

The Role of China in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses

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Abstract: China is a newcomer to Arctic politics and regional relations, but the country has in a short time significantly developed its interests in the Far North as well as its diplomacy with Arctic governments and institutions. While scientific diplomacy remains at the forefront of Beijing's Arctic policies, political and economic events in the region, largely as a result of climate change and ice erosion, have prompted China to examine the Arctic more frequently through a geo-strategic lens. The potential economic opening of the Arctic, in terms of both accessible resources and emerging transit routes, is of great interest to China, and the country has responded by deepening its engagement of the region.

Keywords: China, Arctic, security, maritime, energy

Schlagworte: China, Arktis, Sicherheit, maritim, Energie

1. Introduction: China and Arctic Security

The question of defining 'Arctic security' has, in a very short time, evolved from a fringe issue in strategic studies to one of considerably higher importance and visibility. This is true not only in relation to the policies of the Arctic states but also those of countries outside the Far North which are viewing the region as one of growing importance to their foreign policy interests. China is a primary example of the latter. Unlike the other great powers of America and Russia, China possesses no Arctic border, but is nonetheless working to develop a greater Arctic identity and to increase its diplomatic presence in the region through bilateral and multilateral means. Despite China's long historical interest in the northern polar region, it can be argued that Chinese Arctic policy has only 'deepened' since the turn of the century. This greater engagement has taken place at a time when the Arctic as a whole has undergone not only vast physical changes, largely due to ice erosion as a product of climate change, but also economic, social, political, and indeed strategic transformations.

For a variety of reasons, more aspects of Arctic politics and development have become 'securitized', identified and described as an 'existential threat' which requires a timely and specific set of responses.¹ While Beijing has repeatedly sought to downplay the role of security in its developing Arctic interests, the emerging geopolitics of the Arctic and ongoing questions about its future economic value have meant that China can ill-afford to ignore the security dimensions of the region, especially given the country's lack of an Arctic border and the large number of security variables which are of interest to Beijing's foreign policy expansion.

China, unlike some other non-Arctic states such as Germany and the United Kingdom,² has yet to publish a government white

paper on its Arctic diplomacy and strategy and there remains a degree of ambiguity in the study of Beijing's developing Arctic interests. However, it is possible to discern Beijing's emerging areas of interest in Arctic affairs in a greater diversity of fields. These include:

- 1) Ongoing development of scientific diplomacy through joint cooperation with Arctic states in areas including climate change and the Arctic environment.
- 2) Participation in joint ventures with Arctic states involving regional resource extraction, including fossil fuels, metals and minerals.
- 3) Increased use of potential Arctic sea routes, not only for trade with key markets, especially Europe, but also potentially with other parts of the world.
- 4) Greater participation in Arctic governance and more frequent engagement with regional institutions on the governmental and sub-governmental level.

Currently, much of China's attention in the Arctic region has been based on scientific interests, including studies in geography, climatology (especially climate change), geology, glaciology and oceanography. As well, China is closely watching political and economic developments in the Arctic, while simultaneously seeking a greater voice in northern regional affairs in proportion to its own rising power and capabilities. The region is increasingly being viewed by Beijing as politically and economically valuable, and Beijing's interests in Arctic engagement have become much more visible in recent years.³

China's status as an emerging great power, and the rapid spread of its diplomatic interests on an international level over the past decade, have led to questions about the country's future interests in the Arctic and whether Beijing will seek a 'revisionist' foreign policy agenda in the region as the Far North assumes a greater global focus. It will be argued that China is beginning to look more closely at the Arctic as a strategic concern, while being mindful of the distinct political atmosphere of the region. As a result, Beijing has engaged a

1 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71-6; Holger Stritzel, 'Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond,' *European Journal of International Relations* 13(3) (2007): 357-83.

2 'Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines: Assume Responsibility, Seize Opportunities,' *Federal Foreign Office, Germany*, November 2013, <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/658822/publicationFile/185895/Arktisleitlinien.pdf>>. 'Adapting To Change UK Policy Towards the Arctic,' Polar Regions Department, *UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251216/Adapting_To_Change_UK_policy_towards_the_Arctic.pdf>.

