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The Russian-U.S. Borderland: Opportunities and Barriers, Desires and Fears

Serghei Golunov*

Abstract

The paper focuses on the Russia-U.S. cross-border area that lies in the Bering Sea region. Employing the concept of geographical proximity, I argue that the U.S.-Russian proximity works in a limited number of cases and for relatively few kinds of actors, such as companies supplying Chukotka with American goods, border guards conducting rescue operations, organizers of environmental projects and cruise tours, and aboriginal communities. The impressive territorial proximity between Asia and North America induces ambitious and sometimes widely advertised official and public desires of conquering the spatial divide, promoted by extreme travellers and planners of transcontinental tunnel or bridge projects. At the same time, cooperation is seriously hindered by limited economic potential of the Russian North-East, weakness of transportation networks, harsh climate, and pervasive alarmist sentiments on the Russian side of the border.

Introduction

Russian and U.S. territories are situated close to each other in the areas of the Bering Sea: the shortest distance between the closest islands across the border is less than four kilometers. However, the nearby territories are sparsely populated and have limited resources that make intensive cooperation between them problematic while larger cities are situated at a much larger distance across the border.

The area where Russian and U.S. territories are close to each other can be conceptualized as a geographical proximity that is a multidimensional, relational, and highly subjective phenomenon. In what respects and for whom does the Russia-U.S. proximity matter? To what extent does it matter for cross-border cooperation? What kinds of desires does such proximity induce? Are there some pervasive alarmist sentiments linked with proximity and, if there are, what ways do they influence cross-border interaction?

To respond to these questions, the following issues are addressed. First, I discuss the geographical proximity concept and potential implications of applying it towards the U.S.-Russian cross-border area. Second, I examine key spatial, landscape, demographic, and political characteristics in historical retrospective. Third, I discuss the proximity area's potential for cooperation, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. Fourth, I consider two of the most widespread and publicly discussed kinds of desires induced by the nearness of adjacent Russian and U.S.

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territories: the extreme travellers' desire to cross the Bering Strait by some impressive means and the desire to connect Asia and North America by a tunnel or a bridge. Finally, I discuss alarmist sentiments that promote isolation and hinder cross-border cooperation.

The Russian-U.S. Borderland as a Geographical Proximity

The area where Russian and U.S. territories are relatively close to each other is not an ordinary borderland as these territories (with the exception of the nearby but sparsely populated Diomede Islands) are separated by at least six dozen kilometers of water, and the shortest distance between the closest settlements is more than 100 kilometers. Still, both countries share a long maritime border and the relative positions of Alaska and Chukotka are perceived as neighboring by U.S. and Russian officials and public.

To conceptualize this "distant neighborhood" potential, I resort to the concept of "proximity," employed by economic geographers and, more rarely, by International Relations scholars. Proximity is a multidimensional concept including physical distance, capabilities to cooperate, compatibility of actors etc. [1] The most widely used classification of proximities distinguishes interdependent geographic, cognitive (the extent in which actors share the same knowledge base), organizational (similarity of ways, in which interaction and coordination between actors is organized), social (relations between actors at a micro-level), and institutional (closeness of formal and informal institutional settings, including norms and values) proximities.[2] There is also a notion of "functional distance" that refers to difference between regions in innovation capacity and performance.[3] In this light, geography is not considered as the most important kind of proximities as it just facilitates other proximities but usually does not matter much per se.[4]

Proximity is a highly relational and subjective concept, to a considerable degree being determined by perceptions, comparisons with other similar cases, and roles and interests of specific actors. [5] Even common sensual remoteness of some places can be redefined as proximity (e.g., towards some other regions or some new opportunities) if some important actors have enough creativity and willingness to do so.[6] It is also important that proximity is not necessarily a positive

[1] Karl-Johan Lundquist and Michaela Trippl, "Distance, Proximity and Types of Cross-border Innovation Systems: A Conceptual Analysis," *Regional Studies* 47:3 (2013): 450–460.

[2] Ron Boschma, "Proximity and Innovation: A Critical Assessment," *Regional Studies* 39:1 (2005): 61–74; Pierre-Alexandre Balland, Ron Boschma, and Koen Frenken, "Proximity and Innovation: From Statics to Dynamics," *Regional Studies* 49:6 (2005): 907–920.

[3] Mario Maggioni and Erika Uberti, "Inter-Regional Knowledge Flows in Europe: An Econometric Analysis," in *Applied Evolutionary Economics and Economic Geography*, ed. Koen Frenken (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007).

[4] Boschma, "Proximity and Innovation."

[5] Andre Torre and Alain Rallet, "Proximity and Localization," *Regional Studies* 39:1 (2005): 47–59.

[6] Chris Gibson, Susan Luckman, and Julie Willoughby-Smith "Creativity without Borders? Rethinking Remoteness and Proximity," *Australian Geographer* 41:1 (2010): 25–38.

factor as it can be undesirable and provoke various kinds of conflicts,[7] and as "too close" proximity between cooperating actors can lead to "lock-in," making these actors reluctant to open themselves to outside innovative influences.[8]

What potential implications can the "geographical proximity" concept have for the Russia-U.S. cross-border area? The key problem of applying the concept to this context is that economic geographers usually employ it for different environments, i.e., for areas not divided by strong political borders and connected by good transportation communications. Moreover, it is sometimes highlighted that the concept of geographical proximity is not relevant for the cases where the existence of short distances between actors is not supplemented with easy transportation access in a short time.[9] Still, some International Relations scholars' conceptualizations look to be more flexible in this respect, as they highlight not so much accessibility but rather such largely subjective and changeable drivers as opportunities and willingness of actors to exploit these opportunities as the key factors making geographical proximities workable.[10] It is also important that some economic geographers point out that geographical proximity is a powerful factor for legitimizing cooperating institutions, and also a privileged discourse within regional development policies,[11] that could imply that regional governments and other actors could be interested in exploiting even now "deficient" proximities to obtain funding for their development.

Thus, I understand the Alaska-Chukotka geographical proximity as highly subjective (it can be construed by those actors who are interested in it), relational (it can work for some actors and not work for others), and changeable (it can matter more in some periods and matter less in other periods) condition that can have not only positive but also negative implications for various actors depending on circumstances. I will consider hereafter the evolution U.S.-Russian cross-border interactions since the 19th century until the present time using this conceptual framework.

Territory, Landscape, Demography, and Politics

While Russia doesn't have a land border with the U.S., there are several areas where the two countries' territories lay relatively close to each other. Russia and the USA meet each other in the area including the northern part of the Pacific and in the southern part of the Arctic Ocean, which lies predominantly in the subarctic climate zone. These areas belong to two Russian provinces – Chukotka Autonomous Okrug (50,000 inhabitants) and Kamchatka Krai (316,000) and the U.S. state of Alaska (738,000). It should be noted that the borderland areas are scarcely populated both on the

[7] André Torre and Bertrand Zuindeau, "Proximity Economics and Environment: Assessment and Prospects," *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 52:1 (2009): 1–24.
[8] Boschma, "Proximity and Innovation."
[9] Torre and Rallet, "Proximity and Localization."
[10] Harvey Starr, "Proximity, and Spatiality: The Geography of International Conflict," *International Studies Review* 7:3 (2005): 387–406; Harvey Starr and G. Dale Thomas "The 'Nature' of Contiguous Borders: Ease of Interaction, Salience, and the Analysis of Crisis," *International Interactions* 28:3 (2002): 213–235.
[11] Torre and Rallet, "Proximity and Localization."

