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Chapter 3: China's Arctic policy

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3.1. Introduction

This chapter elaborates on China's evolving strategy in the Arctic. In January 2018, the Chinese government published its first-ever Arctic policy. For many, the overarching and ambitious nature of the country's Arctic policy was a surprise. China emphasized its role in global and regional governance that pertains to the Arctic but also the way it will function in the region through bilateral relations. For China, the Arctic is no longer about simply being an observer in the Arctic Council, but much more. It is therefore important to study the main parameters of this policy. This chapter will analyze mainly the specifics of China's Arctic white paper and examine a pair of specific cases, namely China's role in negotiating the Polar Code and the Arctic fisheries agreement. Special attention will be paid to the ways in which China's national policy towards the Arctic has emerged and how it has been viewed by other actors and commentators following China's role in the Arctic. As a sub-section, China's policy towards the Arctic's indigenous peoples will also be studied. It is additionally useful to explore how China's Arctic national policy compares with other Asian states that were accepted as observers into the Arctic Council. Finally, conclusions are drawn on the impact and future prospects of China's Arctic policy.

## China's Arctic policy

### 3.2. The development of China's Arctic policy

China's participation in Arctic international cooperation is fairly recent, even if the country became a party to the Spitsbergen Treaty in 1925. The country became a member of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) in 1996 but only in 2007 did it start to send delegations to the meetings of the Arctic Council, the predominant inter-governmental forum for the discussion on Arctic issues (Koivurova *et al.*, 2017). China has no territory north of the Arctic Circle, a prerequisite for membership, so the country's only option was to become a formal Observer. For this, the country needed to demonstrate an understanding of Arctic affairs, including economics, history, and peoples, to a degree that would be acceptable to the eight members of the Arctic Council, some of which, including Canada, Russia and the United States, were suspicious of Beijing's motives. China was also at a disadvantage, as the country did not have a long history of engagement and exploration compared with other Observer governments. Beijing also had to address its still-tentative approaches to regional institutions, especially those that were outside of the Asia-Pacific. In short, Beijing had to quickly and effectively build an Arctic identity in the face of internal and external constraints.

There was also a perceived timing issue in Beijing's engagement of the Arctic Council. Until energy and commodity prices fell after 2014, there was much discussion about an 'Arctic scramble' for resources that would place the eight Council members at a distinct advantage (Borgerson, 2008). On one hand, China wanted to avoid the impression that it was seeking to 'gate-crash' the region and challenge Arctic governance, including the Arctic Council. However, Chinese policymakers were also wary of what could be called the 'blueberry pie' scenario, whereby the Arctic is cut up amongst the Arctic Eight, with all other countries being sidelined (Rainwater, 2013; Lanteigne, 2018). Thus, China had to find a middle ground, and a great deal of that process involved presenting itself as an Arctic partner, a process that resulted in a great deal of Arctic diplomacy on a bilateral level. In some cases, the process was extremely successful (Iceland, Russia), producing good returns (Finland, Sweden), but less so in others (Canada, Denmark, United States). Norway was the odd one out in this process until late 2016, when diplomatic relations were more fully restored. Also, Norway did not veto China's 2013 bid to become an Arctic Council observer, despite worsened bilateral relations and speculation that Oslo would seek to curtail China's bid (Watts, 2012).

## China's Arctic policy

The country was accepted as an Observer to the Arctic Council at the Kiruna ministerial meeting in 2013, together with other Asian applicants (Japan, South Korea, India and Singapore) and Italy. China's interest in becoming a Council Observer, along with a potential growing 'line by the front door', as is the current status of many Asian states, forced greater attention to be paid to how future Observers should be chosen. Previous applications that so far have not been successful include Greece, Mongolia, Turkey and the European Union. However, the EU, while it lacks formal Observer status, remains an Observer-in-principle, and is a common participant in Council proceedings.

