

THE DRAGON IN THE NORTH: ON CHINA'S ARCTIC PUSH

J. Jeganaathan & P.H. Bharath



Photo credit: Bojan Randelovic / Shutterstock.com

China's self-proclamation as a "near-Arctic state" and its recent deployment of icebreakers near Alaska illustrate its growing Arctic push. In response, the United States has reinforced surveillance and naval reconnaissance through Operation Frontier Sentinel, commissioned the heavy icebreaker USCGC Storis, and coordinated NATO patrols across the northern waters. The Arctic giant, Russia, combines militarization with economic development by reviving Soviet-era bases along the Northern Sea Route and testing advanced weaponry while concurrently seeking investors for Arctic energy resources. The deepening Sino-Russian partnership, from joint air patrols to energy cooperation, has prompted Washington to recalibrate its Arctic posture. India, a key player in Arctic affairs, has maintained strategic autonomy. It prioritises research and sustainability, even as it expands energy and shipping links with Russia and pursues a guarded rapprochement with Beijing. This issue brief examines the evolving dynamics of this volatile frontier, focusing on China's operational man oeuvres and their geopolitical implications for the Arctic region.

Introduction

In early August 2025, a flotilla of five Chinese icebreakers was seen near Alaska. United States (U.S.) forces monitored and responded to these ships, in particular the icebreaker *Xue Long 2* and research vessels *Ji Di* and *Zhong Shan Da Xue Ji Di*, as they transited the Bering and Chukchi seas.¹ The U.S. Coast Guard carried out *Operation Frontier Sentinel*, maintaining

surveillance, and on 10 August 2025 a new icebreaker, the *USCGC Storis*, was commissioned to bolster American Arctic capacity.² China framed the mission as part of its "Polar Silk Road" under the banner of its multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative.³ The August 2025 Putin-Alaska summit, occurring against the backdrop of these developments, highlights the increasingly contested nature of the Arctic region.⁴



Figures 1 and 2: Chinese icebreaker spotted near Alaska in August 2025 (U.S. Coast Guard Photo courtesy of Air Station Kodiak) and Chinese icebreaker sailing close to China's Zhongshan research station in 2019.

China regards itself as a “near-Arctic state” with growing stakes in Arctic resources and new shipping routes.⁵ Its 2018 Arctic policy called for a cooperative Polar Silk Road (PSR). The PSR is a corridor that connects to the Northern Sea Route (NSR), linking ports such as Dalian, Qingdao, and Tianjin in China to Northern Europe via the Bering Strait and the Barents, Kara, and Laptev Seas. The NSR is one of the key shipping routes that runs along Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone, skirting islands such as Novaya Zemlya, Severnaya Zemlya, and Wrangel Island, and exiting at the Bering Strait.

China has been active in the Arctic since the late 1990s. A noteworthy milestone was its expedition to the coastal village of Tuktoyaktuk, which lies north of the Arctic Circle in Northwest Territories, Canada, in 1999 on its *Xue Long* icebreaker, which was procured from Ukraine in 1994 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁶ Recently, the China Communications and Construction Company agreed to develop Russia's largest titanium mine in the Komi Republic, which is expected to increase cargo traffic along the NSR. To that end, China has rapidly expanded its polar-capable research fleet, commissioning the *Xue Long 2* in 2019, its first domestically built Polar Class 3 icebreaker, designed to operate year-round in ice up to 1.5 meters thick.⁷ This was followed by the addition of *Ji Di* in 2024 and *Tan Suo San Hao*, its fourth vessel, scheduled for completion this year. These vessels significantly enhance China's ability to operate independently in high-latitude ice. Together with its official Arctic policy, these indicate Beijing's ambition to play a major

role in the Arctic. This surge reflects a three-year trend of increasing Chinese research-ship activity north of the Bering Strait.