Russian side and on the U.S. side and (especially Chukotka) are remote from major national economic and political centers.

The first Russia-U.S. proximity zone lies within and around the Bering Strait. The Big Diomede (Ratmanov) Island populated by Russian border guards lays only some 3.7 km from the U.S. Little Diomede (Krusenstern) Island that has the City of Diomede populated by slightly more than 100 inhabitants. Both islands lie in the Bering Strait dividing Chukchi and Seward peninsulas. The narrowest width of the strait between the Cape Dezhnev and the Cape Prince of Wales is 82 km. The distance between the closest continental settlements across the Bering Strait – Russian Uelen (720 inhabitants) and U.S.' Wales (145 inhabitants) – is about 110 km.

The second proximity zone includes the southern part of the Chukchi Peninsula and the large St Lawrence Island—the shortest distance between them is approximately 75 km. The distance between the closest settlements – the Russian city of Provideniya (some 2,000 inhabitants) and the U.S. city of Gambell (680 inhabitants) is some 110 km. and the distance between Provideniya and the closest U.S. continental city of Nome is 375 km. As it will be demonstrated later, the cross-border cooperation in this zone is the most intensive, and this intensity could be attributed to several factors, such as relatively significant sizes of population, satisfactory transportation (ports and airports) infrastructure, and close ethnic ties across the border.

On the contrary, cooperation in the third proximity zone that lies between Russian Commander Islands and U.S. Aleutian Islands is the least intensive, even despite it lies in the milder temperate climatic zone. The distance between the two closest major islands across the border – Russian Medny and U.S. Attu – is about 400 km, but these islands, which previously hosted border guard posts, are uninhabited now. The distance between the closest island settlements – Russian Nikolskoye (637 km) and U.S. Adak (326 inhabitants) – is 1,200 km, but there is virtually no significant communication between them. The nearest major cities – in Russia, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (around 181,000 inhabitants), and in the U.S. Anchorage (approx. 293,000 inhabitants) – are continental and the distance between them is very large (some 3,150 km).

The U.S.-Russian borderline passes through the International Date Line. It is particularly impressive that the time difference between the U.S. Little Diomede Island and the nearby Russian Big Diomede Island is 20 hours and thus a person travelling from Russia to the U.S. can arrive almost a day earlier than she departed.

Indigenous people constitute minorities on both sides of the border: in Chukotka Autonomous Okrug the share of such people (Chukchi, Eskimos, and Evens) was some 30 per cent (it was even some 10 per cent in 1979 but increased sharply after a massive exodus of ethnic Russians and other non-aboriginal groups in the crisis period of the 1990s) and in Kamchatka Krai it was some 4 per cent according to the 2010 census.[12] In Alaska, the share of indigenous population was about 15 per cent according to the 2010 census.[13] The Eskimo Yupik people, whose population in Alaska is

[12] "Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia Rossiiskoi Federatsii," *Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki*. Accessed July 18, 2016: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/per-itog/tab5.xls

[13] "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010 more information 2010 Demographic

some 22,000 and in Chukotka some 1,700,[14] is one of the two most active cross-border groups alongside with Russians. Russians also dominate the ethnic composition of Kamchatka Krai, constituting half (some 25,000) of Chukotka Autonomous Okrug's population and 1.4 per cent (some 10,000) of the Alaskan population.[15] There is also the ancient tradition of various cross-strait interactions between Asian Chukchi and North American Eskimo peoples that was disrupted in the Soviet period.

The process of modern statehood formation in the area started with the expedition of Russian explorer Semyon Dezhnyov, who sailed through the strait separating Asia and North America in 1648 and founded the fortified settlement (*ostrog*) of Anadyrsk a year later. In 1728 the strait was crossed by the expedition of Danish-born Russian explorer Vitus Bering after whom the strait (as well as later discovered Commander Islands) was named. Russians finally managed to take hold of the Chukchi Peninsula after bloody and variably successful wars with Chukchi that lasted many decades until the late 1770s.

Russia started to colonize Alaska from the 1790s, shaping its current territory as a result of the 1825 Anglo-Russian convention defining the border between the two empires. Finally, in the second half of the 1850s, however, Russia decided to sell Alaska to the United States, feeling itself unable to consolidate its presence in the area while having to colonize Far Eastern territories simultaneously. The Washington Convention of March 30, 1867, stipulated (in not quite precise wordings) the new U.S.-Russia border as the combination of straight lines defined by the following three reference points: 1) midway between the islands of Krusenstern and Ratmanov; 2) midway between the northwest point of the island of St. Lawrence and the southeast point of Cape Chukotski, and 3) midway between Attu Island and Medny/Copper Island. Northwards of the midway between the Diomede Islands, the border should proceed 54 degrees, 40 minutes north latitude without limitation.[16]

The transfer of Alaska to the United States didn't cause its immediate rapid economic growth in this region that followed only since the end of 19th century following the Gold Rush (as a result of which the city of Nome was founded in 1901). Subarctic hunting and fishing also became one of the most dynamically developing business activities in Alaska. Thus, local American entrepreneurs started to prevail evidently in cross-border contacts with Russia as they have more suitable vessels and financial resources to organize commercial whale and walrus hunting in Russian waters and barter trade with the indigenous population of Chukotka, as the both activities were largely allowed

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Profile Data," *American Fact Finder*, Accessed July 18, 2016: http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1&prodType=table

[14] "Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia Rossiiskoi Federatsii."

[15] "Selected Social Characteristics in the United States: 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year estimates," *American Fact Finder*, Accessed July 18, 2016: http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_1YR_DP02&prodType=table

[16] "Treaty concerning the Cession of the Russian Possessions in North America by his Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias to the United States of America: June 20, 1867." Accessed July 19, 2016: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/treatywi.asp

by Russian authorities already since the 1820s.[17]

No wonder that when after the 1917 Bolshevist Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War, food supplies to Chukotka almost stopped and American merchants became nearly a dominant economic and even political power in the area. Soviet Russia's authorities finally managed, however, to gain control over Kamchatka and Chukotka in 1922–1923 and started curtailing the U.S. presence in the area. In 1924 the Soviet military expedition on the "Krasny Oktyabr" warship managed to prevent foreign (British and U.S.) claims over Wrangel Island, which had arisen on the grounds that it was uninhabited. Later, the same expedition also removed a geodetic sign left by a U.S. cruiser at the Dezhnev Cape (the easternmost point of Asia) and expelled U.S. traders from Provideniya Bay. During the next year, the border guard ship "Vorovsky" expelled an American trading post from the Big Diomede Island.[18] The Soviet control over the borderland area became permanent since 1926 when the Kamchatka Border Guard Detachment, responsible for both Kamchatka and Chukotka, was established. It didn't bring the U.S. commercial presence to an immediate end, as the detachment's resources were initially weak. Moreover, Soviet authorities still needed American partners who supplied much needed foodstuffs and other goods and provided ships for delivering cargo.[19]