3 Linda Jakobson, 'China Prepares for an Ice-Free Arctic,' *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security* 2010(2) (March 2010), <<http://books.sipri.org/files/insight/SIPRIInsight1002.pdf>>; Marc Lanteigne, *China's Emerging Arctic Strategies: Economics and Institutions* (Reykjavik: Institute of International Affairs, University of Iceland, 2014).

series of bilateral and multilateral policies in the Arctic designed to enhance its status as a partner as opposed to a competitor, but also remains wary of a hardening of regional policies which may shut out China as well as other non-Arctic governments. As well, the changing nature of Arctic security has meant that Beijing cannot afford to play the bystander in that region.

2. The Changes: Understanding the Arctic Security Landscape

In recent years, China has found itself uneasily and unwillingly at the vanguard of two emerging complicated questions surrounding Arctic politics. First, to what degree should Arctic politics and governance be considered an international issue as opposed to a regional one? Second, how does one now define an Arctic 'stakeholder'⁴ among non-Arctic states? As the largest of the non-Arctic great powers, China has focused on these questions, and the answers to them will inevitably involve Beijing.

Arguably, a decade ago both questions could have been answered in a straightforward fashion. In the recent past, although several non-Arctic states had scientific interests in the Far North, the region was not a foreign policy priority for governments south of the Arctic Circle, and the 'international' aspect of the region's politics was minimal. The primary multilateral institution in the region, the Arctic Council, was created in 1996, and during its first decade remained a largely nondescript entity free of any great degree of global scrutiny. The concept of an Arctic stakeholder was also vague and underdeveloped, at least in regards to non-Arctic countries, until recent years since few states outside of the Arctic saw the political necessity to engage the region beyond the scientific realm. Since the end of the cold war, interest waned in the strategic value of the region as an inhospitable buffer zone between the superpowers. Despite Russian attempts to increase its military presence in its Arctic regions at the turn of the century, especially during the second presidential term (2004-2008) of Vladimir Putin when relations between Russia and the West began to cool, a situation which worsened after Putin's return to power in 2012 and the Ukraine crisis in 2014,⁵ the military identity of the Arctic differed from during the time of superpower rivalry. Finally, the financial value of the Arctic was dubious at best given the unacceptably high cost/benefit ratio of most types of economic activity, be it resource extraction or transportation.

The accelerating pace of polar ice erosion has resulted in an increase in the level of international attention given to the Arctic with the retreat of ice both on land and in the Arctic Ocean opening up greater possibilities for fossil fuel (oil and gas) extraction and mining of metal and minerals. One event which significantly highlighted this issue was the 2008 release of a survey

report by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) which concluded that the area within the Arctic Circle, representing six percent of the world's surface, may hold thirteen percent of the globe's unrecovered petroleum supplies (ninety billion barrels), and as much as thirty percent of its natural gas or approximately 47.3 billion cubic metres. A large majority of these fossil fuels, eighty-four percent, would be found offshore, most notably north of Siberia in Russia, in the waters north of Alaska and also between Baffin Island in Nunavut, Canada and Greenland.⁶

The possibility of new sources of untapped oil and gas supplies, especially during a time of high fuel prices, attracted considerable attention from several international actors, including China. Moreover, unlike in other major fossil fuel producing regions, especially the Middle East, the Arctic region was judged to be politically stable and above all, largely predictable in its politics. Although international enthusiasm for developing Arctic oil and gas declined after global fuel prices plummeted between 2014-2015 due to oversupply, economic uncertainties, and the development of shale oil extraction in the United States,⁷ making Arctic drilling even more prohibitively expensive, interest surrounding Arctic energy persists. Market uncertainty may suggest the potential for a regional 'energy bonanza' has been delayed, but not necessarily halted.