A Very Cold Cold War

For the United States, China's growing presence in the Arctic has triggered a proactive focus on Arctic preparedness. The 2024 U.S. Arctic Strategy called for a “monitor-and-respond” approach centered on enhanced ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), space-based communications, and allied information-sharing—paired with the deterrent effect of rapid Joint Force deployment when needed.⁸ Although the U.S. Northern Command and the Coast Guard maintained continuous surveillance and routine patrolling, and resources remained underutilized. The Coast Guard had only one heavy polar icebreaker, the United States Coast Guard Cutter (USCGC) *Healy*, with the USCGC *Storis* commissioned only in August 2025. The Congress has also sanctioned funds for additional icebreakers as part of Trump's “One Big Beautiful Bill” Act.⁹

The U.S. is also working with its Arctic allies. In early August, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) deployed Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1) consisting of Dutch (HNLMS *De Ruyter*), Norwegian (HNoMS *Thor Heyerdahl*), Portuguese (NRP *Bartolomeu Dias*), and German (FGS *Rhön*) vessels to make its presence felt in the northern waters.¹⁰ These efforts show a more vigilant U.S. posture in response to both Chinese and Russian advances.

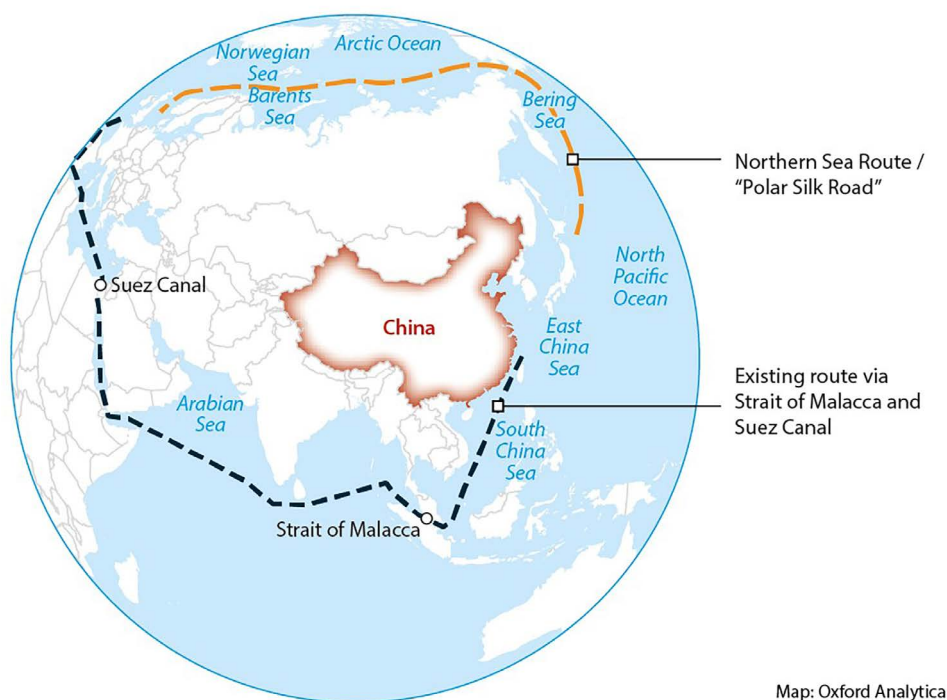


Figure 3: NSR/PSR and existing route via the Strait of Malacca and Suez Canal.

Russia's Arctic strategy is two-pronged: militarizing the North and promoting economic development.¹¹ Since 2014, Moscow has reopened and upgraded half a dozen Soviet-era Arctic bases, airfields, and radar outposts—the Nagurskoye Air Base, Arctic Trefoil Base, Wrangel Island Radar Station, Cape Schmidt Base, and Alakurtti Base—under the Northern Fleet command.¹² It has tested new Arctic-capable weapons, including hypersonic cruise missiles, drones, and nuclear-powered torpedoes, to secure its northern presence. For instance, Russia test-fired *Zircon* (Tsirkon) missile from the *Admiral Gorshkov* frigate and the *Severodvinsk* submarine, in the White Sea and Barents Sea,¹³ and *Burevestnik* test preparation is currently underway at *Pankovo* test site on *Novaya Zemlya*.¹⁴ Russia also maintains over 40 icebreakers—far more than any other country—to keep the NSR open for shipping. Russia's nuclear icebreakers, such as Project 23550 and the combat icebreaker *Ivan Papanin*, are equipped with offensive weaponry, such as cruise missiles or advanced sensors, blurring the line between civilian and military use.¹⁵