The situation started changing dramatically in the late 1920s when the Soviet government began to explore and settle Chukotka systematically to extract its mineral resources and support establishing the Northeast Passage. As a result, a number of settlements (e.g., Lavrentiya, Mys Shmidta, Provideniya, and Pevek) were founded and massive Russian immigration to Chukotka Peninsula (including the forced migration of prisoners to infamous GULAG labor camps) was managed. As the government managed to arrange regular goods supplies, it became more persistent in curbing informal trade between aboriginal people and American merchants that was established in the 1930s. After Soviet border guards expelled a Jesuit missionary who tried to preach on the Big Diomede Island, the Soviet and U.S. governments agreed to restrict the number of authorized visa-free border crossings per year in 1938.[20]

World War II, however, made the Soviet Union and the United States allies and made U.S. military assistance under the Lend-Lease policy crucially important for Moscow. As the Atlantic and Northwestern supply routes were vulnerable to German attacks, the way across the Bering Sea (the so-called Alaska-Siberia or ALSIB route) became an attractive alternative for safety reasons and its relatively short distance. To make the route operable, a number of new airfields, including several ones in Chukotka (primary an airfield in Uelkal and two reserve airfields in Markovo and Anadyr) were built in the shortest time possible by Gulag prisoners, military, and volunteers. The route started in Fairbanks, far inside Alaska, from which Soviet pilots ferried U.S. jets to Uelkal and farther westwards via Yakutia. Though 115 pilots and 81 jets (some 1 per cent of the trafficked volume) were lost due to severe climate conditions, the route was considered very efficient and was widely used not only for military supplies but also by official delegations (more than 128 thousand passengers were

[17] "Amerikantsy na Nizhnei Kolyme," *Yakutia*, October 5, 2005.
[18] "Nad Chukotkoi, v poliarnom tumane proliva…," *Pogranichnik Severo-Vostoka*, 18 (2006).
[19] "Obyknovennye kontrabandisty," *Pogranichnik Severo-Vostoka*, 25 (2010); "Amerikantsy…"
[20] Peter Iseman, "Lifting the Ice Curtain," *New York Times*, October 23, 1988.

transported).[21] The route was closed in 1945 after the allied victory over Japan, but the military infrastructure created for the Soviet part of the Alaska-Siberia route (ALSIB) continued to be used by the Soviet Union.

The outbreak of the Cold War led to the militarization of the area and to repeated military incidents at the border. For the Soviet Union, Chukotka and Kamchatka were considered as vulnerable territories to be defended better but, at the same time, invading Alaska or utilizing Chukotka as a site for missile strikes was a tempting responsive scenario. In 1945, the Kamchatka Border Guard Detachment was upgraded to a military district and after this was supported by new infrastructure, additional personnel, and equipment. In the second half of the 1940s, an airborne army unit was transferred to Chukotka and a fortified area was created near Provideniya.[22] In the 1950s, a mysterious impressive underground military base Anadyr-1, nicknamed Gudym, was built near the city of Anadyr, which, allegedly could be used for storing nuclear missiles for bombers. In the first half of the 1980s, the idea of deploying ballistic missiles in Chukotka was discussed by the Soviet leadership but was abandoned because of the high cost.[23] Kamchatka also became an important military hub, especially in the 1960s when a major base for submarines in Viliuchinsk started to operate. In its turn, the United States created in 1947 the Alaskan Command as a unified command charged with defending Alaska. The Command consisted of air force and army units, Coast Guard, and (until 1971) of the Navy's Alaskan Sea Frontier, which defended the coast from enemy vessels. The United States deployed several dozens of military installations in Alaska, some of which (such as Tin City Air Force Station near the Bering Strait, Northeast Cape Air Force Station in St Lawrence Island, and a radio navigation station in Attu Island) were closely located to the border.[24]

The Cold War also led to disrupting geographic proximity in terms of opportunities for cooperative cross-border interactions. An "iron curtain" for cross-border movement was created quickly, as both Soviet and American security officials didn't trust aboriginal populations and considered them a potential fifth column. Visa-free border crossings in the Bering Sea borderlands were abolished in 1948 on the Soviet initiative.[25] In order to hinder illegal contacts, Soviet authorities relocated the aboriginal settlements of Imaklik (Big Diomede Island) in 1955, Naukan (Cape Dezhnev) and Chaplino (a settlement that was the closest to St. Lawrence Island) in 1958, and Preobrazhenskaya village (Medny Island) in 1970. After this, Soviet border guards were the only inhabitants of Big Diomede Island and Medny Island. As for the closest U.S. islands, the Little Diomede Island was still populated both by aboriginal Alaskans and U.S. Coast Guard, and Attu Island was populated by a small number of military servicemen.

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[21] *Pogranichnik Severo-Vostoka,* "Nad Chukotkoi."

[22] "Nam by tol'ko za berezhok Aliaski zatsepit'sia…," *RG.ru*, March 16, 2015. Accessed January 5, 2017: https://rg.ru/2015/03/16/rodina-arktika.html

[23] Tatiana Urda, "Legendy Gudyma," *Krainii Sever*, July 6, 2012.

[24] "Department of Defense Sites in Alaska." *Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation*, Accessed July 21, 2016: https://dec.alaska.gov/spar/csp/dod_sites.htm

[25] Iseman, "Lifting the Ice Curtain."

The post-war economic development of Chukotka was boosted by the exploitation of major gold fields and of non-ferrous metal mining. This made development of settlements more economically justified and contributed to massive Russian migration into the area (the population of Chukotka grew 3.4 times between 1959 and 1990).[26] The trajectory of Alaska's post-war economic development was similar in some respects as it greatly benefited from discovery of large deposits of mineral resources (Prudhoe oil field) in the end of the 1960s and as its population also grew at an impressive pace in the post-war period. Unlike the case of Chukotka, the Alaskan economy was much more diversified while political development involved political decentralization and autonomization; in 1959, it became a U.S. state and in 1971 the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was adopted that gave aboriginal populations the right to manage vast territories and to have a share of income from exploitation of the state's mineral resources in exchange for abandoning claims for lands necessary to build a pipeline from Prudhoe Bay southwards. As a result, a large part of areas closed to the U.S. – Russian border passed under the control of local corporations representing Alaskan natives' interests.

Political liberalization in the Soviet Union and thawed American-Soviet relations led to gradually softened cross-border barriers. In 1988, the cities of Provideniya and Nome exchanged delegations and a year later regular passenger communication between Provideniya and Nome was established. In 1989, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to allow again visa-free trips for Chukotka and Alaska aboriginal borderlanders having kinship ties; this boosted contacts between the Eskimo people of Provideniya area with their relatives in St Lawrence Island and Nome area. In 1990, Moscow and Washington DC agreed to delimit their maritime border in the Bering Sea. This controversial agreement divided the area, which is rich in oil resources and marine bio-resources.[27] The agreement has yet to be ratified by the Russian parliament but has already been implemented de facto.