During the years immediately preceding Beijing's acceptance as a formal Observer in the Arctic Council, there was a noticeable uptick of media reports and academic studies regarding the country's emerging policies in the Arctic, including references to China as both a 'near-Arctic State' (*jin beiji guojia* 近北极国家) and an 'Arctic stakeholder' (*beiji lihai guanxiguo* 北极利害关系国), despite the fact that China does not have an Arctic border (Jakobsen & Peng, 2012). The shortest distance between the Arctic Circle and China's northernmost point, in Mohe County (漠河县), Heilongjiang province at 53°33' N, is more than 1400 kilometers.

Nonetheless, some Chinese actors argued that China's proximity to the Arctic region, as well as the effects of regional climate change on Chinese weather patterns, justify greater Chinese engagement in Arctic governance. It was also suggested in studies published in March 2017 that changing weather patterns in the Arctic, specifically ice erosion in the Arctic Ocean, coupled with increased snowfall in regions of Siberia, were contributing to reduced wind frequency, which in turn allowed for air pollution to linger over parts of coastal China in winter months (Hernández, 2017). Since then, air pollution levels well above safety levels have been recorded in coastal Chinese cities during the winter, a phenomenon commonly known as the 'airpocalypse' or *morikongqi* (末日空气) in Chinese (Yang, 2016).

However, the concept of 'near-Arctic State' was greeted with suspicion by some Western Observers and at times interpreted as an attempt by China to directly challenge political norms in the region and to act as a 'gate-crasher' in the Arctic. There were also attempts by some Western commentators to draw comparisons between China's claims to the South China Sea and the country's supposed 'assertiveness' in the Arctic Ocean, despite the fact that Beijing is not claiming any sovereignty in the latter region (Houck, 2017, August 1; Martin, 2018, May 5). A

## China's Arctic policy

quotation by then-PLA (People's Liberation Army) Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo (尹卓), stating that "the Arctic belongs to all the people around the world, as no nation has sovereignty over it [...] China must play an indispensable role in Arctic exploration as we have one-fifth of the world's population," was used as further evidence of an emerging revisionist policy in the Arctic on China's part, despite the fact that other reports suggested that the quotation was either mistranslated or taken out of context. The complete statement was also cited as "according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the North Pole and its surrounding areas do not belong to any single country, and the common riches in the area belong to all the people in the world." Both of these alarmist interpretations of China's behavior in the region were clearly expressed by the Secretary of State of the United States (US), Mike Pompeo, in his speech just before the Arctic Council's foreign ministers meeting in Rovaniemi on May 6, 2019 (Pompeo, 2019).

Despite the fact that Beijing had taken great care to stress both scientific diplomacy and its ongoing interest to act as a partner to the Arctic States, since 2013 Chinese officials have also tacitly put forward the idea that despite not being an Arctic State, non-Arctic States such as China should nonetheless play a role, to a certain degree, in Arctic affairs, given the effects of the region in parts of the world further south.

One vivid sign of this was a speech given by then-Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Zhang Ming (张明) at the annual Arctic Circle conference in Reykjavík in October 2015. His speech included a brief, six-point plan for China's emerging Arctic policies, namely the need for future exploration and knowledge about the region, the protection and "rational use" of the Arctic, respect for the inherent rights of Arctic States and indigenous peoples, respect for the rights of non-Arctic States and the international community, creation of a "multi-tiered co-operation framework for win-win results" in the region, and the need for continued observance of relevant international law and institutions, including UNCLOS and the Spitsbergen Treaty (Zhang, 2015). The first three points were hardly groundbreaking and were assumed to be a normal stance by an Arctic Council Observer seeking to build an Arctic identity. However, the fourth, fifth and sixth points were a tacit statement that China wished to play a more central role in future Arctic affairs. China was seeking to walk a fine line between being seen as revisionist in the Arctic but also avoiding what has been called a scenario whereby the Arctic is split up, politically and

## China's Arctic policy

economically, between the 'Arctic Eight', with all other governments being shut out (Lanteigne, 2018).

