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# Climate Change and China's Rise to Great Power Status: Implications for the Global Arctic

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## Introduction

During the last several decades, the world has faced two significant changes that have fuelled the globalisation of the Arctic. In the first, with climate change now a key threat, the Arctic has become a showcase of climate governance. On the one hand, it is the fastest-warming region on earth; on the other, the melting of ice in the Arctic is accelerating climate change and altering ecosystems globally (ACIA, 2004). In the second, the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) has undergone a profound identity change from an isolated communist state to an emerging great power, a transition that has dramatically transformed its sphere of interests. China has recently become interested in Arctic affairs and wants to be recognised as a legitimate stakeholder in governance of the region. This ambition has sparked speculation about whether China is challenging the rights and interests of the Arctic states and whether the country's engagement entails a heightened risk of military conflict in the region (see, for example, Cassotta, Hossain, Ren & Goodsite 2015; Rainwater 2013; Wright 2010).

This chapter investigates the interplay of these two changes by examining the emergence of China's great power status and its implications for the Global Arctic. It focuses on the country's climate policies in particular, because climate change is a central issue in its increasing role in the Arctic: China argues that it has special interests in the Arctic due to adverse effects of climate change and that it must have a chance to be involved in governance of the region. Another salient consideration is that China is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the world and thus the fate of the Arctic – and of the whole world – hinges to a substantial extent on the country's climate change policies.

## China's growing great power status

China's era of reform began in the late 1970s, following the death of Premier Mao Zedong. Economic and political reforms brought rapid growth, which also gradually transformed the country's national identity during the 1980s and 1990s. Although the change in identity resulted largely from economic developments, it encouraged China to take a more active part in the international community than it had before (Qin 2004). Moreover, when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, the international community began to regard China as potential great power. On the one hand, other states sought to integrate China into the community; on the other, theories of "the China threat" started to take shape, especially after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, as the United States (US), Japan and Taiwan speculated whether or not a rising China posed a threat to international society (see, for example, Deng 2006). Since then, the Chinese government has paid special attention to the state's international image (see, for example, Deng 2008; Gries 2004) while Chinese intellectuals have debated the international role and responsibilities of a rising China (Shambaugh 2013; Xia 2001). In 2005, then-US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick gave a famous speech in which he urged China to become a responsible stakeholder, indicating that the country was not yet fulfilling the global responsibilities commensurate with its emerging great power status (Zoellick 2005). Because China's national identity

is in flux<sup>1</sup>, however, it has been very difficult for the Chinese leadership to agree on the scope of China's global responsibility. In general, China accepts that its permanent seat on the UN Security Council entails special responsibilities (Wang 2013).

China has recently begun to identify itself as a great power and to define and implement its “grand strategy” in a more determined way than ever before. In particular, since President Xi Jinping took office in March 2013, the country has departed from its “keep a low profile” foreign policy, set by Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s, and expressed its policy objectives in an unprecedentedly explicit manner. Notably, in his inauguration speech, Xi introduced his vision of the “China dream” (中国梦): “Realizing the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history” (as cited in *Xinhua* 2012). The dream was quickly adopted as one of the hallmarks of Xi's regime and can now be interpreted as China's “grand strategy”. This strategy draws on two “centenary goals”, to be achieved by the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049: 1) “doubling the 2010 GDP and per capita income of urban and rural residents and finishing the building of a society of initial prosperity in all respects” and 2) “turning China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious”. Although these aims were originally put forward in 1997 by then-President Jiang Zemin (*Xinhua* 2014a) at the 15<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) (see Jiang 1997), Xi Jinping's dream has elevated them aims to being China's strategic priorities. This means that although the government's ultimate goal officially continues to be the realisation of communism, in practice its key priorities are economic development and building a harmonious society. Despite its growing international status, China's core interests lie in domestic and regional issues: they include state sovereignty, national security, safeguarding China's political system established by the Constitution, territorial integrity and national reunification, overall social stability, as well as ensuring sustainable economic and social development. The country's foreign policy must support and promote these interests.