The collapse of the Soviet Union caused subsequent radical changes in the U.S.-Russian borderland. A severe economic crisis in Russia caused the government to reduce dramatically the funding of industrial activities and social services in Chukotka that, together with disruptions of centralized foodstuffs, fuel, and consumer goods deliveries, stimulated a massive outflux of the non-aboriginal population from the region. As a result, the population of Chukotka Autonomous Okrug (which separated from Magadan Province in 1992) reduced by 62 per cent in the 1990s and went on declining at a slower pace until the end of the 2000s. The end of the Cold War led to demilitarization at both sides of the border: Russia removed most of its troops and military equipment from Chukotka while the United States more than halved the number of its military installations in Alaska.[28] Some

[26] "Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1959 goda. Natsional'nyi sostav po regionam Rossii," *Demoscope Weekly*, Accessed July 22, 2016: http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_59.php?reg=44; "Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1989 goda. Raspredelenie gorodskogo i sel'skogo naseleniia oblastei i kraev RSFSR po polu i natsional'nosti." *Demoscope Weekly*, Accessed July 22, 2016: http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_89_gs.php?reg=42

[27] John McNeill, "America's Maritime Boundary with the Soviet Union," *Naval War College Review* Summer 1991.

[28] "Department of Defense Sites."

military and border guard outposts near the border were abandoned: Russia removed its border guards from Medny Island and the United States closed Attu Station and also the military bases on Adak Island. At the same time, the entire territory of Chukotka remained a border security zone and both foreigners and Russians had to obtain special permits to enter. At the end of the 1990s, border guards virtually prohibited again uncontrolled cross-border trips of locals by boats, which was justified by the insecurity of such trips and by several fatal incidents.[29]

In the 2000s, the economic situation both in Russia on the whole and in its North Eastern Russian regions in particular started to improve. Disruptions of goods supplies ended and the local government managed to find some ways (such as exploitation of the most profitable gold mines, fishery, and purchasing U.S. goods in cases when they were cheaper than Russian goods) to make the regional economy more efficient. Massive demographic decline in Chukotka largely came to an end in the mid-2000s.

The 2010s were marked by the increasing role of the Northeast Passage in Russian governmental strategy of Chukotka's economic development and by partial re-militarization of the region. Global warming and the gradual melting of Arctic ice elevated hopes for the eventual turning of the Northeast Passage into a major route for intercontinental cargo delivery. To make the route more attractive, the Russian government announced its plans to create ten emergency centers alongside it, including centers in Pevek, Anadyr, and Providenie.[30] Worsened Russia-U.S. relations (especially following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis) prompted Russia to restore partially its military presence in the region. It was announced in 2014 that military bases would be established in Mys Shmidta and Wrangel Island;[31] and a new East Arctic Border Guard Administration (responsible for Chukotka, Yakutia, and Magadan Province) was established. At the same time, in 2015 the U.S. and Russian governments made an important step to facilitate cross-border trips of local aboriginal peoples: Moscow agreed to allow U.S. aboriginal borderlanders to visit their Russian relatives visa-free after the United States introduced a special attachment to a passport certifying a holder's eligibility.[32]

Connection and Cooperation

Despite the existence of a water barrier coupled with the harsh cold climate, the Bering region has been a zone of intensive contacts since ancient times. Contacts between Eskimo peoples were boosted by strong kinship ties while contacts between Eskimos and Chukchis largely rested on barter exchange of marine mammal products for reindeer products. It can be argued that for indigenous people the Chukotka-Alaska proximity worked for the most of the history of their settlement and continues to work now.

[29] Sergei Vasiliev, "Bezvizovyi obmen dal treshchinu," *Krainii Sever*, September 17, 1999.
[30] "Politicheskaia situatsiia ne meshaet proektu po razvitiiu Arktiki – MChS RF," *RIA Novosti*, April 7, 2016.
[31] Mark Franchetti, "Putin's Cold War in the Arctic," *The Sunday Times*, October 26, 2014.
[32] "SShA i Rossia vveli bezvizovyi rezhim dlia korennykh zhitelei Chukotki i Aliaski," *RBC.ru*, July 23, 2015. Accessed July 25, 2016: http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/55b0bb699a7947450e0afbc8

As was mentioned before, after Russia sold Alaska to the United States, American merchants managed to utilize geographic proximity with Chukotka by conducting barter trade with indigenous inhabitants of coastal Chukotka and Kamchatka for many decades until the late 1920s and even early 1930s. While Soviet authorities started restricting aboriginal cross-border trips, they didn't prohibit it completely until the late 1940s.

World War II temporarily created another kind of workable U.S.-Russian geographic proximity based on ad hoc institutional proximity (the goal of defeating Nazism was prioritized over ideological differences) and on functional proximity (quick and efficient sharing of military equipment for achieving military superiority over Germany). During World War II, the Chukchi Peninsula turned into one of the most important sites for Soviet-U.S. cross-border communication as the already mentioned ALSIB route had key importance both for military supplies and for safe mutual official trips.

However, after World War II, the Cold War started – locals were prohibited from crossing the border in 1948 and forcibly relocated from some borderland areas in the 1950s. The area turned into the "ice curtain" as it was called by journalists in the 1980s. Although officially approved U.S.-Russian cross-border contacts were extremely rare, the two countries' officers did communicate in emergency situations – e.g., in 1974 when a Soviet ice reconnaissance aircraft had to make an emergency landing in Gambell.[33] In 1977, Moscow and Washington made a preliminary agreement on the delimitation of the Bering Sea and the United States temporarily gave the Soviet Union a fishing quota in an area that the Soviet Union agreed to cede.[34] As for illegal border crossings, there is a lot anecdotal evidence of aborigines not abandoning this risky practice completely and that some managed to succeed.[35] There were also several cases when ethnic Russians managed to defect across the Bering Strait for political reasons.[36]

Improved American-Soviet relations led to the emergence of governmental and non-governmental actors who were willing to seize the opportunity for making the U.S.-Russian geographic proximity functional. The "ice curtain" that had persisted for nearly four decades quickly collapsed in 1987–88. In 1987, American Lynne Cox managed to get permission in Moscow for swimming in extremely cold water between Little and Big Diomede Island and she ultimately proved to be successful in August. Cox's impressive achievement attracted public attention to an appeal to open a "back door of the Soviet Union" for human contacts and created favorable grounds for the December 1987 Gorbachev-Reagan statement encouraging contacts on Arctic issues. The June 1988 Friendship Flight of an American delegation to Provideniya and the September 1988 return visit of a Soviet delegation to Nome broke the "ice curtain." This has led to the establishment of passenger air traffic between the two cities, and to increases in visits to Provideniya and some other Russia's Far

[33] *Alaska Wing*. Accessed July 26, 2016: http://www.alaskawingcaf.org/Alaska%20Heritage/February%2026-March%204.pdf

[34] Igor Pravdin, "Treugol'nik Razdora," *Moskovskii komsomolets*, July 7, 2015.

[35] See for example: S. Pitirimov, "Nachal'nik Chukotki," *Kaluga vecherniaia*, June 5, 2000.

[36] See for example: Vitalii Gubanov, "V etu noch' reshilsia kazakhstanets pereiti granitsu SShA," *Krainii Sever*, October 15, 1999.

Eastern cities by American cruise ships since 1988. After this, an intergovernmental agreement on abolishing visas for aboriginal borderlanders was concluded in 1989.

