

## **CONNECTING EURASIA AND THE AMERICAS: EXTENSION OF THE HISTORICAL SILK ROAD AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

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The Bering Strait crossing would link the entirety of Eurasia to the entirety of the Americas, and it can be seen as a natural extension of the historical Silk Road. There are some immense geopolitical benefits to such a project. It would bring about a profound and lasting change to the global economic and political outlook. The most valued function of the Bering Strait crossing and the extension of the associated railroad network would be to release the massive natural resources trapped underneath the tundra and permafrost for the benefit of Russia and the world. Moreover, the railroad project(s) would also build development corridors in those underdeveloped parts of the Russian Federation. The development of the resources and their rapid transportation to the global markets would contribute not only to the overall development of the region but also would be valuable for the resource-poor countries of Northeast Asia such as Japan, Korea, and China (relative to its economic size). This paper will explore the possible impact(s) of the Bering Strait crossing as a formidable infrastructure project for the economic development of the Russian Far East (RFE) from the Russian perspective under the frame of geopolitics.

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Furthermore, it will equally scrutinize the implications for the adjacent countries in the region.

**Keywords:** Globalization, geopolitics, Russian Far East, Siberia, Eurasia, economic development, regionalism, Arctic region, Japan, Korea, China, strategy, cooperation, silk road

## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, rivalries between the great powers over natural resources have become astonishingly intense. This competition has reaffirmed itself in a rapid growth of commodity prices and some adjustments in geopolitical considerations. Russia has been benefiting from this situation due to its abundant natural resources on its vast territory.

The rich history of Russian political and economic relations gives ample leadership examples. The avant-garde pushes the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo in various issue areas. Russian distinctiveness regarding divergent thinking creates many opportunities to determine Russia's place in the world. This history, in many respects, also provides commanding clues vis-à-vis Russia's current position in the global political economy. First and foremost, the Bering Strait<sup>1</sup> crossing project, although it seems for many as a misapprehension, reflects the Russian avant-garde drive and spirit.

The Bering Strait rail system, by letting free the vast natural resources trapped underneath the tundra and permafrost, would facilitate the development of the resources in question and their rapid transportation to the global markets, which could contribute to the overall development of these regions. There is no doubt that rail connections in the Russian Far East<sup>2</sup> (RFE) would also generate development cor-

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the strait originates from Vitus Bering, a Danish explorer in the service of the Russian Empire, who entered the region in 1728. The International Date Line (established in 1884, 17 years after the sale of Alaska to the Americans by Tsar Alexander II) passes through the Bering Strait between the Russian and American Diomed Islands, which in turn leaves the Russian and American sides usually on different calendar days.

<sup>2</sup> Up to the 21st century, the RFE lacked officially defined boundaries; generally speaking, the term "Siberia and the Far East" was often used for all regions remaining in the eastern part of the Urals. However, in 2000, during President Putin's first term, the Russian Federation went through a new territorial reorganization which gave birth to larger federal districts. On that occasion, the Far

ridors within which new urban centers would flourish, and existing ones would gain further dynamism, having an impact similar to the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad<sup>3</sup> in the early 20th century.

Right now, most of the Siberian population is concentrated around the Trans-Siberian Railroad, and the RFE is practically empty. As new cities emerge or the existing ones enlarge, they will magnify the erection of brand-new manufacturing businesses/assembly lines, and necessitate the construction of school systems, electricity grids, water systems, and health/hospital systems. This would indubitably entail an expansion of the labor force and overall population, which in turn would increase the population density in those thinly populated areas. Equally, it would be fair to assume that, on a geopolitical level, the movement of goods between Eurasia and the Americas, at previously unheard-of speeds, would revolutionize global productive connections (Deniston 2013; Douglas 2007; Nikishenkov 2011; Panin 2013).

Northeast Asia is also home to four of the biggest economies in the world – namely, Japan, Korea, China, and Russia. The member countries of this strategic quadrangle represent slightly more than one-fourth of global domestic product (GDP)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, if we include in that picture the United States and Canada, then the figure reaches a level of more than half of global GDP. The Bering Strait crossing would connect all those economies in a very efficient way.

The research questions in this study are centered on the contemporary characteristics of Northeast Asia. Thus, they are inherently exploratory and attempt to understand the possible impact(s) of connecting Eurasia and the Americas through a geopolitical prism. Hence, the article aims to contribute to a better perception of

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Eastern Federal District (FEFD) was formed, including Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Kamchatka Oblast with Koryak Autonomous Okrug, Amur Oblast, Magadan Oblast, Primorsky Krai, the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, Khabarovsk Krai, and Sakhalin Oblast, and Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Since 2000, the designation “Far East” has frequently been used by Russians about the FEFD. In that sense, the Far East covers an area of 6.2 million square kilometers, which is in turn approximately one-third of Russia’s total area.

<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the Century, Russian Tsar Alexander III and Tsarevich Nicholas II, showing a spectacular vision, leadership and dedication, initiated the Trans-Siberian Railroad (1891-1916), covering more than 9,000 km which also included the southern Chinese branch connecting Chita and Vladivostok through Harbin in Manchuria. The Trans-Siberian is the longest railroad line in service. Currently, the line is still further expanding into various parts of Siberia and the RFE.

<sup>4</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund, the nominal global GDP in 2016 was \$75 trillion. The total GDP of the four nations of Northeast Asia would be, grosso modo, \$20 trillion (Russia \$1.3 trillion, Japan \$5 trillion, Korea \$1.5 trillion, China \$12 trillion). Moreover, if the above figures are calculated in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms instead of USD denominated nominal values, then we may have even more spectacular statistics.

what/how different factors constrain/shape the future trajectories of the Northeast Asian strategic quadrangle. In that respect, among others, the RFE can play a central role in instigating cooperation in the region.

To this end, this article will delve into the RFE after providing a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature on geopolitics and regionalism. The subsequent sections will highlight the rationale behind connecting Eurasia and the Americas by focusing not only on the significance of the natural resources in the region for global economic development but also the importance of economic growth for this sparsely populated part of the Russian Federation. The remaining sections will address the relationships taking place in the Northeast Asian strategic quadrangle between Russia and Japan/China/Korea by bringing attention to the significant benefits for all parties of connecting Eurasia and the Americas through the Bering Strait.