### 3.3. China's Arctic white paper in a nutshell

By the time of adoption of China's first Arctic policy document in 2018, its stance towards the Arctic Council and Arctic governance has become clearer. Beijing evidently perceives that it will continue as an Observer in the Arctic Council, but the white paper defines its general role in Arctic governance in more expansive and ambitious terms, as is briefly explained below. This stance is clear from the beginning of the white paper, in which the country details what is taking place in the region and who should bear responsibility for the region. In particular, the White paper stipulates:

The Arctic situation now goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature, having a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole, as well as on the survival, the development, and the shared future for mankind (PRC State Council, 2018).

With this viewpoint, the basis for China's policy is to be among those who shoulder their share of responsibility for the development of a sustainable Arctic. Before moving to these themes, the document provides some basic information about the Arctic and recent changes in the region.

Chapter II of the white paper starts out by defining why China perceives itself as a "near-Arctic state". It is, according to the white paper, "one of the continental States that are closest to the Arctic Circle" but also that "[t]he natural conditions of the Arctic and their changes have a direct impact on China's climate system and ecological environment, and, in turn, on its economic interests in agriculture, forestry, fishery, marine industry and other sectors". Then the document identifies how China is already active in the Arctic and has been so for quite some time.

Chapter III of the paper outlines China's policy goals on the Arctic: to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic "so as to safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic, and [to] promote

## China's Arctic policy

sustainable development of the Arctic” (PRC State Council, 2018). In order to realize these policy goals, the white paper elaborates basic principles for their attainment: “respect, cooperation, [a] win-win result and sustainability”. “Respect” is defined as the key basis for China’s participation in Arctic affairs, and “cooperation” aims to establish a relationship “of multi-level, omni-dimensional and wide-ranging cooperation in this area.” Furthermore, a “win-win result” is defined to mean that all stakeholders in this area should pursue and experience mutual benefits and common progress in all fields of activities. Finally, “sustainability” as the fourth principle is defined as meaning “realizing harmonious coexistence between man and nature, better coordination between ecological protection, economic growth and social progress, better balance between utilization, management and protection, and intergenerational equity” (ibid.).

Furthermore, China’s Arctic white paper categorizes Chinese policies and positions on participating in Arctic affairs, in Chapter IV, in four goals: deepening the exploration and understanding of the Arctic; protecting the eco-environment of the Arctic and addressing climate change; utilising Arctic resources in a lawful and rational manner; and, finally, participating actively in Arctic governance and international cooperation. As all the other policies are studied in other chapters of this volume, it is useful to examine here the final one – participating actively in Arctic governance and international cooperation.

In the white paper, China states that it “has worked to regulate and supervise the activities of Chinese citizens, legal persons or other organizations in the Arctic in accordance with the law to ensure that their activities accord with international law and respect the relevant national laws on environmental protection, resource conservation, and sustainable development” (PRC State Council, 2018). It also expresses that it has endeavored to consolidate its overall coordination of its Arctic policy but, importantly, that “China takes an active part in the international governance of the Arctic”. For the country, it is important to uphold the current Arctic governance system with the UN Charter and the UNCLOS as its core. However, China not only foresees that the existing international frameworks are to be upheld in the Arctic, it also expresses its desire to advance international cooperation on the Arctic, for instance, under the Belt and Road Initiative, which may, in China’s view, provide many joint benefits such as linking China and Europe via the Arctic Ocean by building the blue economic passage or enhancing Arctic digital connectivity, including via a potential fibre-optic link from China to the Nordic Arctic via Siberia (Nilsen

## China's Arctic policy

2019), both of which very much hinge on the development of the Northern Sea Route.

