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## INTRODUCTION



# Northeast Asia in regional perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Northeast Asia is a regional imaginary of limited capture among both academics and the general public. As a result, ongoing tensions relating to island claims, sea rights, borderlands, population mobilities, and resource access are too rarely considered from a Northeast Asian regional perspective. The region's parameters are also highly debated, with some conceptualizations restricted to Japan and the Korean Peninsula, while more expansive considerations include Russia, South Korea, North Korea, China, Japan, and Mongolia. We suggest that in addition to these countries, even maritime border zones in the Asia-Pacific and Arctic might be included as part of Northeast Asia's extent. In an effort to advance scholarly research on Northeast Asia, this special issue brings together articles that critically interrogate the region's political, economic, cultural, and environmental dynamics and conditions. Articles approach the region as a whole or employ specific case studies pertinent to relations within and/or between its composite states, subregions, and stakeholders. This introduction brings into relief the region's unique history as an inter-imperial frontier and its role as an understudied European, Asian, and North American borderland. These broad themes require consideration of Northeast Asia as a site of mass migrations, increasing environmental fragility, tentative geo-economic integration, and enduring geopolitical contestation. The editors of this special issue aim for this collection of articles to advance Northeast Asia as both a subject and frame for varied modes of geographic inquiry.

### KEYWORDS

Region; Northeast Asia; geopolitics; geo-economics

## Introduction

Northeast Asia is at once both a familiar region associated with the interstate system and formal understandings of security and an elusive region that is frequently overlooked in accounts of world regions. Many of the countries within the area that might often be considered to constitute Northeast Asia, such as China, Mongolia, and Russia, are arguably more associated with other regions. Nonetheless, a host of historical and contemporary processes involving migration, economic exchange, climate, and ecology can be used to reveal connections at, below, and beyond the scale of the state. In this Special Issue, we

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argue that the “regional betweenness” of Northeast Asia should not prevent us from overlooking the region as an important site of integration and global connectivity not only in the future, but also in the past and present.

This special issue considers the complex and often competing visions of Northeast Asia’s spatial extent and coherence as a conceptual region, demonstrating how it has shifted over time and how it continues to shift today. This introduction will present some of the theoretical issues regarding imagining regions and the fraught politics of conceptualizing regional geographies centered on Northeast Asia. The following section takes a historical approach, considering changes to environmental and human geography in the region over time and the rise of securitization as a defining feature of Northeast Asia. Then, we consider the major and emerging forces shaping Northeast Asia in the twenty-first century, most especially dynamics of divergence and integration from economic, political, and geographic perspectives. Finally, we introduce the contributions to this special issue and illustrate the variety of perspectives that can be taken to critically analyze the both axiomatic and elusory nature of Northeast Asia.

### Where—and what—is “Northeast Asia?”

The question “Where is Northeast Asia?” is deceptively simple. There is little common sense agreement about the ends of the region. Locating its core can be done easily by applying its cardinal direction to the seemingly concrete continent of Asia. But what is included in the region as we move out from this point is hardly finalized. Defining Northeast Asia thus often leads to geometric modifications of a particular center. Calder and Ye (2010, 3–4) include Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, and the Koreas in Northeast Asia, but also define its “economic heart” as the “Shanghai Circle” – a geometric representation of places within reach of a three-hour flight from Shanghai. The Shanghai Circle includes Harbin and Macao, Xi’an and Tokyo, but leaves out Ulaabaatar and Russian cities beyond Vladivostok. This approach has utility; it allows the authors to emphasize the importance of the economic might of their Northeast Asia region. Aggarwal and Koo (2008, 5–6) also use a geometric approach to categorize the various economic and security frameworks and organizations that involve countries they include in the region. Using a measure of 400 nautical miles, they distinguish between “geographically concentrated” and “geographically dispersed” regional connections that are beyond 400 nautical miles. In the latter case, this allows the authors to include Malaysia and Singapore within Northeast Asian functional networks. While the authors further define subregional and transregional connections, the exercise reveals the difficulty of bounding a Northeast Asia beyond a commitment to centering its cardinal location.

Stepping back from these analytical engagements with Northeast Asia, it is worth considering conventional treatments of world regions and how Northeast Asia fits into them. World regional geography textbooks often qualify their definition of “regions” as social constructs and speak to their historical mutability and political contingency (Fouberg and Moseley 2019; Pulsipher, Pulsipher, and Johansson 2019; Rowntree et al. 2017; White et al. 2013; Marston et al. 2016). Nonetheless, these same textbooks offer maps and chapter titles that, among other world regions, clearly identify East Asia and a Eurasian/Russian domain typically consisting of Russia and former Soviet republics. In these books, Central and/or Inner Asia rarely stands alone, and is rather divided into regions

dominated by East Asia, or more typically China, and Russia.<sup>1</sup> Typically, East Asia is cartographically depicted as extending from the southern and western boundaries of China up to the Russian border in the north and to Japan in the east. Taiwan, North Korea, and South Korea are usually comprised within these region boundaries of East Asia, with Russia's Siberian and Far Eastern provinces assigned to a Russian domain, while Mongolia finds itself generally situated within either East Asia or a grouping that consists of Russia plus Central Asia (Eurasia). That East Asia resolutely ends at Russia's southeastern boundaries, despite ecological, demographic, and religious continuities that stretch into China, Mongolia, and beyond, speaks both to the long-running cultural and political debate about where Europe ends and Asia begins, along with the apparently necessary limitations of world regional divisions (Bassin 1991; Lewis and Wigen 1997). In fact, Russia's "trans-continental" extent is among the best cases through which the arbitrariness of global regionalization may be considered.

The Russian Far East and Siberia are included in textbooks as parts of the contemporary Russian state and as areas under the cultural and historical influence of the historic Russian metropolises of Moscow and St. Petersburg. This framing situates the Pacific territories of Russia within a geopolitical sphere more oriented toward Europe than Asia. But this is a matter of perspective, for as the American writer Ian Frazier has written, "St. Petersburg looks most like itself not when you come to it from the West, an approach that might lead you to think St. Petersburg is merely the West's imitation; to be affected properly by St. Petersburg you must arrive from the vast East, where you have already conjured the city in your imagination over the course of four thousand desolate Siberian miles" (Frazier 2010: 51). Likewise, regarding the Russian Far East or even a "Eurasian/Russian Domain" from a more Northeast Asian perspective helps reveal a region whose Russian influences represent just a handful of the many historical ecological, demographic, and political undercurrents there. The same can be said for understanding Chinese or Confucian influences on Northeast Asia, which naturalize the region into the political imagination of a Sinocentric world order, suggesting ancient possession of the region and, as a framework for contemporary politics, elevating China's status in its borderlands (Millward 2020).