Fall of the "ice curtain" produced euphoria on both sides of the border. For Eskimos, this meant re-establishing contacts disrupted 40 years before. For inhabitants of Soviet Chukotka and Kamchatka, it was a chance to discover the "abroad," to consume a variety of previously unseen goods and to attract investments. For the authorities and business communities of Nome and other Alaskan cities, it was a unique opportunity to become pioneers and to make their cities gateways to the Soviet Union. A lot of projects were discussed for several years and some companies in Nome even started accepting payments in rubles from Soviet visitors, hoping that it would soon become convertible in the Soviet Union.[37] The authorities of Chukotka had great hopes that U.S. investments in gold mining and offshore extraction could bring prosperity to the region. Seeking more autonomy in international cooperation, after the dissolution of the USSR, the Chukotka region quickly separated from Magadan province to which it had been subordinated since 1953.

This hope quickly gave way to disappointment as sufficiently close institutional and cognitive proximity hasn't emerged following removal of the "iron curtain" and establishment of some transportation connections. Despite liberalization, burdensome bureaucratic requirements for entrepreneurs and restrictions for foreigners' visits to Chukotka were not eliminated quickly. The economic crisis and hyperinflation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union devalued the ruble and subsequently the ruble stock accumulated by the Nome's business community turned to almost nothing. At the same time, Chukotkans were now disappointed with American reluctance to invest in large-scale industrial projects, which were found too risky and not profitable.

Still, for some kinds of actors and in some contexts, geographical proximity proved to be workable after the disintegration of Soviet Union. While food, fuel, and consumer goods supplies to Chukotka from other parts of Russia became very expensive for the regional budget, supplies from the United States (especially greengrocery supplies) proved to be much cheaper in some cases (most of food was delivered not via Alaska but via the port of Bellingham in the state of Washington). Similarly, in some cases it proved to be cheaper to use American vessels for deliveries. U.S.-made equipment started to be used in Chukotka in various fields beginning with mining and ending with power generation for domestic consumption.[38] Since the late 1980s, Chukotka (as well as Kamchatka) became interim destinations for several cruise companies that closely cooperated with local travel agencies. Joint Russia-U.S. teams conducted a lot of research projects on the Arctic environment and on various aspects of life of aboriginal population. Alaskan and Chukotkan artists exchanged visits, sports persons participated in competitions, such as sled dog races. Alaskans provided humanitarian assistance to Chukotka in the 1990s when the region found itself in disastrous conditions because of interrupted food and fuel supplies and long-term delays in salary payments. In the early 1990s, Chukotka aborigines joined the Inuit Circumpolar conference, which allowed them

[37] Julia Rubin, "Alaskans Gamble on Visitor's Rubles," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 4, 1990.

[38] See for example: "Bol'shoe budushchee maloi energetiki," *Krainii Sever,* July 19, 2002; "V portu Pevek na Chukotke mozhet poiavit'sia novyi punkt propuska dlia zolotodobytchikov," *Portnews*, October 7, 2011. Accessed January 5, 2016: http://portnews.ru/news/70645/

to strengthen humanitarian ties with Alaskan aborigines and to promote their interests jointly.

Central governments also took an active part in solving cross-border issues in some cases both at the bilateral and at the multilateral level. Russian Border Guard Service and the U.S. Coast Guard established efficient cooperation in rescue at sea and in combatting illegal fishing in the Bering Sea by Russian and third-country companies. The most important bilateral environmental project of Beringia Heritage Park covers the territory of the already existing Beringia Land Bridge National Preserve in Alaska and Chukotkan territory. The project was announced in 1990 during the Washington Summit,[39] but its implementation was delayed for a long time because of Russian sovereignty concerns (to be discussed later). Only in 2013 did Russia establish its own Beringia national park in Chukotka while negotiations on establishing a joint part is still under way.

Since 1996, Russia and the United States have been members of the Arctic Council, which was formed by eight Arctic countries and focused on issues of sustainable development. Russia and the United States managed to elaborate common approaches on protecting some endangered species.

In 2000, they concluded a bilateral agreement on restricting the hunting of polar bears.[40] Both governments advocated the prohibition of whale hunting before the International Whaling Commission with exceptions made for some aboriginal communities (including Alaskan and Chukotkan) for whom quotas are allocated.[41]

These patterns of Russian-U.S. cross-border cooperation have not changed a lot upon time. At the beginning of the 2000s, Chukotka's new governor, Roman Abramovich, again had great hopes for U.S. investment in large-scale industrial projects. Yet, U.S. companies ultimately haven't taken the key roles in such projects. Canadian Bema Gold (that was taken over by another Canadian company Kinross Gold after) became a major partner in gold mining while U.S. companies organized charter flights to the area and supplied equipment.[42] Dutch Shell agreed to develop a deposit near the Wrangel Island in 2013[43] (later the project was suspended though). In the region's trade turnover, the U.S. share was significant but typically not the largest: the largest share of Chukotka's export went to Asian Pacific countries (to South Korea and later to China) while the largest share of import was provided not by one but by several countries. In 2006, the United States was the third exporter to Chukotka after Canada and Finland,[44] and in 2014 the United States, despite the Russian food embargo, became the top importer (30.3 per cent) followed by Italy (15.4 per cent) and China (15.3 per cent).[45]

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[39] "History of the Program," *National Park Service,* October 24, 2013. Accessed July 26, 2016: https://www.nps.gov/akso/beringia/about/ru-programhistory.cfm

[40] "Rossiia i SShA soglasilis' ne ubivat' belykh medvedei," *Kommersant-Daily*, October 24, 2000.

[41] See for example: "U.S., Russia Win Whale Hunt Quota Extension," *Nanaimo Daily News,* May 30, 2007.

[42] Bob Stapleton, "Nome Air Carrier Offers Chartered Flights to Russian Gold Mines," *Alaska Journal of Commerce*, January 23, 2009.

[43] Jeremy Cresswell, "Russia's Gazprom and Shell to Mount Arctic Push," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, May 6, 2013.

[44] Boris Volkhonskii, "Bering moi, Bering laskovyi," *Kommersant-Vlast'*, July 23, 2007.

[45] "VED Chukotskogo AO za 2015 god." *Chukotskii Avtonomnyi Okrug*, Accessed July 28, 2016: http://goo.gl/Fk549D

Overall, the scale of U.S.-Russian cross-border cooperation proved to be disappointing for those politicians and business people who had hoped for impressive achievements. Limited opportunities and capabilities of participating actors have been supplemented by bureaucratic barriers on the Chukotkan side and exacerbated U.S.-Russian political contradictions since 2014. Still, some forms of cooperation in such fields as aboriginal issues, environmental protection, emergency rescue operations, and tourism proved to be stable enough and highly immune to unfavorable political and economic changes.

Desires of Exploiting the Asia-America Proximity

The proximity between Asia and North America in the Bering Strait area provokes the desire to triumph over the strait, thus asserting one's own personal or geopolitical significance as well as the desire to achieve linking continents and nations. Such desires imply the conflict between the willingness to exploit potential geographic proximity with limited or illusory opportunities to do it. Two kinds of actors tried to overcome the Bering Strait—thrill-seekers and designers of a cross-strait tunnel (or bridge) project.