For the remainder of this part of the white paper, China affirms that it has a strong role in those global frameworks that influence the future of the Arctic, such as the climate regime or the International Maritime Organization, but also regionally, as an Observer in the Arctic Council. Bilateral cooperation is also seen as an extremely important part of China's collaboration with the Arctic states.

### 3.4. China and Arctic international governance

As a non-Arctic state, China invokes international frameworks of rules that strongly emphasize its role in Arctic governance. China's Arctic strategy pays little attention to the role of the predominant intergovernmental regional forum, the Arctic Council, in regional governance. Yet this may not be a big surprise, given China's limited role in the Council (see Chapter 4) – China is only an observer, a status lower than the small Nordic states, or Indigenous Peoples' organizations that would normally be dubbed as non-governmental organizations in other intergovernmental bodies or treaty negotiations. Conversely, China emphasizes international frameworks in which it itself plays a more significant role. In particular, China's Arctic white paper reiterates that the Arctic is governed not only by the Arctic Council but international norms, rules and institutions apply to the region as well. In particular, the paper stresses the role of the United Nations and its Security Council (where China is one of the permanent members), the UNCLOS (to which China is a party), UN-specialized agencies such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the treaties it produces (China is a party to many of these regimes), and the UN-based regime fighting against climate change and various other international environmental treaties (to many of which China is a party). In this way, China seeks to legitimate its role as one of the main players in Arctic governance. Clearly, China's growing presence in the Arctic countries via scientific engagement (see Chapter 4) and economic policy (see Chapter 6), amongst other ways, shapes regional affairs.

Furthermore, it is also useful to examine more deeply two processes that both commenced around 2010 and that have provided needed regulations for enhancing safe and environmentally sound shipping and responsible fisheries in the Arctic Ocean, as these have not been studied in other chapters of this book. The 2009 Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment

## China's Arctic policy

(AMSA, 2009) of the Arctic Council recommended that the Arctic States take action towards a mandatory Polar Code, which would establish legally binding obligations for states and their vessels when they enter the Arctic Ocean or Southern Ocean surrounding Antarctica. As early as 2002, an Arctic shipping Code was adopted by the IMO as a recommendatory instrument for navigating in the Arctic Ocean, which was then expanded to cover the Southern Ocean via the IMO-adopted non-legally binding 2009 Polar Code (see Jensen, 2007; Polar Code, 2009).

The Polar Code was negotiated to contain both recommendatory and legally binding sections (as amendments to the existing IMO treaties such as the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea — SOLAS and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships — MARPOL) and it came into force in 2017. One of the key objectives of the states in adopting law of the sea measures is to facilitate smooth traffic and navigation. Therefore, the coastal states are generally discouraged from setting construction, design, equipment and manning (CDEM) standards beyond those accepted internationally. As a result, in order to be effective, CDEM standards specific for Arctic shipping needed to be regulated in the legally binding part of the Polar Code. As a Member State to the IMO, China states in its Arctic policy that it will abide by these standards and also that it is willing to further develop these rules, as it “supports the International Maritime Organization in playing an active role in formulating navigational rules for the Arctic” (White paper).

The Arctic Council's Arctic Climate Impact Assessment of 2004/2005 (ACIA, 2005) projected that with warming waters, the fish stocks are likely to move northwards. The United States took the initiative in 2007 by presenting the proposal to the Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) of the Arctic Council that precautionary regulatory action might be needed, but the SAOs did not see that the Council would have competence in fisheries management. For this reason, in 2010 the Arctic Ocean coastal states commenced diplomatic and scientific negotiations to explore whether regulatory action was needed for the possible emergence of high seas fish stocks in the Central Arctic Ocean, an area of about 2.8 million square kilometers. The coastal states issued a declaration in 2015 not to allow their own fishing vessels to enter this area, and then invited four other states (China, Japan, South-Korea and Iceland) and the European Union for further negotiations on a legally binding agreement. The text of the agreement was approved by the parties in November 2017, and the agreement itself was signed in October 2018. With the agreement, these nine states and the EU agree to abstain from commercial fishing, which can be

## China's Arctic policy

lifted if specified procedural and substantive criteria are met. Given that there is no commercial fishing in this high seas area, the agreement is a good example of a precautionary approach to fisheries, as nowadays about forty percent of the high seas area is already open during the summer months (Arctic Fisheries Agreement, 2018). China also played an important role in these negotiations (Liu, 2018).

