



Constructing a gas pipeline. Credit: [Wojciech Wrzesien / Shutterstock.com](#)

In the small hours of October 8th—the day after Hamas attacked Israel and Russian President Putin celebrated his birthday—the Fenno-Estonian [Balticconnector](#) gas pipeline and two underwater fiber-optic cables linking Estonia with Finland and Sweden through the Baltic Sea were broken.

Subsea cable ruptures are not unusual per se. They frequently occur from [negligence or poor seamanship](#). Yet, the location, peculiar timing—just over a year after a series of explosions shut down the Russo-German Nordstream 1 and 2 pipelines—and several other suspicious factors rapidly rang alarm bells.

The specter immediately loomed large that the damage, caused by “[external activity](#)” and “[mechanical force](#),” was not an accident, but an act of deliberate and state-ordered sabotage. With mystery came political uncertainty. Russia’s small neighboring NATO states felt they had been put on notice, and scholars, [pundits](#), and policy makers questioned how NATO might react.

---

Within days, Finnish investigators reported that MarineTraffic [AIS data](#) showed two vessels, the Hong-Kong-flagged Chinese container carrier *NewNew Polar Bear* and the Russian

Rosatomflot-operated *Sevmorput*, a nuclear-powered hydrographic icebreaker, traveling in tandem over all three sites at the times of the incidents. The 169m long *NewNew Polar Bear* and 260m long *Sevmorput* first sailed over the Estonia-Sweden cable near the island of Hiiumaa 133 kms (82 miles) before reaching the pipeline damage site in the Gulf of Finland between Inkoo and Paldiski. The two later crossed the Estonia-Finland cable 32 kms (20 miles) further East. By October 27th, Estonian President Kaja Kallas [stated](#), " We have reason to believe that the cases of Balticconnector and the communication cables are related."

In the media, fingers quickly pointed at the Kremlin. After all, Putin in 2022 started the largest war in Europe since World War II, resulting in a deep freeze in relations between Russia and the West and prompting Finland to join NATO in April 2023. In addition to the Nordstream episodes, [many](#) also [suspected the Russian state](#) to be responsible for severing a comms cable between mainland Norway and [Svalbard](#) in 2022. Russia, therefore, has a history of antagonizing or intimidating its northwestern neighbors by possibly destroying critical data or energy infrastructure. More concerning was the thought that [China](#) might have collaborated with Russia to antagonize European states on their own turf.

The recent incidents in the Baltic Sea interpolate increasingly common displays of Sino-Russian rapprochement, leading many observers to interpret them as manifestations of an expressed and shared long-term vision to create a "[post-Western](#)" and "[multipolar](#)" world order. In fact, as some commentators pointed out, the PRC frequently [engages](#) in maritime harassment and subversion; just earlier this spring, Beijing was [blamed](#) for cutting two undersea internet cables connecting Taiwan and its outlying Matsu islands.

Regarding the Balticconnector event, the Kremlin dismissed any suggestion of its involvement as "[complete rubbish](#)," while proclaiming that any threats made against Russia were "[unacceptable](#)." China, in turn, laconically [declared](#) that it expected an "[objective, fair and professional](#)" investigation and [stood](#) " ready to provide necessary assistance in accordance with international law." Thus far, neither Finland, Estonia, Sweden, nor NATO have specifically accused either Russia or the PRC of a deliberate attack. However, the [Atlantic Alliance](#) did respond, increasing patrols in the Baltic Sea and dispatching aircraft and minehunters to the region. Meanwhile, the plot over the two ships' possible [collaboration](#) and its implications for [a Russia-China nexus](#) has thickened.

---

Until June 2023, the *NewNew Polar Bear*, originally built in Germany and subsequently operated by diverse international owners, sailed under a Cypriot flag and bore the name *Baltic wTónSMDfuentnSfuentfuá*

Shipping, personifying a deeply awkward [Sino-Russian entanglement](#).

Notably, [Rosatom](#) (the State Atomic Energy Corporation) granted *NewNew Polar Bear* a traffic permit this summer to traverse Russia's Northern Sea Route. The *Polar Bear*, a [small container vessel](#), is not particularly profitable in terms of cargo load. Specifically, the ship can carry up to 1,600 boxes and is normally clearly intended for shorter routes, when large, long-range crafts transport some 10,000-25,000 TEU. She is, however, a special ship. Built to the highest standards for operating through polar ice, she, together with four other similar NewNew Shipping Line vessels, set sail in July from St. Petersburg, via Kaliningrad and Arkhangelsk, to Shanghai (also calling at Qingdao and Tianjin). This voyage, along with China's previous commercial and scientific excursions into the Russian Arctic, plus the April 2023 FSB-Chinese Coast Guard [agreement](#), clearly serves to [underpin](#) China's maritime ambitions under Beijing's "Belt and Road" initiative.

Arriving in the PRC on August 4th, *NewNew Polar Bear* returned a month later—after some alleged repairs to its anchors—via Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (Sept. 13th) and Kaliningrad (Oct. 3rd), reaching St. Petersburg on October 8th. Though accompanied by *Sevmorput*, she was the [first container ship](#) to achieve an unassisted Arctic round-trip.