The 2025 Trump–Putin summit in Alaska shows that Arctic issues now shadow high-level U.S.–Russia

talks. Both Presidents placed emphasis on Arctic cooperation, and Putin explicitly cited U.S.–Russia collaboration in the Arctic as “relevant.”¹⁶ The summit thus demonstrated that even amid tensions, U.S.–Russia relations, and by extension Russia–China ties, will shape the geopolitics of the Arctic.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, economically isolated Russia has been courting Arctic investors. It looks to its vast Arctic shoreline as a vital contributor to reviving its sanctions-hit economy. China, after being rebuffed by the other Arctic states—Canada, (Svalbard) Norway, and Greenland—for investment opportunities, has turned to Russia. The two countries have also extended their military cooperation. In July 2024, their long-range bombers—Russian Tu-95 “Bear” and two Chinese H-6—carried out coordinated patrols over the Arctic Ocean within Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).¹⁷ Alaskan Senator Dan Sullivan called the joint Russia–China bomber patrol an “escalation” and urged the U.S. to strengthen its military capabilities in the Arctic to counter the growing authoritarian cooperation. The following month, the Chinese coast guard entered the Arctic for

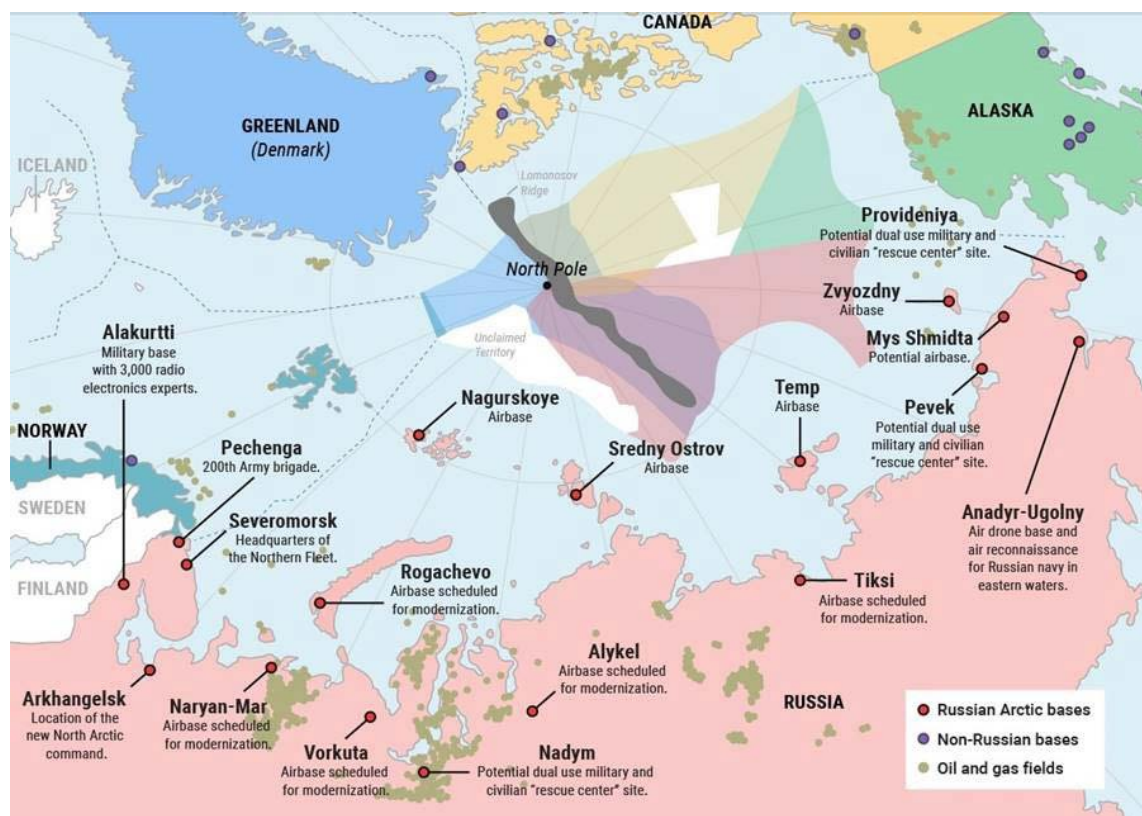


Figure 4: Russian and non-Russian Arctic bases and oil and gas fields.

the first time in a joint patrol with Russian forces.¹⁸

With all other Arctic states aligned under NATO, Moscow seeks an ally that can not only credibly challenge the U.S.-led alliance but also serve as a big market for its Arctic LNG (Liquified Natural Gas) 2 project while helping develop the NSR into a global shipping lane.