Retreating ice also meant that northern Canada and Greenland were viewed as potential sources of valuable resources as changed climate conditions made mining more of a viable option. Furthermore, the opening of sea routes in the Arctic, if fully developed, could act as more efficient alternatives to traditional maritime trade corridors in the south. These include the Northern Sea Route (NSR) north of Siberia, which could be used to link European and Asian markets, the Northwest Passage (NWP) in the Canadian Arctic, the 'Arctic Bridge' across the north Atlantic which links the Russian port of Murmansk to Churchill, Manitoba, Canada and, possibly in the near-future, a 'Trans-Arctic' or even a 'North Pole' route which would bisect the central Arctic Ocean in summer months.⁸ The prospect of increased use of any of these routes presents the possibility of shorter transit times and lower fuel costs for many non-Arctic states and businesses, leading to further discussion about the geopolitical value of Arctic coastal regions in an era of increased regional maritime traffic.

Moscow stipulates that all foreign vessels traversing the NSR, which lies well-within Russian waters, must be escorted by a Russian icebreaker for a fee that varies depending on the vessels involved but normally costing hundreds of thousands of US dollars, plus added insurance fees.⁹ As well, there is

4 Marc Lanteigne, 'Who Is an Arctic Stakeholder Today?' *Arctic Journal*, 14 November 2014, <<http://arcticjournal.com/opinion/1141/who-arctic-stakeholder-today>>.

5 Katarzyna Zysk, 'Military Aspects of Russia's Arctic Policy: Hard Power and Natural Resources', *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change*, ed. James Kraska, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 85-6; Christian Le Mière and Jeffrey Mazo, Arctic Opening: Insecurity and Opportunity (New York and London: IIS Routledge, 2013), 83-7. Irene Quaile, 'Ukraine Crisis Reaches into the Arctic,' *Deutsche Welle*, 16 April 2014, <<http://www.dw.de/ukraine-crisis-reaches-into-the-arctic/a-17640376>>.

6 Kenneth J. Bird *et al.*, 'Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle,' *United States Geological Survey, Fact Sheet 2008-3049*, 2008, <<http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf>>; Donald L. Gautier *et al.*, 'Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas in the Arctic,' *Science* (29 May 2009): 1175-9; John K.T. Chao, 'China's Emerging Role in the Arctic,' *Regions, Institutions, and Law of the Sea: Studies in Ocean Governance*, ed. Harry N. Scheiber and Jin-Hyun Paik (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2013), 469.

7 Clifford Krauss, 'New Balance of Power,' *The New York Times*, 22 April 2015.

8 Scott R. Stephenson, Laurence C. Smith and John A. Agnew, 'Divergent Long-term Trajectories of Human Access to the Arctic,' *Nature Climate Change* 1(June 2011): 156-60.

9 'Arctic Opening: Opportunity and Risk in the High North,' *Lloyd's and Chatham House*, April 2012, <<http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Energy,%20Environment%20and%20Development/0412Arctic.pdf>>.

the potential for further added costs for Arctic shipping in light of the Polar Code negotiations led by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) to develop minimum safety and environmental standards for ships in the region.¹⁰ The unpredictable nature of the NSR as a maritime trade route became much more obvious at the end of 2014, as according to the Northern Sea Route Information Office in Murmansk, thirty-one vessels crossed the NSR that year, the vast majority being Russian ships. This represents a significant decrease from the seventy-one vessels which transited the NSR in 2013,¹¹ and reflected the fact that the Arctic is still far from rivalling traditional transit routes through the Indian Ocean.

Nonetheless, given the growing importance of Arctic maritime sea routes, there has been speculation in policy circles that enduring but muted maritime boundary disputes between Arctic states could evolve into serious strategic challenges. For example, since the 1960s there had been disagreements between Norway and the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation, over their mutual Arctic Ocean boundary in the Barents Sea, a situation complicated further by the rich natural gas supplies in the waterway. However, suddenly in September 2010, a bilateral agreement was signed between Moscow and Oslo which formally ended the dispute.¹² A similar boundary quarrel has been simmering between Canada and Denmark over the status of Hans Island, a 1.3km² barren feature which rests on the maritime border between Canada's Ellesmere Island and Greenland.¹³ Despite long and difficult negotiations, the dispute remains firmly in the diplomatic realm.

