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CRACKS IN THE ICE

Power, propaganda, and Russia's nuclear icebreakers

June 2026



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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Icebreakers have become the symbols of power and presence in the Arctic. Canada and the United States are taking steps to renew and expand their icebreaker fleets, both in numbers and capabilities. They are getting help to achieve these goals from Finland, which has advanced expertise and industrial capacity in this niche sector. Russia has taken note.

In the highly competitive geopolitics of the Arctic, President Vladimir Putin and the industries that surround the Kremlin have seized on Rosatomflot and its fleet of eight nuclear icebreakers to make the case that Russia can outcompete all others.

No other country currently possesses even one nuclear icebreaker and Russia is building more: four new ships have entered service in the past decade, and four more are under construction. Among these are the *Rossiya*, which will be the world's largest icebreaker. Putin and Rosatom, Russia's state-owned nuclear conglomerate, portray Russia as the Arctic's most dominant country, not only currently, but for the long-term; they are using this advantage to emphasize the regime's goals to Russians.

However, behind the headlines delivery deadlines are slipping amid rampant sanctions-inflicted delays. The regime has scaled back orders; from its initial plan of three ships the *Rossiya* is the only one still on the books. Older ships are headed for imminent retirement in the next five to 10 years. The likely reality is that Russia will make incremental progress, given the regime's strong commitment to building new icebreakers, but the strategic paradox of its decision to invade Ukraine is evident in any assessment of Russia's Arctic strategy. Russia needs the resources and transport routes of the region more than ever but is facing high and self-inflicted obstacles to its ability to use and access them.

Rosatom is nearly omnipresent in the deliberations and decisions shaping Russia's Arctic. It has made itself a decisive influence in Russian policy. It operates Atomflot, which maintains the country's nuclear-powered icebreakers, and governs the Northern Sea Route, making it indispensable to the major oil and gas companies Rosneft, Gazprom, and Novatek. Moreover, Rosatom is building its own Arctic business empire, positioning and

portraying itself as a competent technological innovator deserving of Russians' admiration and support – and of a healthy share of state revenues. And it moves in lockstep with Kremlin strategy, in which the Arctic is at the heart of Russia's national security.

One of the policy innovations Rosatom is advancing is the supposedly new concept of the Transarctic Transport Corridor, known by its Russian acronym, TTK. In reality, the TTK is mostly a repackaging of existing state plans for transport infrastructure and economic development. In practice, it is the Russian regime's attempt to fashion itself as a dynamic country setting itself up to be the long-term dominant Arctic commercial player and spreading the rewards of that position nationwide. This propaganda is mostly for domestic consumption – to show that the Russian government's escalating Arctic expenditures, which mostly prop up Russia's key energy and mining companies in the region, benefit all Russians. The TTK claims to plug the Northern Sea Route (NSR) into a nationwide transportation infrastructure. Those claims aim to show Russians living in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Vladivostok that the distant NSR is worthy of national investment, even when that spending comes with hefty price tags. Rosatom carefully crafts its public vision, in which nuclear icebreaker task forces lead convoys of merchant ships through the iciest reaches of the Northern Sea Route year-round, to appeal to all Russians, notably women and youth.

Rosatom also aims to appeal to foreigners with its vision. The TTK showcases Russia as an optimal Arctic partner for developing resources and transit routes, whether that partner be China, India, or the United States. Its geopolitical goal is to extend and enforce its management over a large swath of the maritime Arctic – with itself in the lead. To that end, Rosatom is developing the TTK to appeal specifically to China, both to tap that country's economic interest in the region and to keep Beijing's interests aligned with the parameters Russia has set.

Furthermore, the TTK is taking shape as Canada and US embark on their own procurements of icebreakers, which will see their coast guards acquire polar icebreakers and a host of ice-class vessels of differing capabilities by 2040. Enabling those ambitious goals is Finland, the newly minted NATO ally. Transatlantic co-operation in icebreaker construction now has Finnish shipyards that once fed Russian order-books redirected to serve the Canadian and US fleets. Icebreakers do not compete with one another, but the economic models of the countries that run them do. Russia is arguing that its nuclear icebreakers give it the strategic geo-economic advantage in the Arctic through the TTK concept.

Rosatom's dreams, however, are colliding with cold, hard fiscal realities. Those realities are that Russia is suffering from the ill effects of the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The costs of building high-end hardware, including nuclear icebreakers, have escalated as sanctions are constricting supply chains and money is being diverted to the budgetary black hole that is Russia's war machine as it continues its efforts to destroy Ukraine.

For Canada, the United States, Finland, and their NATO allies, as well as their Indo-Pacific partners, the main response to Russian claims of Arctic dominance from its growing nuclear icebreaker fleet is to see through their own icebreaker and economic development plans. It is important that Canada, the US, and their allies develop icebreaking capabilities commensurate with needs, whether those needs are economic, for sovereignty assertion, to resupply communities, or for marine safety or maritime security. In many cases, Arctic economic development requires government investment and presence. But that development cannot come from the centre and corporate giants alone. The true way to match Russia's illusions of Arctic dominance is to shore up our own efforts by building tight co-operation and interoperability across the democratic nations of the Arctic and its peoples. [MLI](#)

Les brise-glaces sont devenus des emblèmes de puissance et de rayonnement dans l'Arctique. Le Canada et les États-Unis s'emploient à renouveler et à élargir leurs flottes de brise-glaces tant en nombre qu'en capacité. À cet égard, ils sont guidés par la Finlande, laquelle offre une expertise de pointe et des capacités industrielles dans ce secteur clé. La Russie en prend bonne note.

Dans le sillage de l'intense compétition géopolitique qui se dispute en Arctique, la flotte de huit brise-glaces nucléaires de Rosatomflot constitue pour le président Vladimir Poutine et les industries liées au Kremlin un avantage sans pareil.

À l'heure actuelle, aucun pays autre que la Russie ne possède de brise-glaces nucléaires : quatre ont été mis en service pendant la dernière décennie, et quatre sont maintenant en construction. Parmi ceux-ci figure le Rossiya, qui sera le plus imposant au monde. Poutine et le conglomérat d'État Rosatom dépeignent la Russie comme la puissance la plus influente dans l'Arctique, non seulement aujourd'hui, mais pour longtemps ; en vue de mettre de l'avant les objectifs du régime, ils font valoir cet avantage auprès des Russes.

Or, les manchettes ne font pas état des délais de livraison prolongés en raison des sanctions. Le régime a réduit ses commandes – parmi les trois navires initialement prévus, seul le Rossiya demeure inscrit dans les carnets. En outre, les anciens navires se destinent à la mise au rancart dans un délai de cinq à dix ans. Le fait est que la Russie avancera tout de même progressivement, car le régime tient à construire de nouveaux brise-glaces, même si le paradoxe stratégique inhérent à sa décision d'envahir l'Ukraine apparaît clairement dans toute analyse de sa stratégie arctique. La Russie dépend plus que jamais des ressources et des infrastructures de transport de la région. Cependant, elle fait face à de sérieux obstacles, principalement auto-imposés, qui entravent sa capacité d'accès et d'exploitation.

Rosatom figure presque partout dans les discussions et les décisions façonnant l'Arctique russe. Il influe de manière décisive sur la politique. Il dirige Atomflot, qui assure l'entretien des brise-glaces nucléaires du pays et gère la route maritime du Nord, ce qui le rend indispensable pour les grandes sociétés pétrolières et gazières Rosneft, Gazprom et Novatek. De plus, Rosatom construit son propre empire commercial en s'illustrant à titre d'innovateur technologique compétent qui mérite l'admiration et le soutien des Russes – ainsi qu'une part importante des revenus de l'État. Enfin, il évolue en parfaite adéquation avec le Kremlin, l'Arctique étant central pour la sécurité nationale russe.

Une des innovations politiques de Rosatom tient au concept prétendument novateur du Corridor de transport transarctique, désigné par son acronyme russe, TTK. En fait, le TTK met en lumière les projets préexistants de l'État en matière d'infrastructures de transport et de développement économique sous un angle renouvelé. En pratique, la Russie tente de s'affirmer en tant que nation dynamique, prête à se positionner comme un leader commercial à long terme dans l'Arctique et à en répartir les bénéfices à l'échelle nationale. Cette propagande, surtout destinée au marché intérieur, vise à démontrer que les dépenses croissantes du gouvernement russe dans l'Arctique, qui servent principalement à soutenir ses principales entreprises énergétiques et minières, profitent à tous. Le TTK affirme établir un lien entre la Route maritime du Nord (NSR) et une infrastructure de transport nationale. Cette assertion a pour objectif de convaincre les citoyens russes de Saint-Pétersbourg, de Moscou et de Vladivostok du bien-fondé d'un investissement national pour la lointaine NSR, et ce, malgré des coûts élevés. Rosatom élabore avec soin sa vision, laquelle met en évidence des forces opérationnelles de brise-glaces nucléaires chargées de diriger des convois de navires marchands à travers les zones les plus glacées de la Route maritime du Nord tout au long de l'année, afin de séduire tous les Russes, en particulier les femmes et les jeunes.

Rosatom s'efforce également d'attirer des partenaires étrangers. Le TTK présente la Russie comme un partenaire arctique idéal pour le développement des ressources et des infrastructures de transport, que les associés soient la Chine, l'Inde ou, encore, les États-Unis. Son objectif géopolitique est d'étendre et d'affirmer son autorité sur une vaste partie de l'Arctique maritime – en se positionnant comme leader. À cette fin, Rosatom élabore le TTK afin d'attirer tout particulièrement la Chine, tant pour tirer profit des visées économiques de ce pays dans la région que pour aligner les intérêts de Pékin avec les paramètres fixés par la Russie.