## **GEOPOLITICS**

In the 21st century, like in previous historical periods, geography is still indispensable for analyzing some major geopolitical, environmental, and socio-economic conflicts of the contemporary world. In fact, geographical reasoning can provide valuable hints about the challenges that we face currently. In that sense, Northeast Asia is host to a number of security competitions and witnesses severe tension and small-scale violence (Lind 2014). Therefore, it would be futile to reflect on geography just in static and descriptive terms. Most certainly, geography can improve our understanding of many malfeasances of our times ranging from the global freshwater crisis to refugee/immigration matters to sustainable development. Along with this line of logic, the Bering Strait crossing is much more than just a flamboyant infrastructure project (Murphy 2015).

## **METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS**

This article is inspired by a geopolitical method for analyzing the significance of connecting Eurasia and the Americas. Geopolitics is essential to the understanding of the behavior of human societies organized into complex, geographically well-defined systems. Evidently, in modern times, this approach has translated itself to the study of nation-states. Notably, three intertwined notions, namely, economics, war, and poli-

tics, are instrumental in understanding the behavior of nation-states. They are an indivisible entity together establishing the reality of the nation-state. Subsequently, the nation can be viewed as a wealth-producing and wealth-defending structure connected through a complex web of domestic and foreign relations performed by individuals governing the nation-state (Friedman 2011).

Geopolitics offers an overarching approach by eliminating these distinct spheres of economics, military, and politics, which in turn provides a more coherent picture of the social reality of the nation-state. Political and military power continually influences economic life and vice versa. It is impossible to imagine war without taking into account politics and economics. Equally, it is inconceivable to think of domestic or foreign policy without weighing economic and military matters. In crude terms, the abovementioned three aspects were only conceived to organize human activities into manageable pieces. The reality is only seemingly made more manageable, and in fact, is falsified (Friedman 2011). The conventional classification of these aspects imagines distinctions that don't exist and complexities that hide rather than expose the nature of the problem at hand.

There is no doubt that geopolitics is also an abstraction, but it has the virtue of not creating imaginary distinctions. Geopolitics, by adding a forced simplification, provides a more comprehensive view of reality. At this junction, it would be fair to assert that geopolitics is the quest for the center of gravity of reality. Most certainly, the factors and actors at play are never entirely political, military or economic. However, they are neglected and deemed insufficient due to the fact that they are considered just too simple (Friedman 2008). The idea of using geopolitics to understand the rationale behind the Bering Strait crossing is to set the essential parameters and distinguish the broad direction.

## CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS

It is noticeable that the Eurasian transport corridors have always captured and captivated Western and Eastern imaginations throughout history. All new initiatives and projects regarding Eurasian connectivity are indicative of these tendencies, inclinations, and fascinations. To a certain extent, the Bering Strait crossing is the natural continuity of the current "New Silk Road"<sup>5</sup> projects taking place at the heart of cen-

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<sup>5</sup> It was the German traveler and geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen who first coined the

tral Eurasia. At this junction, I would like to provide a very brief intellectual review of the prominence of Eurasia in geopolitical thought (Erdem 2016). However, it is critical to recognize that Eurasia is a highly debated, contested and elusive term with different meanings and perceptions in time and space.

Any discussion about Eurasian geopolitics should start with the seminal work of Sir Halford Mackinder: “The Geographical Pivot of History.” Mackinder regards the Eurasian continent as the “world-island” that contains two-thirds of the world’s population, identifying the defining nature of certain geographic relationships, particularly the “Pivot” or “Heartland” area of Eurasia (Mackinder 1904). Outside of the Pivot area is designated as the marginal or inner crescent. The parameter surrounding the heartland contains the “marginal regions,” which he divided into four geographic areas. Asia is home to two of these regions, which he called monsoon lands (China and India), separated from each other by the Himalayan mountain range. The remaining two areas surrounding the pivot are Europe and the “lands of the five seas” or the Middle East. Accordingly, these geographic regions coincide with the spheres of influence of the four major religions with the most followers: two Abrahamic religions, Islam/Christianity, and two Eastern religions, Hinduism/Buddhism (Erdem 2016). For this early work on geopolitics, it is indisputable that the current RFE and Northeast Asia seem to be just at the fringe of anything quintessential in international relations.

Additionally, Nicholas J. Spykman’s “The Geography of the Peace” built upon Mackinder’s work in a more extensive and focused manner (Spykman 1944). He asserts another layer of explanation, so-called “The Rimland,” which is the intermediate region between the Pivot and the seas. He argues that there is a new mobility in the Eurasian landmass due to improvements in the infrastructure of rail, road, and airplanes, though the natural obstacles of transportation keep the central Eurasian region from realizing its potential in the immediate future. Spykman’s *Rimland* approach, by building on Mackinder’s *Inner Crescent*, allocated a strategic function to Northeast Asia and the RFE by firmly placing them on the geopolitical map (Erdem 2016).

Moreover, in addition to the above mentioned two seminal works on geopolitics, in the closing decade of the 20th century, Samuel P. Huntington introduced a trans-

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term “silk road” in his multivolume historical geography of China (1877–1912). Moreover, another German geographer, August Hermann, used the term “silk road” for the first time in the title of his 1915 essay, “The Silk Roads from China to the Roman Empire,” highlighting the corridor from the “east” to the “west.”

formative ideological piece of geopolitical theory coined “The Clash of Civilizations.” He presents his work as a theory of culture and civilization that utilizes a modernization theory of political violence (Huntington 1997). In that sense, it is also very much a geopolitical theory, since civilizations are in part defined by a specific, generally fixed territory. He argues that conflict in the post-Cold War era would take place between diverging cultures instead of ideologies. Indeed, Northeast Asia represents a cultural fault line separating Russian, American and Chinese/Japanese/Korean cultures from one another. Subsequently, it would be a zone prone to future conflicts.