### 3.5. China and Arctic Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous Peoples are important actors in the avenues of Arctic governance. There is a broad consensus among Arctic States and other actors in the region — at least at a declaratory level — that indigenous concerns and rights need to be seriously taken into account and that Indigenous Peoples should participate in decision-making and in any Arctic-relevant discussion. Hence, any non-Arctic state wanting to develop its Arctic policy needs to take a stance on indigenous peoples, the original residents of the region. All the non-Arctic states that aim to become observers to the Arctic Council need to justify their observer application also by demonstrating their commitment to the region's indigenous peoples. To this end, the Chinese government also commits to “respect [the Arctic region's] diverse social culture and historical traditions of the indigenous peoples” (as well as “interests and concerns of indigenous peoples”) (PRC State Council, 2018), reiterating several times the phrasing found in the Arctic Council's Nuuk Observer rules (see Graczyk & Koivurova, 2014).

Between 2011 and 2013, when China obtained formal observer status in the Arctic Council, Chinese officials approached indigenous representatives, but China did not reach out to Permanent Participant organizations the way that Singapore did, for instance, by inviting Arctic indigenous activists to visit the city-state (Stepien, 2017). Conversely, China's 2018 White Paper states that business cooperation “should accommodate the interests of local residents including the indigenous peoples” in line with the “win-win result” principle. In the same vein, Chinese operators should respect “the efforts made by the Arctic States to empower the local citizens, foster their social and economic progress, and improve education and medical services, so that the Arctic residents, including the indigenous peoples, will truly benefit from the development of Arctic resources” (PRC State Council, 2018).

## China's Arctic policy

There is no indication that any particular attention was given to indigenous interests in the decisions on investments in Arctic Russia. Chinese mining operators in Canada expressed views that the processes of negotiating agreements with local communities is too long and burdensome, contributing to their limited interest in the investments in Canada (e.g., Beeby, 2016, June 7).

Markedly, the statements by China in regards to Arctic Indigenous Peoples primarily reflect the approach of the respect for local/national rules and regulations. In that light, the Chinese government encourages economic actors over which it has some control to take appropriate account of indigenous rights and interests because they operate within the framework established by the Arctic States, which observe these rights. China does not state at any point that it would promote in its activities indigenous rights beyond what is required by the legal systems of the Arctic States, nor in other geographical contexts such as Africa or Latin America. This is in some contrast to the way many western states' approach to indigenous rights within, for instance, development aid, which is the main policy area in which these states encounter indigeneity.

As no actual instances of Chinese activities in the Arctic allow for the proper testing the declarations made in the 2018 White Paper, it is useful to look at China's stances towards indigenous rights globally. China perceives that there are no indigenous peoples in China, as for Beijing indigeneity arises exclusively from the context of colonisation and conquest.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the view of the Chinese government, the issue of indigenous rights does not apply to China itself, which means that any of China's international statements on indigenous issues are seen in Beijing as having no implications for China's internal affairs, including in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> In international law, there is no official definition specifying which groups constitute "Indigenous Peoples". However, elements characterizing Indigenous Peoples can be found in the International Labour Organization Convention no. 169 on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. These elements include traditional lifestyles, distinctiveness compared with majority societies, continuity of institutions and cultures from the times before colonization, invasion or settlement. Representatives of Indigenous Peoples are often critical to any attempts to define which groups are indigenous, and they underline the importance of self-definition as indigenous. While indigenous status is generally accepted in states in which colonization led to the establishment of majority white settlers societies (Americas, Australia, New Zealand, the Arctic), it is often rejected by states in Africa and Asia, where indigenous status under international law is considered to be not applicable to societies in which the majority population originates from within the region. In these parts of the world, certain groups nonetheless claim indigeneity based on their current situation (so-called 'functional indigeneity') — partly arising from the process of European colonization — or the fact of settlement and conquest of their territories by non-European groups. This leads to cases such as at the Chinese-Russian borderlands, where reindeer-herding Evenki people on the Russian side enjoy indigenous status, while Evenki inhabiting the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia are listed among officially recognized ethnic groups, without any special indigenous status.