Le TTK prend forme à un moment où le Canada et les États-Unis mettent en œuvre leurs programmes d'acquisition respectifs, lesquels, d'ici 2040, équiperont leurs garde-côtes de brise-glaces polaires et d'une diversité de navires aux capacités variées. C'est la Finlande, récente membre de l'OTAN, qui assurera la concrétisation de ces objectifs ambitieux. La coopération transatlantique dans la construction de brise-glaces s'effectue dorénavant avec la Finlande, qui met à disposition ses chantiers navals au profit des flottes canadienne et américaine, en substitution des commandes antérieurement passées par la

Russie. Ce ne sont pas les brise-glaces en tant que tels qui se livrent à une concurrence, mais plutôt les modèles économiques des pays qui les exploitent. La Russie prétend que ses propres brise-glaces nucléaires lui confèrent un avantage géoéconomique stratégique dans l'Arctique, en vertu du concept TTK.

Les aspirations de Rosatom se heurtent toutefois à une réalité budgétaire implacable. Effectivement, la Russie fait face aux répercussions désastreuses de l'invasion à grande échelle de l'Ukraine lancée par le Kremlin en 2022. Les coûts de construction d'équipements avancés, comme les brise-glaces nucléaires, ont explosé, car les sanctions perturbent les chaînes d'approvisionnement, tandis que les fonds sont détournés vers le déficit budgétaire engendré par la machine de guerre russe, qui continue sa quête de destruction.

*Pour le Canada, les États-Unis, la Finlande, leurs alliés au sein de l'OTAN et leurs partenaires indopacifiques, la stratégie adoptée face aux ambitions de la Russie dans l'Arctique, manifestée par l'accroissement de sa flotte de brise-glaces nucléaires, repose sur le maintien de la stabilité et la poursuite assidue de leurs initiatives. Il est crucial que le Canada, les États-Unis et leurs alliés développent leurs capacités en matière de brise-glaces afin de répondre adéquatement aux besoins économiques, de souveraineté, d'approvisionnement pour les collectivités et de sécurité maritime. Dans de multiples situations, la croissance économique de l'Arctique requiert l'investissement et l'appui des gouvernements. Cependant, le développement ne saurait émaner exclusivement du centre et des grandes entreprises. Afin de contrecarrer efficacement les perceptions erronées de la Russie quant à sa suprématie en Arctique, nous devons intensifier nos propres efforts en resserrant la coopération et l'interopérabilité entre nations démocratiques arctiques et populations du Nord. **MLI***

Introduction

The completion of the RITM-400 reactor is a landmark event for the icebreaker fleet, for Rosatom, and for our entire country. We decided to give the reactors – which will endow the nuclear-powered vessel with unprecedented power – the names of the epic heroes Ilya Muromets and Dobrynya Nikitich. These heroes of folklore performed feats in the name of Rus', while the new reactors bearing their names will help the icebreaker *Rossiya* conquer the harsh Arctic ice.

–Aleksey Likhachev, director general of Rosatom,
May 2025 (Strana Rosatom 2025v)

Russia's nuclear icebreakers are at the heart of Russia's geopolitics in the Arctic. Only Russia possesses such ships. They are essential for supporting ship movements on the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the sea lane running along Russia's north coast. President Vladimir Putin and Rosatom, Russia's state-owned nuclear company whose subsidiary Atomflot (also commonly known as Rosatomflot) operates the ships, are touting the NSR as the centrepiece of Russia's strategic commercial concept in the Arctic, the Transarctic Transport Corridor (known by its Russian acronym, TTK), a project they argue depends on nuclear icebreakers.

Russia's existing and planned fleet of nuclear icebreakers is formidable. More are coming online, albeit at a reduced rate because of the sanctions imposed on Russia in response to its war in Ukraine. But for the regime, the symbolism of these ships is as powerful as the reactors that propel them. The

regime and Rosatom leadership portray the icebreakers as the markers of an innovative, effective state that has plans for future national prosperity and status that will be built through the Arctic by employing supposedly dynamic strategic and economic concepts.

The quote above from Aleksey Likhachev, the general director of Rosatom, captures the many uses of nuclear icebreakers in contemporary Russian politics: they convey images of technological and scientific innovation, history, national myth, and imperialism (SR 2025a). Those uses are thoroughly geopolitical. Likhachev deploys imperialist language when he talks about dominating the Arctic, by appropriating the folklore of the eastern Slavic peoples and the history of their most powerful medieval state, Rus'; the subtext is that Russia has the right to dominate Ukraine. Putin's Russia wants to claim that Rus' heritage (Snyder 2022). The icebreakers are propaganda vehicles for the Russian state. In the process, they become mythic themselves.

That elevation to mythic status reveals something the Putin regime does not intend to convey in its messaging: there is a widening gap between the rhetoric and the reality of Russia's grand strategy in the Arctic and its implementation.

This paper unpacks the relationship between Rosatomflot's fleet of nuclear icebreakers, the Northern Sea Route (NSR), and the Transarctic Transport Corridor (TTK) amid attempts by the Russian regime and its elites to shore up their legitimacy, status, and sources of wealth. Among its findings are that, at least so far, the TTK is rebranding pre-existing transport development plans. That rebranding shows not only the power of Arctic-centred narratives in contemporary Russia but also the near omnipresence of Rosatom across all Arctic policy – which it is using to reshape the narrative in its favour. The TTK concept works to justify the arguments that Rosatomflot needs more nuclear icebreakers and that the state should cover the heady expenses that these ships in particular, and the NSR more generally, entail. To that end, Rosatom depicts Atomflot, the TTK, and the Arctic as pillars of Russia's economic and technological future, providing opportunities accessible to all Russians through merit. Rosatom is focusing particular attention on women and youth to persuade them to see the Arctic as an opportunity.

Those efforts align with the Kremlin's national security and geopolitical strategies. By inspiring maritime patriotism, it wants to mobilize Russians behind a national effort to strengthen the country by strengthening its Arctic

region. The success of its efforts will depend in part on its success at reinforcing the image of Russia as a responsible maritime power.

The messaging about the TTK concept and the nuclear icebreakers is intended for a broader audience than just Russians. It sends signals to foreign partners and competitors about Russia's strategic goals in the Arctic. In this respect, the paper makes two main arguments: 1) the TTK envisages harnessing the opportunities and risks of China as partner and competitor in the sea lanes to Russia's north; and 2) the concept aims to advance an image of Russia as the optimal gateway to the Arctic by depicting the country as offering the region's most sophisticated commercial model in which the nuclear icebreakers (the Atomflot), the sea lane (the NSR), and the strategic concept (the TTK) can outmatch the assets of any competitors – most importantly, Canada and the United States. That rhetoric eventually circles back to the main audience, Russians, to convince them that their nation will remain the leading power in the Arctic. That is a proposition under increasing pressure as Canada, the United States, and China all move to enhance their sea presence in the Arctic.

Because of the importance of the nuclear icebreakers in these propaganda and geopolitical goals, the paper analyzes the Russian-language posts on Strana Rosatom (hereafter SR), one of the main websites Rosatom uses to publicize its activities and messaging. Taken from the year 2025, these articles give topical and extensive insight into the way Rosatom is explaining Atomflot's nuclear icebreaking, the TTK, and the NSR to the Russian public, promoting its role in high-tech shipbuilding, innovation, science, and international co-operation. Putin and other Russian leaders feature regularly in these materials, and history and patriotism are recurrent themes. The articles tell one part of a larger story about Russia in the Arctic by concentrating on one of the region's most significant corporate players. Discussions in 2025 and 2026 with researchers and experts drawn from the academic, think tank, public policy, and industrial sectors, as well as media and expert publications, supplement the analysis.

Rosatomflot in Arctic grand strategy

Rosatom and Atomflot move in lockstep with Russia's grand strategy. The strategic utility of the nuclear icebreaker fleet is multifaceted. The vessels are assets that can be directed towards state-prioritized projects, and they protect the legitimacy of the Putin regime. Rosatom's curated statements, displayed on the Strana Rosatom web pages, do not acknowledge the company's debt to Russia's strategic plans, but readers can find echoes of the 2021 National Security Strategy (NSS) (Russian Federation 2021a), the 2022 Maritime Doctrine (MD) (Russian Federation 2022a), and the 2022 Plan for the Development of Northern Sea Route Infrastructure (NSR Plan) (Russian Federation 2022b) throughout its portrayals of Rosatomflot's goals and activities. Rosatom's leaders cleave to these narratives and fashion the strategic rationale for Rosatom and its nuclear icebreakers from these documents (Russian Federation 2021a, 2022a, and 2022b).

Officially known as the State Atomic Energy Corporation (*Государственная корпорация по атомной энергии «Росатом»*), Rosatom is one of Russia's most prized state assets. Its involvement in multiple businesses fosters its diverse structure. It has many subsidiaries, handling domestic electricity production, technology, research, renewable energy, technology and equipment export, logistics, and mining, among others. Over 50 more subsidiaries relevant to the Arctic have joined the Rosatom portfolio since February 2022 in non-nuclear sectors, many contributing to the NSR (Gorchakov and Nikitin 2023; Vakhrusheva, Blokova, Levchenko, and Sergeev 2025). Atomflot itself became part of Rosatom in 2008.

Rosatom is a consequential geopolitical actor, inside and outside the Arctic. Because it supplies equipment and services for all phases of the nuclear energy cycle, from mining to reactor design and construction to long-term fuel supply and spent-fuel management, it is influential in global energy security. One of its most important relationships is with China; co-operation with that country dates back to 1992. More broadly in the BRICS+ (the group of countries composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and now with a growing membership in the Middle East) and the "Global South," Russia uses Rosatom to curry comprehensive, durable relationships by providing nuclear facilities, joint research, and mining activities. These are not limited to countries that Russia deems "friendly" as Rosatom is an important

uranium supplier to the US and EU markets. Analysts assess that its presence is declining as a share of the global market but that its significance will continue to give it ongoing leverage in supply chains and export markets (Gorchakov and Nikitin 2025).