### **PRACTICAL ASPECTS: NORTHERN SEA ROUTE<sup>6</sup> AND THE BERING STRAIT**

Although the Russian Far East/Siberia and Bering Strait crossing may seem inconsequential as the periphery of Eurasia, the intensification of globalization, revolutionary transformations in telecommunication/transportation technologies, global climate change, and global demographic trends indicate otherwise.

For instance, the Arctic Ocean is melting at a startling pace. There are some serious implications of this Arctic melting. On the one hand, the ecological balance in the region will change with the thinning of the ice. There will be implications for the global climate, too. The waters of the Arctic Ocean will absorb more heat from the sun, thus introducing more energy into the ocean. On the other hand, there are some potent geopolitical implications of the Arctic’s melting. This phenomenon will make the Arctic Ocean navigable throughout the year. The sea route linking the North American continent with Europe and Asia will shorten the shipping distance between Europe and Asia by over 4,000 kilometers and will lead to changes in the patterns of global trade and shipping (Gupta 2009). The Bering Strait, which is the mid-point in this growing connectivity, was considered for a long time as an inconsequential pe-

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<sup>6</sup> The author of this article prefers to use the term Northern Sea Route (NSR) instead of Northeast (NEP) or Northwest Passage (NWP) to avoid Eurocentric geopolitical classifications. The Northeast Passage is, from the European and northern Atlantic point of view, the shipping route to the Pacific Ocean, along Russian and Norwegian coasts. On the other hand, the Northwest Passage refers to the route along the Canadian coast. Technically speaking, the Northern Sea Route, as it is defined in Russian law, and does not include the Barents Sea and therefore does not reach the Atlantic Ocean. However, since the NSR has a significant overlap over the majority of the NEP, sometimes the NSR term has been used to refer to the entirety of the Northeast Passage.

riphery in political geography; however, in the coming decades, it could be right in the middle of a rapidly expanding trade route.

The Arctic region is witnessing a significant change in terms of conflict and cooperation. In the recent past, militarization was in greater demand than cooperation. However, with the Cold War over and the Arctic's return to peace, the international community and international law are demanding greater cooperation and much less militarization. The current issues facing the Arctic region have developed around the concept of sovereignty. There is no doubt that the Arctic states may eventually resolve their disputes in accordance with international law (Allain 2011).

Nonetheless, the difference between these Arctic states is the degree to which they are cooperating and militarizing, thus making the future of the new Arctic uncertain and fragmented. If the New Arctic is indeed based on cooperation, Arctic states must enter into it with a common goal and a common understanding of how real cooperation is to be achieved. Certainly, the Bering Strait crossing and accompanying infrastructure projects, by creating a mutually propitious milieu, would be instrumental in establishing that cooperative behavior for all nation-states involved. Russia's approach in the Arctic has been to create a win-win situation, that is, gain early military and commercial regional supremacy and hope to win equally at the United Nations and other multilateral platforms<sup>7</sup>. Uncertainty remains as to how Russia will attempt to maintain this win-win strategy as the other Arctic states are now approaching the Arctic differently. Canada, Denmark, and the United States, in varying degrees, have placed more emphasis on cooperation and bilateral governance structures. They are nevertheless feeling the pressure of Russia's militarization and ever-increasing commercial capabilities (Allain 2011).

## REGIONALISM

Northeast Asian countries are pivotal to understanding the overall rise of Asia in global politics. The region has achieved one of the most profound economic transformations in recorded history in a considerably short period, and it represents a wide

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<sup>7</sup> Russia is currently increasing its military activity in the Arctic by developing its fleet of ice breakers and its naval force, thus making its military the Arctic's strongest. Russia's seven newest icebreakers have multi-mission capabilities and are fueled by nuclear reactors capable of breaking through ice twice as thick as its diesel competitors. Russia has 18 icebreakers in its military fleet, including the largest and most powerful icebreaker in the world.



range of diversity in terms of economic development, political governance, socio-cultural profile, and socio-religious traditions (Dent 2016). It will be valuable to discuss the relevant literature on regions and regionalism to design a cognitive map of the Bering Strait and the adjacent area such as the RFE or Northeast Asia as a region. The coming decades may witness the strengthening of existing regional systems or the naissance of many loose and new regional systems (Erdem 2015). This article conceptualizes the growth of regional systems as an important step within the process of globalization<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, a comprehensive study of the areas adjacent to the Bering Strait requires a multidisciplinary approach to embrace different fields of research and offer valuable holistic perspectives on regionalism.

There are multiple definitions of a region and each reflects the peculiarities of a specific historical period of the international system and adjusts itself to the changing environment. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, certain definitions referred to geo-strategic regions (Mackinder 1919), to physiographic characteristics (Vance 1951), or to a homogeneity of economic and social structures within a national context (Odum 1936; Odum and Moore 1938). In the Cold War era, Bruce Russett illustrated the complex process of identifying a “region.” He emphasized a number of criteria such as cultural similarity, common political orientation, institutional membership, transaction flows, and proximity. A region is determined as such if it has attained a certain minimum score when measured quantitatively against these criteria (Russett 1967). Several scholars developed an approach of a region as subsystems based mostly on geographic regions such as either side of the North Atlantic (Hoffmann 1963), Southeast Asia (Brecher 1963; Modelski 1963) or Africa (Zartman 1973).

