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China and the Arctic: China's Interests and Participation in the Region

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CHINA AND THE ARCTIC: CHINA'S INTERESTS AND PARTICIPATION IN THE REGION

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Cover photo: The submarine USS *Annapolis* (SSN 760) rests in the Arctic Ocean after surfacing through three feet of ice during Ice Exercise 2009 on March 21, 2009. The two-week training exercise, which is used to test submarine operability and war-fighting capability in Arctic conditions, also involves the USS *Helena* (SSN 725), the University of Washington and personnel from the Navy Arctic Submarine Laboratory. US Department of Defense photo by Petty Officer First Class Tiffini M. Jones, US Navy.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As China's presence in the Arctic grows, international attention on China in the Arctic also grows. This paper clarifies why China is interested in the Arctic and its role in joining the Arctic play, and touches on future trends in this regard. The paper begins with a discussion of China's recent Arctic capacity building and diplomacy, and the surge of interest in Arctic affairs by Chinese social scientists and strategists in recent years. China looks north for basically four reasons: it is influenced by environmental changes in the Arctic; it is drawn by the business opportunities arising from the opening of the Arctic passages and better access to Arctic resources; and it is also committed to maintaining good governance in the Arctic — which is also in its best interests.

China is coming to the north through a variety of ways: its formal and informal participation in various activities in the Arctic Council; its activities in other Arctic regional organizations; its bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with Arctic countries; and the arrival of Chinese companies in the Arctic. At present, China's participation in Arctic affairs is limited, but it is preparing to make greater contributions to good governance in the Arctic.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, in China, the Arctic had only been the interest of natural scientists focussing on polar research and world travellers; however, things have changed in the past two decades. Since that time, the Arctic has been getting increased attention from Chinese media, social scientists and government officials for a number of reasons, including the increasing international attention surrounding the melting of the Arctic ice caps and the changes that this is expected to bring in both geopolitical and geo-economic terms.

China's interest and participation in Arctic affairs has been growing with the melting of the Arctic sea ice, which has come as a result of global climate change. This interest and participation in Arctic affairs has caught a lot of international attention, and even suspicion about China's intentions as an "outsider" joining the Arctic. In this paper, the recent surge of China's Arctic interests, including academic research interests by social and natural scientists, business interests and political interests (mainly manifested by the open discussion of several Chinese officials on Arctic issues). The paper also discusses China's interest and participation in the Arctic, and as the paper closes, challenges and possibilities for China's future Arctic participation are discussed.

CHINA'S ARCTIC INTEREST

China's interest in the Arctic has grown in the past two decades, and this interest is only expected to increase in coming decades. China's primary interests in the Arctic

are not only in “real-world” practice, which includes the economic interests and business opportunities of a changing Arctic, but also in academia, with more research projects on Arctic social and natural sciences, and more publications in academic journals.

In recent years, there has been an increase in Chinese writings on Arctic affairs from the social science perspective. To some degree, this growing academic interest also reflects the growing interest of Arctic issues from the Chinese government. In a recent paper, David Wright (2011a) summarizes Chinese academic writers on this topic, citing several prominent authors who are vocal about Arctic studies in China: Guo Peiqing and Liu Huirong from the Ocean University of China, who write on Arctic political and legal issues; Lu Junyuan from Suzhou University, who writes on Arctic international relations; Li Zhenfu from Dalian Maritime University, who writes on Arctic passages; and several others researchers in Shanghai who are studying Arctic governance.

The rise of China’s academic interest in Arctic affairs is also shown through its institutional building in the past two to three years. For example, in 2010, Ocean University of China founded the Research Institute of Polar Law and Politics, which is one of the first institutes dedicated to polar social science research. There are also polar research institutes at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Fudan University and Wuhan University. China’s national social science research fund, managed by the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science (NPOPSS) is the highest level of funding agencies in the country. Its suggested project topics are usually regarded as the barometer of China’s governmental focus. Both Arctic studies and “Russia’s Arctic Policy and Its Regional Impacts” are among the funding agency’s 2012 suggested project topics, and Arctic studies is also among the fund’s suggested project topics in 2013 (NPOPSS 2011; 2012). China’s State Oceanic Administration is another major source of funding, with a Polar Strategic Fund set up in 2006, which provides funds for natural science and social science polar research projects. In recent years, the funded projects include more research from social science disciplines. In June 2013, The First China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposium was held in Shanghai with sponsorship from the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) and China’s State Oceanic Administration (China Daily 2013). The symposium was attended by more than 70 practitioners and scholars, and as a result, a China-Nordic Arctic research centre will be established. The research centre will cover studies on Arctic climate change and its impacts, as well as the policy and legislation related to the Arctic.