World regional categories are based largely on adherence to contemporary state borders and the histories that they bound. An unwillingness to regard portions of states as belonging to multiple regions is a prime example of the "territorial trap," or geopolitical/geo-economic thinking that is circumscribed by state-centric geographic imaginaries (Agnew 2017). Furthermore, contemporary formulations of subregional or less commonly used Asian regions, such as Central Asia, are themselves often indebted to scholars and analysts whose institutional support may be linked to nation-centric political priorities and motivations for carving out a subregion to separate it from regions dominated by other states (Bulag 2012). But if offering an alternative region has political implications, so does leaving out a region, as is often the case with Northeast Asia. Textbooks and world regional maps risk reproducing and disseminating national and institutional bias by either overlooking the existence of "Northeast Asia," or by restricting its purview to the "Asian" states, often excluding Siberia and the Russian Far East, while focusing on the Korean Peninsula, China, and Japan. But, as a growing body of literature attests, including the articles in this special issue, Northeast Asia can be understood as an expansive region that includes national, supranational, and subnational

actors and agents. It can also be imagined as a place characterized by both border permeability and closure, national and local efforts to integrate and divide the region, and international setbacks that keep its political and social actors stubbornly apart.<sup>2</sup>

### Geographical imaginations of Northeast Asia

To think of a region is to imagine it. Derek Gregory describes “geographical imaginations” as “profoundly ideological landscapes whose representations of space are entangled with relations of power” (Gregory 1995, 474). Such geographical imaginations work dialectically to “sustain images of ‘home’ as well as ‘abroad,’ ‘our space’ as well as ‘their space’” (Gregory et al. 2011, 370). Geographical imaginaries impact the construction of everyday regional identity, as regular people take up and interpret institutionalized and mediatized expressions of bounded identities of regions that may be promoted by governments, international organizations, written works, and marketing materials (Paasi 2003, 478). “Europe,” “Asia,” and other world regions imply some degree of imaginative and institutional boundedness that allows them to be distinguished from other world regions (Paasi and Metzger 2017).

According to Natalie Koch (2016), one of the tasks of poststructural and postcolonial geographers is to be critical of regions while still seeing their importance both empirically and from perspectives situated within these regions. She argues, for instance, that her informants in conventionally labeled Central Asian states were eager to align themselves with a modern Middle East rather than the declining former Soviet Union (Koch 2016, 810). In a similar spirit, the amorphous region of “Northeast Asia” must be examined as an institutional production that bears political and social ramifications, as a dynamic place that contains divergent and situated perspectives, and as a networked space consisting of social and economic relations that “unfold both above and below the scale of the region” (Murphy and O’Loughlin 2009, 242).

As the five contributors to this special issue suggest, attempting to answer the deceptively simple question, “What is Northeast Asia?” involves the challenging process of disentangling multiple perspectives, each with their own histories of political convictions, goals, values, and dialogs. Similar entanglements can also be found in other regional modifications and qualifications of Asia. For example, Owen Lattimore’s notion of “Inner Asia” – a modification of European imperialists’ and explorers’ “Innermost Asia” – included Mongolia and parts of contemporary Russia and China, while omitting Japan and the Korean Peninsula (1962a, 1940). Lattimore (1940) approached this region from a particular historical and civilizational perspective: his book, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, emphasized the region’s relationship with China over other places. As Uradyn Bulag (2005) has argued, such an approach mirrors the modern Chinese state’s political interest and preoccupation with their internal northern and western frontiers, such as during the Japanese Empire’s occupation of Manchuria, which was concurrent with much of Lattimore’s writing.

Imaginaries of “Eurasia” often imply connections with Russia and the former Soviet Union, Mongolia, Iran, Afghanistan, and other countries. However, they tend to notably exclude Japan, the Koreas, and China – with the possible exception of Xinjiang or Chinese Turkestan (Diener and Megoran [Forthcoming](#)). On the other hand, a cultural and political notion of a “Greater Eurasia” linking Mongolia and Russia also bears a

particular autochthonous understanding that is both integrative and exclusionist; this is further discussed below. Dominant conceptualizations of “Central Eurasia” tighten the region further by including Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Iran, but excluding Russia, China, and other coastal states (Schoeberlein 2002). Notably, the United States (US) State Department has embraced a version of this imaginary by designating Central Asia as within South Asia, while Russia (which includes Siberia and the Russian Far East) is classified as within Eastern Europe. Excluding the maritime and Arctic borderlands, which are increasingly relevant to Northeast Asia in terms of development and connectivity to the rest of the world, begs the question of why region-thinkers and the political places from which they write have such a hard time imagining a region that is simultaneously avowedly continental and inescapably maritime, choosing to privilege the former over the latter. Such difficulties may speak to the long shadow cast by classical geopolitical models (Megoran and Sharapova 2013) and perhaps a resistance to institutionalize regions that might hybridize powers associated with different models.

Contemporary imaginings of sub- or pan-regional Asias can also retain powerful connections to twentieth-century nation-states that emerged through inter-imperial rivalries. In Northeast Asia, differing territorial and cultural claims can be read through political disagreement over toponymy. Li Narangoa (2002, 6) recounts toponymic tensions between Japan and China in the 1920s and 1930s over the names of China’s northeastern provinces. The Japanese press increasingly called them Manshu, while the Chinese media referred to them as Dongsansheng and Dongbei. Narangoa explains, “For each side, having its own name prevail as the accepted term for the region was an important part of this struggle [for legitimate authority].” Toponymic disputes are not unique to Northeast Asia, as the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute between Korea and Japan is mirrored in the disagreement over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands further south.

At the heart of conflicts in Northeast Asia lie not only competing claims to contemporary sovereignty, but also the capacity to imagine alternative ways of ordering this space. To imagine Northeast Asia as Russian, Japanese, or Chinese is to naturalize influence in the region at the scale of national communities. The power to name a region is the power to imaginatively bound it away from other regions, as Lattimore wrote of the moniker Manchuria in the 1930s: “The fact that the problem of regionalism as a dangerous obstacle is instinctively appreciated is borne out by the strong feeling among Chinese that the regional term ‘Manchuria,’ used in all foreign languages, ought to be discontinued” (Lattimore 1962b, 310).

Other considerations can be made of imaginings of Northeast Asia as an expansive space, a perspective that has been picked up by popular writers and politicians in China and Russia alike. Such perspectives invoke a steppe imaginary in which the open spaces and allegedly warlike culture of Mongols and other semi-nomadic peoples on horseback have influenced Eurasian sedentary societies (Buranelli 2020). In China, this imagining has taken the form of calls to national political renewal by infusing the Chinese territorial body with the courage, freedom, and militancy inherent to grassland ways of life (Jiang 2008; Grant 2018). In Russia, a variety of contemporary intellectual trends have sought to relocate Russianness at the state’s periphery (Suslov 2014; Clowes 2011). Neo-Eurasianism, the umbrella term for a variety of heterodox definitions of Russia’s unique civilizational mission, draws heavily from ideas originally put forward by White Russian émigré intellectuals, who saw Russian culture as retaining *sui generis*

attributes which, if fully realized, would allow Russian civilization to redeem its communist self and possibly the world (Bassin, Glebov, and Laruelle 2015). For the contemporary popular writer and political intellectual Alexander Dugin, Russian civilization has been forged from the intermixing of Mongolians and Russians (Clowes 2011). The Russian steppe, potentially including Northeast Asia, thus becomes a productive canvas for thinking through the territorial politics and national character of both contemporary China and Russia. Yet in such visions, peoples and the environment alike risk becoming caricatures for external myth-making for what are ultimately exclusionary and essentialist identities.