A thornier regional diplomatic situation involves debate over the jurisdiction of the Lomonosov Ridge, an undersea mountain range stretching through the central Arctic Ocean region. The Ridge has been claimed to various degrees by Canada and Russia as well as by Denmark acting on behalf of Greenland, each side arguing that the region is an extension of their respective continental shelves. In 2007, a Russian submarine appeared to force that issue by planting a national flag, made of titanium, on the ocean floor beneath the North Pole, a gesture widely interpreted as symbolising Russian claims to the Lomonosov area.¹⁴ The incident sparked considerable regional debate over whether a more overt Arctic rivalry was beginning and whether the region was to become militarised as a result of a race for northern access and riches.

In January 2015, Denmark added more fuel to the debate by submitting its demarcation report to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS), representing a claim of almost 900,000 square kilometres and including the North Pole itself. However, despite the difficult political situation existing

between the three claimants, and especially between Canada and Russia since the Ukraine crisis intensified, it remains unlikely that the disagreement will provoke a use of force. The five Arctic states with Arctic coastlines, including the three Lomonosov claimants, agreed in 2008 under the auspices of the Ilulissat Declaration to settle any boundary disputes peacefully and in keeping with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁵ Thus, the issue is likely to be one dominated by protracted legal negotiations as opposed to military posturing.

The other major change in the Arctic status quo in the recent past has been the growing international spotlight on the question of Arctic governance, another area which has generated a reconsideration of the 'regional versus the international' question. Compared with other regions, the spread of international institutions in the Arctic has been thin and there is the question of whether existing regional regimes, especially the Arctic Council, can withstand growing levels of international scrutiny, or whether the development of other forms of cooperation which better address the regional interests of Arctic and non-Arctic states will be required, especially should economic activity in the Far North rise sharply as climatic conditions permit. The membership of the Arctic Council is composed of the eight states with lands above the Arctic Circle, namely Canada, Denmark (via Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States, but the number of observer nations and groups in the organisation has risen, with others also seeking future admission.

China's interest in joining the Council as an observer took place at a time when other Asian economies were seeking similar status, given their economic interests in the region as well as the potential for greater use of Arctic sea routes, especially the NSR. The question of new observers, however, was divisive within the Council and at the 2011 Ministerial meeting in Nuuk, Greenland. It was decided to place the issue of new observers in abeyance while more specific criteria for formal observers could be drafted for the following ministerial gathering at Kiruna, Sweden.¹⁶ In May 2013, China was granted formal observer status in the organisation along with Italy and other Asian states also interested in the economic potential for the Arctic, namely India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.¹⁷ By 2015, however, another metaphorical queue had formed outside the Council in the months leading to the April Ministerial meeting in Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada. These included Mongolia and Switzerland as well as the European Union, which had seen its previous bids deferred due to intractable political differences, especially with the Canadian government, over the EU's decision to ban seal hunting. During the Iqaluit meeting, the still difficult issue

10 IMO, 'Shipping in Polar Waters: Development of an International Code of Safety for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code),' *International Maritime Organisation*, <<http://www.imo.org/MediaCentre/HotTopics/polar/Pages/default.aspx>>.

11 'Transits 2014', *Northern Sea Route Information Office*, <http://www.arctic-lio.com/docs/nsr/transits/Transits_2014.pdf> and 'Transits 2013', <http://www.arctic-lio.com/docs/nsr/transits/Transits_2013_final.pdf>.

12 Arild Moe, Daniel Fjærtøft and Indra Øverland, 'Space and Timing: Why Was the Barents Sea Delimitation Dispute Resolved in 2010?' *Polar Geography* 34(3) (September 2011): 145-62.

13 Kim Mackrael, 'Canada, Denmark Closer to Settling Border Dispute,' *Globe and Mail*, 29 November 2012.

14 Timo Koivurova, 'The Actions of the Arctic States Respecting the Continental Shelf: A Reflective Essay,' *Ocean Development & International Law*, 42(3)(2011): 211-26; Arvind Gupta, 'Geopolitical Implications of Arctic Melt-down,' *Strategic Analysis* 33(2) (March 2009): 175; 'New Global Warming Report Deserves UN Push,' *Korea Times*, 7 October 2003.