Rosatom generates significant revenue for the Russian state. According to the Bellona Environmental Foundation, its multiple business lines earned the company at least 2,572 billion rubles in 2023 (about US\$29.1 billion). Rosatom's export revenues brought in US\$16.5 billion in 2025 (slightly down from US\$18 billion in 2024) (Bellona 2026; Gorchakov and Nikitin 2025). In the Arctic, Rosatom's activities have been targeted by the US, EU, UK, Japan, and Canada, all of which have sanctioned Rosatomflot and its leadership since 2023 because of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine (Gorchakov and Nikitin 2025; Nilsen 2025; European Union 2023; Global Affairs Canada 2026; Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023; UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office 2026; US Department of State 2025). Some of its other Arctic-related subsidiaries are also subject to sanctions, including Rusatom Arktik (for example, see Global Affairs Canada 2026).

Core assets: the Atomflot

Rosatom is a geoeconomic and geo-technological pillar of Russia's Arctic grand strategy. Rosatomflot is the leader among a suite of Arctic-focused Rosatom subsidiaries; it manages and operates the nuclear icebreaker fleet. Among others in the conglomerate are Rosatom Logistics and Rusatom Arctic (*АО Русатом Арктик*). The former transports cargo; the latter develops regional business opportunities and has mining interests in lithium, lead, zinc, and gold in the region (Vakhrusheva et al. 2025). Rosatom also holds controlling or majority shares in transport logistics companies such as FESCO and the Delo Group of Companies, which are key components of the NSR. Finally, Rosatom is also a governance power. It oversees the Main Northern Sea Route Directorate, through which it operates the NSR, a responsibility it acquired in 2018 (Gorchakov and Nikitin 2025).

Rosatomflot, officially known as the Federal State Unitary Enterprise "Atomflot" (*Федеральное Государственное Унитарное Предприятие "Атомфлот"*), is the centrepiece of Rosatom's presence in the Arctic. Its fleet consists of eight active nuclear icebreakers. Each ship is one of three types: the "Arktika" class, which came into service in 1992 and consists of two ships,

the *Yamal* and the *50 Years of Victory*; the Taimir class, consisting of two ships, the *Taimir* and the *Vaigach*, which came into service in 1989; and the newest ships in the fleet, the Project 22220 series. This series has four active ships: the *Arktika*, *Sibir*, *Ural*, and *Yakutiya*; a fifth, the *Chukotka*, is in the advanced stages of construction. Two more are under construction: the *Leningrad* and the *Stalingrad* (Rosatomflot 2026b).

Currently under construction at Zvezda Shipyards in Vladivostok is the Project 10510 Lider class ship *Rossiya*, which is to be the largest nuclear icebreaker built to date. The first ship in what originally was to be a series, *Rossiya* will likely be available only by 2030, and that is an optimistic assessment given the dual challenges of a shipbuilding industry plagued by sanctions and harassed by Ukrainian drone and covert operations (Vakhrusheva et al. 2025; Humpert 2025a). In 2023, the Kremlin amended the 2020 Strategy for Development of the Arctic Zone, which reduced plans to build three Project 10510 icebreakers to the current one. The strategy reframed the one icebreaker as the “lead ship” in the series to maintain a perception that in the future more ships may be built. The onus shifted to the Project 22220 fleet, with the Kremlin resetting its plans to acquire “no less” than five such vessels to building at least seven of them. The change of plans was a result of the war in Ukraine and was a net loss of federal funding for Rosatomflot. Nonetheless, the Lider class ship *Rossiya* remains a preferred talking point for the Kremlin and Rosatom (President of Russia 2024a, 2024b, 2025a; Russian Federation 2023a; United States Naval War College 2023; Vakhrusheva et al. 2025). At this stage, the Project 10510 icebreakers appear to be as much a regime prestige project as an actual necessity.

Nuclear icebreakers are among the three fleets that Russia is prioritizing for modernization. According to Russia’s Arctic strategy, the NSR Plan and the Maritime Doctrine (Russian Federation 2022a, 2022b) are prioritizing icebreakers along with ice-class commercial vessels as the most important northern infrastructure need, along with auxiliary ships and search and rescue (SAR) vessels (Russian Federation 2023a). According to these documents, these ships will enable the NSR’s “comprehensive development,” “legal regime,” and “navigational management,” all priorities of Russian Arctic policy.

Rosatom provides the underpinnings of “destinational” shipping, i.e., maritime transport between natural resource projects and their refineries and markets, the main goal of NSR policy (Russian Federation 2020a, 2020b, 2023a). Rosatom provides the underpinnings of “destinational”

FIGURE 1: The *Yakutiya*, a Project 22220 nuclear icebreaker



Source: *The Barents Observer*

shipping, i.e., maritime transport between natural resource projects and their refineries and markets, the main goal of NSR policy. As a material component of Arctic infrastructure, the Atomflot enables domestic natural resources to get to market, generating the wealth that guarantees that Russia's elites will continue to support Putin. More specifically, Rosatomflot enables what Russian strategic documents term the "cargo base" – the commodities and goods that ships are to carry on the route (Russian Federation 2022b, 2024; Russian Government 2024a, 2025b). This idea reappears in the NSR and TTK concepts, which wed sea-going and shore-based logistics to the extractive enterprises. The NSR Plan closely associates cargo carrying with icebreaking (Russian Federation 2022b).

Radiating power: Rosatom's omnipresence in Arctic state planning

The Atomflot's nuclear icebreakers have ensured that Rosatom has a dominant governance position on the NSR. Administratively, it controls the Main Directorate of the Northern Sea Route (*Главное управление Северного морского пути*, often referred to as *Главсевморпуть*, or *Glavsevmorput*). The Kremlin made Rosatom the route's operator in 2018 under what was then called the NSR Administration and it assumed full control of the route in 2022, taking over from the Ministry of Transport's Federal Agency for Maritime and River

Transport (often known by its short form, Rosmorrechflot, *Росморречфлот*) (Vakhrusheva et al. 2025; Bouffard and Lackenbauer 2025; Bellona 2022; Nilsen 2018). According to marine industry sources, Rosatomflot's nuclear icebreakers were the key factor that enabled Rosatom to gain control of NSR operational governance (Chatham House 2025).

Its administrative role gives Rosatom a strong position in the Arctic from which it can shape and benefit from state policy in the region. Rosatom is near omnipresent in devising and implementing Russia's grand strategy in the Arctic. The National Security Strategy (NSS) lists centralized strategic planning as a core element of contemporary Russian policy (Russian Federation 2021a). Rosatom may not be the richest member of the circle of Russian ministries and state enterprises with a stake in the Arctic, but its governance assets and its involvement in the major energy and commodities projects there have made it a powerful broker.

Rosatom has a seat at the table on Arctic planning that goes far beyond the nuclear sector. With the NSR Plan, Rosatom joins all the energy and mining majors: Novatek and Yamal LNG (SR 2025g); Rosneft and the Vostok Oil project on the Taimir Peninsula; Gazpromneft's energy projects; nickel giant Norilsk Nickel's mining and processing operations; the Severnaya Zvezda project's coal mining operation; and the Baimskiy mining project in Chukotka. In fact, of the NSR Plan's 152 areas of activity, Rosatom is involved in 96 of them. Moreover, it is involved in planning major terrestrial infrastructure projects including both ports and railways (Russian Federation 2022b).

This unmatched access grants Rosatom a comprehensive awareness of Russia's key Arctic development initiatives and business plans. The company is thus a player in all stages of policy development, from data collection, analysis, formulation, and coordination to implementation (Russian Federation 2022b). The company's centrality is reflected in the composition of Rosatom's board, which includes Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyyenko, a deputy director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), and other high-ranking advisors and officials (Gorchakov and Nikitin 2023; Vakhrusheva et al. 2025). These individuals help Rosatom shape the way it presents itself to the public.

Through the Main Directorate, Rosatom has day-to-day power over the NSR's operations. It sets the tolls foreign ships pay to transit the route, granting it effective control over what ships can ply its waters (SR 2025h). The FSB

and the foreign ministry advise Rosatom in determining what tolls vessels must pay and their admissibility (Russian Federation 2022b), giving Rosatom a voice in traditional national security matters like maritime border security. Finally, Rosatom is charged with delivering essential services like remote community resupply and “cabotage” – sailing between domestic ports – that Russian strategists consider elements of national security in “low-population geostrategic territories” (*малонаселенные геостратегические территории*) and natural resource towns (*минерально-серьевые центры*) in both the Transport Strategy (Russian Federation 2021b) and the Arctic Development Strategy (Russian Federation 2020b).

Rosatom draws extensively on the National Security Strategy to frame the objectives of the enterprise and its fleet. The NSS postulates a world in flux and new architectures of power. In that world, Russia is under economic siege and it is an NSS goal for it to display resilience to sanctions – the nuclear icebreaker fleet is a visible manifestation of that resilience. Moreover, according to this view, unfriendly foreign states want to hold back Russia’s Arctic economic development, but the unique capabilities of Rosatomflot rebut such pressure. Rosatom serves Russia’s fundamental national security goals, like strengthening sovereignty and independence, expressing statehood, and defending territorial integrity through investments in, and the operations of, Rosatomflot. The nuclear icebreaker fleet is an emblem of the way Russia is finding opportunities in a world of “new architectures, rules and principles,” strengthening economic security through “scientific-technological” development (Russian Federation 2021a).