Reimagining Northeast Asia is important for not only thinking through how and why the region appears in textbooks and international institutions, but also for making sense of how different political actors seek to bind proximate strategic areas within their spheres of influence. Sensitivities over toponymy, as well as essentialist and potentially exclusionary imaginings, arguably represent the outcomes of the region's often militarized inter-imperial and international history, to which we now turn.

### **Northeast Asian regionalism: from environmental determinism to state transformation**

Northeast Asia's definitional fluidity owes itself to historic and contemporary divisions between civilizational modalities and political geographic entities. Throughout much of history, the region comprised a borderland where pastoralist and sedentary livelihoods came together, and where subsistence lifestyles encountered more intensive exploitation of coastal and forest resources. Exemplifying the classical geopolitical tension between environmental determinism and possibilism, the steppe lands of Northeast Asia were conventionally seen by geographers as on one hand largely determined by environmental "pulses," and on the other hand a place where cultural and political practices were adapted to the resources at hand (Huntington 1907; Lattimore 1940). As the argument went, challenging environmental conditions, from expansive forest to harsh temperatures and rivers that flowed north towards the Arctic Ocean rather than south towards population and economic centers, made it difficult for the region to be wholly incorporated by sedentary – that is, agricultural and bureaucratic – states. Although contemporary China and Russia share one of the oldest continuous boundaries in Asia, which was initially determined near the Amur Valley by the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, for hundreds of years, this boundary remained a site of imperial aspirations. In the nineteenth century, Russian, Ukrainian, Chinese, and Korean peasants moved to the area in search of land to cultivate (Urbansky 2020; Park 2019).

In the pre-modern era, Chinese empires viewed the steppe, tundra, and arctic portions of Northeast Asia as a "tabula rasa" populated by "migrants or invaders who periodically emerge" to "impinge" on China's "civilized cultures." But peoples inhabiting these grasslands and forests did not live separately "out there," and in fact shaped Eurasian affairs for centuries (Frank 1992, 43). For instance, the Mongol Empire loosely united territories from China to modern-day Ukraine, and the various successor polities that emerged after the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227 quickly became identified with their individual localities (e.g. the Golden Horde in the Russian steppe, the Ilkhanate in Iran, the Yuan state in China, etc.). The Mongol conquest and subsequent Pax Mongolica fundamentally

reshaped the political, economic, and cultural landscapes of Eurasia. Scholars have suggested the emergence of an informal Mongol “commonwealth” that facilitated movement and exchange within the empire (Kotkin 2007). Others have highlighted the Mongols’ influence on Chinese artistic culture (Rossabi 2015), the early-modern Muscovite state (Vásáry 2015), the politics and society of Muslim Syria (Amitai 2015), and the demographic composition of lands spanning from China to Poland (Allsen 2015). In this sense, portions of what might now be considered Northeast Asia became important for shaping surrounding regions, rather than being external to global development.

After the decline of Mongol power, Russian- and Chinese-based empires exercised increasing political influence in the region. From the west, the concomitant expansion of the nascent Russian state centered on Muscovy in the 16th century altered the political balance of power. Indeed, Ivan IV’s conquest of the Kazan Khanate in 1552 symbolically demonstrated the ascendancy of the Russian state (Khodarkovsky 2002; Crews 2006) and subsequent military expansion of Russian territory across the Urals and eastwards to the Pacific. The Manchu conquest of China under Nurhaci birthed the Qing Empire, which conquered much of present-day Mongolia and Xinjiang, uniting the steppe grasslands in the west with the forested valleys of the Pacific northeast, not to mention extending Qing territory onto the Tibetan Plateau (Perdue 2005). By the early twentieth century, these empires dominated Northeast Asia. But the lands they ruled were not uniform and homogenous political territories. They were divided by ecological, religious, economic, and demographic differences that empires sought to reinforce in order to create political buffer areas and, in the case of the Manchus, retain a homeland unsettled by outsiders. Human-designed fortifications such as the Great Wall and the Willow Palisade were deployed as political technologies to maintain separation between borderlands and retain regional heterogeneity for various political purposes (Barfield 1989; Edmonds 1979). As these fabricated boundaries ultimately proved incapable of stemming migration flows, states instead turned to accelerating and in some cases forcing settlement by Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Korean peoples, to the demographic diminishment of indigenous Mongols, Buriats, and other pastoralist peoples. As agrarian transformation turned the steppe into sown land, state attempts to retain the loyalty of all of these populations significantly impacted the region.

Owen Lattimore argued that a “cradle of conflict” in which various cultural zones came together over a changing landscape shaped this international zone. Rather than seeing the region as belonging to any particular place, he noted the Chinese state’s pretensions to convert the area into their own domain through irreversible progress (Rowe 2007, 771; Lattimore 1962a). This included Chinese migrants from Shandong Province, south of the Bohai Sea, who came to Manchurian and Mongol lands to till the soil. But it also included Ukrainian farmers who came to the Russian Far East via the Trans-Siberian Railway and Korean farmers who crossed the Tumen River to work marginal land (Park 2016a, 2016b). Rather than simply serving as bodily extensions of their respective states by populating the land and domesticating its soil, Alyssa Park (2019) has argued that Northeast Asian states also tried to nationalize Korean migrants in particular. In other words, securing sovereignty and legitimate authority also depends on transforming locals to push the region into the fold of one state.