The task of crossing the strait on foot or by some other unconventional means is extremely complicated in any season. Crossings are hindered not only by cold temperatures and frequently worsening weather but also by pack ice. While aborigines and illegal border crossers managed to cross the strait in rowboats or in motorboats, extreme travellers chose more complicated means. It is important that similar extreme crossings had divergent meanings and effects depending on political and other contexts. Not all attempts proved successful. In fact, some attempts led to conflicts between travellers and Russian border guards as the area of crossing lied far away from officially established points of entry.

As was mentioned before, the first extreme crossing, strictly speaking, was the crossing of not the entire strait but of a four-kilometer space separating Soviet and U.S. territories between the Diomede islands, by American swimmer Lynne Cox in 1987. The very fact that Soviet permission was finally obtained and, of course, the impressive success of a human who managed to cross some four kilometers of extremely cold sea, attracting public attention to the existence or obsolete "ice curtain" and eventually to its quick destruction a year later.

The second renowned attempt of crossing the strait by an extreme way was undertaken by Russian traveller Dmitry Shparo together with his sons Matvei and Nikita (participated in two first attempts) who tried to get to the American coast on skis. The two first attempts in 1996 and 1997 proved to be unsuccessful and travellers were rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard. The third attempt, when travellers crossed the strait to the reverse direction, finally proved to be successful despite Matvei and Dmitry Shparo had to cross 300 km for 20 days because of drifting ice. The travellers' achievement was also met with wide recognition and was also praised by U.S. president Bill Clinton, who called it an important and inspiring symbolic contribution to the development of the U.S.-

Russian relations.[46]

In 2006, UK traveller Karl Bushby and his French companion Dimitri Kieffer managed to beat Shparo's achievement crossing the strait on foot with help of waterproof suits in 15 days. However, unlike Cox's and Sparo's crossings, this achievement failed to contribute to public diplomacy, but rather a cause for diplomatic conflict, as after reaching the Russian coast the two travellers were arrested by border guards for non-authorized entrance into Russia outside an official port of entry. As a result of two legal proceedings, the two travellers were just fined but not deported.[47] It is worth mentioning that Bushby's and Kieffer's record was also broken in 2012 when a South Korean team of four members led by Hong Sung-taek managed to cross the Bering Strait from Uelen to Wales in six days in 2012.[48] This achievement was not constructed by the Russian media as a symbolically important act of public diplomacy, though, as well as the first ever crossing of the strait by car (a Land Rover remodeled to amphibian) by UK travellers Steve Burgess and Dan Evans.[49]

On the contrary, 2013 the Bering Strait Relay Swim, in which 65 swimmers from 17 countries (including Russia and the United States) took part, was a highly-publicized event supported by the Russian government. The participants, each of whom swam several kilometres and received official support and permission with visas, were escorted by a military ship with a medical team on board.[50] Overall, the relay crossing was not really a public diplomacy action but rather a governmental PR action for promoting the image of Russia.

Projects for building a tunnel or a bridge across the Bering Strait typically involve individual, corporative, and national self-assertion at once. While initially, at the end of the 19th century, proposals focused on building a bridge, in later proposals a tunnel was evidently preferred, as a bridge would be vulnerable to ice packs, storms, and cold temperatures.[51] Yet, a viable tunnel route would be much longer than the narrowest distance between the Asian and American coasts, amounting up to 103 km.[52]

The first widely advertised proposal to connect the banks of the Bering Strait by a bridge was made by governor of Colorado William Gilpin in 1890. Two years later, American engineer Joseph Strauss presented a proposal for a bridge project as his graduate thesis. In the 1890s and early 1900s, British travel writer Harry DeWindt promoted the idea of a tunnel as more viable in comparison to a bridge. In the early 1900s, French engineer Loicq de Lobel started making practical steps for the tunnel project's realization. Together with his American partner John Healy, he started lobbying for the transcontinental railway project to include a tunnel before American and Russian

[46] "Na lyzhakh cherez Beringov proliv," *Pravda*, May 28, 1998.
[47] "Round-the-World Walker to Resume Trip," *Yorkshire Post,* March 8, 2007.
[48] Oh Kyu-wook, "Korean Team Crosses Bering Strait," March 1, 2012. Accessed July 28, 2016: http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120301000341
[49] *Cape to Cape Expedition*. Accessed July 28, 2016: http://www.capetocape.org.uk/
[50] "V estafete plovtsov cherez Beringov proliv uchastvuiut 65 sportsmenov is 17 stran," *ITAR-TASS – Programma Vostok,* August 6, 2013.
[51] Aleksandr Latyshev, Piotr Obraztsov, "Sleduiushchaia stantsiia – Aliaska-tovarnaia?" *Finansovye izvestiia*, March 31, 2008.
[52] Natasha Shanetskaya, "Building Bridges to Billion-Dollar Dreams," *The Moscow Times*, January 12, 2001.

governments. In 1903, de Lobel proposed to the Russian government building a railway. This railway should be constructed by efforts of an American syndicate in exchange for granting this syndicate leasing rights for a railway together with an adjacent 16-mile zone for 90 years. Though the proposal was met favorably by the Russian tsar Nicolas II, in 1907 the idea was abandoned, supposedly because Russian officials were afraid of the potential threat of Siberia's crawling colonization by the United States.[53]

The idea of tunnel was revived in the 1990s on the wave of the U.S.-Russia rapprochement and of euphoria about the prospects of bilateral regional cooperation across the Bering Sea. The project was advanced by Alaskan governor Walter Hickel and, in 1991, the Interhemispheric Bering Strait Tunnel and Railroad Group was established by the state of Alaska and a range of business entities. The group had its branch in Russia where the project was called Transcontinental. In 1996, the group managed to obtain governmental support for conducting a preliminary study and to achieve formal recognition of the project as a valuable program from the U.S.-Russian intergovernmental commission.[54] Yet, no further steps were made after this for nearly a decade. This was explained by some observers to be the result of Russian internal problems, including personal changes on the top of the Russian government.

By the second half of the 2000s, the Russian government had already made the next salient move. This move was particularly advocated by the Russian Railway headed by Vladimir Yakunin, among all known for his conservative Eurasianist views and numerous publicist entries on geopolitical importance of railways. In 2006, the Russian Federal Railway Transport Agency approved a plan to build a railroad from Yakutsk to Uelen (that would be meaningless without a transcontinental tunnel) and in 2007 this plan was supported by the Russian government as a part of national railways' development strategy. In May 2007, a major and widely publicized international conference devoted to a transcontinental route project across the Bering Strait (called ICL-World Link) was held in Moscow.[55] Yet, U.S. interest to the project proved to be limited at this stage. The administration of Alaskan governor Sarah Palin initiated a study of the project's feasibility in 2009, but ultimately found it too expensive.[56] In 2011, the U.S. State Department claimed that it was unaware of the tunnel building project, but generally was content with the state of U.S.-Russian cooperation on regional issues, thus demonstrating the lack of interest to the project.[57]

