



Russia's far North: the contested energy frontier, 1st edition

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BOOK REVIEW

Russia's far North: the contested energy frontier, 1st edition, edited by Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, Shinichiro Tabata, Daria Gritsenko and Masanori Goto, London and New York, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series, 2018. £115.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781138307544 (Published 2018-03-14); ISBN 9781315121772 (eBook from 18.50)

Russia's Far North is a topic that is often overlooked in the broader study of international relations and even domestic Russian politics. In international terms the Arctic is one of the last areas where there is any significant cooperation between Russia and the United States. However, it is rarely mentioned by non-Arctic experts. Within Russia, the emphasis is usually on national politics, the current president, and discussions of the various oligarchs and siloviki surrounding the Kremlin, with most debate examining who is up and who is down.

Beyond the works examining these typical topics, there is a small and growing group of scholars interested in some of the key issues that matter most in Russia beyond its authoritarian state. At the top of that list is natural resource exploitation and the Arctic region, where much of Russia's future energy production is expected to take place (p. 41). Moreover, with the melting sea ice, Russia is hoping to benefit from a growth in trade between the giant Asian producers of China, Japan, and Korea and the lucrative markets of Western Europe. Whether Arctic energy production will be profitable and trade through the Northern Sea Route actually can take place are at the center of discussion in this book.

The multi-disciplinary, multi-national author collective represents some of the leading Russian scholars in Finland and Japan. These countries bracket Russia on the west and east and both have long and complex histories with the land of the czars, soviets, and the personalized, hybrid, and surprisingly dynamic but simultaneously stagnant contemporary state.

This useful edited volume provides us with a variety of tools to understand where Russia's north is headed. The contributions range from straightforward economic analysis to a discussion of the artist Ivan Bilibin's folkloric book illustrations. Given the richness of the discussion in this book, it would be impossible to examine all of the chapters, so I will limit myself to a few of the highlights.

Although it might be fair to say that the Russian north overall is cold and remote, Shinichiro Tabata and Tomoko Tabata's chapter teases out how the various Russian Arctic regions differ based on the main source of their wealth: hydrocarbons, mineral resources and relations with nearby regions. The authors conclude that development of the region is likely to continue because such work benefits Russia's economy as a whole. However, they point to five risk factors: a drop in the price of oil, continuing sanctions due to the fighting in Ukraine, the need to protect the environment, the fate of residents in the region, and the level of political stability in the Arctic region as a whole. The current situation is mainly under threat from spillover from the on-going Ukraine conflict, a place where no resolution is currently viable. One result is that sanctions are likely to continue, blocking the sale of Western technology that Russia needs to continue off-shore development (p. 42).

Speculation about the future prospects of the extent of shipping likely on the Northern Sea Route is a frequent topic of analysis in publications and conferences addressing the

Arctic's future. Here Natsuhiko Otsuka, Toru Tamura, and Masahiko Furuichi argue that currently economic conditions and political uncertainty are greater obstacles than natural barriers. Their chapter is particularly useful for readers interested in this topic since it presents a wealth of data that can put the shipping into context. The future prospects of trade across the top of Russia will depend on a host of factors, including market conditions, type of cargo, origin and destination of that cargo, demand, season, and punctuality of the shipping (p. 62). Maps contrasting the Arctic and Suez routes help to illustrate these points with great effect.

The Arctic is nothing if not a land of contradictions. Observers never tire of pointing out that climate change is occurring in the far north at twice the rate of change in more southerly regions. At the same time, Arctic economies rely on producing the very hydrocarbons that are propelling these changes forward. In fact, the more the climate changes and regions of the Arctic warm up, the easier it becomes for oil companies to drill for oil and gas in the polar region. How can these issues be reconciled? Lassi Heininen struggles with this Arctic paradox in his chapter, which points out that while some of the issues take place within a national framework, many of them are in fact global issues that may require a global solution (p. 92). The contribution by Daria Gritsenko and Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen shows that in its representations of the Arctic, the Russian government stresses the problems of climate change much more in its international messaging than it does in communications with a domestic audience (p. 203). And, as Tynkkynen points out, another paradox for Russia will be how to thrive after oil runs out (4).

The Arctic is typically portrayed as a zone of cooperation, with the 2010 agreement to delimit a sea boundary between Russia and Norway one example of how disputes can be resolved peaceably. However, Russia, Denmark, and Canada have now all made territorial claims to the various parts of the Arctic and it will be up to a UN committee to adjudicate who eventually will be able to control what. Valery Konyshhev and Alexander Sergunin argue that UN auspices are a good way to resolve these differences (pp. 108–9). While a decision is likely many years in the future, it remains unclear to what extent the losing sides will accept UN determinations.

This book provides an excellent overview of the issues that shape Russia's Arctic today. Given its approachable style and wealth of information, it is useful for both students learning about the area for the first time and experts who already have a base of knowledge.

Most helpfully, perhaps, is that the chapters also point out what we do not know now and where future research could be most helpful. For example, in their chapter on sustainable development in the Arctic, Gritsenko and Elena Efimova point out that we do not currently have enough high-quality environmental data to measure the impact of resource development on local conditions and human health. Such improved data will make it possible to examine the encounters of industry and society in greater detail and potentially assure a more sustainable future (p. 79).

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