The Transarctic Transport Corridor

Despite the refreshed terminology, the idea of a Transarctic Transport Corridor is not new. It mostly repackages objectives set out in the Transport Strategy, the NSR Plan, the Mineral Resource Strategy (Russian Federation 2024a), and the shipbuilding plans developed since 2014, with the National Security Strategy animating how the TTK concept is presented. The idea of the NSR as an infrastructure backbone interlinking sea, air, and land transportation corridors with natural resource projects and industry was already emergent in these earlier documents (Dalziel 2025). Most notably, the TTK adjusts the less flashy “Unified Transport Network” narrative from the 2021 Transport Strategy, so that it now positions the Arctic as the conceptual hinge of Russia’s

internal transportation network, a signal of the prominence of the Arctic in Russia's strategic discourse, second in importance only to Ukraine.

That said, the TTK has yet to appear in a formal Russian strategy document. The next Russian Arctic strategy, likely to come out in 2026, will reveal more conclusively whether it will point to new directions in Russian Arctic policy and whether the TTK branding will gain traction as a durable, long-term feature of Russia's agenda. The TTK is tackling recurrent strategic goals and domestic governance challenges, like linking the natural resources of Russia's Arctic, Siberian, and Far Eastern hinterlands to industrial centres in Russia west of the Ural Mountains and in Vladivostok and its environs.

The NSR is the TTK's defining component and Rosatomflot's icebreakers are its critical enablers. The TTK provides a stronger rationale than the earlier documents did for investing in the NSR and nuclear icebreakers. The Kremlin and Rosatom consistently emphasize this goal in their language. Putin calls the NSR the "main artery" of the TTK (President of Russia 2025b). Rosatom head Likhachev credits Putin for the concept and has described the TTK as being built on the "foundations of the NSR" (SR 2025az). At an international forum, Rosatom Special Representative for the Development of the Arctic Vladimir Panov recounted Putin's words about the NSR being central to the TTK. Many Rosatom statements emphasize the NSR as the centrepiece of a domestic network of terrestrial interconnections from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok. Statements by Rosatom's leaders highlight that the TTK unifies the NSR with domestic maritime, river, port, rail, and road systems. At a more granular level, they claim that the NSR's coastal infrastructure, navigational aids, technology, and SAR services make it a competitive, safe, and reliable transport link between Europe and Asia (SR 2025aq). From a geopolitical perspective, the TTK offers, in this narrative, an unparalleled commercial model providing access to the Arctic and Siberia.

That Likhachev gives singular credit to Putin for the TTK concept is a genuflection that belies the likelihood that it is the product of a multi-year Rosatom lobbying effort. Highlighting Putin's support signals to other state and business entities that they must mobilize behind it. The TTK's origins are evident in statements that emerged before Putin's overt endorsement of it at the March 2025 Territory of Dialogue conference. For instance, according to the Kremlin, in fall 2024, Likhachev presented the idea to Putin, proposing a "Greater NSR" (*Большой Северный морской путь*) that would facilitate exports and national

transport connectivity (with international transit as something of an aside in his remarks). Notably, in that meeting he portrayed icebreaker construction as advancing nicely and drew Putin’s attention to the need for more cargo ships (also a Rosatom business line) (President of Russia 2024c). Earlier in 2024, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandr Novak called for a “synchronization” of NSR developments with other state projects (Russian Government 2024). Secondary sources that pay close attention to the Russian state ascribe the idea as originating in Rosatom circles as early as 2021 (Vakhrusheva et al. 2025). However it came about, the TTK has Putin’s seal of approval.

“ *The Northern Sea Route is the TTK’s defining component and Rosatomflot’s icebreakers are its critical enablers.* ”

At the heart of the TTK’s notional operations is the idea that Rosatomflot nuclear icebreakers will escort convoys of commercial vessels to enable them to sail the route during the harshest times of the year, a Soviet-era concept of questionable value in today’s transport context.¹ These would be “icebreaker task forces” (*отдельная ледокольная группировка*) (SR 2025aq). Such task forces, Rosatom officials contend, are imperative to manage the “serious growth” in traffic, especially given the conditions of the eastern NSR – its “most complex” stretch (SR 2025d) – if Rosatom is to achieve its goals of meeting tight delivery schedules transporting high volumes of cargo year-round. Likhachev uses the metaphor of a street-car or subway system to communicate the “rhythmic regularity” (*ритмичность*) to which Rosatom aspires and that would make the TTK competitive (SR 2025aq, 2025bd).

These statements suggest that the TTK is, in part, a Rosatom-centric play designed for it to acquire more icebreakers. Likhachev has called for a minimum of 11 nuclear icebreakers and as many as 17 (SR 2025c, 2025l). For the convoy model to be viable, Rosatom officials point out, it requires

1 The author would like to thank Lawson Brigham for this observation.

that Rosatomflot have more nuclear icebreakers – and the state funding that subsidizes their construction and operations. Although Rosatomflot claims to have erased the icebreaker deficits of the past, it insists that new construction must proceed apace to meet the TTK’s ambitious objectives. Moreover, the matter is urgent: Rosatom Assistant General Director Andrey Nikipelov has indicated, for example, that because three of Russia’s nuclear icebreakers will be decommissioned by 2033, they will need to be replaced just to maintain the status quo. Rosatom officials have been keen to point out that a decision from Putin about whether to build more icebreakers to align with the TTK’s “financial-economic model” will be forthcoming in 2026 (SR 2025q). Even if he should agree, independent reporting on the pace of icebreaker production suggests it is unlikely the roll-out of new ships will match Rosatom’s sense of urgency (Kagermazov and Platonova 2025).

Officials tout the Project 10510 “Lider” series as especially important to “ensure a steady cadence of escort vessel operations in the eastern NSR” (SR 2025bg). Only these ships will cut a path wide enough for the biggest ships, like Novatek’s LNG carriers, in the NSR’s most arduous stretches to maintain year-round service, they claim (SR 2025b, 2025j, 2025al). According to Likhachev, these (expensive) capabilities will “further stimulate Arctic development” (SR 2025at).

From the perspective of senior state officials and Rosatom’s leadership, the TTK is also an attempt to implement, influence, and justify industrial policy that favours corporate interests, positioning and portraying Rosatom as a sectoral leader delivering unique services and high-tech innovation in the Arctic. In his remarks to the Eastern Economic Forum in September 2025, Minister of Transport Andrey Nikitin underscored that the success of the TTK hinged on the development of its “transport base,” i.e., its cargo ships and icebreakers, and thus on Russia’s ability to build ice-class ships. He added that technological developments like autonomous/remote cargo vessels could form part of the fleet. The TTK would also have a digital platform to handle sophisticated transport logistics (SR 2025aq). Nikitin’s words clearly align with the objectives of the National Security Strategy, which aims to stimulate Russian competitiveness through a “new technological foundation” (Russian Federation 2021a).

Rosatom champions the main economic security objectives of the NSS, which sets the goals of strengthening Russia’s economic sovereignty, raising its

competitiveness, and generating growth. Among the 35 ways in which the NSS seeks to achieve these outcomes, tasks suited to Rosatom include top priorities like establishing a “new technological foundation” for the economy, onshoring high-value-added industries, and maintaining its leadership in shipbuilding, all of which will create “balanced economic development on a new technological foundation” (Russian Federation 2021a). Rosatom’s sophisticated nuclear supply chain, associated technologies, and multiple spin-off applications – such as nuclear-propelled icebreakers and ice-class cargo ships – serve that agenda. The state will channel resources to those who can advance these goals, and Rosatom is a leading – and eager – recipient.

Performing with competence and accountability

Atomflot is an additional source of political legitimacy. Russia’s leaders invoke nuclear icebreakers as symbols of patriotism, national resilience, and part of a coordinated endeavour to mobilize the general populace in favour of Arctic development. Touting their accomplishments and announcing plans to build more of them also distracts Russians from the costs in life and money of the disastrous war in Ukraine, thereby helping to preserve the credibility of the national leadership and the elite-centred mega-projects they fund (Flikke 2021; Yakovlev 2021). Rosatom leaders are making a concerted effort to explain and rationalize the high costs and extent of state intervention in supporting nuclear icebreaker construction and operation.

Despite not meeting its earlier benchmarks, officials to date have presented NSR development as a roaring success. Putin bluntly told Rosatom employees in August 2025 that it would be “stupid” not to develop the NSR further. Accordingly, one rationale that Rosatom officials invoke is that the current set of objectives for the NSR has largely been completed and that the TTK is its next evolution. At the 2025 Eastern Economic Forum, Likhachev cited current NSR cargo volumes to argue that the logical next step was the TTK, a more ambitious project offering new vistas of national prosperity. He told the audience that Rosatom was nearing completion of the current NSR strategy’s “maximal” goals, having set up a Marine Operational Centre and the Main Directorate of the NSR. As a concept, the TTK signals to Russian audiences that Russia is having success in the Arctic in part due to Rosatom’s effective management fulfilling the president’s wishes – a sign of a responsible government in charge.

Most of this signalling flies in the face of the actual numbers. NSR sailings, which peaked at 38 million tons in 2024 before dropping slightly in 2025, have not achieved even half of Putin's earlier objectives of 80 million tons of cargo by 2024 (SR 2025aq; Humpert 2026), which is partly a sign of the NSR's limited commercial prospects in this period of economic sanctions.