The melting of the Arctic and the opening of Arctic passages and resources have also attracted quite a lot of interest among Chinese businessmen. The most significant headline-maker is billionaire Huang Nubo, a Chinese real estate developer,

and his ongoing investment plan in Iceland. Huang’s investment in Iceland — the purchase of a 300-km² area in Iceland for a tourist resort, including a luxury tourist centre with a golf course, villas and other attractions — was first announced in September 2011 (Mei 2012). The original plan has met with difficulties from Icelandic Parliament and was changed from a land purchase into a land rental agreement for 99 years’ development. Huang was expected to sign the contract in October 2012 (ibid.); however, this changed plan was thwarted again by Icelandic officials in late 2012 (Fontaine 2012).

As Wright (2011a) states, “China is quite aware of the U.S. Geological Survey’s estimates that ‘25% of the world’s undiscovered hydrocarbon resources are found there, along with 9% of the world’s coal and other economically critical minerals.’” So property development opportunities, such as that envisioned by Huang Nubo, are but one kind of opportunity that the opening Arctic can offer to Chinese companies. Beyond tourism, there are significant opportunities to develop Arctic resources in partnership with companies from Arctic countries. China’s state-run oil companies are pioneering in this regard, joining the bids for Arctic resource development and investing strategically in Arctic resources.

ARCTIC CAPACITY BUILDING

As the old Chinese proverb goes, “capacity decides the place,” and China is fully aware of this in the Arctic play. Thus, strong and robust capacity in Arctic research and other issues are a must, in order to gain a place and to contribute to good Arctic governance. Polar research capacity is key to any polar expedition, and China is enhancing its Arctic capacity building, which it emphasizes at high-level conferences on polar research. Chen Lianzeng, deputy director of the State Oceanic Administration, emphasized this in the 14th Meeting of the Chinese Advisory Committee for Polar Research. At the meeting, Deputy Director Chen’s emphasis was on better coordination and planning of polar research, practical implementation of polar research findings, and enhanced education and professional training for polar works (Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration 2012).

Yellow River Station, China’s first and only Arctic scientific research base, was established on Svalbard, Norway in 2004. China has conducted five Arctic expeditions to date, with the first and second scientific research expeditions carried out in 1999 and 2003, before the Yellow River Arctic Research Station was built. The third and fourth expeditions were conducted in 2008 and 2010. The fifth — and most well-known expedition — occurred in summer 2012. In this expedition, China’s only operating icebreaking research ship, the “Snow

Dragon," travelled 18,500 nautical miles, including about 5,370 nautical miles in the Arctic ice zone. This was the first time that a Chinese vessel had made a round-trip high-latitude voyage across the Arctic, reaching a latitude as high as 87°40' (Science and Technology Daily 2012). China is planning its sixth Arctic expedition, and "an advanced new icebreaking research vessel to meet the increased need of polar scientific research" is being built in collaboration with a Finnish company (Embassy of Finland 2012). The new icebreaker is capable of breaking ice up to 1.5 metres thick, with a tonnage of 8,000, will have a cruising capacity of 20,000 nautical miles, and can work in water for up to 60 days with a top speed of 15 knots. It is scheduled for use in 2014 (Xinhua News Agency 2012a).

Though China is a signatory to the Svalbard Treaty, it is a latecomer to Arctic research, and research in this field does not get much attention within China. There is a great gap between the international research capacity for studying Arctic issues and China's research level in the field, in both natural and social sciences. Thus, international cooperation is an important way for China to enhance its Arctic research capacity. It is doing so by joining international research organizations and conducting joint Arctic research expeditions. China joined the International Arctic Science Committee in 1996, becoming the organization's sixteenth member country. In 2005, China hosted the Arctic Science Summit Week, initiated and organized the Pacific Arctic Group, and that same year, China was admitted to the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee. Through these international platforms, Chinese scientists have more access to keep up with international Arctic research communications and information, and have the opportunity to participate in cutting-edge research with other scientists from abroad. China also joined and actively participated in activities of International Polar Year (IPY) 2007-2008. That year, Chinese scientists proposed 16 Arctic research projects to IPY, and one of them, Project PANDA, was accepted as one of the IPY's core research projects. Project PANDA "is a multi-goal research plan including deep ice coring at Dome A, the highest location on the Antarctic ice sheet, and a study of the interactions of the ocean-ice shelf-ice sheet system from Pridz Bay to Dome A via the Amery Ice Shelf" (Xinhua News Agency 2007). Though Project PANDA is an Antarctic project, it shows China's enhanced polar research capacities and its aspirations for international cooperation in polar research. Through active participation in IPY activities, China also aims to enhance public education on polar affairs, thus increasing the general public's awareness of polar issues.