In the post-Cold War era, International Relations (IR) scholars started to redefine these concepts along with the concept of globalization. Holm and Sorensen (1995) provide four different definitions of the concept of region: geographical units with natural barriers (e.g., the Caucasus and Africa); social or cultural entities (e.g., Polynesia and the Iberian Peninsula); organized political units (e.g., the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area); and regions of identity (e.g., Central Asia and Latin America). Andrew Hurrell’s definition implies that regionalism is understood as an integral part of globalization by intensifying market interaction and the flow of people and that awareness in regional identity can be instrumental in the creation of

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<sup>8</sup> For further information and discussion on regionalism and regions, see Erdem, C. (2015). “Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization.” In *Regional Economic Integration and the Global Financial System*, E. Sorhun, Ü. Hacıoğlu & H. Dinçer (Eds.), (pp. 257-273). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

regionalism (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995). It is assumed that regionalism is a unifying process rather than fragmenting on an international level. Bjorn Hettne after identifying three models of region—trading blocs, geopolitical division, and process of regionalization—claims that the “new regionalism” is the outcome of the process of regionalization and represents a version of “extended nationalism.” Subsequently, he develops five levels of regional complexity with an evolutionary logic—geographical unit, ecological unit, social system organized cooperation, regional civil society, and region as an acting subject. This new regionalism differs from the old one in three important ways. The new one is the product of a multipolar world order, created “from within,” and represents a multidimensional process. On the other hand, the old one was the product of the bipolar Cold War context, created “from above,” and specific in terms of objectives (Farrell, Hettne, and Langenhove 2005; Hettne, Inotai, and Sunkel 1999);).

## **THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

For centuries, the territories of the Russian empire located to the east of the Ural Mountains were considered places of promise and natural resource wealth (Kangas 2007). Over three centuries, imperial Russia expanded both northward and southward across Siberia. After the Treaty of Peking was signed in 1689, Russia directed its energy toward the Sea of Okhotsk, Kamchatka, Chukotka, the Kuril Islands, and Alaska. Russia entered the Amur region in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1856 and 1857, Russia seized Chinese territory north of the Amur River. In 1860, all land east of the Ussuri River was ceded to Russia, thus extending the Russian empire from the Baltic to the Pacific (Troyakova 2007).

After the disastrous Crimean War of 1854–56, Russia’s priorities shifted away from the Northeast Pacific. Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867. The central and northern Kurils were handed over to Japan in exchange for Sakhalin in 1875. Soon a combination of external and internal developments forced the Russian government to upgrade the Far East to accommodate imperial priorities. In 1884, the Transbaikal, Amur, Primorye, and Sakhalin districts were merged to create the new Priamurskii governorship. This new territorial entity established an institutional framework for the regional identity of the Far East (Troyakova 2007).

As the Trans-Siberian Railroad extended steadily eastward, it brought European and Asian Russia together. Not only ethnic Russians but also other imperial subjects

such as Ukrainians and Tatars moved to the Far East, where they discovered Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese populations residing within the Priamurskii governorship. This unusual ethnic mix shaped regional development and added a cosmopolitan shade to Russian life.

From the end of the nineteenth century through the years leading up to World War I, the region played an important economic role in East Asia. It attracted loans and investments that supported its industrialization process. Although the economic interaction between the region and the rest of Russia was limited, the Far East was the gateway for Moscow to initiate relations with Asian countries. Labor resources were satisfied by migration not only from the European part of Russia but also from China, Korea, and Japan. In general, the region was seen as a place for agriculture, political exile, and a military base for the Russian Pacific Fleet at Vladivostok (Bliakher and Vasil'Eva 2010).

During the early Soviet period, the region—then known as the Far Eastern Republic—developed as a relatively autonomous economic area. However, in the 1930s, Moscow adopted a model of centralized state control and support. The Soviet system imposed a centrally planned economy, limiting the region's economic ties with the outside world. The central government provided substantial economic support because of the geostrategic significance of the region, but it paid little attention to the long-term economic viability of the Far Eastern economy. Moscow stressed the development of mining and defense industries, eventually turning the region into a fortress (Kuhrt 2012).

During the apex of the Cold War years, the massive Soviet arms buildup in the Far East and Northeast Asia was a constant source of considerable concern for all neighboring countries—China, Japan, and South Korea. By the early 1960s, as a result of the deteriorating relations, the Sino-Soviet border was closed. Mao Zedong<sup>9</sup>, the ultimate leader of China, openly spoke of his country's legitimate claim to the southern part of the Russian Far East<sup>10</sup>, which is sometimes referred to as outer Manchuria.

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<sup>9</sup> The Sino-Soviet split took place between 1960 and 1989. It started during the Nikita Khrushchev years and lasted until the visit of Mikhail Gorbachev to Beijing in 1989. The deterioration of political and ideological relations between the two largest communist countries was instrumental in Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s and facilitated by the disastrous policies of Mao Zedong through the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

<sup>10</sup> The Aigun Treaty of 1858 between the Russian Empire and the Qing Dynasty forged the current configuration of the Sino-Russian border along the Amur River, modifying the almost two-century-old Nerchinsk Treaty of 1689. Russia gained access to a further 600,000 sq. km on the left bank of the Amur, known as Priamurye, which had belonged to China up to that time. Furthermore, the year 1860

Seemingly, this hostile environment was not conducive to economic contacts.

Moscow later eased its grip, and the Far East became one of the few regions in the Soviet Union where the central authorities encouraged an export-based development strategy. In the 1970s and 1980s, the region was supposed to benefit from expanded trade with Asian countries, particularly through a number of compensation agreements between the Soviet Union and Japan. The region's natural resources were offered in order to finance purchases of machinery and equipment for further resource development. As a result of these agreements, several projects were implemented, including the Vostochnyi port near Nakhodka, and the South Yakutia coal complex. Initial work to develop the oil and gas deposits offshore of Sakhalin Island also began. The region also has considerable reserves of iron, lead, zinc, silver, gold, lumber, farmland, and fish (Sullivan and Renz 2010; Zausaev 2012).

By the mid-1980s, the Far East began to reorient from a military outpost to an economic player. The successful development of China's growing economy improved the chances for greater trade and joint projects between the two countries. Indeed, over the past twenty years, Russia and China have sought new points of agreement for broader and more institutionalized cooperation.

During the last years of the USSR, in 1986 and again in 1988, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev called for the integration of the Soviet Union into the Asia-Pacific region. He stressed that the Cold War era was coming to an end and the Soviet government would like to open the Far East by adopting a more diversified economic profile for the region.

