

China and the Arctic

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Over the past three decades, the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) has become increasingly interested in participating in Arctic affairs and utilizing new economic opportunities offered by melting Arctic sea ice. Generally, China's interests in the Arctic can be divided into four themes: scientific research, natural resources, shipping, and regional governance. First, Chinese scientists have conducted polar research onboard the icebreaker *Xuelong* since the early 1990s. In 2004, China established its first Arctic research station, Yellow River (*Huang He*) station, in Svalbard. In 2019, China's first home-built research icebreaker *Xuelong II* started to operate.

Overall, China has actively partaken in Arctic science diplomacy. Second, Chinese investors are interested in lucrative Arctic energy and other natural resources. For instance, Chinese companies have involved in Novatek's Yamal liquid natural gas (LNG) and Arctic LNG 2 projects in Siberia. Third, the Arctic shipping lines are of interest to China because they make it possible to transport LNG and other natural resources from the North to China. In addition, they offer shorter and geopolitically safer access to the European and Northern American markets compared to the traditional routes through the Malacca Strait and the Suez Canal. In 2017, China renamed Arctic shipping lanes "the Polar Silk Road" and added it to the Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, as a rising global power, China seeks to partake in various international decision-making processes, and Arctic diplomacy makes no exception.

In January 2018, China released its first Arctic Policy White Paper (hereinafter Policy), detailing the country's main principles and goals of its participation in the Arctic. According to the Policy, China's key policy goals in the region are to understand, protect, develop, and participate in the governance of the Arctic, to safeguard the common interests of the international community in the Arctic, and to promote sustainable development of the Arctic. To better understand the Arctic, China has been actively promoting scientific research and expedition in the Arctic. To seize the opportunities in the Arctic development, China has been developing increasing economic ties with the Arctic states. At the same time, China is committed to respecting the cultures

and historical traditions of the Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. Moreover, China calls for the Arctic states to balance their Arctic interests with the common interests of the international community and to build a “community with a shared future for mankind” together in the Arctic. Although China does not view the whole Arctic as a “global commons,” it emphasizes that certain areas of the Arctic Ocean form part of the high seas and the Area. For instance, from 2015 to 2017, China actively participated in all the negotiations of the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated Commercial Fishing on the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean (hereinafter Agreement), which bans unregulated fisheries in the high sea portion of the Central Arctic Ocean for sixteen years. On 25 June 2021, the Agreement entered into force and China is a party to the Agreement.

To achieve its Arctic goals, China particularly underscores the importance of international cooperation in both formal and informal forums to tackle Arctic issues. In May 2013, China was accepted as a full Observer of the Arctic Council. To date, however, China’s contribution to the Council’s work has been relatively limited. China has also actively taken part in other international platforms discussing Arctic affairs, such as the annual Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik. In May 2019, China organized the first Arctic Circle China Forum in Shanghai. In addition, China highlights the role of international law in Arctic governance and invokes the broad framework of international law to support its rights and participation in Arctic Governance. Specifically, China views that there is no single comprehensive treaty for all Arctic affairs; the UN Charter, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Spitsbergen Treaty, other treaties on climate change and shipping, and general international law all govern the Arctic issues. For example, as an important member, China participated in the development of the International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

In practice, China has acted very carefully in the Arctic to avoid creating fear of an assertive China. For instance, China chooses not to take a clear side on any territorial and maritime disputes in the Arctic, including Russia’s controversial regulation of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and Canada’s control of the Northwest Passage (NWP). Beijing has repeatedly expressed its recognition of the sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction of the Arctic

states and highlighted reciprocal respect as the key basis for China's participation in the Arctic. On the other hand, China also highlights that non-Arctic states enjoy the rights and freedoms of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines, as well as resource exploration and exploitation in various areas in the Arctic Ocean, pursuant to treaties such as UNCLOS and general international law.

Lastly, as China is the biggest carbon dioxide emitter in the world, it plays a crucial role in international efforts to mitigate climate change. China is a party to the Paris Agreement. In 2020, it pledged to reach carbon neutrality by 2060. For the time being, however, China's carbon emissions continue to increase, and per capita emissions have tripled over the past decade. In the Arctic context, China has not introduced additional efforts to mitigate climate change, nor has it taken part in the Arctic Council's work on reducing black carbon and methane emissions. Looking forward, China should engage more closely in international efforts to reduce short-lived climate pollutants via the Arctic Council and the Climate and Clean Air Coalition. It would also be important to assess the Arctic footprint of China's domestic emissions of pollutants, such as mercury and persistent organic pollutants, prone to long-range transport into the High North.

In sum, China portrays itself as a "responsible" and "constructive" player in the Arctic. China's influence in the Arctic will likely continue to grow in the coming years.

For more on this, read...

The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (January 26, 2018)

http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm

Koivurova T and S Kopra (eds), *Chinese Policy and Presence in the Arctic* (Brill Publishing 2020)

Hong N, *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed* (Routledge 2020)

Xinmin MA, 'China's Arctic Policy on the Basis of International Law: Identification, Goals, Principles and Positions' (2019) 100 *Marine Policy* 265.