15 'Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), Outer Limits of the Continental Shelf beyond 200 Nautical Miles from the Baselines: Submissions to the Commission: Submission by the Kingdom of Denmark,' *UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf*, 8 January 2015, <http://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/submission_dnk_76_2014.htm>; 'Denmark to Claim Slice of Continental Shelf in Arctic Ocean,' *Reuters*, 15 December 2014; Carl Bildt, 'The Battle for Santa Claus's Home,' *Project Syndicate*, 24 December 2014, <<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/north-pole-claims-negotiations-by-carl-bildt-2014-12>>.

16 Linda Jakobsen and Jingchao Peng, 'China's Arctic Aspirations,' *SIPRI Policy Paper* No. 34 (November 2012): 19.

17 As of mid-2015, the observer states in the Arctic Council are China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Spain and the United Kingdom. See 'All Eyes on the Arctic Council,' *Deutsche Welle*, 17 May 2013.

of new observers was deferred again until 2017,¹⁸ suggesting the issue was far from being resolved despite the publishing of observer guidelines by the Council after the Kiruna meeting.

It is unclear whether the expansion of the roster of Council observers will affect the decision-making capabilities of the Council, given that only the initial eight Arctic states retain voting rights and decisions within the body continue to be made by consensus. However, there is the concern that a miscellany of permanent observers may adversely affect debate and problem solving within the membership, potentially marginalising the roles of Arctic indigenous organisations and their specific concerns regarding the region's future. There is also the question of whether the larger number of observers will affect any future initiatives to widen the mandate of the Council. Moreover, security issues have been intentionally left off the Council's jurisdiction, in accordance with the 1996 Council Declaration.¹⁹ It remains to be seen whether the greater internationalisation of the Council, through the addition of China and other non-Arctic observers since 2013, will increase or decrease pressures to introduce harder security issues into the organisation.

3. The Responses: China's Arctic Thinking

As noted, one of the difficulties in understanding China's emerging Arctic interests is that there has yet to be a governmental policy paper, or a White Paper, released by Beijing specifically elucidating these policies. Indeed, in 2009 a senior Chinese foreign policy official stated for the record that his government 'does not have an Arctic strategy'.²⁰ Part of the rationale is the view within the Chinese government that Beijing's visibility in the Arctic, unlike in other parts of the world, has not developed to the point where such a paper is warranted either for domestic or international consumption.²¹ At the same time, the degree of policy research in China on non-scientific aspects of the Arctic while still comparatively low, is steadily increasing. Another likely reason for a delay in releasing such a statement would be that given China's size and international visibility, an Arctic White Paper would be subject to a high degree of analysis from international actors as opposed to similar papers from other non-Arctic states, suggesting the need for caution and a punctilious approach to drafting any such document.

China's Arctic interests can be traced to its signing of the Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty in 1925, permitting Chinese vessels to engage in fishing and commercial activities in the high Arctic region, but there was little Chinese activity in the region until decades later.²² Indeed, the signing was largely symbolic, given that China's ability to operate in the Arctic was severely limited.

In the 1990s, however, Beijing began to further clarify and expand its Arctic research agenda with its first North Pole expedition in 1999, followed by sea-based research expositions. China joined the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC), a non-governmental organisation dedicated to coordinating regional scientific research initiatives, in 1996.²³ Beijing's research interests later culminated in the opening of the Yellow River Station at Ny-Ålesund on the Norwegian islands of Svalbard in July 2004.²⁴ China's developing Arctic scientific work was also supplemented by the 1993 purchase from Ukraine of an icebreaking ship, the *Xuelong* (*Snow Dragon*), with a second icebreaker, built under contract with a Finnish company, expected to be completed by late 2016, with its exact completion date remaining unclear.²⁵ In July 2014, the *Xuelong* began its sixth Arctic expedition and the vessel has also been active in the Antarctic region.²⁶ It has become a symbol for China's scientific interests in the polar regions. The areas of scientific development and cooperation remain high on Beijing's Arctic agenda and have been a major contributor to Chinese partnerships with Arctic states.