As Soren Urbansky (2020) has shown, the granting of the Chinese Eastern Railway to the Russian Empire in 1896 ushered in a new era not only of regional trade and

settlement. It also connected distant metropolises into the region with devastating consequences for local interactions. Over the subsequent decades of inter-imperial and international conflict, the borderlands became increasingly structured by state spaces. During the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s and the Sino-Soviet Split of the 1960s, the Sino-Russian and Sino-Mongolian border became increasingly closed. Political boundaries that had before been demarcated by natural features and piles of stones suddenly hardened as a result of materialized ferroconcrete pillboxes and barbed wire. Motorized troop patrols replaced horseback customs agents and borderlands populations were naturalized or, if deemed too politically suspect, arrested or deported. Propaganda targeted national populations, attempting to stoke anxiety over the cross-border “other.” The Korean War in the 1950s also led to the militarization and polarization of borderlands on the Korean Peninsula. In general, Northeast Asia’s spatial expansiveness and cosmopolitan cultural character made it a political liability as a backdoor vulnerable to military invasion, yet difficult to patrol and supply.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Northeast Asian borders of China and Russia became open to trade and labor mobility once again (Urbansky 2020; Park 2016a , 2016b ). Yet these borderlands’ relative underdevelopment compared to booming coastal China and the growth of post-Soviet primate cities at the expense of national peripheries after the collapse of command economies has meant that only in the twenty-first century has the region experienced renewed significant economic investment and urban growth. Just as Northeast Asia’s newfound railway connections turned it into an important export center for fur, beef, and gold in the late 19th and early twentieth century (Urbansky 2020), today, new transportation infrastructures, international cooperation agreements, and changing global commodity markets are altering the ecology and economy of the region. The proliferation of global connections has not, however, erased the region’s legacy of closely guarded boundaries. The following section explores these recent changes.

## **Twenty-first century dynamics and complexities of Regionalism in Northeast Asia**

Like all regional imaginaries of global space, Northeast Asia’s territorial extent comprises portions of states whose geo-economic patterns and geopolitical affiliations overlap with other world regions. Where most states find ways of turning their multi-regional presence into advantages, Northeast Asia seems hamstrung by the limited convergence of its major state-actors and their tendency to locate themselves within alternative regional imaginaries. As Julian Dierkes and Mendee Jargalsaikhan observe (2018, 91), “Regional integration in Northeast Asia is far behind other regions.” While this may be accurate, such persistent disunity is not for a lack of initiatives seeking to establish organizational linkages between states and sub-state regions. This section explores the alternating dynamics of regional divergence and convergence within the space we regard as Northeast Asia.

### **Regional divergence**

One may at least partially attribute Northeast Asian regional divergence to what Franck Billé (2014, 2016) refers to as “phantom pains,” or the latent tensions and fears from

conflictual, colonial, imperial, and oppressive histories (e.g. Mongol, Qing, and Japanese imperialism and colonialism, treaties favoring Tsarist or Soviet territorial acquisitions, the Korean War, etc.; see also Urbansky 2020). Dierkes and Jargalsaikhan (2018, 92) describe Northeast Asia's status quo within interstate relations as "a standoff" in which broader geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics inhibit regionalization. This would aptly characterize the as yet officially unratified peace between North and South Korea. "Standoff" could also be applied to the ongoing disputes over the Kuril Islands between Japan and Russia. The term also described the China/Russia border until the mid-1990s, when territorial concessions by the Russian state began to lead to the demarcation of the two countries' entire border, which was fully resolved in 2008.

Far from unique to Northeast Asia, multilateral and/or bilateral cooperation usually reflects state-specific interests shaped by both "phantom pains" and broader geopolitical contingencies from within and outside the region. For example, the Dalai Lama's visit to Mongolia in 2016 prompted China to increase tariffs on Mongolian goods (Goodson and Addleton 2020, 5). Also, in 2016, South Korea allowed the US THAAD missile system to be deployed on its territory. This problematized China's participation in Seoul's Eurasia Initiative, which, in conjunction with the impeachment of President Geun-hye Park in 2017, caused that project to falter (Zhang 2018, 5–6). Japan's efforts to assert economic leadership in the region are often seen by member states as overtly self-serving (Zhang 2018, 5); while North Korea's policies toward South Korea and defiance of the US efforts at impeding nuclear proliferation profoundly impact the regional tenor.

While Northeast Asia comprises more than China and Russia and, as noted above, regional divergence can be attributed to various histories and current interstate relations, aligning Russia's and China's signature economic visions – the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)<sup>3</sup> and the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), respectively – is integral to any more cohesive regional future. At present, Russia's "Pivot to Asia" and membership in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) suggest rising interest in Northeast Asian regionalization. Recent efforts to establish a free-trade area in and beyond Central Eurasia under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) may constitute a model for Northeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> Having launched in 2003 with a focus on border disputes and security issues, the SCO has taken on a greater economic focus, being touted by both Chinese and Russian officials as a useful platform for coordinating the EAEU and the BRI (Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2015). But, as noted by Jonathan Hillman (2020, 74) "the EAEU and SCO members do not overlap neatly, with the latter including a number of additional states. When Pakistan and India, two countries with high tariffs and political tensions, joined the SCO in 2017, a free-trade zone became even more unlikely." Similarly stark ideological differences amongst Northeast Asian states would inhibit economic integration. Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia may have forged unique relationships with North Korea and China, but Russia's and China's unwillingness to cede economic sovereignty to any meaningful degree continues to profoundly inhibit Northeast Asian regional integration. Both the EAEU and BRI are designed to enhance the influence of the states lying at their respective helms. Moreover, the two visions of regional linkage maintain a "defensive posture:" the EAEU protects Russian interests, while despite all the rhetoric surrounding the BRI promoting connectivity, China limits financial flows with capital controls, impedes information flows with internet restrictions, and restricts

the movement of people and goods with security policies (Hillman 2020, 75). These strategies speak to both Moscow's and Beijing's political, and arguably existential, interests in domestic stability and self-preservation. There is little chance of China joining the EAEU because this would undercut Moscow's power in the organization.

Despite a steady outpouring of mutual praise and allusions to joint partnership by both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, disparities between China and Russia that are particularly stark in Northeast Asia remain fundamental barriers to regional integration. For example, China economically and demographically dwarfs Russia in Northeast Asia, but comes up territorially short. China's northeastern region has abundant labor but relatively little land, whereas Russia's Far East encompasses nearly a third of the country's territory but only five percent of its population. China's Heilongjiang province alone possesses six times the population of the Russian Far East. None of these facts are lost on Russian or Chinese officials, with the former often worrying over supposed threats of Chinese migration (Wirth 2014) while the latter regret the loss of 600,000 km<sup>2</sup> of formerly Qing territory to Russia following the Treaty of Aigun in 1858 and the Treaty of Peking in 1860 (Callahan 2009).

Russia's historical concern pertaining to varied Asian peoples migrating to its eastern provinces manifested in Pan Slavists touting a "Yellow Peril" during the late Tsarist era, while concern over Korean's potential divided loyalties prompted Stalin's first en masse ethnic population transfer in 1938 (Diener 2004). Despite rich shuttle or "suitcase" trade<sup>5</sup> involving Chinese entrepreneurs crossing into Russia, rhetoric fanning the flames of migration-fear resurfaces consistently in the region (Billé and Urbansky 2019; Park 2018a, 2018b). In 2000, for example, Putin stated, "If in the near future we do not make real efforts, then even the primordially Russian population in several decades will speak mainly in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean languages" (Putin 2000). Recent efforts to bolster the ethnic Russian population of the Far East follows historical patterns of offering free plots of land and requiring foreign investors to employ Russian citizens (Russia Briefing 2017).