Guided by the “China dream”, China increasingly identifies itself as a great power in the international arena. In February 2012, then-Vice President Xi Jinping referred to China as a great power by introducing the concept of the “new type of great power relationship” (新型大国关系) and highlighted the need to expand shared interests and mutually beneficial cooperation between the US and China (Xi 2012). In June 2013, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave an unusually comprehensive statement of China's foreign policy entitled “Exploring the Path of Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics” (Wang 2013) and in November 2014 President Xi Jinping presented the concept of “major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” at a high-level foreign policy conference in Beijing (*Xinhua* 2014a). Xi's speech established guiding principles for Chinese foreign policy for the coming years. On the one hand, he emphasised China's increased interdependence with the rest of the world and the need for global cooperation; on the other, he stressed in an extraordinarily explicit terms the growing importance of foreign policy in ensuring the realisation of the “China dream” and achievement of the “two centenary goals” (see also Swaine 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Jin Canrong (2011, 251) has distinguished four identities for China, all of which all are currently in flux: First, China's identity as the largest developing country is being challenged by its economic miracle; second, China's identity as a regional power is not very accurate anymore, as contemporary China has wide global interests and influence; third, China's identity as a socialist country is being eroded by its capitalist market system and consumerism; and fourth, China's identity as a Confucian civilization is being lost in modernisation and market economy.

As a result, China is now taking a more assertive approach to foreign policy than ever before. Advised by Xi, China will “never give up [its] legitimate rights and will never sacrifice [its] national core interests” (as cited in *Xinhua* 2013a). The Chinese government also attempts to set international agendas proactively: it has begun to develop and promote its own concepts and ideas, such as “harmonious world” (和谐世界), “the Asia-Pacific dream” (亚太梦) and a “new type of international relations” (新型国际关系) in order to organise international society. Time will tell if these new concepts succeed in transforming international discourses and practices such that they become “less Westernized” and better accommodate Chinese values and interests. The purpose of these concepts is to reform international society in a “responsible manner”, not to replace the existing practices from which China has benefitted. In some policy sectors, however, China has suggested alternative sources of global governance, proposing new foreign policy initiatives such as One Belt, One Road, or the New Silk Road and establishing new multilateral financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS New Development Bank.

Along with its other efforts to advance its great power status, China has significantly prioritised maritime issues on its agenda and now endeavours to become a “maritime power”. This objective was declared by then-President Hu Jintao in his report to the 18th National Congress of the CPC in November 2012. According to Hu, China should enhance its “capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect the marine ecological environment, resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power” (Hu 2012). According to Devitt (2016, 2), China’s conception of a maritime power not only emphasises strong naval power but also includes civilian capabilities such as a good coast guard and port infrastructure, advanced shipbuilding capacity, high-level merchant shipping and fishing fleets, as well as the technology and know-how to utilise maritime resources. The objective of becoming a maritime power was incorporated into China’s 2012 white paper on armed forces, which was published after Xi Jinping took office in spring 2013:

China is a major maritime as well as land country. The seas and oceans provide immense space and abundant resources for China's sustainable development, and thus are of vital importance to the people's wellbeing and China's future. It is an essential national development strategy to exploit, utilize and protect the seas and oceans, and build China into a maritime power. (Information Office of the State Council 2013)

Although China has not officially made reference to the Arctic when outlining its efforts to become a maritime power, some Chinese scholars have made strong linkages between the two (Jakobson 2015, 161). Since becoming a maritime power now constitutes an essential part of Xi Jinping’s “China dream”, which in turn is a key guideline of China’s foreign policy, it can be assumed that China’s increasing activities in the Arctic Ocean are informed by this objective.