As compared to Antarctic research expeditions, funding for Arctic research is relatively small. Funding for China's Arctic research expeditions comes from different sources: the National Development and Reform Commission,

which is mainly responsible for providing funds for infrastructure building; the Ministry of Finance, which is mainly responsible for the cost of implementing the polar research expeditions; the National Science Fund, which funds Arctic research projects; and the Ministry of Science and Technology, which provides funding for regular observations. There is neither special nor regular funding for polar research in any of the aforementioned ministries, so China's polar expeditions suffer from a lack of adequate and stable funding.

CHINA'S ARCTIC DIPLOMACY

There is no doubt that China would like to participate more actively in Arctic affairs. With China's increased interest in the Arctic, it is engaging in more bilateral and multilateral relations with Arctic countries. China is not an Arctic country, so international cooperation is the only way for China to join the Arctic play. With respect to the legal order of the Arctic, the Chinese government's position is that the current system of international law of the sea provides a sound legal foundation for the settlement of Arctic affairs covering the basic problems of Arctic affairs, including maritime delimitation, marine environmental protection, navigation and scientific research.

In a 2010 statement on the website of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Hu Zhengyue, then assistant minister of foreign affairs, said that "recognizing and respecting each other's rights constitutes the legal basis for cooperation between Arctic and non-Arctic states. In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS] and other relevant international laws, Arctic states have sovereign rights and jurisdiction in their respective areas in the Arctic region, while non-Arctic states also enjoy rights of scientific research and navigation. To develop a partnership of cooperation, Arctic and non-Arctic states should, first and foremost, recognize and respect each other's rights under the international law" (cited in Zhu 2011). The principle of international cooperation was also emphasized by Zhao Jun (2013), Chinese ambassador to Norway, in a speech he delivered at the Arctic Frontiers conference held in Tromsø, Norway, in January 2013. He said that "China respects the sovereignty, sovereignty rights and jurisdiction of the Arctic states, attaches importance to Arctic scientific research and environmental protection, and supports the principles and objectives of the Arctic Council...China's Arctic research could not have been done without cooperation from other Arctic countries. China is hoping to continue enhancing its cooperation on Arctic scientific research with the Arctic countries, and to share the findings of the scientific research, so as to contribute to peace, stability and sustainable development of the Arctic region" (ibid.).

China is practicing this through multilateral and bilateral diplomacies, and on Arctic research expeditions, China is open to international cooperation with scientists from other nations. Four scientists — from Russia, South Korea and Japan — joined China's 1999 Arctic research expedition; 13 foreign scientists — from the United States, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Finland, Russia, among other nations — joined China's 2003 Arctic research expedition; 11 foreign scientists joined the 2008 Arctic research expedition; and eight foreign scientists joined the 2010 Arctic research expedition (Qu et al. 2011). Chinese scientists have also joined foreign Arctic research expeditions and have started exchange and cooperation programs with Arctic research centres around the globe, including the University of Alaska, the University of Washington, the International Arctic Research Center and the Korea Maritime Institute.

As for bilateral relations, China is conducting Arctic diplomacy and discussing cooperation for Arctic issues with all eight Arctic countries. Though the United States is a reluctant superpower in Arctic affairs (Huebert 2009), it remains a very influential player in Arctic affairs. Indeed, Arctic issues have been a priority of the high-level US-China Strategic Economic and Strategic Dialogue since the third round in 2011, and were listed again in the fourth round dialogue in 2012. Moreover, Canada is a major Arctic player. During Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's visit to China in February 2012, China's interests in Arctic issues were among the topics for discussion (Payton 2012). In May 2013, Canada assumed a two-year term as chair of the Arctic Council; China is expected to apply for formal observer status during Canada's term.