The above are just part of a long list of challenges to regional economic development in the Russian/Chinese borderlands of Northeast Asia, where foreign investors also confront corruption, weak property rights, small market sizes, and poor infrastructure. These issues, however, have not stopped numerous joint projects from being proposed, even if actual progress on the vast majority remains limited. Even before the BRI, hundreds of joint Chinese/Russian projects were put to paper. For example in 2009, the Chinese and Russian heads of state released a list of 205 joint projects (He 2010) that by 2015 resulted in only 19 actually taking physical form. Of those projects announced between 2009 and 2018, only eight out of thirty-two had been completed (Hillman 2020, 72). Part of the problem is that other states, which might be able to contribute to development projects, have limited access to the area. Such issues are exemplified by the hermit state of North Korea, which heavily restricts access to international visitors and investors. Meanwhile, along the 4,600 km border between Mongolia and China, there are only five official border crossings. Along the 4,200 km eastern border between Russia and China, there are officially 26 border crossings, but only four host active railway crossings. By contrast, the US-Canada border, while twice as long, has more than six times as many railway crossings. The Mongolia-Russia border has ten official crossing points, two of which have railway lines but only one allows passenger traffic. Recent increased attention to

highways extending from Mongolia north to Russia and south to China form part of Ulaanbaatar's quest to embrace a role within the BRI and leverage its territorial centrality in Northeast Asia (Diener and Batjav 2019).

BRI infrastructural projects may help knit together the region under China's imprint. For instance, the China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC) includes a rail route through the border cities of Manzhouli (China) and Zabaykalsk (Russia), while the New Eurasian Land Bridge connects China and the European Union via railroads through Mongolia, Russia, and Belarus. Northeast Asian transit routes attest to China's impetus to engage with both the EAEU and the European Union (EU).<sup>6</sup> Planned rail linkages require large-scale infrastructure investments that form the subject of highly touted cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. But like many such projects, plans and promotion have outpaced construction. For example, Chinese engineers and crews completed construction of their portion of a railway bridge linking Tongjiang and Nizhnelenskoye in 2016 (Sanderson 2016) and then awaited fruition of Russia's efforts until 2019 (Stolyarov 2019). This delay may not only reflect the fact that construction in Russia takes longer than in China, but also perhaps a degree of wariness in Russia regarding increasing the number of linkages to its southern neighbor (Jia and Bennett 2018).

### *Regional convergence*

Moscow remains ambivalent towards certain BRI infrastructure projects that might reduce its regional influence, such as oil and natural gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to China, while supporting others, like plans for developing the Polar Silk Road, a maritime route hugging Russian's northern coastline (Tillman, Yang, and Nielsson 2018). Meanwhile, Beijing largely plays along with Putin's rhetoric regarding "a larger Eurasian partnership" to soften suspicion of the BRI. Both Putin and Xi have strong political incentives to find complementarity in their respective regional development visions. Evidence of this is found in Xi opening his remarks at the first Belt and Road Forum in 2017 in Beijing by mentioning the EAEU project, which Putin has reciprocated by prioritizing the BRI amongst his preferred "integration formats" (Bendarzsevskij et al. 2018). Driving this mutual promotion is a shared desire to reduce Western hegemony of the global political and economic order. With US and EU sanctions remaining in place against Russia and increasingly restrictive trade policies against China, both Xi and Putin relish their position as proponents of free trade and liberalization in which their respective states lead an alternative conversation about globalization that paints the West as the problem (Hillman 2020, 67–68).

Toward this end, there are concrete efforts in which not only Russia and China but other Northeast Asian states have put forth regional initiatives (see Table 1) or participate in regionalization as full members, observers, or partners. These are often more broadly "Asian" or "Asia-Pacific" oriented and include the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Transpacific Partnership (CPTPP), Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ASEAN-ARF), ASEAN Dialogue Partnerships, Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), APEC, Australia Group, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). A broader scope of regional cooperation initiatives

**Table 1.** Recent Initiatives in which Northeast Asia is at least a partial focus.

Country	Year	Name	Goal
United States	2010	Pivot to Asia	Geostrategic
Russia	2012	Pivot to the East	Economic; Infrastructure
Japan	2012	Abenomics	Economic
China	2013	Silk Road Belt	Economic; Infrastructure
China	2013	Maritime Silk Road	Economic; Infrastructure
South Korea	2013	Eurasia Initiative	Economic; Infrastructure
Mongolia	2014	Prairie Road	Economic; Infrastructure
Russia	2015	Eurasian Economic Union	Economic
China	2016	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank	Economic; Infrastructure
Russia	2016	Greater Eurasian Partnership	Economic
South Korea	2017	New Northern Policy	Economic; Infrastructure
Japan	2018	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership	Economic

might also involve the SCO and BRICS. Mongolia and North Korea, while not devoid of such memberships, are generally less involved compared to Japan, South Korea, Russia, and China. Mongolia, for example, though enacting the market reforms and democratization promoted by Western sponsors since 1990, is Northeast Asia's only landlocked state. It therefore requires cooperative arrangements (particularly with its two bordering states of Russia or China) to access oceangoing ports for import and export. This geographic centrality within the region is both a blessing and curse. Mongolia's location evokes a certain dependence on their neighbors but also affords a prospective role as connector, not only between Russia and China, but Northeast Asia and Central Asia (Goodson and Addleton 2020). As it currently stands, however, Mongolia may be argued to exist in a state of "regional betweenness" or what Dierkes and Jargalsaikhan (2018, 94) call "regionless fate."

Initiatives to unite Northeast Asia through economic development pacts have faced stalls and difficulties since the 1990s. For instance, political disagreements between states and a lack of financing have continuously impeded efforts to realize one cooperative economic development project proposed by China, Russia, and North Korea, which all abut the uniquely shaped Tumen River borderland. Endorsed by the United Nations Development Plan in 1991 and signed in 1995, the Tumen River Area Development Project (TRADP) included these three countries, as well as South Korea and Mongolia. Lacking the participation of Japan and the Japanese-based Asian Development Bank, however, TRADP accomplished little (Park 2016b, 372). The Project's 2005 successor, the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI), stalled when North Korea withdrew in 2009. Russian and North Korean emphases on securing sovereignty in the face of globalizing economies have stalled multilateral development (Park 2016b). Indeed, the continued pursuit of security has been a key feature of bilateral and multilateral subregional agreements in Northeast Asia since the 1990s. Moreover, military and economic security continue to frame international relations discussions of the region (Pempel 2013; Aggarwal and Koo 2008). Security language inflects discussions of the Tumen River and the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as historical and contemporary political, economic, and cultural "buffer zones" or "buffer spaces" that both distance and connect polities (Song 2020; Choung 2021). Such framings raise serious questions about the nature of Northeast Asia as a region. Can its conceptualization as a buffer zone be resolved with the notion of Northeast Asia as a place of looming integration where disparate states

pursue cross-border initiatives? Does this paradox of togetherness and apartness ultimately reify Northeast Asia in a way comparable to other world regions? Or is Northeast Asia above all a cartographic space drawn to encircle ultimately fissiparous political territories?