International climate politics is an especially interesting window on China’s emerging great power status, because China has increasingly started to call itself a major power in international negotiations on climate change while continuing to emphasise that it is a developing country (Kopra 2016). Although China resists formal talks on climate change in the United Nations Security Council, it seems to acknowledge that great powers should take the lead in international efforts to combat the problem. For example, China’s Special Envoy at the September 2014 UN Climate Summit, Zhang Gaoli, declared: “responding to climate change is what China needs to do to achieve sustainable development at home as well as to fulfil its due international obligation as a responsible major country” (Zhang 2014). Moreover, China has

published its key climate commitments in joint statements with the US, indicating that this was done with a view to the great power context (see White House 2014; White House 2015, White House 2016a, White House 2016b). Yet, while *China's National Climate Change Plan (2014-2020)* confirms the country's responsibility as a great power in climate change mitigation, the document also defends the state's "legitimate development rights and interests" as a developing country (National Development and Reform Commission 2014, 4–5).

### **China's role in international climate politics**

There is clear evidence that human activities such as burning fossil fuels have increased the concentration of GHGs in the atmosphere and hence are contributing to climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014). Historically, climate change has largely been caused by the industrialisation of developed countries, but the rapidly growing proportion of GHG emissions in emerging economies is also a contributing factor. In particular, China's total GHG emissions have grown at an extraordinary rate due to its rapid economic growth: between 1990 and 2013, the country's carbon emissions increased 80 per cent (PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency 2015, 10). In 2004, China's total emissions surpassed those of the US, and it is now the world's largest carbon dioxide emitter. In 2015, China accounted for 30 per cent of total global carbon dioxide emissions (PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency 2015, 12). Although the Arctic produces essentially no GHG emissions, the region has warmed more rapidly than any other region on earth during the last thirty years. The impacts of climate change in the Arctic, such as the reduction in sea ice and loss of snow cover, not only harm the region's vulnerable natural environment and livelihood of the local populations, but also have significant global impacts (ACIA, 2004).

Since climate change is a complex global problem, global efforts are necessary to address it; it cannot be solved by Arctic regional governance. China's engagement in international climate politics is undoubtedly imperative: without its participation, any global effort to combat climate change is going to fail. Since the early 1990s, international negotiations on climate change have been conducted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). For a long time, China's attitude towards the UNFCCC was marked by a reluctance to take any measures to mitigate climate change. Instead, it underlined the historic responsibility of developed countries and demanded that they shoulder all the responsibility for tackling the problem. At present, however, the Chinese leadership recognises that climate change is a "challenge faced by the entire world" and thus can only be solved by "extensive international cooperation" (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2008). China has gradually changed its attitude in international climate politics since the 2009 UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen, where it came under harsh international criticism. Although it continues to refuse to commit itself to legally binding emissions targets at international level, it can no longer be seen as "irresponsible".

China played an influential role at the UN Climate Conference in Paris in 2015, where the most recent global climate agreement was concluded. For the first time ever, the president (instead of the premier) represented the country, portraying it as a responsible stakeholder and committed facilitator of the agreement. After the Conference, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei (2015) praised "China's sense of responsibility as a major country in tackling climate change". For China, the "bottom-up" approach of the Paris Agreement was appealing: it does not impose a top-down obligation on any of the parties but allows them to commit to voluntary, domestically formulated mitigation plans instead. China obviously prefers to make moderate voluntary commitments without legal international obligations, as

they involve no fear of failure but rather offer it an opportunity to “gain face”<sup>2</sup> by exceeding global expectations.

In its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) to the UNFCCC, published in 2015, China committed to peak its carbon emissions around 2030 and pledged to reduce its carbon intensity, that is, the amount of carbon dioxide per unit of GDP, by 60 to 65 per cent from its 2005 level by that same year. It also undertook to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 20 per cent and to increase its forest stock volume by around 4.5 billion cubic meters over the 2005 level (National Development and Reform Commission 2015, 5). Notably, China was among the first countries to ratify the Paris Agreement, in September 2016, an action which undoubtedly heightened the willingness of other states to ratify it.