## China's Arctic policy

international criticism of the Chinese government regarding its policies towards minority ethnic groups, in particular Uighurs and Tibetans. In the UN system, China has therefore proven to be a fairly strong proponent of indigenous rights. China not only voted in favor of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples but attempted in the past to be an active and supportive actor in the area of indigenous rights, for instance by organizing a pre-sessional meeting of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in Beijing in 2007 (Stepien, 2017). This notwithstanding, the 2018 White Paper does not mention 'indigenous rights', preferring phrases such as indigenous interests, concerns, culture and traditions.

China declares that it takes into account that "[c]ommercial activities in the region [...] exert important influence on the way of work and life of Arctic residents including the indigenous peoples" (PRC State Council, 2018). Admitting that Chinese activities may also have impacts on Arctic livelihoods is of high importance, as, in principle, it should translate to the notion of Chinese operators' responsibility. Chinese investors and financial institutions have been accused in the past of neglecting indigenous interests in places such as Africa or South America, in particular in cases of hydropower, mining and agricultural projects. Partly in response to this criticism, the Chinese government adopted a variety of guidelines with strong emphasis on the proper management of local social and environmental impacts. These guidelines are directed mainly at the state owned enterprises (SOEs) and public financial institutions. It is difficult to evaluate whether such documents have a tangible influence on the actions of these actors in particular projects (Stepien, 2017).

At the Arctic Circle China Forum held in Shanghai in May 2019, the Chinese representatives often emphasized their respect for indigenous peoples' cultures and traditions – a change in tone that surprised many in the audience (e.g. Bennett, 2019). This may indicate a learning curve in which the Chinese government has understood the importance of indigenous people's role in Arctic governance and their status as central stakeholders in many Arctic economic plans such as the planned Arctic railway through the homelands of the Sami in Finnish Lapland (see Chapter 7). Despite Beijing's efforts to emphasize its positive and responsible interest to protect indigenous populations traditions in the Arctic region, however, Beijing's actual conduct suppressing Uighurs, Kazakhs and Tibetans do not increase foreign powers' trust in Beijing's wording.

## China's Arctic policy

### 3.6. Chinese interests in the Arctic as compared to other Asian states

As noted above, five Asian states have developed their distinct Arctic policies in the past decade: China, India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. The Republic of Korea was an early starter in developing its Arctic policies, publishing a White Paper in 2013 and stressing the need for greater education and scientific cooperation in the region. However, being a major player in shipbuilding, Seoul is also watching the emergence of shipping in the Arctic Ocean. The 2013 paper, referred to as the 'Master Plan', was written via consultation with several governmental ministries including Foreign Affairs, Trade, Fisheries and and Future Planning, as well as affiliated research institutes including the Korea Maritime Institute (KMI) and the Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI). The paper described three major policy goals: the building of a "co-operative Arctic partnership", the enhancement of scientific research in the region, and the exploration of new business opportunities. For example, a Korean shipping firm agreed to sign on to the Tromsø-based Arctic Economic Council (AEC) in 2017.