Evoking the thesis of this special issue, in terms of policy, academic focus, and popular imagination, “regional betweenness” might well apply to Northeast Asia more generally. Increasing US emphasis on Indo-Pacific over Asia-Pacific relations divert attention from a regional construct that already suffers from limited purchase in international discourse. Trends toward a bipolar geopolitical and geo-economic world order in which the US and China hold primary levers of power are unlikely to elevate Northeast Asia’s status in Western policy making, given both governments’ focus on East Asia’s southern as opposed to northern littoral. While it is fair to assess some of the punditry relating to the BRI and Chinese resource development projects (e.g. in the Arctic as discussed below) as alarmist (Mawdsley 2008; Brady 2017), a palpable concern pertaining to China’s capacity to impose its will on neighboring states has emerged in Northeast Asia, as it has in Central Asia (Billé 2015). Trends toward integration, nevertheless, remain possible and should not be fully discounted.

The combination of Western sanctions against Russia since 2014 and China’s trade war with the US starting in 2017 has prompted integrative political and economic dynamics among constituent states of Northeast Asia. Russia’s “Pivot to Asia,” for example, has streamlined visa arrangements with 18 countries, created the Free Port of Vladivostok, and formed Territories of Priority Development across Russia’s Far East (RFE). Meanwhile, the Polar Silk Road concentrates on building resource extraction and transportation infrastructure, which also provides China with outlets for excess industrial capacity and new areas to which it can export certain civilizational aspects and environmental norms. North–South roadways are under construction within Mongolia and herald further transit integration beyond the current railway connections from Russia and China across the country (Diener and Batjav 2019).

Common grounds on which to advance cooperation in Northeast Asia are multi-fold and explored in subsequent sections of this introduction and in the articles of this special issue. China’s and Russia’s greatest synergy lies within the energy sector, relating to the fact that China ranks first among the world’s energy importers, while the Russian economy is highly reliant on the production and export of oil and natural gas. China’s demand for resources aligns with Russia’s supply and desire for investment.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, shared dissatisfaction with US displays of naval power in the South China and East China Seas mutually support, at least to an extent, Russian and Chinese maritime policy in the Pacific. Put simply, from a policy perspective, the convergence of Russia’s “Pivot to Asia” and China’s calculated partnerships with the Russian Federation will have implications for defining the regional scope and dynamics of Northeast Asia’s internal and external relations into the twenty-first Century (Billé and Humphrey 2021).

### **Northeast Asia: Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean interfaces**

In considering possible configurations of Northeast Asia’s composite states, it is worth breaking away from not only the territorial trap (Agnew 2017), but also a focus on

territory full stop. Anyone who has traveled between North America and Europe and North Asia will note that their route, as conveniently displayed on seatback monitors, traverses northerly latitudes that venture into the Arctic Ocean. World maps bearing a polar projection reveal the proximity of states at the juncture of the Arctic and North Pacific Oceans. While maritime boundaries constitute conspicuous lines of contention between littoral states and interested great powers of the South China Sea, the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean are also sites of interaction and competition between Northeast Asian and North American states.

Competition within a broader notion of Northeast Asian frontiers is evinced in the tag line for the 16th season of the popular Discovery Channel television show *Deadliest Catch* – “The Russians are Coming.” This relates to the Russian government’s recent delay in opening red king crab fisheries (the scientific name of the prized red-king-crab is *Paralithodes camtschaticus* – named after the Russian peninsula). The Russian crabbing season has traditionally launched before those of the US and Canada, allowing Russian crab to reach global markets first and set the price. Their early start, however, has been shown to diminish the quality of the meat and also undercut breeding for future harvests. The Russian government’s effort to delay the harvest suggests an interest in sustainability, but also places the Russian crab fisheries in direct competition for a trans-boundary species with the US and Canadian fleets (Rice 2020).

Alaska has a longer shoreline than the rest of the US combined and is a littoral territory to the North Pacific, Bering Sea, and Arctic Oceans. The de facto contiguity and interrelated economies of North American and Northeast Asian fisheries and airspaces combine with the prospect of Arctic maritime shipping channels to prompt consideration of an expanded Northeast Asian regional capture (Bennett 2014). Whether viewed as its own region or part of a greater Northeast Asia, China and Russia each possess interests in accessing the Arctic (Brady 2017; Conley 2018). China asserted its claim to being a “near-Arctic state” with its first Arctic policy in 2018. As mentioned earlier, Beijing has also offered to help develop a Polar Silk Road linking China to northern Europe China through the Arctic. Comprising Russia’s Northern Sea Route, a shipping route developed by the Soviet Union, an expanded version of this transit corridor would take advantage of polar warming occurring at nearly three times the global average. Moreover, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and China’s Silk Road Fund have garnered stakes in Russia’s Yamal liquid-natural gas project, which started operations in December 2017. This joint Russia/China cooperation has the potential to compel the expansion of the port in Arkhangelsk, on the White Sea, and a railway from the port to central Russia (Pezard 2018). Marlene Laruelle’s (2020, 28) report on Russia’s Arctic Policy in the lead-up to its chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2021 states, “Moscow remains unable to imagine that there are structural impossibilities of designing a form of economic development that is not solely focused on exploiting minerals and fossil fuels, and which creates new human capital.” As such, it is not surprising that new partnerships for resource exploitation are a priority for Moscow.

Such Arctic projects are not without controversy. Prospects of a Chinese “deepwater navy” involving submarines spur Russian concerns over other states establishing a presence in “Russian waters” (Sengupta and Myers 2019, 12). Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “earned the equivalent of diplomatic eye rolls” at a May 2019 meeting

of foreign ministers in Rovaniemi, Finland when he touted Chinese “aggressive behavior” in the Arctic (Sengupta and Meyers 2019, 4). But while this speech may have been largely dismissed, like much punditry pertaining to China’s Northeast Asian economic projects, it followed suit with a tone of trepidation that often accompanies Beijing’s efforts to enter new markets and regions. Many writers on the subject of China’s foreign investment include the phrase “for now,” acknowledging that certain infrastructures may readily convert soft to hard power (Goodson and Addleton 2020, 5; Hillman 2020, 74; Shaglanov 2016, 3; Laruelle 2020, 20–22). As noted above, regional convergence in Northeast Asia is driven in part by broader geopolitics but cannot be disconnected from geo-economics, the exploitation of natural resources, and the attendant effect on the environment.