The Paris Agreement entered into force in early November 2016. Climate sceptic Donald Trump was elected US President only several days later. His election raised serious concerns worldwide over the US commitment to the Agreement, as he had repeatedly threatened to that the US would withdraw from it. If President Trump vitiate the climate policies put in place by the previous administration under the leadership of Barack Obama, the action could highlight China’s new emerging leadership in international climate politics. Indeed, it seems that China might well be ready to assume that position: since Trump’s election, the Chinese leadership has declared several times that it will not dilute its climate commitments despite the potential US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (see, for example, China Daily 2016b). Notably, at the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos Xi Jinping urged that “[a]ll signatories should stick to [the Paris Agreement] instead of walking away from it as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations” (World Economic Forum 2017). Furthermore, in a speech at the United Nations Office at Geneva, Xi (2017) sent a clear message to the world – and especially to President Trump – about China’s unwavering climate commitments.

Talk of China’s new responsibility is not only empty rhetoric; rather, it seems that the Chinese political leadership and the general public widely agree that they – and the planet – cannot afford to follow the Western model of industrialisation based on a “pollute first, clean up later” mentality. China’s new development policies acknowledge that going green is the only option for the realisation of the “China dream”. Since the early 2000s, China has examined how it could modernise in a more sustainable way and hence alleviate social and environmental problems caused by its development model (Dent 2014, 57). To ensure an energy supply, the government launched a series of policies and measures to decrease dependency on (imported) fossil fuels and to promote the production of non-fossil energy, especially hydropower and nuclear energy.

In addition to economic interests, the country has strong human security incentives to respond to climate change, for it is state is geographically very vulnerable to climate-related disasters. The Chinese government is increasingly aware of the adverse effects of climate change on the country. Advised by the first *National Assessment Report on Climate Change*, published in 2006, China’s first *National Climate Change Program*, released in 2007, recognised that the climate was already changing in China: the average surface temperature had already increased by between 0.5 and 0.8 °C during the 20th century;

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<sup>2</sup> In the Chinese context, the concept of face is often used to describe human concerns over honour and respect. It explains why national image building plays such an important role in Chinese foreign policy: the Chinese government seeks to maintain face, because it means “maintaining authority” and the state’s national honour; losing face would mean “losing status and the ability to pursue instrumental goals” (Gries 2004, 29). In China, others can also “give face” to a person or social group.

mountain glaciers were melting at an accelerated rate; the frequency and intensity of heatwaves had increased in the northern provinces; and heavy precipitation had increased in the southern provinces (National Development and Reform Commission 2007).

Forecasts estimate that China's average temperatures will rise between 1.3 and 5.0 °C by the end of the century (China Climate Change Info-Net 2015). Therefore, it is assumed that China will suffer the most from a "business as usual" scenario - in which no effective emission cuts are implemented and the global average temperature will increase to 4°C - and has the most to gain from limiting warming to 2 °C (Strauss, Kulp & Levermann 2015, 10). Although China is not an Arctic state, climate change in the Arctic poses tremendous risks to the country. For example, many of China's mega-cities, such as Shanghai, Tianjin and Hong Kong, are located in coastal areas and are at high risk of flooding due to rising sea levels caused by the melting of sea ice in the Arctic. Furthermore, climate change in the Arctic will alter many global natural processes, causing changes likely to hamper China's agricultural production. Food security is not only important for feeding China's large population but is also a critical aspect of the legitimacy of the Communist Party. Given these problems, it is no surprise that scientific research on climate change is one of the key interests of China's Arctic policies today.

