

A New Map of the Arctic

by Antonia Colibasanu - November 14, 2025

U.S. lawmakers are **reportedly moving this week** to formally establish a senior diplomatic role known as ambassador-at-large for Arctic affairs – a position created in 2022 but rarely filled – to better coordinate federal policy on Arctic strategy, security, environmental protection and Indigenous engagement. The legislative push seems to have begun in the final week of October, coinciding with the announcement of a landmark agreement between China and Russia to jointly develop and commercialize shipping along Russia's Northern Sea Route. The deal will enhance Sino-Russian cooperation in the region and, in theory, turn the NSR into a major Asia–Europe trade corridor. Russia's nuclear icebreaker operator, Rosatom, will lead infrastructure efforts to keep the route navigable. Beijing has also ramped up Arctic research, sending icebreakers on long expeditions to study sea-ice patterns and improve operational efficiency.

It's a matter of fact that Western shipping activity along the NSR plummeted after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. The decline owes partly to operators' desire to avoid sanctions and partly to the fact that they relied too heavily on Russian icebreaker escorts and ports to do business. What wasn't immediately clear was just how quickly China and Russia took advantage of the void left by Western firms. After a brief hiatus in 2022, transit shipping rebounded in 2023 to record levels entirely because of Chinese demand. The NSR saw 75 transit voyages carrying 2.1 million tons of cargo in 2023 – a sharp recovery from virtually no transit traffic the year before. Today, China is the predominant international user of the NSR. More than 95 percent of all transit cargo in the region in 2023 traveled to or from China, according to data from the Center for High North Logistics. China accounted for almost all non-Russian NSR activity: Bulk carriers, tankers and a new Chinese-operated "Arctic Express" container service were virtually the only foreign-linked voyages that returned to the route.

The surge in traffic was due in large part to the shift in energy trading. After the EU banned imports of Russian crude oil in December 2022, Russia redirected some oil exports to Asia via the NSR. In the summer of 2023, Russia began to send Arctic crude shipments eastward through the polar seas to China. At least 14 laden oil tankers transited the NSR in 2023, delivering about 1.5 million tons of Russian crude oil to Chinese ports. These Arctic oil convoys – unprecedented in scale – resulted in China, now the principal buyer of Russian oil, effectively replacing the lost European market. The shipment of other resources followed a similar pattern: Iron ore and coal cargoes that once might

have gone to Western markets were instead shipped to Asia via NSR routes. By 2024, the trend had accelerated; preliminary figures showed a record 3 million tons of transit cargo moved through the NSR, of which 95 percent came to or from Russia and China. In other words, nearly all international transit on the NSR was bilateral Sino-Russian commodities trade.

Beyond bulk commodities, China has also spearheaded a renewed push for Arctic container shipping with Russia. In 2023, China's new Polar Silk Road ambitions yielded experimental container voyages along the NSR. Chinese logistics firms ran a series of pilot container ship transits from East Asia to the European side of Russia via the Arctic in 2023. A total of seven NSR container ship trips were completed in 2023. By 2024, this figure doubled. While still modest, these forays demonstrate Beijing's intent to establish a regular China-Russia Arctic transport link, reducing the time it takes for goods to transit the Suez Canal.

Beijing and Moscow have also formalized their cooperation on NSR development. In March 2023, during President Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing, they issued a joint statement pledging to "work together to develop the Northern Sea Route" and even set up a joint committee on NSR coordination. By August 2024, this had evolved into a dedicated sub-commission for NSR cooperation, under which an action plan was approved to increase Arctic shipments.

Washington's move to appoint an ambassador-at-large for the region indicates that the U.S. is taking this development seriously. The reconfiguration of international trade routes notwithstanding, Russo-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic also raises serious questions over governance. The entire NSR lies within Russia's exclusive economic zone, yet there is an interesting feature with regard to **how the skies above the NSR are mapped**. The western entry corridor of the NSR, particularly around the Kara Gate and eastern Barents Sea, runs near the "no-man's-land" airspace between the Norwegian Bodo flight information region and the Russian Murmansk flight information region.

Flight information regions are airspace zones in which a state is responsible for providing air traffic services under the framework of the International Civil Aviation Organization. FIR boundaries are set for aviation safety and efficiency, not for the delineation of sovereign territory. An FIR can extend over international waters or into another state's maritime zones because, at heart, it is a delegated zone of responsibility for civil aviation regulation, not an expression of territorial control. By contrast, an exclusive economic zone is a maritime zone up to 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) from a nation's shores. It is defined by the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, which Russia and China ratified but interpret to fit their own interests. Beijing interprets EEZs through the lens of "historic rights," especially in the South China Sea, while Moscow wants an extended continental shelf in the

Arctic, claiming areas such as the Lomonosov Ridge as extensions of its continental margin. Within its EEZ, a state has sovereign rights to exploit marine resources – fish, oil, gas, etc. – but does not possess sovereignty over the waters or in the airspace beyond the 12 nautical mile territorial area. In fact, UNCLOS explicitly notes that the EEZ has “no legal consequences for aviation.” Put differently, the airspace above an EEZ is open airspace for anyone to use.

Because of these differing legal regimes, FIR boundaries and EEZ boundaries don’t always align. Ordinarily, it’s never much of a diplomatic problem. But in strategically sensitive regions – particularly where states contest sovereignty or resources – a mismatch between who controls the EEZ and who manages the skies can introduce complications.

The Arctic exemplifies these complications. For more than 40 years during the Cold War (and after), Oslo and Moscow sparred over 175,000 square kilometers of maritime area – a contested zone rich in fish and potentially vast oil and gas reserves (the Shtokman gas field). They ended the dispute in 2010 when they signed a treaty delimiting an EEZ boundary. But the treaty didn’t clarify FIR responsibilities. A large area of international airspace over the Barents Sea – from about the 70th parallel north to the North Pole – was historically unassigned to any FIR. This left a strip of unresolved airspace between the Norwegian and the Russian FIRs roughly above the once-disputed waters. Flights that cross the high Arctic have to coordinate with both Norwegian and Russian authorities and obtain ad hoc clearances to transit the gap.

This is why the unresolved airspace above the NSR is a challenge for both Russia and China. So far, bilateral cooperation has been relatively frictionless. But Beijing and Moscow understand that as NSR traffic grows, so too will the number of supporting flights for navigation, logistics and surveillance. If they continue to jointly operate, control of the airspace for route monitoring and operational support will likely be contested, particularly if third-party aircraft transit the same corridor.

The mapping of FIRs and EEZs is more than mere bureaucratic drudgery; it will determine who controls, monitors and secures critical domains. In moments of crisis or conflict, these invisible lines can define escalation risks, influence freedom of movement and shape strategic postures. The failure to strictly define, say, the FIR over the Barents was inherently political: Neither side wanted to cede airspace management in a zone crucial for hydrocarbons exploration and, if push came to shove, nuclear bombers. The same logic applies to the recent U.S. initiative to formalize the ambassador-at-large for Arctic affairs. Though it may seem a symbolic post in times of peace, the timing of the appointment reveals Washington’s awareness that the Arctic is no longer peripheral. It signals a recognition that Russia and China’s deepening cooperation in Arctic development has strategic implications far beyond trade.

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