

DAVID SCOTT

China's 'Polar Silk Road': mixed fortunes

Expert article • 4047

The Chinese state media started 2026 asserting that “the ‘Polar Silk Road’ which China advocates building jointly with all parties, is becoming a widely welcomed international public good” (Global Times, January 12, 2026). In reality, China’s Polar Silk Road scheme, launched in 2014, has progressed yet also fallen back. Indeed, at the annual China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre conference, held at Tromsø in February 2026, Chinese participants did not mention the ‘Polar Silk Road’, and suggested that the Arctic was not among China’s foreign-policy priorities.

China’s support for Russia is a noticeable feature in Arctic deliberations. China-Russia naval exercises in the Baltic in 2017 were an uncomfortable occurrence for other Baltic actors, while Chinese support to Russia in its aggression against Ukraine particularly further concern Norway, Finland and Estonia – which all border Russia.

Cyberspace threats from China feed into mistrust perceptions. Norway formally raised China’s troubling cyber activities in December 2025, as did Estonia’s Internal Security Service’s Annual Review released in April 2026. China was labeled a “threat” in Norway’s first National Security Strategy, published in May 2025. In February 2026 China was again labeled a threat in the annual threat assessment reports released by Norway’s Police Security Service and the Norwegian Intelligence Service.

Chinese shipping has been problematic at times. In October 2023, there was speculation that the New Polar Bear, a Chinese container vessel, on its way to St. Petersburg from Arctic waters, had destroyed a gas pipeline linking Finland and Estonia. Speculation was renewed in the Yi Peng 3 incident in November 2024 over cables being cut from Helsinki to Germany.

Consequently, European countries across the Far North have pulled back from involvement in China’s Polar Silk Road. Discussions between Kirkenes’ port manager Terje Jorgensen and the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) were blocked by the Norwegian government in September 2024. Estonia withdrew from China’s Belt and Road (BRI) initiative in November 2022, as well as (like Lithuania and Latvia) leaving the China and Central Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) forum in 2022. Finland never actually joined the BRI or China-CEEC forum. Whereas the 2019 China-Finland Joint Action Plan envisioned deepening Arctic cooperation in law, research and marine technology, their Joint Action Plan signed in November 2024 had no mentions of Arctic cooperation.

This leaves the Polar Silk Road as ever more a China-Russia venture, with China providing the industrial-trade push and Russia the infrastructure expertise for clearing its Arctic waters of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). One telling statistic was that between January 2022 and June 2023, the number of Chinese-owned companies registered in the Russian-controlled Arctic surged by 87 percent compared to the previous two years, reaching a total of 234 firms. On the security front, Russia’s Federal Security Service and the China Coast Guard Bureau signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2023 to cooperate on maritime law enforcement in the Arctic.

China is thus still able to push on with long-range transportation along the NSR. In 2025, Chinese operators completed 14 container ship voyages along the NSR to Russian ports, compared with 11 voyages in 2024 and 7 in 2023. Conversely, American (Maersk) and European (MSC) companies have stepped back from container shipping along the NSR. In October 2025, the first transit commercial voyage from China to Western Europe was recorded, the inauguration of the “China-Europe Arctic Express” by the container ship Istanbul Bridge which went from Ningbo-Zhoushan (the world’s busiest tonnage port) to Felixstowe, UK. Its journey time of 20 days was up to half the time of alternative sea routes via the Suez Canal. Overall, traffic on the NSR also set a record in 2025, with 103 transits carrying about 3.2 million tons of cargo.

That said, Arctic container traffic is much smaller, at first sight still extremely modest in comparison to global trade flows. World-wide, ships move more than 11 billion tons of goods every year, including around 180 million standard containers. The Asia-Europe corridor via the Suez Canal handles over 13,000 ships annually; the NSR, by contrast, just over one hundred transits of all types in 2025. Arctic containers remain deeply marginal – far below 0.1 percent of global container flows. Mega-hubs like Shanghai, Singapore, Rotterdam or Antwerp each handle tens of millions of containers a year; the NSR’s 400,000 tons of containers barely register beside that.

Looking past the ‘current’ modest capacity of the Polar Silk Road, the potential is there for China and its Polar Silk Road, for China’s ‘future’ Arctic presence and options. The Far North and the Baltics should beware? ■

**David Scott**

Dr., Member, Writer and Researcher
Center for International Maritime Security
(CIMSEC)
USA

davidscott366@outlook.com