Unfortunately, it is now becoming clear that states have failed to stop climate change. The Earth's climate is changing regardless of any actions states may be taking, and the Arctic is already experiencing rapid changes as result. In this light, adaptation is important alongside mitigation. China's first nationwide climate change adaptation strategy, published in 2013, warned that Chinese society in its entirety is ill-prepared to deal with the serious threats posed by climate change. Taking "significantly enhanced adaptation capacity" as the ultimate goal, the plan outlines a wide range of measures to be implemented by 2020 in order to protect water, forest and soil resources, safeguard agricultural output, strengthen infrastructure, improve risk management systems, increase public awareness and establish institutional mechanisms (National Development and Reform Commission 2013). Engagement in the Arctic offers China a chance to gain scientific knowledge that can be utilised to formulate plans allowing the country to adapt to climate change. Accordingly, the primary interest of Chinese polar research is to gain better understanding of climatic changes in the Arctic and their impacts on China. In particular, the Chinese government is interested in learning more about linkages between climate change in the Arctic and extreme weather, floods and impacts on agriculture in the country. In contrast to sensitive issues such as sovereignty and resource exploitation, the issue of climate change is regarded as uncontroversial enough for China to encourage enhanced collaboration with the Arctic states.

China has made major structural changes in its economy and energy sector in an effort to reduce its carbon emissions. In fact, forecasts suggest that the emissions peak could occur earlier than 2030, because China's total coal consumption seems to have already peaked in 2013 (see, for example, Buckley & Sanzillo 2015) and the growth of its total emissions has slowed since 2012 (PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency 2015,5). In 2014, China's *Energy Development Strategy Action Plan (2014-2020)* included, for the first time, a cap on national coal consumption by 2020 and pledged to raise the share of non-fossil fuels in the total primary energy mix to 15 per cent by 2020 from 9.8 per cent in 2013 (Xinhua 2014b). Looking forward, China has issued many other ambitious strategies, such as *China's National Climate Change Plan (2014-2020)*, published in 2014 and its *Integrated Reform Plan for Promoting Ecological Progress*, published in 2015, to reduce emissions in the energy and industrial sectors, the construction industry, transportation and agriculture, as well as to develop high value-added manufacturing and a less energy-intensive service sector. Moreover, eleven Chinese cities and provinces have committed themselves to peaking their carbon emissions before the national target of 2030, with

two of the biggest cities, Beijing and Guangzhou, even promising to do so by the end of 2020 (US–China Climate Leaders’ Declaration 2015). Most importantly, China’s *13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020)* integrated the state’s international climate pledges into the regime’s most authoritative domestic development objectives and measures. It aims to reduce carbon intensity by 18 per cent from 2015 levels. It seeks to not only implement but also *strengthen* the country’s INDC and reiterates the above-mentioned national energy consumption cap of 5 billion metric tons of standard coal equivalent by 2020 (National People’s Congress & Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference 2016). All in all, there are strong hopes that China will fulfil its international climate commitments in the coming years while simultaneously growing its economy.

### **China’s grand strategy and the Arctic**

As China is not an Arctic country, engagement in the Arctic is not one of its political priorities and it has no Arctic strategy. Nevertheless, it has become more and more interested in the Arctic in recent years (see, for example, Chen 2012; Jakobson 2010; Jakobson & Peng 2012). In general, the country’s involvement in polar affairs is nothing new: it acceded to the Svalbard Treaty as far back as in 1925 and started its own Antarctic research programme, with the support of the US, New Zealand, Japan and Australia, in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Brady, 2012, 104). In the early 1990s, Chinese scientists started to do research and participate in multinational projects in the Arctic, and since 1994 they have conducted expeditions in the both polar regions on board the research ice breaker *Xuelong* (Snow Dragon) (see Jakobson 2010, 3–5). However, the main focus of China’s polar research, in terms of funding and expeditions, has been – and still is – the Antarctic (Jakobson 2015, 156).