The cost of a nuclear icebreaker is not just high, but escalating. Rosatom officials put the price of the latest Project 22220 vessels at 60 billion rubles each, about C\$840 million (US\$615 million), a significant escalation from the about 42 billion rubles per ship in 2014 (Staalesen 2023; Interfax 2021). The Ukraine war and the increased costs of circumventing sanctions or developing domestic supply chains have been the main factors in the price increase. Further, the defence budget has eaten up a greater and greater share of the federal budget since 2022; its year-on-year growth in 2024 is estimated at a 38 per cent increase (Daniels 2025). Rosatom is thus competing with the military for funding for its Arctic projects. Sanctions are making a "meaningful dent" (Davis 2025) in the icebreaker delivery schedule, introducing further tensions into Russia's shipbuilding ecosystem. In fact, Rosatomflot is suing Baltic Shipyard (Baltiysky Zavod, *Балтийский завод*) for the delayed delivery of the Project 22220 *Yakutiya* (Davis 2025). The rather modest claim of US\$500,000, relatively speaking, suggests that the regime is making an example of the shipyard, signalling to domestic players that it will not tolerate digression from the narrative that Russian technology and equipment can successfully replace imports. Such tensions are likely to persist given that Baltic Shipyard has incurred serious losses building the icebreakers. The completion of the second and third Project 22220 series ships, *Sibir* and *Ural*, went 19 billion rubles over budget (Nilsen 2024).

Nonetheless, one facet of Rosatom's strategic communications is to project competence. One article celebrates that Rosatom is ahead of schedule on the production of fuel for the Project 22220 Chukotka, illustrating Rosatom's reliability in delivering the RITM-200 reactor (SR 2025ax). Reporting about the timely delivery of two cutting-edge RITM-400 reactors celebrated this heightened achievement (SR 2025at). Other metrics are less sophisticated but designed to be equally eye-catching. One article touted the record level of steel casting in 2025 – 320 tons of which were for the Project 10510 *Rossiya* (SR 2025ap). Moreover, Rosatom subcontractors were also commended for their achievements; the head of the shipyard building

the Project 22220 ships explained the importance of continuous learning in refining technology and output, citing the introduction of “large-block construction technology” to reduce labour costs and speed up production (SR 2025ai). Likhachev reported to an international audience at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Rosatom was making steady progress in delivering a “unique Russian nuclear icebreaker fleet,” revisiting outcomes like the entry into service of the *Yakutiya*, the launch of the *Chukotka* and the Project 22220 icebreakers, and the completion of the first RITM-400 reactor (SR 2025as). These statements collide with the reality that the Russian sector is in fact experiencing: deliveries are delayed and construction has slowed (Kagermazov and Platonova 2025).

“*The cost of a nuclear icebreaker is not just high, but escalating.*”

Another aspect of Rosatom’s strategic communications is to project accountability. In highly stage-managed public displays, Rosatom and government officials from across Russia appear to debate the right approach to TTK and nuclear icebreaker funding, although at most these likely only affect details and are mostly aimed at influencing the public’s views of the projects. Insight into the particular elite-driven political economy of authoritarian Russia is their discussion about the TTK being “one national project” (*нацпроект*). According to Rosatom officials, making the TTK a single national project is an economically sound move that will unify administrative and financial tools in a “coordinated integrated plan” that, they contend, “will help lower risks and attract investment.” Russians are asked to look to the long term – a future in which the state will no longer need to intervene to make the NSR viable.

Finally, Rosatom and Russia’s leaders portray state investments in the NSR and nuclear icebreakers as required now, but ultimately temporary; they will supposedly end when market forces kick in once the necessary infrastructure is in place. In part, these leaders claim that foreign dynamics

are to blame for the need for state investments: Rosatom's Likhachev used the Ukraine war and its consequences to argue in favour of state support, claiming that given the "current conditions" of sanctions and high borrowing rates, to attempt to operate the icebreaker fleet commercially would effectively end their use. Putin assured audiences that the rationale for the TTK and the icebreaker fleet is ultimately economic, stating that "this [project] must be an economic one above all," and he asserted that the NSR's competitiveness and attractiveness underpin its economic viability, with the government guaranteeing that business will keep flowing. He proposed that the aim should be to "integrate" the nuclear icebreakers "into the economics of Arctic projects" (SR 2025l), presumably to defray costs. According to Rosatom advisor Panov, while state support is required now, Rosatom is trying to introduce competition into the mix to reduce state support. Moreover, Panov argued that having one operator for the NSR stabilizes the price of consumer goods in the north (SR 2025l, 2025ag). According to the director of Rosatom Logistika, the TTK would lower domestic costs for importers and exporters by stimulating a "diversity of routes" developed in cooperation with "partners" and "friendly countries" (SR 2025ag). Their words imply that the TTK, NSR development, and nuclear icebreaker construction aim to make Russia competitive in the world.

Control and competition in the Arctic

By all appearances, the TTK is a domestic project, designed to link and integrate Russia's transportation network via the Arctic. However, some statements from Rosatom and Russian officials imply that with the TTK they are envisaging a wider range of "maritime Arctic routes" (SR 2025az). They are coy about what and where these other routes might be. When he was talking about American interest in Russian technologies following his August 2025 meeting with President Donald Trump in Alaska, Putin himself alluded to Rosatomflot as a service provider beyond the NSR (SR 2025ao).

Such hints may suggest a multiplicity of singular routes between different points, such as the "Arktik Ekspres #1" container route launched

between Arkhangelsk and Shanghai in 2023 (Dalziel 2025). Or they may hint at routes cutting across the Central Arctic Ocean, which some analysts identify as China's ultimate objective (Arctic Frontiers 2026). On this latter point, how Russian leaders depict Russia's nuclear icebreaking capabilities provides a clue. The narrative about the unique capabilities of the nuclear icebreakers points to Russia's general commercial maritime dominance across the region, as it holds assets that no others do. That dominance, however, focuses on making the NSR a safe, reliable transport route through a range of infrastructure investments. Implicitly, Russian Arctic assets like the icebreakers may be used elsewhere and will be essential to other countries wanting to conduct other projects in the region. The TTK does not close the door on that option, but it does signal that Russia's focus will be service provision for foreign ships along the NSR and providing economic development for Russians by leveraging the route (Russian Government 2025d). In effect, the main goal of the TTK and its "convoy model" looks to be to herd foreign vessels towards Russia's northern coast, rather than across the transpolar route. The former outcome is more in line with the core Russian geopolitical goals of maritime control for the purposes of national security and prosperity for the elites.

Even if the TTK is not transpolar, it is a manifestation of Russia's geopolitical agenda to handle and exploit inter-state competition and rivalry in the Arctic. Nuclear icebreakers are essential for Russia to maintain control in the Arctic. Foreign policy and geopolitical considerations permeate the TTK discussion. Consistent with Russia's "gateway" strategy of being the preferred access point to the region, the TTK is an exercise in the maintenance and projection of geoeconomic power. Russia is developing the TTK as the primary commercial gambit in its Arctic grand strategy. In doing so, Rosatom will be the essential commercial partner – and Rosatomflot's nuclear icebreakers the essential operational partner – for other countries that want to use the NSR.

In public pronouncements, Putin and other leaders talk about the TTK in grandiose terms that proclaim its national focus but international significance. In November 2025, Rosatom General Director Likhachev described it as a "massive, planetary scale" project. Deputy Prime Minister Yuriy Trutnev claimed that the "whole world's" development hinged on the Arctic and that the NSR was Russia's "strategic advantage" (*стратегическое превосходство*) (Russian Government 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Rosatom special advisor Panov

emphasized it as a national program of domestic interconnectivity, merging maritime and internal waters and dry-land infrastructures like ports, railways, roads, and high-tech and extractive industries that would boost Russia's competitive ability to attract foreign partners like India and China (SR 2025ag, 2025ao; President of Russia 2024c).

Managing opportunity and risk

At the Eastern Economic Forum in 2025, Likhachev claimed that about half of the 38 million tons of cargo that moved along the NSR in 2024 was a result of traffic redirected from the Suez Canal, which faced major disruptions because of Houthi rebels in Yemen attacking shipping in the Red Sea. Likhachev has been explicit that the NSR is a competitive alternative to the Suez Canal (SR 2025aq; Russian Government 2024). As a tool of economic competition, Rosatom officials regularly contend that the TTK is a way to deal with geopolitical risk. They present the NSR as a safety valve when disruptions cause bottlenecks in international shipping.

The TTK articulates a management framework to handle partners and competitors – categories that are easily blurred in the corridors of Russian authoritarianism. The TTK is Russia's proposition in the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the Arctic. Nuclear icebreakers are a symbolic and material dimension of that proposition, a unique asset that differentiates Russia from all its competitors. Russia is to be the Arctic's primary gateway and Rosatom its core service provider of necessity, if not of choice. The TTK rhetorically reinforces the idea that the NSR is part of Russia's transportation infrastructure and the country is ready to let other nations use that infrastructure providing they abide by Russia's preferences. The TTK also provides a way for Russians to retain their confidence in the nation's achievement and its "world leadership in the construction and operation of nuclear icebreakers."

The following sections will look at how Russia is handling its ostensibly "no-limits" partner China, arguing that the TTK is a way to harness China's interests in the region. It will then look at the TTK in relation to North America and Europe. Currently, nuclear icebreakers are unique to Russia and position it as a dominant player in a field that will get much more competitive in the next decade – with a likely loss of relative position for an isolated and economically declining Russia.

Harnessing China's Arctic ambitions

The TTK's immediate objective is to manage China in the Arctic Ocean. That objective is twofold: harness both China's interest in Arctic shipping and its activities so they follow Russian rules. China's 2018 White Paper on the Arctic makes clear that it is interested in all the region's sea routes, including the Central Passage across the Arctic Ocean (People's Republic of China 2018). Thus, for Russia, it is a balancing act to encourage China to use the NSR by bolstering its access to Russia's natural resources while at the same time attempting to implicitly channel China's Arctic ambitions away from the Central Arctic Ocean and constrain them in accordance with Russia's maritime geopolitical goal of having "national" control over the NSR.