For Beijing, the partnership provides access to critical energy supplies at a time when its once-rapid economic growth is slowing, and hints of domestic discontent are beginning to surface. Additionally, it promises alternative maritime routes that could reduce China's reliance on checkpoints that are vulnerable to disruption. In September, the Chinese Haijia Shipping Company launched the first liner-type container service through the Arctic, linking ports in China with Rotterdam, Felixstowe, Hamburg, and Gdansk in Western Europe.¹⁹ This announcement is part of the "Scramble for the Arctic"—a contest where Trump floated buying Greenland, or where Moscow pursues energy ambitions in a region once considered a frozen

periphery, now transforming into a frontier of global power politics as a result of melting glaciers, primarily driven by anthropogenic climate change.

The Elephant in the Room

If the Arctic is increasingly cast as a theatre of geopolitical rivalry between the Dragon, the Bear, and the Eagle, India's official Arctic Policy frames New Delhi's objectives as scientific research, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development, rather than an alignment towards any particular bloc.²⁰ India's Arctic Policy, issued by the Ministry of Earth Sciences, pledges an institutional commitment to a rules-based, multi-stakeholder approach rather than balance-of-power politics. New Delhi's Arctic posture is one of strategic autonomy seeking cooperation with Arctic states, lawful economic access, and hedging against Moscow, Beijing, and even Washington.

In practice, India pursues energy and trade ties with Russia, including talks on LNG and Arctic projects,²¹