Between October 10th and 12th, both left once more for Asia. *NewNew Polar Bear* stopped at Kaliningrad on the 13th and arrived at the port of Archangelsk on the 22nd. Here, ominous [photos](#) soon surfaced of the Chinese ship without its anchors.

Two days later, Finland's central criminal police [reported](#) that an anchor, weighing 6 tons and missing

one of its prongs, had been lifted from the seabed. There, Finnish authorities found deep drag marks on both sides of the fractured pipeline. Finland's National Bureau of Investigation officially [announced](#) a parallel lack of "visual confirm[ation] that both front anchors of the [Chinese] vessel were in their place."

Meanwhile, Finns (and Norwegians) were merely able to look on as the runaway *Polar Bear* journeyed onward in international waters where they were unable to stop it. "Unresponsive" and clearly "reluctant" to voluntarily engage with Finnish authorities' enquiries, she stubbornly steamed North, set to rendezvous with Russia's *Sevmorput* in the Barents Sea before embarking on the long voyage east to the Pacific. Still, while growing evidence pointed to Chinese [culpability](#) in the pipe and cable incidents, authorities could not rule out Russian complicity, or full agency.

There were more awkward pieces to fit into the puzzle:

First, according to sources referred to by *The Economist* journalist, [Shashank Joshi](#), between October 6th and 8th, the *NewNew Polar Bear* appeared to have taken on a new *Russian* crew during its Kaliningrad stop before the alleged "sabotage" occurred. Second, when the Chinese ship left Arkhangelsk on October 25th, it bore a freshly updated [Rosatom NSR sailing permission](#) to last [until mid-November](#). In a sinister twist, the name of the ship's operator was switched from Hainan Yangpu NewNew Shipping Co. to the Russian-registered arm of Torgmoll. [Third](#), the choice of Russian ports, Rosatom's close shadowing of the Chinese ship, and the latter's unusual small size raised the possibility that Chinese and Russian sailors performed a potentially sensitive exchange of a [high-value](#) goods on the NSR to circumvent the international sanctions regime imposed on Russia.



So, however awkward the *Polar Bear's* conduct, questions remain regarding the centrality of Russia's role in this disruption.

Regardless of whether the Baltic Sea incident was intentional, and whether the Russian or Chinese governments were directly complicit, Sino-Russian dual presence during the incidents unsettled Finns, Estonians, Swedes and Norwegians, further fraying nerves in an already volatile geopolitical environment and a regional theatre on edge. Given the many incongruities in Sino-Russian behavior on what's now effectively NATO's Northeastern flank, their active drive for political and economic synergies as they confront the "West," and their aggressive conduct and history of hybrid warfare elsewhere, strong suspicions over their motives and actual deeds persist.

Who, bar Russia (and to a lesser extent China), could benefit from sabotage against Western

Baltic-Sea infrastructure? Who would profit from causing upset and unease in an otherwise relatively peaceful and stable European neighborhood? What exactly were the roles of the Russian and Chinese states in the activities of the "private" companies involved? And what does this Balto-Arctic incident reveal about the Sino-Russian nexus with respect to a world order in flux?

---

The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China under Putin and Xi [share](#) the view that they have been unjustifiably lambasted by Western voices and ostracized from international dialogue. They also conceive of a world order in which the U.S. is a declining and hypocritical hegemon, and at least rhetorically believe that it is time to recognize the global reality as "multipolar." As wars rage in Europe and the Middle East, it is possible that Beijing and Moscow perceive in the current

Cargo ship in the Baltic Sea. Credit: [Aastels / Shutterstock.com](#)



geopolitical chaos an opportunity to assert their mutual interests behind turned backs.

The Sino-Russian relationship has garnered much

warfare," "gray-zone warfare," or, more recently, "sharp power." Each of these terms possess country-specific doctrinal definitions or varying scholarly interpretations. However, they all try to describe how states project power through economic, political, or otherwise unconventional manipulation, or aggression that falls short of war. "Sharp power" specifically addresses states' capacities to undermine faith in or the function of governing institutions. Gray-zone, or "sharp" techniques are difficult to rebuke because the agent who enacts them, the political or legal entity responsible for guarding against or penalizing them, and the appropriate punishments for them are frequently unclear. So, it is possible that Russia and China are exploiting loopholes in maritime law by obfuscating state or commercial responsibility, as they seek to escape discipline through causal ambiguity.

The question therefore remains: why would Russia and China engage in a joint Balto-Arctic sharp power

campaign when the penalty would asymmetrically affect China's reputation? Perhaps Moscow and Beijing feel the costs of limited mischief-making are acceptable, considering what they stand to gain by generating regional anxiety and recalibrating the

interests. A Russian "loss" to the "collective West" would compromise their (at least loosely) coordinated effort to adjust the current order such that they each enjoy the privileges of a regional hegemon; the character of a true joint push for a novel global order is less clear

**Ce** **son**  
**te**