In addition to the traditional scientific interest in the Arctic, an increasing number of Chinese analysts are now working on geopolitical, economic, legal and other aspects of the Arctic. On the one hand, this growing interest is seemingly motivated by the globalisation of the Arctic: as demonstrated by the present volume, there are a number of political, economic and environmental changes going on in the Arctic which have global repercussions, including impacts on China. On the other hand, as China’s global status has dramatically changed, it is no surprise that the country has started to pursue economic and political interests at the global level. The melting of the Arctic icecap no doubt provides economic opportunities that will support China’s long-term development strategy. In particular, the northern sea routes are of special interest to China, because they not only provide it with faster and shorter access to Western markets but also decrease its heavy dependence on the narrow and politically insecure Strait of Malacca (the so-called “Malacca dilemma”). What is more, with its growing hunger for oil and other natural resources, the large unexplored areas in the Arctic containing petroleum and untapped minerals resources are also of interest. Since China does not have the advanced technology required to extract oil or gas from the Arctic continental shelf, it has increased cooperation with transnational oil corporations and the Arctic states – and will probably continue to do so. In political terms, the Arctic offers another platform for China to take part in international governance and enhance the country’s international status. (For more detailed discussion of China’s interests in the Arctic, see, for example, Chen 2012; Jakobson 2010; Jakobson & Peng 2012; Kopra 2013; Xing & Bertelsen 2013)

China’s growing international status has raised global concerns that it will challenge the existing international norms and institutions. Classic realists believe that because the world is “condemned to perpetual great-power competition” (Mearsheimer 2001, 2), the rise of China will inevitably lead to a war for hegemony. China’s increasing interest in the Arctic has generated much public unease, although many of the concerns are based on myths and misconceptions of China’s Arctic diplomacy: Chinese Rear



Admiral Yin Zhuo's misinterpreted statement that the Arctic does not belong to any country, China's involvement in the mining of Greenland's rare earth elements, a Chinese businessman's plans to buy a large area of land in Iceland, and the Chinese government's alleged plans to establish a "super-embassy" with a massive number of personnel in Iceland (see Ping and Lanteigne 2015, 2–13). For their part, critics of realism the "China threat" view as simplistic, because circumstances and ideas both influence how great powers behave. On the one hand, a rising China is faced with a very different international system and very different political problems than previous rising powers have encountered; on the other, national identities, norms, and values influence how great powers see the world and how they behave. Regarding the Arctic, the globalisation of the region and the causes and effects of climate change largely link the interests of states, including the great powers.

China has attempted to alter regional power relations in the East Asian region, especially in the South China Sea, but this does not prove that it is a revisionist power on the global stage. There is no evidence that China would pose a threat in the Arctic region (Cassotta, Hossain, Ren & Goodsite 2015). It has never disputed the Arctic states' sovereign rights over their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), nor has it questioned the role of the Arctic Council, the key regional forum established in 1996 to enhance cooperation and coordinate interaction amongst the eight Arctic states and Arctic indigenous communities on sustainable development and environment protection in the region, or suggested an alternative international body to govern Arctic affairs. In order to be granted "permanent observer" status on the Arctic Council, China had to accept the Nuuk criteria defined by the Council in 2011. By so doing, it agreed to "recognize Arctic States' sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic" as well as the Law of the Sea and regional indigenous peoples' culture and rights (Hong 2013; Arctic Council 2011).

As part of its efforts to gain access to Arctic governance, China has increased its cooperation with the Arctic countries and started to identify itself as a "near-Arctic country" and an "Arctic stakeholder". This discursive identification is motivated in particular by the threats that climate change is expected to pose to China's environment, agriculture and coastal urban areas. Yet, it should be noted that China is not the only non-Arctic country that has made efforts to create an Arctic country "brand". Other observer states on the Arctic Council, such as Japan, United Kingdom, France, South Korea and Singapore, have published, or are in the process of preparing, policy papers outlining their identities, visions and interests with respect to the Arctic. China's "branding" efforts, however, have been seen in a far more negative light than those of other non-Arctic states – even though the United Kingdom, for instance, has used a very similar discourse to identify itself as a "nearest neighbour of the Arctic" (United Kingdom Government 2013, ii; see also Ping & Lanteigne 2015, 16).