### Northeast Asian environmental issues and resource partnerships

Many BRI projects are replacing or completing either outdated or unfinished infrastructure projects begun when partner countries were still European colonies. In the process, these infrastructure improvements evoke “phantom pains” or insecurities relating to trading dependencies akin to those with former colonizers. Less broadly considered, in part due to the authoritarian nature of most regimes in the region, is how environmental concerns of broader national publics have regional implications. China’s decision to ban logging in national forests (other than those that are replanted – first regionally in 1998 and nationally in 2016), has sent the Chinese wood product industry in search of rough logs, timber, and pulpwood abroad to satisfy its need. This involved logging leases in cash-poor states with abundant forests (e.g. Peru, Papua New Guinea, Mozambique, Myanmar, Solomon Islands, and Indonesia). It also shifted the environmental burden to these states, leading to denuded mountains, polluted rivers, watershed damage, and species habitat destruction. Such is the plight of Russia’s Siberian and Far Eastern provinces as they become increasingly popular venues for tree harvesting (Myers 2019). The charge of US\$2 per hectare or US\$0.80 per acre is well below the logging cost of other countries and raises the specter of rampant corruption.

China hosts the world’s ten largest construction companies and a variety of finished wood product industries (e.g. furniture, musical instruments, etc.). The country is also already developing requisite transportation infrastructure across Northeast Asia, making the prospect of further logging high (Hillman 2019, 3; Myers 2019).<sup>8</sup> International demand for wood in China has increased ten times since it set restrictions on domestic logging in 1998 and 2016. In 2017, wood products nevertheless amounted to a US\$23 billion industry involving 500 registered companies. Many have thus formed Russian partnerships for logging Russian timber, which accounts for 20 percent of China’s wood import by value (Myers 2019, 6).

The 2019 fires in Siberia prompted public outcry in relation to rumors that arsonists may have been responsible pursuant to a law permitting logging in protected-forests damaged by fire. Following Russian President Vladimir Putin’s reference to Russia’s forestry industry as “very corrupt,” the upper house of parliament challenged the head of Russian Forest Service on the point of timbering-driven deforestation. In response, the official blamed Chinese companies for exceeding their concessions. Despite extant public concern that has found voice in the Duma, plans to move wood harvests further west toward Krasnoyarsk exist (Myers 2019).

Another example of resource nationalism manifesting in Northeast Asia, specifically in Siberia, is the collection of over 1 million signatures in an online protest of a Chinese water-bottling plant in Listvyanka. The plant is intended to export Lake Baikal's water.<sup>9</sup> That Chinese historical texts have codified Lake Baikal as the "Northern Sea" – an old Han Empire name – and drawn into question the 1858 treaty that ceded the territory to Russia catalyzes insecurity amongst Russian residents of the lake (MacFarquhar 2019, 5). Their response was to rename the central thoroughfare of Irkutsk "Karl Marx Street" and protest the use of Chinese characters on billboards and signage, despite the city economically benefiting from Chinese tourism. By contrast, the Chinese free-trade border town of Manzhouli has emerged as a main wood processing hub, with 120 mills and factories that employ 10,000 people in a city of 250,000. The city's architecture is an homage to Russian culture with faux onion domes, a replica of St. Basil's, and a hotel that is the largest matryoshka in the world (Myers 2019, 9; Billé and Humphrey 2021).

Such dynamic interactions and isolations form the crux of this special issue. Like many regions comprising distinctive ethnic, national, and cultural groups, borderlands can be among the most vibrant but also abrasive settings (Humphrey 2018; Park 2018a). The Kuril Islands have proven caustic issue in Russia/Japan relations, North and South Korea still chafe at the DMZ, Sinophobia remains prominent in Mongolia (Billé 2014), and the cities of Vladivostok and Harbin have long and often complex histories of hosting peoples from the other side of the Russia/China border (Billé 2012; Humphrey 2018). The articles included all share a critical perspective on what makes Northeast Asia a region, but they do so by emphasizing different facets of regional connectivity and boundary distinguishing practices. The following section of this introduction will discuss a few of the overlapping themes shared in these articles, suggesting where they speak to one another and where they offer alternative approaches for making sense of this durable but always changing region. Though not exclusive, we suggest that pertinent themes include bordering, gateways, and transformations.

## Themes of this special issue's articles

### *Bordering*

Bounding a region is always a complex task for scholars, who have to square their formal properties with the realities of both shared features and differences that cut across international boundaries. In their contribution, Boyle and Iwashita (2021) argue that what distinguishes Northeast Asia is that despite increasing economic exchange along its borders, the region's internal boundaries remain heavily securitized. While these internal boundaries, such as those between the Koreas, remain rigidly militarized, the region's external boundaries are more global in nature. In other words, Russia, the US, and China all exert influence in the region in a manner that prevents further integration while also maintaining Northeast Asia as a distinct region. This contrast of inner hardness and relative outer indeterminacy makes Northeast Asia an exceptional region compared to the economic and political connectivity found in other Asian regions. For the authors, Northeast Asia may be imagined as a region, but this geographic imagination does not translate into a political or social community. Both securitized bordering practices and external influences have stifled regional community building.

## Gateways

In his contribution, Jeremy Tasch (2021) looks at bridges as materials and metaphors in Russia's Far East. Tasch sees bridges as gateways that seek to spur international connection and economic investment, but also as metaphors that work to bring certain horizons closer to hand. In this case, the material and policy bridges of Russia's Far East have recently become part of Moscow-based projects under Vladimir Putin's Asian Pivot. The construction of actual bridges speaks to the expansion of the city of Vladivostok and efforts to position the city as a regional economic and cultural hub. There are bottom-up effects as well, as Russian subnational government offices seek to build connections with other subnational administrations in neighboring countries. Tasch suggests that there is more to the metaphor of the bridge than just connection. At the same time, his research emphasizes the need to go beyond the flashy aesthetics of new development projects and declarations of political and economic connection and look at the underlayers of material and metaphoric "bridgework." Tasch argues that many people in Vladivostok are doubtful that recent construction projects and political and economic programs, such as those associated with the establishment of the Free Port of Vladivostok, will prove to be gateways for their futures. Skeptical of the superficiality of bridgework they have already encountered, they envision few palpable benefits on the horizon. Rather than bringing deeper integration with Northeast Asia and attendant economic development, then, there are apprehensions that bridges simply lead back to Moscow, whose political endeavors are in fact focused elsewhere in the world, hampering the Far East's developmental horizons.