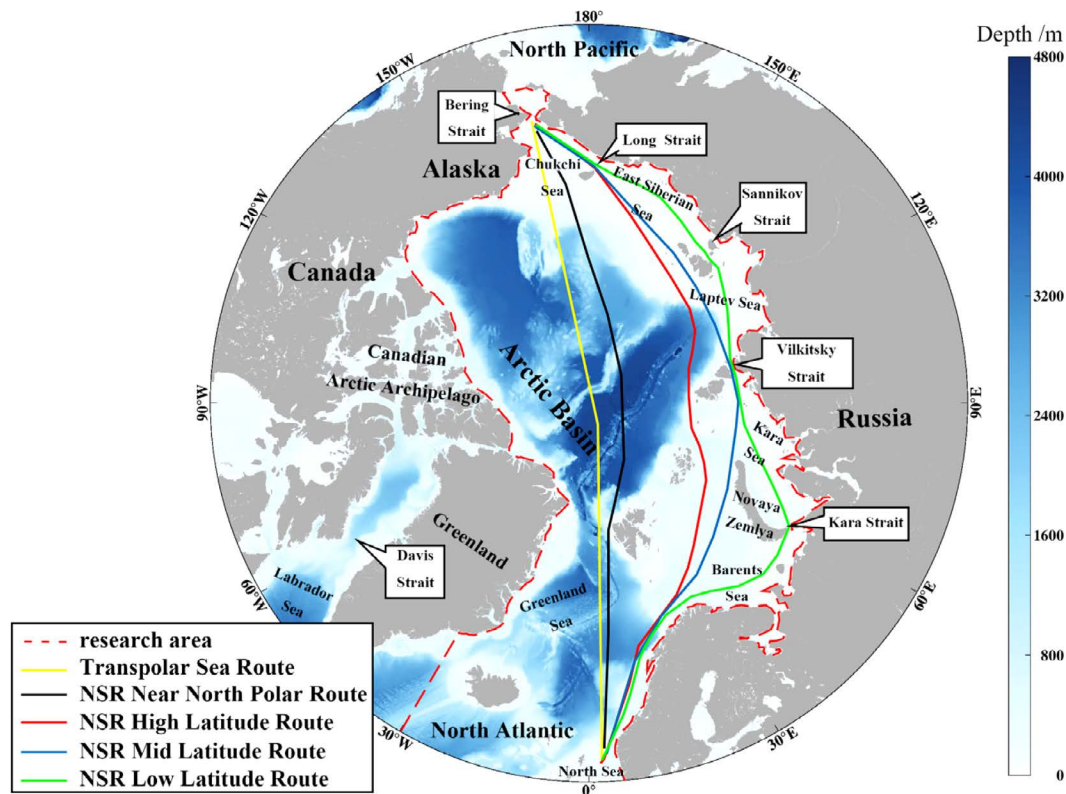


Figure 5: Schematic of the Northern Sea Route and Transpolar Sea Route.

while simultaneously keeping China at arm's length—evidence of pragmatic, not ideological proximity—reminiscent of Cold War non-alignment. India also lacks a polar vessel,²² which curtails her ability to act individually in the Arctic region and looks to Russia for cooperation in the NSR via the Chennai–Vladivostok Maritime Corridor. Notably, during Prime Minister Modi's July 2024 visit to Moscow, India and Russia did not sign the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS)—a pact that would have facilitated India's unrestricted naval access to Russian Arctic facilities.²³ Its absence remains a handicap for New Delhi's operational reach in the High North. Moscow views Indo-Russian Arctic cooperation as mutually beneficial, emphasizing investment, infrastructure, and joint use of the NSR while inviting Chinese capital to develop LNG and port projects. Although Russia treats China and India as Arctic partners to circumvent Western sanctions and finance Arctic development, it has recently grown slightly wary of an assertive China and is determined to retain sovereignty over the NSR. It has adopted a more cautious approach, turning to India as a neutral actor to blunt potential risks.²⁴

Strategic Recalibration: Beyond the Arctic

As Washington ratchets up trade pressure on New Delhi, India has mooted a strategic recalibration. In late August 2025, the US announced an extra 25 percent punitive tariff on Indian imports (bringing total duties to 50 percent) explicitly to punish India's discounted purchases of Russian oil.²⁵ These tariffs provoked outrage in India and stalled U.S.–India trade talks. Meanwhile, the U.S. has refrained from punishing China, currently Russia's largest oil customer.

India's demand for Russian energy has seen a marked uptick since 2022, when it was virtually zero. India now imports 2 million barrels per day of Russian crude oil. These purchases, made at steep discounts (often 5–7 percent below market) and even settled in rupees, are deemed highly lucrative by Indian refiners. Moscow is pivoting to Asia harder than ever as it sends Siberian gas to China via the Power of Siberia pipeline and is actively negotiating a second Power of Siberia 2 pipeline through Mongolia.²⁶ Talks have even revived

on a long-proposed Russia–India gas link. In 2016, New Delhi and Moscow signed a Memorandum of Understanding to study a 4500–6000 km pipeline, estimated at \$25 billion, to bring Siberian gas to India.²⁷ One of the proposed ways to lay the pipeline is through China and Myanmar.

These developments exemplify a transition from non-alignment and multi-alignment to deliberate strategic realignment. Although India has publicly maintained a policy of strategic autonomy, New Delhi has quietly warmed to the idea of trilateral cooperation with its northern neighbors. In July 2025, the Indian government announced its willingness to resume the dormant Russia–India–China (RIC) dialogue.²⁸ Indian overtures seem to be elicited by what it perceives to be Western “double standards”, as European countries continue to import volumes of Russian energy despite sanctions. Russian officials have been more candid; Foreign Minister Lavrov has voiced Moscow’s “genuine interest” in reviving the RIC troika format.

This pragmatic hedging also finds institutional expression within BRICS, which offers a multilateral vehicle for non-Western economic cooperation and insulating its members from unilateral sanctions through a prospective BRICS currency.²⁹ The financial arm of the BRICS, the New Development Bank, coupled with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, was conceived to sidestep the West-dominated Bretton Woods institutions by serving as a substitute for infrastructure, trade, and payments cooperation.³⁰ On 31 August 2025 upon his arrival in Tianjin for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, President Vladimir Putin decried the “discriminatory sanctions” threatened to be imposed against BRICS countries by the U.S., as it would stifle their socio-economic development.³¹ His Chinese counterpart, President Xi Jinping, and Prime Minister Modi recognized the need to expand trade ties and reduce trade deficits, acknowledging that their two economies constitute indispensable pillars for the stabilization of global commerce. In an air of unmistakable bonhomie towards Modi, President Xi suggested that “a cooperative de deux of the dragon and the elephant”