Up to recent times, Russia did not develop strategy and implement large-scale economic programs for the development of port facilities in the waters of the Chukchi Sea, the Bering Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the East Sea. After the tormented first decades following the collapse of the USSR, the RFE became one of the most strategically important regions of Russia, and its development carries national and global significance. The further development of the manufacturing capacity of the region would determine Russia's role in a significant economic zone of the world, namely the Asia-Pacific region. The degree to which the transportation, telecommunications, and social infrastructure of the RFE are developed would strategically predetermine the export potential of the country (Rozman, Togo, and Ferguson 2006).

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saw the signing of the Convention of Beijing, again, with very advantageous terms for Russia, which gained complete control over the Primorye region down to Vladivostok. From the Chinese point-of-view, both treaties are considered unequal, illustrating the Western imperialist period, infamously the "Century of Humiliation."

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF NATURAL RESOURCES FOR GLOBAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

It is central to emphasize the relevance of natural resources regarding the Bering Strait crossing project. Natural resources, certainly, are a source of potential international cooperation. The shared interest of producers and consumers in commodity trade can be the source of harmonious relations among states. International cooperation is needed to bring these resources from remote reserves to consumer centers. To this end, development projects such as the Bering Strait crossing can be structured in such a way that all the participants benefit from them (Moran and Russell 2009; Ross 2004; Russett 1979; Stulberg 2007; Victor and Victor 2003; Winchester 2007; Winrow 2007; Yergin 2006).

On the other hand, a competition for natural resources – necessary for any economic development – can also be a source of potential conflict between states. For instance, energy resources are regarded as a source of zero-sum or mixed-sum competition because the amount of hydrocarbons in the world is limited (Chun 2008; Ebel 2009). To a great extent, politics determines economics and reflects the concern for war. The view that force and the threat to use force are the salient features of the international system means that states must prepare for future conflicts. Heavy reliance on foreign suppliers for strategic resources, such as oil, natural gas, and coal, can be a threat to national security. Consequently, in a situation of crisis or war, access to those vital resources can be denied. Given the importance of energy to a state's ability to wage war, disruptions in supply could put national security and independence at risk.

In that respect, Siberia and the Russian Arctic Region have been of particular interest to the great powers due to its possibly vast natural resources and strategic location. In fact, any analysis of energy issues can no longer be reduced merely to a discussion of supply and demand in the world market, but must also focus on global energy security from geopolitical and geoeconomic perspectives (Vahn 2017). In this strategic milieu, major oil and gas consumers such as the United States, the European Union, China, Japan, South Korea, and India are paying close attention to developments in that particular region. To this end, Russia is making every effort to retain influence over its strategic resources (Howard 2009).

It is critical to understand that Siberia (Akaha 1997; Davis 2003; Forsyth 1992; Gentes 2008; Groisman and Gutman 2013; Hill and Gaddy 2003; Hudgins 2003; Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov; Naumov 2006; Wood 2011) and the Russian Arctic are one of the richest regions in the world in terms of its petroleum, natural gas, coal

and mineral resources. It also has immense geopolitical importance. Over the last two decades, there has been considerable interest vis-à-vis the Arctic region in Western academic circles (Allain 2011; Anderson 2009; Byers 2009; Emmerson 2010; Erdem 2013; Gerhardt et al. 2010; Grant 2010; Howard 2009; Wilder 2010; Young 2011) and in Russian academia (Evdekimov, Vsotskaya, and Kostlev 2012; Ivashov and Kefeli 2012; Kharlampieva 2011; Konovalov 2010; Kozmenko, Selin, and Shchegolkova 2012; Kuznetsov 2011; Lebedev 2011; Nikolaeva 2010; Rudomiotkin and Nagorskiy 2010; Savelyeva and Shiyan 2010; Selin and Tsukertan 2008; Sosnin and Ryzhov 2010; Stolbov 2009; Tamitskiy 2012; Timoshenko 2011; Vasilev, Selin, and Tereshchenko 2009; Vsevolodovich 2012).

With advances in science and technology (particularly over the last decades), it is possible to measure and quantify the economic potential of these resources more accurately. Consequently, it would be fair to argue that this changing situation has made the region more attractive for the big powers surrounding it. Russia, with an extensive coastline in the Arctic zone, has increased its strategic operations and started to sign some international economic agreements concerning the region (Byers 2009; Dalby 2003; Emmerson 2010; Fairhall 2010; Gerhardt et al. 2010; Grant 2010).

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE BERING STRAIT CROSSING FOR THE RFE**

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Russia and the United States have been holding talks on probable collaboration on this issue and have given some important indications of joint efforts to construct a railway tunnel under the Bering Strait to link Siberia with Alaska. During the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in 2012 at the Russian Pacific port city of Vladivostok, the Russian Railways president asserted that the project to extend a railway line to Kamchatka and then to build a tunnel across the Bering Strait could be actualized in the not very distant future (Douglas 2007). The technical and financial aspects of the project are not that much related to the tunnel itself (somewhere around 100 kilometers), but in building links to the tunnel from existing rail lines in Russia, the United States and Canada. On the one hand, from the Russian perspective, the Bering tunnel is meant to connect to the Trans-Siberian and Baikal-Amur main line subsequently—*Baikalo-Amurskaya magistral*—and would require about 4,000 kilometers of rail lines to be built from Yakutsk (Sakha Republic/Yakutia). On the other hand, in the United States and Canada, ap-

proximately 2,000 kilometers of track would need to be made ready from the tunnel's landing point to the existing rail connection in Canada. It's hard to come up with exact figures on the total cost of the project. However, estimates range from \$35 billion to as much as \$100 billion (Panin 2013).

Moreover, Russia also plans to build a railroad that links Eurasia with Sakhalin Island—extremely well endowed regarding natural gas fields—and eventually reaches Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. The Ministry for Development of the Russian Far East has said that construction would start in 2017 on the 580-kilometer railroad that will connect the Khabarovsk region and Sakhalin Island. A bridge is envisioned over the narrowest part of the Tartar Strait<sup>11</sup>. The total cost of the project is estimated to be at around \$10 billion (Nishimura 2013).