China is the foreign country that is most interested in using the NSR and the readiest to accept the political risks of collaborating with Russia. Russia makes a show of diversifying its relations, frequently mentioning India as another country interested in the NSR – an interest Indian diplomats acknowledge (Arctic Frontiers 2026). But China has far stronger geoeconomic imperatives pushing it to make use of the NSR. It wants to do so not just because of geographical proximity, but also because the Chinese Communist Party is driving to make China a polar power. Behind China's Arctic aspirations is its support for Russia in the Ukraine war, with China proving the most resilient export market for Russian oil. Consequently, it currently has a great deal of leverage over Russia.

Russia will have been attentive to developments that point towards China seeking more autonomy in Arctic policy through new and expanded capability to navigate there. The most noticeable evidence of this capability was in Arctic shipping and in China's multiple scientific research voyages in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas in 2025 (Humpert 2025b), which may well have been a signal to Russia as much as to Canada and the United States that China has strategic latitude to operate in these waters. Less public, but likely attracting more of Moscow's notice, are Chinese shipbuilding advancements in developing ice-class fleets (Davis 2025; SMEOcean 2025).

Rosatom leadership wants China as a partner in the TTK. This involved considerable message management when the containership Istanbul Bridge sailed from China to Europe in 2025. The vessel passed along the NSR without stopping at a Russian port (Centre for High North Logistics 2025). Sea Legend Shipping – a Singapore-headquartered company backed by Chinese

investors and known for its appetite for high-risk ventures in the Red Sea (Maritime Executive 2025; JCTrans 2025; Xie 2024) – announced this would be the first in a new route it would run along the NSR between China and Europe. Despite the Istanbul Bridge not docking at any Russian port during its voyage, Rosatom leadership spun its journey as a positive development. One Rosatom article framed the ship’s passage as a “historic event,” evidence of the NSR’s merits of shorter distances and lower costs. It was “a powerful signal to the market” that “the trade route through the Russian Arctic connecting Asia and Europe is open” (SR 2025av). In a meeting with a Chinese counterpart, Rosatom General Director Likhachev claimed that China had an “enormous interest” in Arctic shipping. Seen through this lens, the Istanbul Bridge’s voyage furnished evidence of the good sense behind Russia’s goal of making the NSR a “key transport artery of the 21st century” and a “fast, effective and secure route between parts of the world” (SR 2025av).

There are good reasons to think this positive spin conceals strategic concerns. First, the thrust of Russian economic development strategy in the Arctic focuses on destination shipping, i.e., using the NSR to accelerate exports of energy and minerals from Russia’s north. Transoceanic shipping is indeed an element of Russia’s plans, but strategic documents like the Transport Strategy and the NSR Plan generally give it a lesser role and a longer time horizon – less urgent than exporting the oil, LNG, and commodities (Dalziel 2025), which are propping up state coffers and Russia’s war in Ukraine. Moreover, non-stop direct transoceanic transits through the NSR will have fewer economic spinoffs for Russia – and by extension for Russians – beyond the fees Russia charges for transit. The gloss Likhachev put on the Istanbul Bridge’s voyage was that China-Russia cooperation was diversifying transport routes and together the two countries were deploying new technologies for sailing in “complex northern routes” (SR 2025au).

The TTK’s putative “convoy” business model indicates that with it in place, Russia wants to control the use of the Arctic shipping lanes by China and other countries. Likhachev expressly mentioned the convoy model with relation to China. He underlined the complexity of navigation in the region as grounds for the ongoing need for Russia’s services (SR 2025au). It is an image of a dynamic and mutually beneficial relationship – and sends a message to China that Russia will be present to aid Chinese navigation, whether China wants such assistance or not.

Moreover, Likhachev’s rhetoric also suggests that resource extraction will take precedence over transoceanic shipping in managing Chinese actions and statements. In his public remarks after meeting with Chinese officials in October 2025, Likhachev subtly altered the discussion from the Istanbul Bridge’s transoceanic transit to the goal of 20 million tons of “Russian-Chinese” cargo travelling along the route by 2030 – in other words, destination shipping of a direct value to Russia (SR 2025au). Other officials, though, hint at a problem: a lack of cargo from Russian northern ports. Putin has remarked that the TTK is not only about transit but about building up a “cargo base” for the route. Developing natural resources for the cargo base was an agenda item in the discussions led by presidential advisor Yuriy Trutnev in December 2025 (Atom Media 2025; President of Russia 2024b; Russian Government 2025d).

“ *The TTK’s immediate objective is to manage China in the Arctic Ocean.* ”

Most poignantly, it is not Canada, the US, or Finland that threaten Russia’s monopoly on nuclear icebreakers – it is China. While China’s commitment to following through on the construction of such expensive ships is unconfirmed and far from certain, the Chinese State Shipbuilding Corporation’s 708 Research Institute’s concept for a nuclear-powered icebreaker – implausibly being described as a tourist vessel and more credibly as a cargo vessel (Leahy and Milne 2026; China Daily 2025) – became public in 2025. Multiple agencies and business entities are progressing on concepts for ice-class nuclear vessels, including containerships that could enter production in the next decade (Ren 2025). Some reporting – though of uncertain reliability – claims that China is starting to build a nuclear icebreaker (SMEOcean 2025). It will be hard for the security- and Arctic-absorbed minds in the Kremlin and in Russia’s armed forces and security services to not read this as a signal of at least a growing Chinese intent for presence in regional shipping, even if China does not include reactors on

its ice-class ships. And despite Russia's existing track record in developing reactors for ice-class ships, some analysts have concluded that China is developing these ice-class nuclear ships independently, without Russian involvement (Davis 2025).

Competing with North America and Europe

The TTK also aims to show that Russia has built the most sophisticated and resourced economic model in the Arctic, outcompeting rivals in North America and Europe. But Russia can see that, with Finland's help, Canada and the United States are undertaking ambitious modernizations and expansions of their capabilities in polar waters. Their fleet re-capitalization plans set Russia a challenge. While Russia's nuclear icebreaker "monopoly" may be intact for some time, the country's leadership will eventually face the reality that its Canadian and US Arctic neighbours will have larger and more capable icebreaker fleets. However, for the Kremlin, Rosatomflot's nuclear icebreakers clinch the argument that Russia is uniquely capable of being the world's gateway to the Arctic – a putatively incontestable argument it can deploy to claim superiority.

Finland's entry into NATO has coincided with accelerated plans for the acquisition of new conventional icebreaker fleets in Canada and the United States. The three countries' trilateral ICE Pact (Icebreaker Collaboration Effort Pact), signed under the Biden administration in 2024 and reaffirmed by the Trump presidency in 2025 (Department of Homeland Security 2026), has effectively shifted Finnish shipyards – previously an asset Russia availed of for icebreaker design and construction – to serve North American needs and interests, a consequential geoeconomic shift that has weakened Russia and strengthened North America.

This transatlantic re-orientation is helping the Canadian and US coast guards recapitalize and grow their icebreaker fleets. The Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) is to acquire some 26 new ships of varying capabilities by 2040, ranging from the highest to lowest ice classifications. The United States Coast Guard (USCG) is radically expanding its fleet and has plans for two new "Polar Security Cutter" heavy icebreakers and up to 14 Arctic Security Cutter medium icebreakers (Public Services and Procurement Canada 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2026; USCG 2026; Humpert 2025c). Moreover, the CCG is developing a maritime security mandate, a significant change from its previous purely

civilian role, to a remit that adds security patrols and intelligence gathering and sharing (Department of National Defence 2025; Public Safety Canada 2026). The USCG is central to the ambitious Arctic agenda outlined in the US Maritime Action Plan (White House 2026), which focuses on asserting US presence and interests in the region's waterways. These plans will greatly reduce Russia's icebreaker "advantage."

With the TTK, Russia thus has a counter narrative to that of Canada and the US. It portrays Russia as the only real full-spectrum commercial actor in the Arctic, thanks to its unique icebreaking strengths. Crucial to Russia's argument is that doubling down on the nuclear icebreakers emphasizes one advantage Russia is unlikely to concede in the coming decade. Canada and the US have no plans to acquire such a capability. In this sense, the TTK can be seen as part of the information confrontation doctrine that Russia is employing (Eggen 2025; Voo and Singh 2025) to distract domestic and international audiences from Canadian and US procurements and to discredit or minimize their activities. Such arguments, Russia hopes, will alleviate domestic perceptions that the country is somehow falling behind in national prestige – in icebreaker "dominance." The TTK works to convince Russians that spending large amounts of state revenue on nuclear icebreakers is in their interests and a matter of national prestige and competitiveness.

A hint of these motives can be found in Putin's attempt to discredit Finland, and by extension, the ICE Pact agreement. He falsely accused Finnish President Alexander Stubb of trying to trick US President Donald Trump in the first months of 2025 into believing Finland could build nuclear icebreakers. There is no evidence in English or Finnish-language media that Stubb ever made such a claim. Putin exploited this bit of disinformation about ICE Pact co-operation to then further diminish Finland as a global leader in icebreaker construction, saying that the Finnish sector owed much to the history of Soviet and Russian orders for the vessels – rather than Finland's ability to fill those orders, presumably. He was at pains to say that Russia had never transferred nuclear icebreaker technologies to Finland. Thus, he concluded, it could never build anything like the Project 10510 Lider series (President of Russia 2025a). This appears to be a domestic disinformation narrative designed to minimize other countries' capabilities to compete with Russia's icebreaker fleet, as well as to diminish the ICE Pact and US-Finnish relations more generally.