Beyond scientific interests, the economic possibilities of the Arctic have also caught the attention of Chinese policymakers and businesses. Despite dropping prices for both fossil fuels and commodities, the resource potential of the Arctic continues to factor into Beijing's developing Arctic thinking. Iceland has also joined the Arctic energy game. In October 2013, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and Reykjavík-based energy firm Eykon signed an agreement to survey for oil and gas in the Dreki region near Jan Mayen Island in the North Atlantic, with Norwegian energy firm Petoro joining the project shortly afterwards. The partnership was granted a licence by the Icelandic Energy Authority to commence surveys in January 2014.²⁷ During the January 2015 Arctic Frontiers meeting in Tromsø, a major Track II gathering in the region, a visiting senior official with the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), Sun Xiansheng, announced that the firm was 'willing and able to participate in Arctic oil and gas cooperation to better promote the development of Arctic resources' and that regional partners would be sought for joint energy ventures.²⁸ Low fossil fuel prices notwithstanding, Beijing continues to view the Arctic as a source of much future energy potential.

In Greenland, two Chinese firms were engaged in surveys during 2009 for potential mining ventures, Jiangxi Zhongrun Mining and Jiangxi Union Mining. The latter firm represented the first Chinese mining corporation to conduct operations within the Arctic Circle.²⁹ As well, in January 2015, Hong Kong firm General Nice Group purchased iron mining rights in Greenland's Isua region after the

18 'Canada Against EU Entry to Arctic Council Because of Seal Trade Ban,' *CBC News*, 29 April 2009; Heather Exner-Pirot, 'Arctic Council Ministerial- Winners and Losers,' *Alaska Dispatch*, 29 April 2015, <<http://www.adn.com/article/20150429/arctic-council-ministerial-winners-and-losers>>.

19 Andrea Charron, 'Has the Arctic Council Become Too Big?' *International Relations and Security Network (ISN)*, 15 August 2014, <<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=182827>>.

20 Peter Hough, *International Politics of the Arctic: Coming in from the Cold* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 31.

21 Interview with Chinese Arctic policy specialist, Shanghai, April 2014.

22 Zhiguo Gao, 'Legal Issues of MSR in the Arctic: A Chinese Perspective,' *Arctic Science, International Law and Climate Change / Beiträge zum ausländischen öffentlichen Recht und Völkerrecht* 235(2012): 142.

23 'Significance of Arctic Research Expedition', *China.org.cn*, <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/40961.htm>> (Accessed 1 August 2014).

24 'Yellow River Station Opens in Arctic', *China Daily*, 29 July 2004.

25 Interviews with China Arctic policy specialists, Shanghai, May 2015.

26 'Chinese Icebreaker Heads for 6th Arctic Expedition', *Shanghai Daily / Xinhua*, 11 July 2014. Interviews with Chinese Arctic policy specialists, Shanghai, April 2014.

27 Beth Gardiner, 'Iceland Aims to Seize Opportunities in Oil Exploration', *The New York Times*, 1 October 2013; 'Iceland: China's Arctic Springboard?' *Energy Compass*, 26 July 2013; 'Orkustofnun Grants a Third License in the Dreki Area', *Orkustofnun, National Energy Authority*, 22 January 2014, <<http://www.nea.is/the-national-energy-authority/news/nr/1540>>.

28 'China's Energy Giant Willing to Cooperate in Arctic Resources Extraction', *China Daily* (Europe), 20 January 2015.