In recent years, the RFE has also been a point of interest in academic circles (Alexeeva 2008; Arsenov, Artemkina, and Zabojev 2005; Barkovsky 2006; Blank 2011; Bliakher and Vasil'Eva 2010; Kangas 2007; Kuhrt 2012; Nemchaninova and Buldygerova 2012; Rozman 2008; Sullivan and Renz 2010; Troyakova 2007; Vishinevskii and Demyanenko 2010; Zausaev 2012). It is considered a region in crisis due to troubled economic conditions, corrupt governance, and problem-ridden cross-border relations with China, Japan, and both Koreas (Rozman 2008). Due to some fears that the Russian Far East might disengage itself from the center and other regional/global powers may end up having a major grip on the region, Moscow has started to show some genuine interest in these eastern border provinces (Kangas 2007).

The region in question covers a broad geographical area from Siberia to Russia's Pacific coast, forming the northeastern corner of Asia. Although the Far East constitutes one-third of Russia's total landmass, it has only 6.6 million residents—4.7 percent of the total population. The low population density, just over one person per square kilometer, makes the region one of the most sparsely populated places in the world. The scarcity of residents exists alongside a wealth of natural resources that have attracted the interest of the Russian central government as well as foreign investors. The current situation is deemed so critical that President Putin approved a law offering land plots of 2.5 acres to any Russian citizen willing to migrate to the RFE with the aim of boosting the economy in the region. Furthermore, foreign entrepreneurs investing \$10 million or more in the economy of the RFE can receive Russian citizenship without going through the required five-year legal stay on Russian

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<sup>11</sup> The Tartary Strait divides the Russian island of Sakhalin from the Eurasian continent and connects the Sea of Okhotsk with the East Sea. It is 4–20 m deep and 7.3 km wide at the narrowest point.

territory (Kovalev 2017). Evidently, Russian politicians and bureaucrats/technocrats are all concerned about the level of socioeconomic development in the region (Troiyakova 2007).

However, it would be fair to assert that the developmental troubles of the RFE partly relate to the region's history and location. The USSR also neglected the region socio-economically until its collapse in 1991. After the disintegration of the Union, the RFE, like many other regions, was to a great extent abandoned by the financially struggling central government in Moscow. The extended negligence towards the region has left the RFE provinces economically vulnerable, demographically challenged, and geographically isolated. The Russian government has recently begun to focus unequivocally on rejuvenating the RFE. The decades-long dynamic economic growth and surging global trade in neighboring China have drawn the international community's attention to the potentiality of further developments in the Pacific region. The geopolitical center-of-gravity moving to the East through the transformation of the global political and economic state of affairs has given birth to a reassessment of Moscow's policy in the RFE. Notably, given the region's exorbitant amount of natural resources and its strategic location, Russia has initiated an overhaul of its policy guidelines vis-a-vis the region (Alexeeva 2008; Blank 2011).

Russian leadership considers the development of transportation infrastructure a fundamental element for uplifting the large underdeveloped regions of Siberia and the RFE. The planned road, rail, and pipeline system would be instrumental in intensifying the integration of the global trade. Moreover, it will make it possible to connect more of eastern Russia's hydroelectric potentiality. Russian leadership envisions a 4,000-km rail line from the Lena River to the Bering Strait, as a high-priority task and very consequential in terms of economic development. The Lena is the easternmost of Siberia's three great river systems – the others being the Yenisei and Ob Rivers – and is the tenth longest river in the world. Consequently, it will allow development of previously inaccessible mineral resource deposits. The connection of the power systems of Siberia, the RFE, and North America would generate significant economies in electricity supply (Douglas 2007).

There is no doubt that spectacular economic growth is taking place in Asia and the world's economic center has swung towards the Pacific region. The prevalence of transatlantic trade is losing momentum to the benefit of transpacific trade. The industrial regions of China, South Korea, and Japan can be linked to the Russian railroad system with the ultimate goal of connecting them to the manufacturing centers of the midwestern United States and the critical Pacific ports in California, Washington State



and British Columbia. The Bering Strait crossing can be an essential *raison d'être* to trigger such a project. Consequently, it is possible to observe a significant geopolitical shift towards the Pacific region. Due to global warming, the melting of Arctic ice is opening up northern shipping routes and Arctic development is increasingly becoming an area of significance with major untapped resource deposits. The extensive resources available in the Arctic can be developed, and raw/semi-processed/processed goods can be rapidly delivered to the industrial centers in question at each end of Asia and North America, radiating the effects of a higher level of productivity throughout the global economy (Deniston 2013).

### **STRATEGIC QUADRANGLE IN NORTHEAST ASIA: RUSSIA, CHINA, JAPAN AND KOREA**

Northeast Asia is home not only to two members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) – China and Russia – but also three countries with nuclear weapon capabilities (Russia, China, and North Korea) and two of the world's largest economies (Japan and China). All these aspects converge around the unstable pivot of the Korean Peninsula. Probably, it ranks today among the most dangerous areas of the planet, tormented by security problems of nuclear proliferation (Rozman, Hyun, and Lee 2008). However, despite all these unfavorable facets, the Bering Strait crossing can present an opportunity to strengthen the evolution of social, economic, and political ties among Japan, Russia, China and both Koreas. Currently, regarding the political uncertainties, Northeast Asia, along with the Middle East, holds a dangerous potential to transform the global outlook. However, an economic interdependence facilitated by the transport corridors of the Bering Strait crossing would be a significant catalyst to establish a constructive environment.

The Third Eastern Economic Forum, which was held in Vladivostok in September 2017, affirmed again the efforts of Moscow to attract much-needed foreign investment and expand international cooperation for the economic development of the RFE. These resolutions are good indications showing the vulnerabilities of the RFE such as the process of depopulation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The primary rationale behind the Eastern Economic Forums in Vladivostok since 2015 has been to make foreign investment/economic collaboration attractive and beneficial to all parties in Northeast Asia. President Putin has highlighted, on numerous occasions, that the country's Far East region should become an absolute priority for

the entire 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some radical reformists have even argued about the so-called “Doctrine of De-Moscovication” of the Russian Federation by shifting the political and economic center of gravity from European Russia to East of the Ural Mountains (Velanskaya 2017).

