large portion of the Arctic, including the North Pole. One of the arguments was a statement that the Lomonosov Ridge, an underwater mountain ridge underneath the Pole, and the Mendeleev Ridge are extensions of the Eurasian continent. In 2002, the CLCS neither rejected nor accepted the Russian proposal, recommending additional research (see: CLCS/34).

On August 3, 2015, Russia resubmitted its application, fostered by new arguments based on 'ample scientific data collected in years of Arctic research' (CLCS/93). Through this request, Russia is claiming 1.2 million square kilometers (over 463,000 square miles) of Arctic Sea shelf extending more than 350 nautical miles (about 650 km) from the shore.

While the governance of both the NWP and the NSR are disputed (Lanteigne 2019), the TSR, that is currently only navigable by heavy icebreakers, largely avoids the territorial waters of Arctic states and lies in international high seas. The passage outside the EEZs of Arctic coastal states makes the TSR of special geopolitical importance and triggers disagreements about maritime boundaries beyond the EEZs of the littoral states (Lanteigne 2019). Due the increasing decline of Arctic Sea ice extent, the TSR may emerge as a major Arctic shipping route (Rodrigue 2017). The Russian claim before the CLCS puts at risk also the TSR.

Adm. James G. Foggo, the commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa and Allied Joint Forces Command Naples (JFC Naples),⁸ characterized the Arctic region as 'nobody's lake' and called to limit Russian sovereignty over that 'international domain' (U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet Public Affairs, 2019). His remarks were particularly aimed at the Northern Sea Route.

Arctic security is a main security challenge – a global one, not only a regional one – not only for the Arctic countries, but for the whole international community, first of all the European. Nowadays, environmental and economic issues are broadly considered to be threats to security and stability (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2003). Therefore, the protection of these resources is a security issue, which involves the use of force, or military means. This is an issue that concerns the traditional domains of operations – land, sea, and air. The maritime domain – i.e. the Arctic Ocean – is predominant, due to the allocation of resources, and the operating environment. Sea routes are the 'liquid' highways along which goods travel across the world, and therefore play a strategic economic role – a global one (Rodrigue, 2017).

Arctic Governance and European Security

⁸ JFC Naples is a NATO military command.

The security of the Arctic region is a complex picture. A major role is played by the Arctic Council, a high level intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States – the US became an Arctic nation after the purchase of Alaska and from the

Russian Empire on March 30, 1867 (Lawson & Seidman 2004). Among Arctic states, only the UK is not an AC member. Thirteen non-Arctic states have observer status: France, Germany, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Poland, India, Korea, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, UK and China, the self-named ‘near-Arctic state’.

Seven AC members, out of eight, that are allies and partners of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), share the interest in maintaining the international rules-based order in the region (Cronk 2019). Five out of eight members are also founding members of the Alliance. Finland and Sweden are not NATO members, but have joined the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative, both promoted by the Atlantic Alliance (NATO 2020). The RF joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 and later (1994) joined the PfP programme. This dialogue was succeeded in 1997 by the EAPC, which brings together all Allies and partner countries in the Euro-Atlantic area to develop dialogue and practical cooperation in areas of common interest.

The cooperation was suspended and resumed by NATO two times, following the contested recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states by Moscow in 2008 and after the annexation of Crimea by the RF in 2014 (Marsili 2021).

When we talk about security in Europe, we necessarily talk about NATO. The European defense and security are enhanced and guaranteed under the NATO umbrella. The NATO-EU partnership is complementary and mutual and is based on common values and strategic interests (Marsili 2020). NATO and the EU have 22 member countries in common – most of the EU Member States, except the ‘neutral counties’ Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Sweden (Marsili 2020). After all, Arctic security is a global issue, but it is, to a greater extent, for the European Union – the EU itself is not an AC observer, but three EU nations (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) are also Arctic countries, while Iceland and Norway are EFTA Member States. The Union’s application to become a permanent observer in the Arctic Council was blocked in 2009 by Canada in response to the EU ban on the importation of seal products (Conley & Kraut 2010) – sealing continues as a traditional activity in Greenland, which is part of Denmark but not of the EU.⁹ At the Kiruna Ministerial Meeting in 2013, the AC received the application of the EU for observer status, but deferred a final decision (Arctic Council 2022).

⁹ The EU-Greenland relationship, based on Council Decision 2014/137 of March 14, 2014, is complementary to the Overseas Countries and Territories Association arrangements under Council Decision 2013/755/EU.



Figure 5: Russia’s military buildup on the top of the world (Graphic News)

The EU Arctic policy drafted in 2016 by the EC and the HR/VP, shares the concerns on global issues (e.g., energy, climate change, environment, natural resources) and acknowledges that the opening of the NEP poses threats to maritime security, but fails to address security in the strict sense. In this context, the EU Council emphasizes the strategic importance of the Arctic, which is an ‘area of active cooperation between major regional and global actors’ and it underlines the importance of the region from a foreign and security policy point of view. The Council of the European Union (2016) considers that many of the issues affecting the Arctic can be more effectively addressed through regional or multilateral cooperation. The European Parliament resolution on an integrated EU policy for the Arctic (2017) recalls the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – an integral part of the CFSP – but mentions broadly security challenges (i.e., civilian, food, energy, environment, and human security).

By establishing the position of the Special Representative for Arctic Issues in 2015, the Parliamentary Assembly (PA) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)¹⁰ highlights the increasingly importance of the region. The OSCE PA (2015) believes that the environmental, economic, social, geopolitical, and security threats faced by Arctic states should be addressed by the international community. These issues are confirmed by the reports delivered by the Special Representative for Arctic Issues (Elvestuen 2017; Eidsheim 2019).

Speaking at the Marshall Center’s 2020 Security Seminar North, the OSCE PA Special Representative on Arctic Issues, Torill Eidsheim, focused on the increased geostrategic importance of the Arctic and its security challenges. In her keynote address at the seminar on ‘The Arctic: Risks and Opportunities’ held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, the Norwegian politician emphasized that climate change is increasing the geostrategic importance of the Arctic, with melting sea ice opening new trade routes that unleash international competition, which can trigger tensions. She highlighted that this is ‘a global security matter’. Eidsheim noted that strong assets of parliamentary engagement are: proposing legislation, holding governments to account for the implementation of laws and international commitments, and she called to foster international co-operation on Arctic matters.

Conclusions

In an era of increasing economic interdependence China is playing a growing role in the global economy, including Europe, which presents both opportunities and challenges. The long-term strategic competition with the PRC is one of the major global economic, military and political challenges that can affect EU solidarity and security. The impact of the MSR over European ports and port competition undermines EU cohesion.

As climate changes makes the Arctic accessible through alternative maritime routes, the EU and Arctic nations should enhance their cooperation even further to address common security threats. The Arctic’s strategic importance, including its vast resources and shipping lanes, are of increasing interest to Europe, not only to China and Russia. The Arctic is rapidly taking on new strategic significance, and there is risk of militarization of the region, with the RF and the PRC that are expanding their role and have begun to deploy assets in the region in a way that they have already achieved a strategic advantage.

¹⁰ OSCE PA consists of 323 members from 57 parliaments (OSCE PA n.d.).

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