In addition to playing key roles in horizons of development and metaphors of political connection, cities can also be gateways for industrial networks. Julia Loginova (2021) analyzes urban connectivity in relation to energy and resource firms in Northeast Asia. She finds that the resulting geographical network is neither an unbounded, fluid zone nor a conventionally contiguous, bounded, geographic region. Instead, what emerges is a reframed Northeast Asia that is both globally and internally connected. Loginova takes account of differing patterns of integration, showing how mining and energy firms take on differing locational geographies, with the latter concentrating in political urban centers in particular. Capital cities can serve as gateways for national control (in particular for state-owned enterprises) and in the cases of China's and Russia's economies, indicate the national orientation of connectivity to Northeast Asia. In contrast, other economically important cities, such as Shanghai and Hong Kong, play important roles as international gateways. Multinational firms headquartered in such cities help connect Northeast Asian resources to global economies. Finally, the smaller cities located closer to actual resource extraction sites in Northeast Asia are themselves diversified gateways to resource access that may link up with different regional, national, or global scales. The resulting geographies of urban connectivity are messy and complicate notions of a neatly scaled Northeast Asia; the local can hardly be imagined without considering how national networks are oriented within wider global economic networks, with cities like Moscow potentially more closely connected with cities like London than Vladivostok. Loginova's article suggests that empirically grounded arguments about Northeast Asia integration may challenge presumptions about the degree and nature of these connections and the power geometries behind them. To focus on gateways in Northeast Asia is to follow many paths.

## Transformation

Boyle and Iwashita (2021) also engage with the theme of transformation, but suggest a surprising lack of change despite decades of multilateral efforts to link together Northeast Asia. They identify the problem to be long-standing differences in security, and suggest that the COVID-19 epidemic is but the latest in a decade of backsliding in integration efforts. In her contribution to this special issue, Juliane Schlag (2021) examines the dynamics of long-term forested landscape transformation in Northeast Asia, in particular the historic region of Manchuria. Through periods of Qing imperial control, Japanese colonial rule, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, authorities have sought to manage the landscape for political and economic ends, often to the detriment of the region's ecosystems, water resources, and socio-ecological traditions. Recent attempts at reforestation often take too narrow scientific or economic views on the way forward. Schlag argues that interdisciplinary studies of history, ecology, and regional economy are necessary prerequisites for creating successful forest and ecosystem restoration policies across Northeast Asia. The article also questions the conceits of colonial modernity, revealing the enduring and devastating consequences of resource extraction carried out under modernizing states. Ultimately, Schlag's contribution refocuses attention on one of Northeast Asia's dominant biomes – forest – without doing so in a manner that is environmentally deterministic. Instead, she demonstrates how politics have shaped the landscape and how, in turn, a reconfigured nature continues to mold the space of Northeast Asia.

## Conclusion

The northerly vectors of China's BRI, Russia's "Pivot to Asia," Mongolia's "Third Neighbor Policy," South Korea's "New Northern" policy, Japan's efforts to serve as a "system stabilizer" (Taniguchi 2019), and North Korea's intermittent overtures and reversals of denuclearization speak to Northeast Asia's potential to become a region of particular global significance. Northeast Asian development remains, however, mostly promise and, even where actual progress is made, it tends to stir no shortage of controversy. Traction gained in natural resource extraction, for example, catalyzes significant economic, social, and environmental impacts at the local household, intra-state-regional, and national levels (Tasch and Auton 2008; Billé 2012; Woon and Dodds 2021; Billé and Humphrey 2021). The prospect of ongoing development has the potential to both improve and adversely affect lives and local communities.

As trade and transport connections across Northeast Asia expand and link Pacific and Eurasian neighbors, a deeper understanding of the region's past and present is necessary to map its future. The degree to which constituent states can avoid becoming subsumed within a regional imaginary dominated by China, Russia or both countries is uncertain. While national governments dominate energy deals and security concerns, provincial interests complicate a picture of concentrated national authority in decision-making for the region, as do external interests by actors like the US and EU. For example, the northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Heilongjiang, and Jilin have all pursued relationships with the states most proximate or infrastructurally accessible to their provincial boundaries (Christoffersen 1996), and cross-border traders have taken advantage

of flexible documentation arrangements to conduct their business (Park 2018). Meanwhile, as Loginova (2021) demonstrates in this special issue, tracing connections between resource extraction sites and the headquarters of extractive firms – many of which are located far from Northeast Asia – also complicates our perspectives on regional connectivity by topologically expanding Northeast Asia to include cities and countries not conventionally associated with it.

We therefore suggest that the degree to which both scholars of and practitioners in Northeast Asia attend to regionality represents an important consideration for future research. Other regions in Asia, such as Southeast Asia and South Asia, already command significant attention. Northeast Asia merits similarly sustained critique, too. We hope that this special issue will prompt further interest in Northeast Asia and pave the way for new scholarly and policy perspectives that will benefit the people of the region.

## Notes

1. Of the books mentioned here, only one of them treats Central Asia separately. Rowntree and colleagues (2017) provide a distinct Central Asian Region, of which the Chinese administrative regions of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang are included. These Chinese regions are, however, marked on their maps with a double color banding to denote both the Central and East Asia regions, reminding us of China's - and therefore East Asia's - political dominance in them. Foubert and Moseley (2019, 318) provide a region called North and Central Eurasia, which despite its unique name "is dominated territorially by Russia, the world's largest country in land area."
2. It is worth noting that research centers such as Mongolia Inner Asian Studies Unit (MIASU) at Cambridge, the Eurasia Border Unit at Hokkaido University, the Center for Northeast Asian Studies at Tohoku University, the Northeast Asia Council at Arizona State University, the Pyle Center of the National Bureau of Asian Research, the Northeast Asia Center at Seoul National University and the Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia (ERINA) produce robust scholarship and policy analysis focusing on Northeast Asia.
3. EAEU comprises Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. It has courted with limited success Moldova, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Georgia. Some signed on as observer states but as of 2019 none had made substantive overtures for full membership.
4. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a political, economic, and security alliance to facilitate relations between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan.
5. Downtown Blagoveshchensk hosts a bronze statue of a man carrying an oversized suitcase in one hand. The inscription reads: "For the hard work and optimism of the entrepreneurs of the Amur." See Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey (2012) and Pulford (2019).
6. In fact, three of the BRI's six proposed economic corridors pass through the EAEU. The China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC) does not include Russia but does traverse EAEU members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan en route to Iran and Turkey.
7. Several multi-decade deals in support of this relationship have taken form, starting with the 2010 oil pipeline from Skovorodino in Russia to Daqing in China. This was followed in 2014 by a thirty-year, US\$400 billion agreement for natural gas between Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation. Russia's most expensive project since Soviet times took the form of a new pipeline, deemed the "Power of Siberia," which stretches 3,000 kilometers from gas fields in eastern Siberia to the Russia/Chinese border at Blagoveshchensk/Heihe (Foy 2018).
8. China is the world's largest wood importer, while the US is number two. In 2008, the US put into practice the Lacey Act, which forbids the import of illegally harvested trees (Myers 2019, 10).
9. Lake Baikal holds 20 percent of the earth's fresh surface water.

## Disclosure statement

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