29 Pu Jun, 'Greenland Lures China's Miners with Cold Gold', *Caixin Online*, 12 July 2011 <<http://english.caixin.com/2011-12-07/100335609.html>>.

previous owner, London Mining, filed for bankruptcy the previous year. This agreement was the first time an Arctic development project came under exclusive ownership of a Chinese firm.³⁰

China is also viewing the Arctic through the lens of potential maritime trade routes in the region, especially the NSR, as more of the Arctic Ocean becomes ice-free during the summer months. This would introduce the possibility of shorter and less expensive transit times between key markets, especially between Europe and East Asia. Since the 1990s, much strategic attention by Beijing has focused on the development of improved 'sea lanes of communication' (SLOCs) for trade. With the expansion of Chinese trade, there has been greater concern expressed in Beijing about the protection of maritime shipping from foreign interference or even interdiction, by both state and non-state actors. Therefore, alternative trade routes in less politically sensitive regions, being less expensive to maintain, have constantly been sought by China.

During the last few years of the Hu Jintao government, and the first few of the presidency of Xi Jinping, China has sought to rebalance its domestic economy away from an established emphasis on exports and towards greater domestic-level growth and household consumption,³¹ in preparation for an economic 'soft-landing' and lower growth rates closer to traditional Western levels. Yet, for the near term China's economy will remain largely based on exports, and any means by which to bring Chinese products to European and other Western markets and vice versa using faster, more efficient methods will continue to attract the attention of Beijing policymakers. This fact was underscored in 2013, when President Xi unveiled plans for the development of expanded transit routes to better connect China with markets in Europe as well as Africa and Eurasia. These proposals were summarized as a 'One Belt and One Road' (*yidai yilu*) strategy, also known as 'OBOR', of developing new land and sea links with vital Western European markets. These links would include land routes through Eurasia to Russia and Europe, as well as maritime routes between China and South Asia and Western Africa as well as European ports.³²

It is not yet clear whether an Arctic trade route or an 'Ice Road', involving the NSR will also factor into the future development of the OBOR strategies, but should the Arctic become more practical for maritime transit due to retreating ice, it is likely China would wish to make use of such outlets. For example, the Northern Sea Route, if used for transit from Shanghai to Hamburg, would be approximately 6400 kilometres shorter than the traditional Asia-Europe shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean which pass through the Malacca Straits and Suez Canal.³³ Although it is likely that the Indian Ocean will play a greater role in Chinese trade interests, as evidenced by its central role in the OBOR policies, the NSR has the advantage of being more politically, if not climatically, predictable in comparison from a Chinese viewpoint.

Even if greatly increased securitisation of the Arctic does not occur, future scenarios for China's use of Arctic waterways, especially the Northeast Passage near Siberia, would be based on maintaining strong Sino-Russian relations, which have grown closer under Putin and Xi and have become dominated by the energy sector, including in the Arctic. In March 2013, during Chinese President Xi's first trip abroad as leader, an agreement was signed to allow China to purchase up to 620,000 barrels of oil per day from Russian state-owned company OAO Rosneft as well as the joint development of a gas pipeline to China. Rosneft also linked with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) to jointly explore waters north of the Russian coast for fossil fuels.³⁴ In May 2014, an even more ambitious thirty-year Sino-Russian natural gas deal worth US\$400 billion was completed involving cooperation between CNPC and the Russian energy firm Gazprom. China also agreed to underwrite the development of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the Yamal Peninsula in northwest Siberia, in November 2014, proposing up to US\$10 billion in initial investment. Once operational, the Yamal facilities would require the use of modified 'icebreaker tankers' to be used by Chinese and other firms to transport the LNG to outside markets.³⁵

Beijing demonstrated its overall commitment to participating in the future economic opening up of the NSR for commercial shipping in August-September 2013 when the modified Chinese cargo vessel *Yongsheng* owned by China Cosco Shipping Group, sailed from the port of Dalian to Rotterdam in thirty-three days via the Arctic route, saving approximately two weeks of transit time.³⁶ The event marked the first time a container vessel made the journey, and emphasised not only the potential viability of the passage for Chinese and Asian shipping, but also China's growing maritime prowess. The *Yongsheng* was scheduled to make a second test run through the NSR during the summer of 2015.³⁷ The possibility of the Arctic becoming a primary focus of Chinese naval interest, however, remains extremely remote, given the current political atmosphere of the region.