would chart the most propitious course forward for both India and China.³²

Yet, important caveats remain—historical mistrust between India and China, accompanied by border disputes and India’s democratic ties with the West, will be limiting factors in the prospect of a complete entente between the two. Any alignment will likely be on a give-and-take or temporary basis rather than a lasting security alliance. This balancing act by New Delhi, devoid of ideological bias, reflects its long-standing commitment to non-alignment, enabling it to leverage its bargaining power with Moscow and, to a cautious extent, with Beijing, while preserving the option to draw on the U.S. when needed. The result is a pattern of transactional engagements that supplant old bloc politics, reorganizing geopolitics across Eurasia with inevitable spillover onto the Arctic.

Authors –

J. Jeganaathan is an Associate Professor in the Centre for European Studies at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Bharath P. H. is a doctoral research scholar at the Centre for European Studies at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2025. This issue brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute’s primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe’s neighborhood.

www.isdp.eu

Endnotes

- 1 United States Coast Guard News, “U.S. Coast Guard responds to Chinese Research Vessel off Alaska,” Press Release, July 26, 2025, <https://www.news.uscg.mil/Press-Releases/Article/4256470/us-coast-guard-responds-to-chinese-research-vessel-off-alaska/>.
- 2 Zita Ballinger Fletcher, “Chinese research ships in US Arctic draw Coast Guard response,” *Military Times*, August 12, 2025, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2025/08/11/chinese-research-ships-in-us-arctic-draw-coast-guard-response/>.
- 3 The State Council Information Office, “Full Text: China’s Arctic Policy,” People’s Republic of China, January 26 2018, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.
- 4 Lars Hanson, “Key takeaways: Putin/Trump Alaska summit,” *Alaska’s News Source*, August 16, 2025, <https://www.alaskasnewssource.com/2025/08/16/key-takeaways-putintrump-alaska-summit/>.
- 5 The State Council Information Office, “Full Text: China’s Arctic Policy,” People’s Republic of China, January 26 2018, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.
- 6 Senate of Canada, “The Standing Committee on National Security and Defense – Evidence,” March 8, 2005, <https://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/committee/381/defe/42280-e>.
- 7 Malte Humpert, “China launches domestically-built ‘Xue Long 2’ icebreaker,” *High North News*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-launches-domestically-built-xue-long-2-icebreaker>.
- 8 US Department of Defense, “2024 Arctic Strategy,” June 2024, <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Jul/22/2003507411/-1/-1/0/DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY-2024.PDF>.
- 9 Gary Warner, “Coast Guard gets \$25B in funding for border security efforts and more icebreakers,” *Stars and Stripes*, July 11, 2025, https://www.stripes.com/branches/coast_guard/2025-07-11/coast-guard-funding-icebreakers-southern-border-18412284.html.
- 10 NATO Maritime Command, X Post @NATO_MARCOM, August 4, 2025, https://x.com/NATO_MARCOM/status/1952323760343671122.
- 11 Heather A. Conley, Matthew Melino, and Jon B. Alterman, “The Ice Curtain: Russia’s Arctic Military Presence,” CSIS, March 26, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence>.
- 12 Gary K. Busch, “Russia’s New Arctic Military Bases,” *IRIA*, July 5, 2027, <https://ir-ia.com/IRIA-Russia%E2%80%99s-New-Arctic-Military-Bases.html>.
- 13 “Russia Test-Fires Tsirkon Hypersonic Missile in Arctic,” *The Moscow Times*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/11/18/russia-test-fires-tsirkon-hypersonic-missile-in-arctic-a75604>.
- 14 “Russia moves to test nuclear-powered Burevestnik missile after 11 failures,” *New Voice of Ukraine*, August 14, 2025, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/russia-mobilizes-for-burevestnik-cruise-missile-test-launch-despite-failed-trials-50537093.html>.
- 15 Thomas Newdick, “Russian’s New Combat Icebreaker Starts Sea Trials,” *The War Zone (TWZ)*, June 28, 2024, <https://www.twz.com/news-features/russians-new-combat-icebreaker-starts-sea-trials>.
- 16 “Highlights of Putin statement after summit with Trump,” *Reuters*, August 16, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/highlights-putin-statement-after-summit-with-trump-2025-08-16/>.
- 17 Dzirhan Mahadzir, “NORAD Jets Intercept Joint Russian, Chinese Bomber Flight Near Alaska,” *USNI News*, July 25, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/07/25/norad-jets-intercept-joint-russian-chinese-bomber-flights-near-alaska>.
- 18 “Chinese, Russian coast guards conduct joint patrols in Arctic Ocean, marking CCG’s first entry into the region,” *Global Times*, October 2, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202410/1320657.shtml>.
- 19 Tomas Kristiansen, “Chinese carrier launches first regular liner service north of Russia to Europe,” *Shipping Watch*, August 25, 2025, <https://shippingwatch.com/carriers/Container/article18466973.ece>.
- 20 Ministry of Earth Science, “India’s Arctic Policy, Government of India, 2022,” <https://www.moes.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-03/compressed-SINGLE-PAGE-ENGLISH.pdf>.
- 21 “India, Russia agree to boost trade ties after foreign ministers meet in Moscow,” *Reuters*, August 21, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/india-russia-agree-boost-trade-ties-after-foreign-ministers-meet-moscow-2025-08-21/>; Dinakar Peri, “India a stabilizing factor in the Arctic, says Russian Ambassador,” *The Hindu*, March 21, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-a-stabilising-factor-in-the-arctic-says-russian-ambassador/article69354871.ece>.