Korea also hosts a number of Track II initiatives, that is, informal dialogs, including the annual Korean Arctic Academy conference in Busan for students in the region, a Korea Corner at the University of Greenland in Nuuk, and an Arctic Circle Forum conference in Seoul in December 2018. At present, North Korea's Arctic interests have been limited to some shipping ventures with Russia, and also the Kim Jong-un government did announce its interest in signing the Svalbard Treaty in 2016.

Japan issued its Arctic White Paper at the Arctic Circle conference in October 2016, and although Japan has also sought to push for scientific partnerships, there was an additional stress on Arctic shipping as a strategic priority, given the high dependency Japan has for imports of resources and energy. Tokyo wishes to expand its use of the Northern Sea Route for European trade, and it is concerned both about the potential militarization of the Arctic as well as the possibility of China's seeking a dominant role in the Arctic Ocean. Nonetheless, Japanese representatives have met with their counterparts in China and South Korea for trilateral Arctic summits. While there have been agreements between the three governments to pursue joint Arctic research programs, specifics have so far been limited.

India and Singapore have thus far been more outliers in the Arctic, given their geography. India is active in polar research in a variety of areas, but it does not benefit from the opening of

## China's Arctic policy

Arctic shipping due to its location, and to date has not published a specific Arctic policy. Singapore's situation is also distinct, since although the country has pledged support for research initiatives in the Arctic, its primary concern is the possibility of expanded Arctic shipping that may compete in the future with the Malacca Straits. As a shipping power, Singapore wishes to be front and center for the opening of the Arctic Ocean to expanded maritime traffic. However, the country is also active in Track II organizations including the Arctic Circle (including a breakout forum), and has also held Arctic conferences dedicated to information-sharing.

### 3.7. Perceptions of China's Arctic policy

Thus far, the responses to Beijing's Arctic strategy have been mixed and have been viewed differently in various parts of the Arctic region. The nordic states have been largely positive about greater Chinese engagement, especially with the prospect of an 'Ice Silk Road' (*Bingshang Sichouzhilu* 冰上丝绸之路) emerging in the region (Global Times, 2019, April 7). This development would mean increased numbers of Chinese cargo vessels making use of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) in the Arctic Ocean between Siberia and Northern Europe, but also other communication and transportation projects that would link China with Arctic States and organizations. Canada and Russia, states that have traditionally been more wary about their Arctic sovereignty, have been cautious of Beijing's longer-term goals in the region. However, the Sino-Russian relationship in the region has arguably been one of convenience; Chinese support has been crucial for Russian economic initiatives in Siberia and the Russian Far East (RFE), such as the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) initiative (Reuters, 2018, July 19). The United States is becoming more concerned about the growing Russian and Chinese strategic interests in the Arctic, including an emerging 'icebreaker gap' and the possibility of shared Sino-Russian technology exchanges, such as in the area of nuclear powered icebreakers and submarines.

In particular, some alarmist studies suggest that Beijing is seeking to overturn the political and legal status quo in the region, both in the hopes of gaining access to emerging regional resources and establishing a strategic presence in a region that may grow in global importance in the coming decades. These studies also suggest a 'stealth' or 'sneaking' approach on China's part to the region, masking a longer-term hard security strategy in the region (Brady,

## China's Arctic policy

2017; Robinson, 2013). This alarmism was further consolidated by Mike Pompeo's (2019) speech, which was actually not a planned event but announced by the US just before the foreign ministers meeting in Rovaniemi.

Secretary of State Pompeo posed questions about the Arctic policies of Russia and China, the latter being the major opponent for the current Trump administration. In particular, Pompeo criticized China's description of itself as a near-Arctic state. According to him, such a category does not exist in Arctic governance, and thus it "entitles China to exactly nothing" (Pompeo, 2019). Yet it should be noted that China has *not* claimed that its status as a near-Arctic state would entitle it to any additional rights or privileges. Pompeo also mentioned the "positive" investments by China to the region, which he views as beneficial from the US point of view. Yet, when it comes to China's role in the Northern Sea Route, the tone of Pompeo's speech changed clearly: He warned about a "very familiar pattern" in which "Beijing attempts to develop critical infrastructure using Chinese money, Chinese companies, and Chinese workers – in some cases, to establish a permanent Chinese security presence" (Pompeo, 2019). In particular, Pompeo (2019) reminded the audience of the potential security impacts of Chinese Arctic activities:

Our Pentagon warned just last week that China could use its civilian research presence in the Arctic to strengthen its military presence, including our deployment of submarines – including deployment of submarines to the region as a deterrent against nuclear attack. We need to examine these activities closely, and we need – and we keep the experience we have learned of other nations in mind.

Finally, Pompeo (2019) posed provocative questions about the future of the Arctic region, demonstrating very clearly that in his opinion, China's growing presence in the region would result in "militarization and competing territorial claims" as well as "ecological devastation". This amount of alarmism from the US Secretary of State against Chinese policy and presence in the Arctic surely made many question what China is indeed doing in the Arctic.

While a certain amount of criticism towards China's cross-regional diplomacy may be justified, we should remember that critics of China's Arctic policy tend to ignore several factors. First, China has no Arctic geography, and therefore, before building its Arctic policy, it must

## China's Arctic policy

gain the acceptance of the Arctic States, including some, such as Russia, that have traditionally been very protective of safeguarding their sovereignty in the Arctic. An overt revisionist approach to the Arctic on China's part would invite a serious backlash that may result in higher costs for Chinese regional interests. Second, unlike other states, including in Europe but also some of China's neighbors such as Japan, Singapore and South Korea, China is a great power and is therefore under much more overt international scrutiny in the Arctic. While Beijing does not want to be left out of emerging trends in the Arctic region, it cannot afford to be seen as a gatecrasher or a spoiler, and so it must find a middle ground that both includes scientific diplomacy and also seeks Arctic partnerships on a bilateral and regional level. Third, as China settles into its great power status, it is finding itself under greater challenge by the United States, as can be seen in security areas such as the South China Sea, but also in the economic realm as Washington begins to push back via an emerging trade war against what it sees as unfair Chinese trade practices as well as concerns about being leapfrogged by Chinese firms in areas of high technology. Thus, Beijing can ill-afford to see the Arctic become another potential area of great power competition. In short, while China may indeed become a "polar great power" as one study argued (Brady, 2017), it does not follow that China is seeking to upset the status quo in the Arctic, especially since the economic, political and strategic atmosphere in the Arctic greatly favors cooperation over confrontation.

### 3.8. Conclusion

China has by now established itself very clearly as an Arctic actor, the final touch being the adoption of the country's first ever Arctic policy in 2018. As a great power entering the Arctic, it is clear that most attention of all non-Arctic states has been targeted in China, even if its neighbours China and South Korea have also advanced fairly ambitious Arctic policies. To legitimate its regional role, the Chinese government has sought to define the Arctic as a global commons and China as a 'near-Arctic state'. It can be concluded that China's presence in international cooperation in the Arctic has grown significantly from 2007 onwards, when it started to send delegations to the Arctic Council Senior Arctic Official (SAO) meetings. China's view is that the Arctic is being governed on both global and regional levels. This view became evident at the latest in its 2018 Arctic strategy. China perceives the Arctic Council as only one

## China's Arctic policy

segment of a broader network of Arctic governance, and that its own expanded role in international affairs successfully demonstrates that it is already one of the relevant parties in Arctic governance. In this way, China also shifts the attention from the region to larger policy frameworks in which the Arctic's future will, to an extent, be determined. From this vantage point, it is China, together with other permanent members of the UN Security Council, that have responsibility for maintaining peace and security in the Arctic. It is China and the rest of the international community who are committed to managing the oceans via UNCLOS, mitigating climate change via the Paris Agreement and combating other environmental problems through various international environmental treaties, and so on. China's approach to indigenous peoples' rights remains complex.

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