The most prominent display of China's efforts at Arctic diplomacy is with the Nordic countries. Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Denmark in June 2012, marking the first visit by a Chinese head of state since the two countries established diplomatic ties 62 years ago. The Arctic was not a major topic during the visit, but a good relationship with Denmark is a must in galvanizing support for China's future application to the Arctic Council. In April that same year, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited both Iceland and Sweden, which was also the first visit by a Chinese premier in decades. The visits by top Chinese leaders to these Nordic countries not only shows the increased importance of these countries on China's diplomatic relations list, but also demonstrates expanded bilateral cooperation in economic and academic fields. The visit to Iceland was quite fruitful, with a total of six agreements and declarations being signed during the visit — two of which are directly related to Arctic development. A framework agreement will strengthen the countries' bilateral Arctic cooperation, while a memorandum of understanding in marine and polar science and technology will enhance research cooperation (Staalesen 2012). The

China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre, housed within the PRIC in Shanghai, is China's first joint research centre dedicated to social studies of Arctic issues. According to Zhang Xia, director of the strategic studies office at the Institute, the new centre will push forward international cooperation in Arctic Studies between China and all the Nordic countries (Xinhua News Agency 2012b).

WHY CHINA LOOKS NORTH: THE ARCTIC AND CHINA

China is joining the Arctic play for basically three reasons: out of environmental concern, (as a "near Arctic state," China may be impacted by Arctic climate change, necessitating research); economic opportunities, as the opening of Arctic passages offers great financial opportunity; and better Arctic governance.

ARCTIC ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES AND CHINA

China is located in the northern hemisphere, with its far north close to 50 degrees north latitude, and thus defines itself as a "near Arctic state." According to a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, global warming in the Arctic is accelerating at a rate two times faster than the rest of the world, and its environmental changes might negatively impact the rest of the world, especially countries in the northern hemisphere, so China is concerned with the impacts that such warming might have on it (cited in Xinhua News Agency 2012c). And it seems that China is itself experiencing some climate change impacts; for example, some scientists say the early 2013 cold weather and snowstorm in China are related to environmental changes and sea ice loss in the Arctic. As China relies heavily on agricultural production, a warming Arctic is also expected to impact that sector of the economy. As Chen Lianzeng, deputy head of China's State Oceanic Administration has said, "As the largest developing country located in the Northern Hemisphere, the climatic and environmental changes in the Arctic will have a profound effect on the climate and environment in China, and directly relate to Chinese industry, agriculture and people's living. Therefore, the conduct of scientific research and expectation on the Arctic has significant meaning to China and its sustainable development" (cited in Zhang 2010).

ARCTIC PASSAGES AND CHINA

As the largest exporter and second-largest importer of global shipped goods, China relies heavily on sea lanes. The prospect of the opening Arctic passages is the most attractive reason for China's coming to the Arctic. The benefits of the Arctic passages are fourfold:

- The shortened distance. Arctic passages are nearly 2,000–3,500 nautical miles shorter than the customary sea routes from Chinese coastal ports to the east coast of North America, and reduce the length of customary routes from ports north of Shanghai to the ports of western Europe, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea by 25 to 55 percent.
- The reduced cost. By using the Arctic passages, it is estimated that the cost of Chinese international trade will be reduced by US\$53.3 billion to US\$127.4 billion yearly.
- The commercial use of the Arctic passages will put China much closer to Arctic resources and make China's use of them more feasible.
- The ports in northern China will benefit enormously from the opening of the Arctic passages, because a greater volume of goods will be transported through these ports. According to Guo Peiqing, associate professor of polar politics and law at the Ocean University of China, Arctic passages "will change the structure of global trade. It may well bring about the emergence of a new, circumpolar super-economic belt made up of Russia, North America and Northern Europe" (*Maritime Magazine* 2010).

ARCTIC RESOURCES AND CHINA

As one of the world's fastest-growing and biggest developing countries, there is no doubt that China needs more energy and resources for its future development, and a large part of these will be imported from abroad. The Arctic contains up to 30 percent of the world's undiscovered gas and about 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil resources. The region also contains large amounts of chromium, coal, copper, diamonds, gold, lead, manganese, nickel, rare earths, silver, titanium, tungsten and zinc. China is diversifying its energy sources, and the opening of the Arctic offers more possibility of providing resources. Commentators agree that Arctic minerals are China's new strategic target (Erickson and Collins 2012). There is no doubt that for China, gaining access to Arctic resources — which, according to estimates are mostly located within the exclusive economic zones of Arctic coastal states — will require cooperation with the Arctic countries to gain access to those resources. Chinese companies are seeking opportunities with both Russian oil tycoons in developing Russia oil in the Arctic region and with Canadian oil companies, as well.

