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Introduction to China's Arctic Engagement

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Published in:
Chinese Policy and Presence in the Arctic

DOI:
[10.1163/9789004408425_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004408425_002)

Published: 01.01.2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Kopra, S., & Koivurova, T. (2020). Introduction to China's Arctic Engagement. In T. Koivurova, & S. Kopra (Eds.), *Chinese Policy and Presence in the Arctic* (pp. 1-4). Brill Nijhoff .
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004408425_002

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Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction to China's Arctic engagement

Sanna Kopra and Timo Koivurova

In: Timo Koivurova & Sanna Kopra (eds.) *Chinese policy and present in the Arctic*. Leiden: Brill Publishing

Although the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) lacks territory and waters above the Arctic Circle (ca. 66°33' N), it has become an increasingly influential actor in Arctic affairs during the past decade. In 2007, China started to take part in the work of the Arctic Council, the key intergovernmental forum in the region, and in 2013, its observer application was accepted. In June 2017, the Polar Silk Road (a series of planned Arctic shipping routes) was officially added to President Xi Jinping's flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In January 2018, the Chinese government published its long-awaited first Arctic strategy. According to the strategy, China is a "near-Arctic state" that respects the sovereign rights of the eight Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) but has legitimate rights in the region as well. Furthermore, Chinese scholars conduct polar research onboard icebreaker research vessels MV *Xuelong* and MV *Xuelong 2* – the latter, delivered in 2019, being the first domestically-built icebreaker in China – and Chinese corporations have become partners in various economic projects in the Arctic, especially in Russia's Siberia, where massive projects of liquefied natural gas take place. The development of infrastructure along the Polar Silk Road is also of interest to Chinese investors. Lastly, China's policies indirectly influence the future of the Arctic, given the state's status as an emerging great power and the biggest carbon dioxide emitter in the world. Without a doubt, both factors are important: first, the Arctic is not untouched by international economic and geopolitical fluctuations, and second, climate change proceeds faster in polar regions than elsewhere on the globe.

Due to China's autocratic governance system and the poor track record of Chinese companies in other parts of the world, among other issues, China's growing footprint in the Arctic region has caused concerns and speculations amongst the regional actors. Although Beijing has stressed that it has no military intentions in the Arctic, the country's growing maritime power and its rising presence in other oceans, including the Indian and Pacific, has led some scholars to question the motives of Chinese engagement in the region. Accordingly, they view China's

Introduction

increasing involvement in the Arctic in unfavorable and hostile terms, and they interpret Chinese actions in the region predominantly in security and military terms. Critics have pointed to the potential for the ‘dual-use’ of Chinese facilities in the Arctic and warned against China silently expanding its influence and dominance through scientific and economic engagement. Other scholars, however, have found this approach to be highly reductionist and limited in the necessarily nuanced analysis of Chinese Arctic policy. This latter group notes that such concerns have much to do with the fact that China is an emerging great power and therefore seen as having a strategic agenda in much of its activities in the High North. In any event, these disagreements over China’s underlying Arctic interests demonstrate the necessity of academic research on China’s policy and presence in the Arctic.

Despite a rapidly growing number of academic papers elaborating China’s Arctic interests (e.g. Chen, 2012; Jakobsen, 2010; Jakobsen & Peng, 2012; Koivurova et al., 2017; Kopra, 2013; Lanteigne, 2014; Lanteigne & Ping, 2015; Sørensen & Klimenko, 2017; Tonami, 2014; Yang, 2014), extensive reviews of China’s policy and presence in the Arctic remain close to zero (but see Brady, 2017). This book seeks to fill this gap in literature by elaborating on China’s evolving Arctic interests, policies and strategies. The book builds on and expands the findings of our report “China in the Arctic”, prepared for the Finnish Prime Minister’s Office in 2019 (Koivurova et. al, 2019). The publication of the report drew a lot of attention from both national and international media, which also demonstrates the public’s thirst for knowledge of China’s plans and visions in the High North. In response to these calls, this book offers a comprehensive account of China’s diplomatic, economic, environmental, scientific and strategic contribution to the Arctic region. In this way, the book aims to increase understanding of Beijing’s polar interests and potential influence on the future of the region – intellectual capital that not only helps regional decision-makers and stakeholders plan their future activities but also possibly makes the cooperation between China and the Arctic states easier.

Organization of the book

As China’s Arctic policy is not separated from the other national interests of the country, Chapter 2 by Marc Lanteigne and colleagues gives an introduction to China's overall foreign policy interests. It also reviews the ongoing global economic, political and legal transformations that

Introduction

undoubtedly shape China's overall interests in the region. Chapter 3 by Timo Koivurova and colleagues moves to study China's evolving Arctic policy. It demonstrates that the release of Beijing's first official Arctic strategy in 2018 was the culmination of a long process that Beijing undertook over the previous decade to demonstrate its growing knowledge of, and commitment to, the Arctic region in order to be accepted as a legitimate Arctic actor. It also briefly reviews the Arctic states' responses to Beijing's Arctic strategies.

Chapter 4 by Malgorzata (Gosia) Smieszek and colleagues elaborates on the development of Chinese scientific activities in the Arctic since the 1980s as well as the contribution of the Chinese experts to the Arctic Council's activities since 2007. Clearly, climate change is a key interest of Chinese scientists – a pressing political problem that is also addressed in Chapter 5 by Sanna Kopra and colleagues. Clearly, climate change cannot be solved simply by regional cooperation in the Arctic; truly global efforts are necessary. Therefore, Chapter 5 focuses on China's contribution to international climate negotiations under the UN climate regime and also reviews China's potential to reduce black carbon emissions. The chapter also briefly examines China's broader ecological footprint in the Arctic.

Chapter 6 by Adam Stępien and colleagues scrutinizes China's economic presence in the Arctic. It offers an extensive outline of the on-going and planned economic activities in which Chinese stakeholders are involved. In addition to economic benefits, the chapter suggests that such activities may consist of various concerns and risks, especially for the small Arctic states. Chapter 7 by Stępien and colleagues offers a case study of China's economic cooperation with one of the eight Arctic states, namely Finland, where Chinese investors are involved in plans to build a new Arctic railway, to name just one project. In this way, the chapter sheds light on the opportunities and concerns that China's growing Arctic interest may bring in Finland and beyond. Finally, Chapter 8 summarizes the findings of the book and discusses the risks and future prospects of China's role in the Arctic.

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Introduction

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