## **RUSSO-JAPANESE RELATIONS**

The two new extensions of the iconic Trans-Siberian rail network are good indications showing Russian strategic thinking about the region. The first bridge would connect Vladivostok with Sakhalin Island through the Tartary Strait, while another bridge would connect the southern tip of Sakhalin with Japan’s northernmost island of Hokkaido. Consequently, Japan, for the first time in its history, would be joined directly to the Eurasian continent.

The Third Eastern Economic forum in Vladivostok was again instrumental in drafting the Muscovite plans for this direct rail connection to strengthen relations between the two countries. Historically speaking, the proposed bridge and tunnel would be as revolutionary as the Channel Tunnel joining Britain with the rest of Europe. There is no doubt that the materialization of this project will be a breakthrough in global politics. The envisaged rail connection would boost Japan’s trade with Eurasia and the Americas by lowering the transportation cost/time and increasing its dependability. That would give a much-needed stimulus to a stagnant Japanese economy.

The strategy of Russia’s Japan diplomacy aims to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and long-desired stability in bilateral relations—like Moscow’s initiatives vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula—with the hope that there would be some spillover impact and positive ramifications in other issue areas. To this end, during President Putin’s 2016 visit to Japan, the leaders declared a joint initiative on economic ventures in the South Kuril Islands while still being truthful to their respective positions regarding the Northern Territories. That was a win-win situation for both sides. For Japan, it was a step towards securing an economic presence in the region to further its territorial claims over the islands. For Russia, it was a great convenience to attract much-needed foreign investment to this undeveloped corner of the RFE.

Consequently, the long-disputed Kuril Islands issue between Russia and Japan may finally come to a halt, and the process of diplomatic normalization can be initiated through signing a comprehensive peace treaty.

## SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Historically speaking, Sino-Russian relations have probably gone through their golden years since the end of the Cold War. Both countries are working closely in a number of regional or international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization<sup>12</sup> (SCO) and BRIC<sup>13</sup> or Chinese initiated projects such as One Belt-One Road<sup>14</sup> (OBOR). This last project involves the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project, covering land routes, and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) project, covering sea routes (Toksoz 2017). On many levels, these are manifestations of China's rapid rise to global power status and have unquestionably changed the parameters of the strategic chess game in global politics. Consequently, its relationship with Russia is also frequently renegotiated because Russia is an important neighbor and a crucial natural resource base in a time of ever-growing Chinese energy hunger. Overall, it would be fair to describe the flourishing Sino-Russian relations as a game changer in international relations.

However, Chinese investment and China's growing presence in the RFE is viewed with suspicion by some Russian policymakers and administrators or simply locals. The arrival of Chinese migrants through Chinese investment is often perceived by locals as an expression of China's de facto territorial expansion. Russian public sensitivity over the issue originates from the ever-expanding Chinese economic and demographic realities (Zeihan 2017).

Russia is almost twice the size of China regarding territory, but China's population is about ten times that of Russia. Remarkably, as mentioned earlier in the article, the population of the RFE, comprising seven provinces, is only a little more than 6

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<sup>12</sup> The SCO is an intergovernmental organization founded on June 15, 2001, in Shanghai by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The primary objectives are establishing confidence and good neighborly relations between the member countries and promoting efficient collaboration in all areas ranging from politics/trade to science/technology to energy/transportation. It is clear that the end of the Cold War did bring with it some significant alterations to global politics. Russian and Chinese foreign policy concerns have become increasingly aligned, which in turn has been influenced by both countries' anxiety about American power in Eurasia as well as a joint preference for the construction of a multipolar international system rather than a system based on US hegemony. The SCO was a great vehicle for both countries to realize their strategic goals.

<sup>13</sup> BRIC is an acronym coined in 2001 by the former chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, Jim O'Neill, for Brazil, Russia, India, and China.

<sup>14</sup> OBOR is considered the most substantial overseas investment initiated by a single country. China is planning to invest up to \$900bn in infrastructure projects ranging from ports to high-speed railways to gas pipelines to increase Chinese access to markets. For further information, see Hancock 2017.

million—an average density of less than one person per square km. Furthermore, the region is going through a depopulation process with low birth rates and migration to other areas of the country deemed to have better living and working conditions. Since the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1991, the RFE has lost almost a quarter of its population (Tselichtchev 2017). That depopulation trend is notably affecting the agricultural sector. For instance, China and Russia have a long border of over 3000km, mostly along the RFE. The southernmost areas bordering China contain the majority of the RFE's arable land, and one-fifth is already owned or leased by Chinese entrepreneurs to produce vegetables, grains, and livestock.

Economic interests for both sides are complementary, not contradictory. The RFE needs Chinese labor resources, investment, and technologies. On the other hand, China needs the RFE's land and natural resources. In 2014, the Russian government enacted a bill establishing the Territories of Accelerated Development (TAD) law for the RFE, creating special economic zones providing significant tax and other benefits to attract foreign investors. However, Russia's desirability as an employment destination is fading fast because earnings in China are catching up very fast with Russian levels.

## **RUSSO-KOREAN RELATIONS**

After the establishment of the Korea Arctic Scientific Committee in 2011, Korea opened its first research station in Svalbard, the northernmost island of Norway in the Arctic Ocean. In 2009, for the first time, Korea used the Northern Sea Route (NSR) by sending two cargo ships from Ulsan and to Rotterdam via the Bering Strait. Throughout the last decade, there has been an increased awareness about the Arctic region among the Korean public. In October 2013, the Korean shipping liner Hyundai Glovis completed Korea's first cargo transportation through the NSR after a 35-day navigation (Tonami 2016).

South Korea enjoys a unique, stable and mutually beneficial relationship with one of the most critical Arctic coastal states, namely Russia. Unlike the remaining northeastern countries, there are no unsolved issues between these two countries. The relationship between Russia and South Korea is dependent on strategic triangular relations between South Korea, Russia, and North Korea. Russia borders North Korea just south of Vladivostok, and from Soviet times has provided full support as a staunch ally of North Korea.