In May 2014, some sources claimed that China considered funding the railway and

[53] David Rainbow, "Amerikanskoe proniknovenie? Proekt soedineniia rossiiskoi i amerikanskoi seti zheleznykh dorog v nachale XX v.," *Vestnik Omskogo universiteta* 3 (2011): 122–130.
[54] Elena Mironenko, "Beringov tonnel'," *Yakutsk vechernii*, August 26, 2011.
[55] "V Moskve obsuzhdaiut proekt transkontinental'noi magistrali Evraziia-Amerika cherez Beringov proliv," *RIA Sibir'*, April 24, 2007.
[56] Terrence McCoy, "Russia Reportedly Wants to Build a Mega-Road and Rail Link from Europe to America," *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2015. Accessed July 28, 2016: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/03/26/russia-reportedly-wants-to-build-a-mega-road-and-rail-link-from-europe-to-america/
[57] Andrei Surzhanskii, "SShA zaiavliaiut, chto ne v kurse planov stroitel'stva tunnelia pod Beringovym prolivom, odnako dovol'ny sotrudnichestvom s Rossiiei v regione," *ITAR-TASS*, September 8, 2011.

participating in its construction.[58] It is not clear if the Chinese interest is serious and long-lasting though, especially considering the subsequent aggravation of the U.S.-Russian political conflict over Ukrainian issues, U.S. financial sanctions against a number of Russian banks and companies, and also the Russian economic crisis.

Each time the idea of building a transcontinental road and a tunnel was promoted actively, there were heated debates between its proponents and opponents. The former argued that a 103-kilometer tunnel project is yet unprecedented but technically viable because of the relatively small depth of the Bering Strait and the possibility of using the two Diomede Islands for ventilation.[59] They also argued that the project's cost is less than the cost of large-scale oil extraction and that the potential profitability is high because of the future transit fee and access to extremely valuable deposits of the North Eastern Russia. Adversaries pointed out the huge lengths of Russian and U.S. railroads (more than 3,500 km and some 2,000 km respectively) to be built to reach the tunnel, claiming that it would be too long and uncomfortable for passengers and too expensive for cargo deliveries in comparison with sea transport.[60] They also pointed to numerous construction and exploitation difficulties, taking into account the extremely cold and highly instable temperatures in the Russian North East and almost complete absence of any dwelling and supply infrastructure alongside most of the route.[61] It was also pointed out that the United States could face strong environmental protests and legal resistance of aboriginal Alaskans' corporations, whose lands would have to be taken for the railway.[62]

Overall, arguments against the project look more powerful now while the interest of potential investors is seemingly not sufficiently high, firm, or stable. It is important that all mentioned efforts have largely rested on highly personified interests of politicians, activists, and some entrepreneurs. For most of them, connecting Asia and North America probably could be largely a self-assertive goal similarly to the importance of crossing the Bering Strait for extreme travellers.

Geopolitical Divide and Alarmism

The U.S.-Russian cross-border cooperation is hindered not only by distance and scarcity of resources on the Russian side, but also by strong alarmist sentiments. There is a long tradition of mutual mistrust and framing each other's intentions as steps to prepare the ground for occupation. This kind of perception is especially pervasive in the Russian approach as Russia traditionally views itself as the weaker side in the region. It is no wonder that in some cases Russia takes a very cautious approach to intensifying cross-border cooperation and human contacts, and in some cases, hinders it

[58] Ishaan Tharoor, "China May Build an Undersea Train to America," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2014. Accessed July 29, 2016: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/05/09/china-may-build-an-undersea-train-to-america/

[59] "Arkticheskii tonnel'," *Stroitel'naia gazeta*, August 10, 2007.

[60] "Transkontinental'noe prozhekterstvo," *Agentstvo politicheskikh novostei*, June 5, 2008.

[61] Ibid.

[62] See for example: "Tak vot zachem Abramovichu Chukotka!" *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda*, January 5, 2001.

deliberately. It can be argued, thus, that the U.S.-Russian geographic proximity is still perceived as undesirable, at least to some extent by some military, central and regional government officials, and public activists on both sides of the border.

The fear of America's creeping occupation of Russia's Far East started influencing Russian attitudes towards joint projects already in the 19th century. At the end of the 1850s, Russian regional authorities declined a U.S. company's offer to develop the basin of the river of Amur as they were afraid that the territory could share the fate of Mexican Texas.[63] The fear of U.S. creeping occupation played a significant role in St. Petersburg's final decision to decline the first tunnel project in 1907. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the influence of American merchants on the Chukotkan aboriginal population was also considered as dangerous for Soviet territorial integrity.

The Cold War exacerbated occupation fears and made the U.S.-Russian geographic proximity largely undesirable for both sides. Both Soviet and U.S. military authorities now considered the aboriginal population as potential enemy agents and took measures for preventing cross-border contacts (the Soviet Union resettled the population of towns and villages closest to the border). Soviet plans in the 1940s and 1950s for invading Alaska and creating a strong assault force in Chukotka in the case of the war prompted the United States not only to take responsive measures, but also to prepare for a possible occupation of Alaska by creating a network of local agents who would do underground work.[64] Such fears were supplemented with news reports that stated that the Soviet military allegedly made periodical clandestine raids on St Lawrence Island.[65] The popular fear of Soviet invasion was reflected in the 1984 "Red Dawn" feature movie in which the Bering Strait was one of the main directions of Soviet aggression and in which Alaska got occupied. In its turn, Soviet authorities were also concerned with the growing militarization of Alaska and with intensive reconnaissance activities allegedly involving numerous violations of Soviet borders.

Alarmist sentiments didn't disappear after a political thaw between the two countries occurred and the Soviet Union collapsed. Initially, Chukotka laid great hopes for cooperation with the United States, but already in the 1990s suspicions that the United States were going to annex Chukotka after taking economic control over it (and that the federal government was ready to sell it) started hindering bilateral cooperation. Alarmists considered the 1990 Soviet-U.S. border treaty as "selling the Motherland." They argued that Moscow made excessive territorial concessions in the Bering Sea: it agreed to a straight borderline instead of a curve following the shape of a coastline (that gave the United States most of the Bering Sea), and it agreed to an orthodromic instead of a loxodromic line despite the 1977 preliminary agreements establishing a median line between the two (that gave the United States about 8,000 square miles in addition) and additionally dividing an open sea area in a 10:1 proportion in the U.S. favor.[66]

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[63] V. Bulgakov, "Sibirskie Shtaty Ameriki," *Zapoliarnaia zvezda*, March 10, 1999.

[64] James Carroll, "A Cold War Secret Op with a Fresh Lesson," *Boston Globe,* September 14, 2014.

[65] Iseman, "Lifting the Ice Curtain."

[66] Cherevko K. "Iavliaetsia li zapadnaia granitsa russkoi Ameriki spravedlivoi liniei razgranicheniia morskikh prostranstv mezhdu SSSR/RF i SShA (Kartografiia i mezhdunarodnoe pravo)?" *Trudy Instituta rossiiskoi istorii. Vypusk 9*, ed. E.N. Rudaia (Moscow-Tula: Grif i K, 2010); Pravdin, "Treugol'nik Razdora."