Although Beijing has stressed the peaceful use of the Arctic region for scientific and economic purposes, the ability to send ships through the Arctic will be a critical test of the country's evolving strategic policy of expanding its maritime interests further beyond Chinese waters, including in more environmentally hostile regions such as the Far North. In the case of the Arctic, Beijing will continue to be wary of any attempts by the littoral states to develop more hard strategic policies and legal restrictions which would not only increase regional tensions, but also lead to the greater exclusion of non-Arctic states from economic activities in the region either by design or as an unwanted side-effect. At present, despite ongoing political differences between Russia and the West over Ukraine, the security milieu in the Arctic appears to be one of cordial cooperation, a situation greatly preferred by Beijing.

30 Lucy Hornby, Richard Milne and James Watson, 'Chinese Group General Nice Takes over Greenland Mine', *Financial Times*, 11 January 2015.

31 Huang Yasheng, 'China's Great Rebalancing: Promise and Peril', *McKinsey Quarterly*, June 2013, <http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/asia-pacific/chinas_great_rebalancing_promise_and_peril>.

32 'Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt, (September 7, 2013) *Xi Jinping: On Governance* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 315-9; Tang Danlu, 'Xi Suggests China, C. Asia Build Silk Road Economic Belt', *Xinhua*, 7 September 2013, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/07/c_132700695.htm>; Jeremy Page, 'China Sees Itself at Centre of New Asian Order', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 November 2014.

33 Gang Chen, 'China's Emerging Arctic Strategy', *Polar Journal* 2(2) (December 2012): 361.

34 Rakteem Katakey and Will Kennedy, 'Russia Gives China Arctic Access as Energy Giants Embrace', *Bloomberg/National Post* (Canada), 25 March 2013.

35 'Chinese Banks Ready to Invest \$10 Billion in Yamal LNG', *Moscow Times*, 7 November 2014; Atle Staalesen, 'To Yamal with World's Most Powerful LNG Carriers', *Barents Observer*, 11 November 2014, <<http://barentsobserver.com/en/energy/2014/11/yamal-worlds-most-powerful-lng-carriers-11-11>>.

36 Charlotte MacDonald-Gibson, 'From China to Rotterdam, and Into the Record Books', *The Independent*, 12 September 2013.

37 Interviews with Arctic regional policy specialists, Shanghai, May 2015.

4. Future Considerations

Although scientific endeavours, especially in the area of climate change issues, will form an important part of China's Arctic policies in the coming years, strategic concerns will also inevitably comprise a larger share of Beijing's Arctic thinking as the region continues to develop. This will be due to ongoing demands by the growing Chinese economy for ready access to fossil fuels and raw materials, as well as a more efficient means to transport Chinese goods to markets. China also wishes to avoid being excluded by other great powers and the Arctic littoral states, should economic activities in the region develop at a rapid pace and especially if energy prices rebound in the short term. Although political and economic disputes in the Arctic have been addressed, and oftentimes settled, by diplomacy, there remains the potential of larger political and strategic differences between regional powers, such as Moscow and Washington, spilling over into the Arctic itself. This would be a nightmare scenario for China. Even if security problems do not appear in the Arctic in the near term, Beijing will remain watchful of any attempts by the littoral states to exclude non-Arctic governments from what China sees as international issues, including the question of resources, governance and transport routes.

As China's political and economic rise continues, the Arctic will assume a much greater importance for Beijing as it settles further into the status of a great power and potential global power in the international system. Thus far, it has been in China's interests, along with the other non-Arctic states seeking a greater presence

in the region, to avoid overt zero-sum policies and instead to seek regional cooperation and joint confidence-building and problem-solving. More overt competition for resources, access and influence in the Arctic becoming the norm, is a dubious but not an impossible future scenario. For now, although there are differences among regional governments and outside actors over some areas of future Arctic governance, the current political atmosphere very much favours cooperation and communication. The example of China's growing Arctic interests, however, underscores the shifting lines between the regional and the international in the Far North, including in the realm of security.



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