While the Chinese government has not officially commented on the Nuuk criteria, various Chinese scholars have criticised the Arctic Council's position as the sole decision-maker for the region (Jakobson and Peng 2012, 13-14). For instance, Professor Guo Peiqing (2011) has argued the following:

Arctic states announce to the world: The Arctic is an "Arctic-states" Arctic. They oppose the idea that the Arctic is common property of the whole of humankind and desire to advance their own interests and to impair the participation of non-Arctic states through the Monroe Doctrine.

Yet China is not totally excluded from governance of the Arctic. In 1996, it ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the key international agreement for regulating maritime activities in

the Arctic. As a signatory to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, it has a right of access to Svalbard and as a member of the International Maritime Organization, as well as other international bodies, it can take part in the formulation of international regulations that directly or indirectly influence Arctic governance. As a non-Arctic state, however, China is not eligible to become a full member of the Arctic Council. In 2007, it did acquire ad hoc observer status at Arctic Council meetings. In 2013, after two failed attempts, China's status was elevated to "permanent observer", which does not accord it decision-making powers (voting rights) but does guarantee access to all Arctic Council meetings and activities. This was an important decision for China, because it ensured that its voice is now heard in the Council and that it will have an opportunity to "get to know the Arctic better, and then [be] able to join effectively international cooperation" (*Xinhua* 2013b).

It is likely that China hopes to play a more influential role in the Arctic Council. Notably, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming declared in 2015 that China is a "major stakeholder" in the Arctic (Zhang 2015). Although China has not questioned the Arctic states' sovereign rights in the region, it often emphasises that Arctic governance concerns itself with regional as well as global issues and therefore the voices of non-Arctic states must be properly heard (see, for example, *Xinhua* 2013c). Zhang also seemed to express his concern that non-littoral states would not gain full access to Arctic natural resources. He pointed out that "the overall interests of the international community in the Arctic should be respected" (Zhang 2015).

## **Conclusions**

In step with its growing great power status, China has started to demand access to all international political forums, and Arctic governance is no exception. This has raised global concerns as the Chinese government has not yet published an Arctic strategy or other official document that would explain Chinese visions of the future of the Arctic region. In the long run, China has such important economic and security interests related to shipping, access to natural resources and climate change in the Arctic that it will likely seek a more influential role in governance of the region. This ambition is also motivated by its "policy of face" and pursuit of honour globally. Given China's own strong doctrine of sovereignty, however, it is not likely that it will challenge the sovereign rights of the Arctic littoral states. Yet, if the government issued an Arctic strategy or other document describing its objectives in the Arctic, this would not only alleviate international concerns of a "China threat" but also provide China with an opportunity to demonstrate its emerging great power responsibility, especially where environmental protection and climate change mitigation are concerned.

China's position in international climate negotiations has changed dramatically since the early 2010s. It no longer focuses exclusively on the historic responsibility of developed countries but has started to make ambitious efforts of its own to mitigate climate change. It indeed seems that China is now increasingly taking on the role of a great power in international climate politics. If the country manages to continue to expand its economy while substantially reducing carbon emissions, it has great potential to act as a role model in climate change mitigation globally. In any event, China has a key role to play in this effort in the Arctic: one hand, it is in a position to make or break an ambitious global agreement on climate change; on the other, its domestic efforts to peak and reduce GHG emissions are necessary in order to limit the global stock of carbon dioxide. Indeed, the early peak of China's GHG emissions is the most important variable in Arctic climate change due to the country's position as the largest GHG emitter in the world; however, at the moment its climate policies do not make references to the melting ice of the Arctic. In any event, deeper involvement in Arctic affairs will probably increase China's motivation to

reduce GHG emissions. Scientific research in the Arctic will also help the country to develop its domestic plans for adapting to climate change. From this perspective, China's active Arctic engagement should be encouraged. For the future of the Arctic – and the planet at large – China must make a firmer commitment to respond to climate change.

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