- 22 Claudia Chia and Zheng Haiqi, "India Officially Ventures into the Arctic," *ISAS Briefs*, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, March 21, 2022, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-officially-ventures-into-the-arctic/>.
- 23 Elías Thorsson, "India's Arctic ambitions face setback as pact with Russia put on ice," *Arctic Today*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.arctictoday.com/indias-arctic-ambitions-face-setback-as-pact-with-russia-put-on-ice/>.
- 24 Mirza Abdul Aleem Baig, "Polar Silk Route And Sino-India Arctic Geopolitics," *Eurasia Review*, September 18, 2024, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/18092024-polar-silk-route-and-sino-india-arctic-geopolitics-oped/>.
- 25 Krishna N. Das and Aftab Ahmed, "Russia expects India to keep buying its oil and seeks China-India-Russia talks," *Reuters*, August 20, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/russia-expects-india-keep-buying-its-oil-seeks-china-india-russia-talks-2025-08-20/>.
- 26 "Putin and Xi to talk energy, discuss Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline," *Reuters*, May 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/putin-xi-talk-energy-discuss-power-siberia-2-gas-pipeline-2025-05-06/>.
- 27 PTI, "India, Russia to study building \$25 billion pipeline," *The Economic Times*, October 16, 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/india-russia-to-study-building-25-billion-pipeline/articleshow/54878729.cms>.
- 28 Maria Siow, "Why China-Russia 'troika' talks are back on India's table," *South China Morning Post*, July 27, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3319638/why-china-russia-troika-talks-are-back-indias-table>.
- 29 Mariel Ferragamo, "What Is the BRICS Group and Why Is It Expanding?" Backgrounder, Council on Foreign Relations, June 26, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-brics-group-and-why-it-expanding>.
- 30 "New Development Bank names RBI's Rajiv Ranjan as vice president," *Reuters*, August 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/new-development-bank-names-rbis-rajiv-ranjan-vice-president-2025-08-25/>.
- 31 PTI, "Russia, China opposes 'discriminatory sanctions' against BRICS countries, says Vladimir Putin," *The Hindu*, August 31, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/russia-china-oppose-discriminatory-sanctions-against-brics-countries-says-vladimir-putin/article69995810.ece>.
- 32 "PM Modi in China Highlights: 'Peace and tranquility along border is like insurance policy for ties', India tells China," *The Hindu*, September 1, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-china-visit-tianjin-sco-summit-2025-xi-jinping-putin-live-updates/article69995599.ece>.