Another example where Putin spotlighted the nuclear icebreakers as an unparalleled national advantage came in his message after the August 2025 Alaska summit with Trump. To accentuate Russia's leadership, Putin told Rosatom employees later that month that Western countries like the US were turning to Russia for assistance in developing natural resources, in Alaska as well as in the Russian north, because Russia had technologies (here he was alluding to the nuclear icebreaker fleet), that no one else possessed (SR 2025ao).

Strana Rosatom, like most Russian media, also makes various digs at the US in an attempt to reveal the latter's supposed ineptitude or inadequate Arctic capability as compared to Russia's civilian use of atomic energy in icebreaking. Likhachev, for example, speaking to the IAEA in September 2025, pointed out that while Russia had not been the first to build an atomic weapon, it had been the first to build a nuclear icebreaker (SR 2025as). When talking about one of the nuclear icebreakers rescuing a female moose, a Rosatom article related a separate example of Russian vessels also rescuing grey whales off Barrow, Alaska – some 37 years earlier in 1988 (SR 2025s). Anti-Americanism remains a frequently used tool in appealing to the Russian public. And nuclear icebreakers are one way to highlight America's competitive disadvantage.

National mobilization: the Atomflot and Arctic maritime patriotism

Putin's, Likhachev's, and other Russian leaders' lofty proclamations about the TTK as a global project should not obscure that the TTK's primary audience is domestic. It has more banal, hard-nosed, and sordid objectives in the authoritarian, resource-constrained internal politics of today's Russia. As a concept, it aims to justify expenditures on expensive items like nuclear icebreakers that ply waters far from where most Russians live. In addition, the Russian communication machine uses the TTK to demonstrate the leadership's competent handling of economic development through savvy projects that enrich Russians and strengthen the nation amid intense foreign pressure.

In its public communications, Rosatom advances the Kremlin's domestic and geopolitical goal of stimulating maritime patriotism (Russian Federation 2019, 2022a). Rosatom contributes to this goal with historical narratives designed to inspire national pride. It gives activities at Russian museums regular attention (SR 2025k, 2025l, 2025w, 2025aa, 2025ad, 2025bb). These events cover different epochs of Russian and European history. Rosatomflot helps to justify its present mission of achieving Russia's (expensive) goals in the Arctic by reinforcing the country's goals in Ukraine and connecting contemporary Russia to a glorified imperial and Soviet past (SR 2025p, 2025x, 2025av). Inculcating maritime patriotism is one of Rosatom's goals in order to provide the political and social license for the highly elite politics of Arctic transport and resource extraction.

One way Rosatom does this is by connecting an image of an epic past to an image of an epic future. By turning to the medieval legacies of Kievan Rus', as quoted in this paper's introduction, Rosatomflot is embodying its most cutting-edge activities in a narrative of political legitimacy – a narrative that entails controlling Ukraine. Articles extolling the “Heroes of the Year,” the two new RITM-400 nuclear reactors for the Project 10510 Lider series ship, *Rossiia*, contain one example. At Likhachev's inspiration, according to SR, the two reactors were nicknamed “*Ilya Muromets*” and “*Dobrynya Nikitich*,” heroes from the medieval Kievan Rus' epic folk stories. Also referred to as the “two reactor-heroes” (*двух реакторов-богатырей*) (SR 2025v, 20255al, 2025ar, 2025at), the ships reinforce a mission of “epic ambitions” (*богатырские амбиции*) in the Arctic. These connections to Rus' – the history of which had little to nothing to do with the Arctic – also came up at the 2025 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, where organizers named one session that was looking at the future of the Arctic “The Maritime Route on the Northern Frontier of Rus'” (SR 2025ag). This rhetoric perpetuates Kremlin-endorsed views of the Russian Federation as the sole inheritor of the legacies of Kievskaya Rus', rather than Ukraine or Belarus, although they can also trace their political histories back to Rus' (Snyder 2022).

References to later medieval and imperial history function similarly. The year 2025, SR regularly proclaimed, was the 500th anniversary of the NSR. This narrative centres on the words of a Russian diplomat to the Papacy in the sixteenth century who talked about the shortest route from Europe to China (SR 2025n). Similarly, Rosatom's leaders highlight early

examples of Russian Arctic exploration. Russia's first female icebreaker captain, Marina Starovoitova, for example, when speaking to students invoked the history of the Pomors, Russian settlers of the White Sea region who explored Arctic islands and parts of the NSR and Siberia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (SR 2025ba). This narrative is a crucial element in current Russian (dis)information campaigns to support Russia's presence in Svalbard and undermine Norway's authority there and is based on questionable interpretations of the Pomors' history (Myklebost, Bones, and Nilsen 2025).

Finally, Soviet history provides a more direct means of connecting Rosatom to a supposedly glorious Soviet Arctic past: victory in the Second World War and nuclear innovation. A prominent theme in selling the value of these ships to the Russian population is evident in the naming of the Project 22220 ships and of the Main Directorate of the NSR. The Project 22220 icebreakers *Leningrad* and *Stalingrad*, for example, were previously to be christened the *Kamchatka* and the *Sakhalin*. The revised names harken back to iconic Soviet victories in World War II, reflecting the current wartime mentality of Russia's leadership, mired as it is in the war in Ukraine and beset by foreign sanctions, as well as the nuclear icebreakers' significance as markers of national dignity and accomplishment. Similarly, when Rosatomflot took over the administration of the NSR, the Kremlin renamed the body the Main Directorate of the NSR, a name it had once had between 1932 and 1964 (Centre for High North Logistics 2022; Rosatomflot 2026). That reconnection to the Soviet past is an important component of Rosatomflot's public messaging. It is evidence of the way in which Arctic-related projects have been rebranded to increase their legitimacy and connect with the public by creating a sanitized nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

The connection to Soviet history goes further. In addition to naming it after the NSR's 500th anniversary, Rosatom touted 2025 as the 80th anniversary of Russia's civilian nuclear industry. At a slipway ceremony near St. Petersburg, for example, speakers feted the Red Army's counteroffensive "Operation Uran." The name for the ship was chosen in 2023, the 80th anniversary of the operation – to defend the city against the invading armies of the Third Reich as a "turning point" (*переломный момент*) in the Great Patriotic War. The phonetic similarity of the Russian word for "uranium" (*уран*) and "Operation Uran" (which refers to the Roman god Uranus) is

a good example of Rosatom rhetoric that melds epic historical threads with Soviet history to legitimize Rosatom's role in contemporary policy. The connections of the ship to the "Hero City" of Volgograd – formerly Stalingrad – also reflect the attempt to connect Arctic investments and politics to Russia at large through state-devised interpretations of history (SR 2025az):

I am confident that the new icebreaker *Stalingrad* will worthily bear this proud name. Operating in the harsh conditions of the Arctic, carving a path through the ice, it will become yet another symbol of the talent, strength, and creative energy of our people — of their ability to set the boldest goals for themselves and bring them to life, and to endure in the most difficult times.

– Vladimir Putin, 2025 (SR 2025az)

State interpretations of history that root Rosatom's current Arctic leadership in Soviet legacies and heritage also serve to emphasize that the corporation is a cutting-edge economic actor bringing benefits to the whole nation. The state portrays Rosatom as having been a global leader in the fusion of icebreakers with nuclear technology since Soviet times (SR 2025ax). Rosatom communications outline a world in which nuclear propulsion in the maritime sector is garnering new interest, but it is a business that Russia via its unique nuclear icebreaker fleet has been in since 1957 and Rosatom situates its reactors at the high-tech cutting edge (SR 2025bf, 2025bd). For the Putin regime, Soviet benchmarks are a favoured measuring stick of contemporary success. The continuity of the icebreaker fleet that has served the NSR from Soviet times to today allows Russia to claim that it is matching or surpassing Soviet accomplishments, which vindicates current policies and argues for further investments. As one article states, the current pace of icebreaker construction will allow a "pace and volume of traffic" greater even than during the highest Soviet years (SR 2025aq). The implication is that Russia remains a great maritime power, as per Russia's Maritime Doctrine (Russian Federation 2022a).

National benefits

This line of argument contends that the Rosatomflot's activities on the NSR are of national benefit. Unsurprisingly, it plays to Rosatom's established strengths and core businesses in the nuclear energy sector and how these strengths and businesses benefit Russia's most populous regions in and around Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Vladivostok. In the case of icebreakers, for instance, Rosatom underscores how their nuclear propulsion systems employ Russians far from the Arctic. The development and manufacture of the RITM-400 nuclear reactors in Podolsk, outside of Moscow, for the Project 10510 series vessels is a repeated theme (SR 2025af, 2025at). Similarly, Rosatom showcases the construction of the newest Project 22220 series icebreakers at shipyards in the Baltic Sea region in and around St. Petersburg and the Project 10510 ships in and around Vladivostok (SR 2025e, 2025ai, 2025az). The TTK attempts to integrate ports, shipbuilding, and supply chains into one concept that focuses on the Arctic as a national asset.

Innovation and economic spinoffs

Rosatom also encourages Russians to get behind the TTK. In line with the National Security Strategy's statements on economic security and the necessity of technological innovation, Rosatom strives to portray its nuclear icebreaker technologies as at the heart of a Russian innovation economy, past and present. It gives the RITM-400 and RITM-200 reactors as primary examples. One article extols the high-tech advances behind the Project 10510's RITM-400 nuclear reactors, such as their compactness and greater power, leading to new intellectual property and patents (SR 2025f, 2025af, 2025at). The RITM-200 reactors designed for the Project 22220 ships, one article notes, feature a compact design that forms the basis for the small modular reactor technology that Russia is exporting to Uzbekistan (SR 2025r), which communicates the idea that nuclear icebreaker innovations have broader relevance to the high-tech civilian export economy.