Similarly to Zbigniew Brzhezinski's works, Walter Mead's idea to purchase Siberia and the Far East from Russia for two or three billions of U.S. dollars (the part of this sum should be given for purchasing U.S. goods and remunerating U.S. advisers)[67] was perceived as a reflection of U.S. long-lasting governmental plans to dismember Russia by seizing its eastern territories.[68] Large-scale U.S.-Russian cooperation projects initiated in the 1990s were perceived in the light of the alleged occupation threat. Alarmists argued that the Beringia cross-border reserve project was designed to paralyze military and drilling activities in and near Chukotka, thus making it defenseless and causing economic collapse.[69] Some even argued that the only true purpose of the Bering Strait tunnel project was to colonize Russia's North East.[70]

Apart from some alarmist notions and conspiracy theorizing the vision of their own mission by regional border guards emphasized legalism and assertion of one's own importance. In their public statements, representatives of the regional branch stressed their role in maintaining law and order, preventing smuggling and illegal border crossings and in rescue operations. For efficient fulfillment of these tasks (especially combatting illegal fisheries and rescue operations), cooperation with the U.S. Coast Guard was framed as efficient and desirable. While recognizing the fact that the most important threats to Russian border security (e.g., drug-trafficking, illegal immigration, and movement of militant extremists) were either non-existent or very weak border guards' public reports highlighted tightened regional border security importance again by perceived U.S. activities, such as plans for economic colonization, espionage, promoting malicious cross-border projects (such as Beringia reserve), or subversive activities of missionaries and international organizations of indigenous peoples.[71] Foreign extreme tourists apprehended for violating border regime were sometimes just lectured for the lack of discipline and proper respect to Russian laws while sometimes even framed as probable spies. In particular, Karl Bushby and Dimitri Kieffer were portrayed by regional border guards in some of their subsequent public reports as highly suspicious persons and likely not true travellers,[72] despite their being cleared of any serious charges by a regional court and despite Bushby being granted a Russian visa to continue his travel the next year.

The mentioned suspicions combined with continued spying mania perceived border security threats prompted Russian regional and federal authorities to maintain Soviet restrictions for foreigners and even Russian citizens' visits to Chukotka—visitors had to obtain special permissions beforehand initially from regional authorities and, beginning in the second half of the 2000s, from the Federal Security Service. These harsh restrictions, partially relaxed in the first half of the 1990s but again tightened thereafter, greatly hindered American business activities and tourism. It was reported that the restoration of Soviet-style restrictions was lobbied for by the first Chukotka governor

[67] V. Bulgakov, "Sibirskie Shtaty Ameriki."
[68] Walter Mead, "Let's Buy Siberia!" *GQ: Gentlemen's Quarterly* 64:3 (1994): 224.
[69] See for example: A. Nikolaev, "Pogranichnye voiska i voennaia doktrina Rossii," *Obozrevatel' – Observer*, 16–17 (1994), Accessed July 29, 2016: http://www.observer.materik.ru/observer/N16-17_94/16-17_04.htm
[70] See for example: Pavel Kovrigin, "Vibriony protiv spirokhet," *Zavtra*, July 12, 2006.
[71] "Nad Chukotkoi, v poliarnom tumane proliva…"
[72] See for example: Vladimir Skibitskii, "Otnosheniia u nas osobye," *Pogranichnik Severo-Vostoka* 9 (2008).

Alexander Nazarov, who initially laid great hopes on large-scale cooperation with the United States. However, after being disappointed with the alleged "haughtiness" of the American counterparts, he found a more restrictive approach towards foreign visitors and aboriginal border crossers necessary to prevent defections to the United States and smuggling.[73] Despite the second governor Roman Abramovich expressing high hopes for cooperation with the United States and advocating for more openness (including the abolition of special permits for visiting Chukotka[74]), he was reluctant to oppose Moscow and the powerful Federal Security Service that managed to lobby for the establishment of vast border security zones in the northern regions in the second half of the 2000s. Only in 2013, more than two decades after concluding a preliminary agreement, did Russia agree to establish the Beringia reserve on its territory and only in 2015 did Russia agree to facilitate visits of Alaskan aborigines to Chukotka.

Finally, on the U.S. side of the border, alarmist sentiments framing Russian policy in the region as a return to the Cold War grew after Russia took the Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and after a U.S. Navy official claimed that Russian activity in the area had reached the Cold War level.[75] In their turn, Russian officials and observers also blamed the U.S. military for increased military activity in the region.[76]

Conclusion

As was argued, the workability of Russia-U.S. geographic proximity proved to be highly relative, greatly depending on perceptions, changing political and economic circumstances, as well as on the willingness and opportunities of certain actors to cooperate. Historically, proximity was exploited efficiently by aborigines who are still highly interested in maintaining and developing cross-border ties but are constrained by poor transportation and border barriers (e.g., by restrictions on using private vessels for cross-border trips). The case of the Alaska-Siberia route during World War II demonstrated that nationally important geographical proximity with efficiently working transportation could emerge for some time when it is based on temporary political proximity and vital common goals and tasks. In the post-Soviet period, proximity has been working efficiently for supplying Chukotka with U.S. foodstuffs, fuel, and some other goods, rescue operations, environmental projects, cruise tourism, and, again, for contacts between aboriginal communities.

Proximity induces "grand desires" when the willingness to exploit proximity is conflicting with illusory or limited opportunities. Even though sometimes such desires do not bring significant changes, they have some influence on regional and sometimes even on global public discourse. Extreme travellers try crossing the Bering Strait largely for self-assertion and self-advertising and

[73] Viktor Erofeev, "Ubivaem zavtra, edim vchera. Zimnie zametki o letnei ezde na krai sveta," *Argumenty i fakty*, March 8, 2000.
[74] Volkhonskii, "Bering moi."
[75] "Navy official: Russia Sub Activity at Cold War level," *University Wire*, April 17, 2016.
[76] See for example: "SMI soobshchili o perekhvate amerikanskogo samoleta-razvedchika v raione Kamchatki," *Interfax*, April 28, 2016. Accessed July 29, 2016: http://www.interfax.ru/world/506125

sometimes for public diplomacy purposes (crossing the Bering Strait by Lynne Cox in 1987 was a significant contribution to the subsequent quick destruction of the “ice curtain”). Ambitious projects for connecting the Bering Strait by a tunnel or a bridge could be largely explained by somewhat similar motivation. No wonder that such projects are usually promoted by passionate leaders and activists and that strong political motivation can be found behind them at least in most cases. Yet, the feasibility of such projects is questionable and all of the obstacles listed before are still there. It looks like smaller scale and more realistic projects will dominate the agenda of the Russia-U.S. cross-border cooperation in the foreseeable future rather than grand ideas.

However, efficient cross-border interaction potential of the U.S.-Russian cross-border area generally proved to be limited due to a number of factors, such as the limited economic potential of adjacent territories (especially the Russian North East), the weakness of transportation networks, and the harsh climate. These factors are compounded by mutual alarmist perceptions that are especially pervasive on the Russian side of the border because of the perceived vulnerability of Russia’s North East before potential U.S. economic and ideological expansion. Alarmist sentiments seriously influence practical policies, and harsh restrictions on the movement of both foreigners and Russian citizens to Chukotka hinder the region’s international cooperation. No wonder that attempts to intensify passenger transportation communication have had only modest success so far and that joint entrepreneur activities have been very limited.