Although South Korea and Russia had virtually no contact for three decades after the end of the Korean War, the 1980s saw a change not just in Soviet behavior vis-à-vis South Korea but also South Korean behavior regarding the USSR. From the Soviet point of view, the rationale behind such a strategic move was related to the very challenge of ignoring the rising economic power of South Korea. For an increasingly prosperous South Korea, communism was no longer something to be feared. On the one hand, since the normalization of relations in the 1990s, Russia has considered South Korea as an influential player in Northeast Asia and a key partner for its economic revitalization policies in the RFE. On the other hand, Russia views North Korea as a valuable opportunity in its attempt to initiate its long-desired diplomatic and geopolitical renaissance (Tonami 2016).

Most recently, Russo-South Korean relations look very promising after the South Korean president's speech at the Third Eastern Economic Forum in September 2017 highlighting the desire to expand financial, economic and trade links in Northeast Asia. South Korea's new northern policy is constructed around the strategy of "nine bridges" in the region, to open the era of the Pacific Ring. The approach involves projects ranging from natural gas pipelines to railroads to the Northern Sea Route. Evidently, President Moon's principal concern revolves around the current insecurity on the Korean Peninsula. South Korean authorities' attempts to create better ties with Russia are related to finding possible new diplomatic overtures to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. The Moon presidency, by promoting trilateral projects involving both Koreas and Russia, is aiming to connect the Korean Peninsula and the Russian Far East, and subsequently bring peaceful cohabitation on the peninsula.

At the same venue, along the same line of logic, President Putin also indicated Russian enthusiasm for putting together infrastructure projects with the participation of North Korea that would facilitate the delivery of Russian energy resources to both Koreas. The integration of power lines and railroad networks by connecting Russia, the Republic of Korea, and North Korea would also create an uninterrupted transport corridor from Pusan to London. Most importantly maybe, those initiatives would form a great platform to build up a much-needed atmosphere of mutual trust and stability on the Korean Peninsula. In crude terms, we can call those attempts a revival of the Sunshine Policy.

Consolidating the Korean Peninsula with the RFE would open a direct connection not only with Russia but also with the members of the Eurasian Economic Union<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The EAEU is an integrated single market—Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Tajikistan—of 183 million people and a GDP of \$2 trillion in nominal values.

(EAEU). The Russian grand strategy to create a Russia-Korean economic corridor would inherently require the interaction all of three countries, which in turn would be a preferable approach to alternative proposals presented by the Americans – economic sanctions or military solutions. It seems that the carrot-and-stick model is more suitable than tit-for-tat as a foreign policy orientation. The anticipation of material gain may push North Korea into a position of de-escalation regarding the nuclear issues.

## CONCLUSION

The recent developments vis-à-vis the RFE, in particular, have great potential to create a window of opportunity for further improvements of bilateral relations in the region. The construction of a major transport route by including infrastructure projects such as high-speed electric trains, a highway, power lines, oil and gas pipelines, and fiber optics would most certainly create an environment of trust and stability. Opposing arguments, mainly from some economists, indicate serious concerns and doubts about the economic feasibility of the project. It is important to remember that at the turn of the twentieth century, on a macroeconomic level, some economists/experts claimed that the Trans-Siberian Railroad—built between 1891 and 1916—would also not pay for itself, but it did so in only six years. More importantly, this visionary project politically and militarily made Tsarist Russia a powerful player in any Eurasian geostrategic calculations. Equally, the current project would also take some years to complete but would pay for itself considerably fast. It could contribute tremendously to Russian political/economic power in Eurasia.

Moreover, the Bering Strait crossing has a wider significance for global politics, security, and economics because the adjacent states with almost 30 million km<sup>2</sup> form one-fifth of the earth's landmass and half of global GDP. The Russian Federation and the United States are two of the most prominent states of the international system as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

There is no doubt that the RFE has many barriers to economic development. It is very important for Northeast Asian countries to establish a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship by following their converging interests. While discussing long-term prospects of cooperation, it is possible to envisage some scenarios of economic development that may be useful to policymakers. The active involvement of Korea and Japan in the economic development of the Russian Far East seems to be the best

way to accelerate not only the economic development of the region but also give a long due stimulus to their slowing economies. Consequently, it is possible to generate powerful arguments for such a policy regarding the region (Arsenov, Artemkina, and Zaboev 2005)

On the other hand, the very dynamic Chinese economy shows remarkable strength not only in the region but also all over the world. The length of the border between Russia and China in the RFE makes possible the development of joint production facilities by creating “frontier zones” of economic interaction. This desired economic interaction could make the region more attractive for Chinese labor, which in turn would promote stable/friendly interstate and inter-regional Russian-Chinese relations.

Moreover, the relationship in this Northeast Asian strategic quadrangle can be characterized by mutual security, cooperation and mutual economic development. There is no doubt that the countries in question have different political/economic systems and social structures and maybe more importantly dissimilar national interests. Consequently, there are often misapprehensions regarding a number of issues. However, through a regional cooperation scheme, all sides would get familiar with these situations which may prevent misreading each other. A strategic partnership between Japan, Korea, China and Russia should be forged on interests, rationality and the rule of law by avoiding the dangers of excessive sentimentality. The RFE can present a good opportunity and induce them to create the environment where the mutual interests of all sides would come together.

Although much remains to be done, this study mainly focused on the RFE and the strategic quadrangle countries in Northeast Asia. It was not in the scope of this paper to provide an extended discussion on the possible impacts on the Americas. However, the article would benefit substantially by extending the analysis to the US and Canadian side of the Bering Strait. An investigation of the possible benefits and drawbacks of the Bering Strait crossing for the Americas would be complementary to the current study by providing a better understanding of the big picture. Moreover, in future research, the author also intends to investigate in depth the impact of the Bering Strait crossing and the accompanying ambitious infrastructure projects from the Korean, Chinese and Japanese perspectives.

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