Rosatom also explains that nuclear icebreakers stimulate other technologies. Its communications illustrate the company's growing presence in the digital sector, for example. At the 2025 St. Petersburg International Forum, an exposition entitled "The Pride – The Inspiration – The Dream" positioned atomic icebreakers among corporate activities in quantum technologies, nuclear medicine, electric propulsion, and outer space (SR 2025ae). One particularly

flagrant stunt was advertising the launch of a Russian electric vehicle, the Kama auto company's "Atom," on the helipad of the nuclear icebreaker *50 Years of Victory* on a trip to the North Pole, supposedly for cold-weather testing (SR 2025ae, 2025ah). The product launch likely aimed to feature Rosatom's participation in a broader innovation culture in Russia, its connection to the wider national industrial base, and its ecologically friendly credentials. One of the articles attempted to connect the Kama Atom EV to over 80 years of Soviet and Russian innovation in the nuclear sector (SR 2025ac).

Another area where Rosatom makes claims of icebreaker-to-commercial innovation is in simulator technology. Here again, Rosatom attempts to tie TTK and NSR icebreakers to high-tech innovation and support for the domestic digital economic sector. Specifically, a Project 22220 icebreaker simulator opened in May at the Admiral Makarov State University of Maritime and Inland Shipping, programmed with over two dozen scenarios for the NSR involving collaboration with other vessels. The simulator was realistic down to the detail of the Northern Lights appearing on the virtual screen. The simulator brought together diverse expertise from the highly abstract to the everyday practical. For instance, they used cutting-edge mathematical models "developed together with experienced captains" to simulate different ice conditions. This, Rosatom claimed, was world-class technology, the first in the world for "modeling the formation of the edges of the ice channel and its refreezing" (*"моделирование формирования кромок ледового канала и его смерзания"*) (SR 2025z, 2025ab).

Rosatomflot: inclusive meritocracy

Finally, to encourage the populace to view Rosatom favourably, Rosatomflot portrays itself as an inclusive, meritocratic workplace, where Russians of all backgrounds can work together to accomplish national goals in the Arctic (SR 2025aw). These depictions of maritime patriotism build on the moral and spiritual components that the Russian National Security Strategy and the maritime strategic documents emphasize (Russian Federation 2019, 2021a, 2022a).

Rosatom claims the Atomflot is a great place to work. It portrays itself attending conscientiously to basic crew needs, serving quality food, rewarding accomplishments and offering amenities such as the swimming pools aboard the Project 22220 icebreakers (SR 2025t, 2025aj, 2025ai, 2025ai). Moreover,

the materials intimate, Atomflot is about people. One refrain is that “It is not the icebreakers that break the ice, but the people who operate them” (SR 2025an, 2025aw). Recruitment is one goal of such communications, evident in Rosatom’s campaign to promote careers on the nuclear icebreakers by extensively reaching out to schools and the public (SR 2025y). In these campaigns Putin himself is sometimes personally involved (SR 2025i, 2025j, 2025k, 2025ad, 2025ah, 2025ao, 2025bc). One article stated that exposure to the high technology of nuclear icebreakers through public exhibits of their propulsion systems is one way to get people thinking about their “own professional futures” (SR 2025aa).

Depictions of Rosatomflot crew extend to their high moral and patriotic character and stress the theme of national unity. Likhachev and other Rosatom senior executives identify the cooperative ethos and personal attributes the organization seeks, such as “strong professional skills and a tough, steely character” (SR 2025aw), traits consistent with the moral and spiritual values promoted in the National Security Strategy (Russian Federation 2021a). Moreover, despite the fact that it works in the distant northern reaches of the country, Rosatomflot brings the people of the country together. For instance, one article promotes the experiences of a woman from Russian-occupied Crimea who had neither sailors nor nuclear workers in her family (SR 2025ab). Alongside Rosatom’s efforts to display the nationwide economic benefits of the nuclear icebreaker fleet, these presentations work to reinforce Rosatomflot’s value as a national unifier. The nuclear icebreaker fleet is an open place where any Russian with the right skills and personal strengths can aspire to work.

Women are particularly singled out in Rosatom’s messaging. As in the case of the Crimean woman, Rosatom is making a pronounced effort to show national inclusiveness by portraying women’s contributions to Rosatomflot in a variety of roles, including those that reach the top levels of the fleet. These depictions give Rosatom the opportunity to show how female characteristics are part of maritime patriotism and how women are dedicated to Russia. This is a priority for the Kremlin: women are a constituency that the Kremlin aims to keep onside as the Ukraine war drags on and casualties mount.

To that end, Putin himself points to Rosatomflot’s promotion of women to senior positions at sea. Over the course of 2025, Rosatom showcased the story of Marina Starovoitova, the first female icebreaker captain, as an example

of women working at sea generally, and in the nuclear sector specifically (SR 2025am, 2025an, 2025ao, 2025az, 2025ba). Starovoitova received the “person of the year” award and took part in frequent interviews and public speaking opportunities, including to school-age children in Russia and Bangladesh. These sessions included some surprising statements, such as her being held back because of Russia’s “patriarchal society.” But she persevered: when the military academy refused her admittance because of her sex, her “spirit of adventure and romance” led her to defy the odds and choose a life in the north working for the Atomflot. As evidence of upward mobility, she related that she started out by working on a barge. Among the characteristics for career success she highlighted were learning from others and taking initiative. She describes her responsibilities and her sacrifice as a mother, working strictly from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. when ashore, but 24/7 when at sea (SR 2025ba). These attributes contribute to a state-endorsed Russian conservative vision of womanhood that integrates professional life and family commitments – and that illustrates maritime patriotism through sacrifice. Starovoitova also invokes maternal tropes, describing the crew not as a team, but as a family, and the icebreaker as a “school and a home.” Accolades from Putin and presidential advisor Kiriienko lauded her valour, tirelessness, and sacrifice.

Youth is another particular focus Rosatom uses to connect the icebreaker fleet to society at large. The “Icebreaker of Knowledge” competition is one of the main means for promoting the way Rosatom identifies talented students and gave them a chance to visit the north and sail its ships. The competition also opened up spots for students from other countries, like Bangladesh, India, and Kazakhstan. Articles highlight that more than 67,000 students competed and 350 were successful and became part of NSR’s 500th anniversary celebrations (SR 2025u, 2025ak, 2025be). Through the competition, youth are exposed to the Arctic in the hopes that it would inspire them to become “new pioneers (*первооткрывателя*) and creators of cutting-edge technologies” (SR 2025m, 2025ak). Other ways of promoting youth engagement included toy icebreaker video games and educational sessions with sailors aboard nuclear icebreakers. Students learned about Russia’s 500-year history on the NSR and were told that one day they could crew the new icebreakers currently under construction (SR 2025o, 2025ab, 2025ay).

Conclusions

Multiple analysts and scholars have cast doubt on the viability of the TTK, Russian nuclear shipbuilding plans, and the reality of Rosatom's credibility as an administrator in the Arctic. Estimates of when nuclear icebreakers will be delivered are highly uncertain (Davis 2025). Commercial shipping volumes are likely to fall far short of Putin's aspirations. At its root, the TTK concept and the grandiose aspirations to make the NSR a transoceanic commercial sea lane of international significance will not be met as long as Russia struggles under sanctions and while European commercial shippers and industries shun the route and its adjacent resources (Schuler 2026; Chatham House 2025; Kagermazov and Platonova 2025).

Rosatom spends considerable energy making the case that it is essential to Russia's grand strategy in the Arctic. Atomflot's nuclear icebreakers have certainly been Rosatom's strategic advantage in positioning itself as a near omnipresent element in Russian Arctic decision-making. The company's public communications faithfully convey national security policy. Furthermore, those communications provide insight into corporate lobbying in authoritarian Russia, a dynamic in which the Arctic sits at the heart of contemporary authoritarian Russia. So, in addition to faithfully articulating the Kremlin's goals and views on national security, Rosatom and the Atomflot give an insight into the particular dynamics of lobbying in Russia, where powerful companies can attempt to drive the public dialogue in ways that tip final decision-making in their favour.

In Russia, whether or not companies find favour is determined by elite politics and the control of northern assets in the energy and natural resource sectors. Rosatom has found success in inserting itself at the intersection of the interests of the Kremlin, energy companies, and shipbuilding, which in Russia have pronounced Arctic dimensions. In short, Rosatom has made itself a builder not just of nuclear icebreakers but of coalitions of elite interests.

This paper has argued that one of the goals of the TTK concept and the icebreaker flotillas that are to enable its workings on the NSR is to manage an aspiring China in the region. The China challenge is part of a broader implicit concern that other countries, led by Canada and the United States, are building icebreaking capacity in the Arctic. As Russia's shipyards and sea lanes are harassed by Ukrainian drone strikes and constrained by foreign sanctions,

Russia is likely to continue to demean the democratic Arctic 7 countries and valorize China as a partner. The upshot, however, is that Russia's leaders perceive themselves as increasingly alone in the Arctic.

And while there is no need for Canada or the United States to try to outcompete Russia on the size and capabilities of their icebreaker fleets, the TTK and the commercial proposition embedded in the Atomflot point to the challenge. Russia wants to set the rules for a large portion of the Arctic. Asserting a dominant commercial position in the Arctic will strengthen Russia's position to set the standards that govern navigation in the region. As an agent with a record of trustworthiness and co-operation built on the NSR, Rosatom articulates a responsible ethos that positions the company to contribute to Russia's role as a setter of those "rules and norms." In carefully managed stagecraft, Rosatom has Atomflot's mariners attest to the necessity of new "methodical recommendations" for navigation and passage on the NSR (SR 2025av). These areas will present one of the defining long-term challenges in the Arctic for Canada, the United States, and their allies. [MLI](#)

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