CHINA IN THE ARCTIC: RESOURCE GUZZLER OR RESPONSIBLE STAKEHOLDER?

China's primary reasons and intentions for coming to the Arctic are interpreted differently by foreign commentators and scholars than by their Chinese counterparts, including government officials. Generally speaking, the international interpretation of China's coming to the Arctic falls in one of two extremes: it is either an opportunity, or it is a threat. Media commentators and "hardcore realist" scholars are more prone to the latter categorization; more liberal scholars tend to be more inclusive and see China's coming to the Arctic as an opportunity for improving good governance in the Arctic.

Those who uphold the "threat" mentality raise concerns about the possibility of China's sovereign claims over certain parts of the Arctic. Secondly, they voice apprehensions that China's state-sponsored strategic investment in the Arctic might bring about a new "gold rush" to the Arctic region. Some of these worries are overstated, misinterpreted and wrongly cited. There was, for example, a wrongly cited hawkish argument by Chinese Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo about China's would-be policy on Arctic affairs. In an article by Gordon C. Chang (2010), which appeared in *The Diplomat*, Admiral Yin was quoted as saying that "The Arctic belongs to all the people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it." The original source, however, reads that "Yin Zhuo said, according to UNCLOS, north pole and the surrounding areas, does not belong to any one country, but to all the people in the world" (Luo 2010). In fact, as no country has provided enough proof of extended continental shelf to the point of North Pole, the area surrounding the North Pole is considered international commons, a view shared by Paul Berkman and Oran Young (2009).

Chinese commentator Li Zhenfu writes that "the possibility of [China's] open declarations of sovereignty over the Arctic and Arctic sea routes, as well as territorial claims cannot be eliminated" (cited in Wright 2011a). Sentiments such as these have stirred a kind of fury from foreign writers, such as David Wright (2011b), who states that "we must stand up to China's increasing claim to Arctic." In fact, making any such sovereignty claims in the Arctic is by no means China's official intention in joining the Arctic play. In his later writings, it should be noted that Li Zhenfu is more conservative and rational.

For more liberal writers and scholars, China's interest in the Arctic is legitimate and reasonable, and they would like to "listen to the voices of non-Arctic states" (Young 2012); some even see China's coming to the Arctic as an opportunity (Lasserre 2010). If we look at what China is doing in the Arctic, there is no doubt that the alarmists are

no more than exaggerating, analyzing issues through an old Cold War or “China Threat” mentality.

While it is true that China’s official position on Arctic issues seldom mentions Arctic resources, there is no doubt that the accessibility of such rich resources will be a bonus for China, as it is developing so quickly. That said, China is following the rules and regulations set by Arctic countries and international agreements. For new and emerging rules governing international practices, China, along with other non-Arctic countries, is eager to weigh in its influence, but only through following the already-established rules, and solely for the purpose of good Arctic governance.

As for the Arctic Council, China (along with five other countries) was granted observer status at the Council’s eighth ministerial meeting in May 2013. This move demonstrates the Council’s acceptance of China’s contribution to good governance in the Arctic. The next question for China, then, is what can it contribute to the work of Arctic Council as an observer? According to the Arctic Council’s Senior Arctic Officials’ (SAO) Report to Ministers, as an observer state, China will attend Arctic Council meetings, will have better access to information and greater opportunity to have its voice heard (SAO 2011, 50–1). The primary privileges for permanent observers are sitting in on the conferences, receiving documents and other information in advance of the meetings (ibid.). Under the authorization of the chair, observers may make speeches, present written statements, submit relevant documents and take part in the activities of the Arctic Council’s working groups (ibid.). Observer states may also get the opportunity to exchange ideas with representatives from Arctic states at the ministerial meeting (ibid.). According to Shin Mang-ho, director general of international legal affairs of South Korea’s foreign ministry, non-Arctic states regard the observer status as “a more secure position so [they] can watch how the meetings go, and discuss cooperation with stakeholders afterward” (quoted in Shin 2012). The observer status is primarily symbolic, but more substantial work should follow, such as China’s enhanced research in Arctic issues, and possibly a white paper on China’s Arctic policy.

It is good that China has joined the Arctic Council as an observer, but there are other platforms for China to join in Arctic affairs, including international organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), which is formulating rules for navigating in the ice-covered region in the Arctic. China can and is expected to play a more active role in helping the IMO to shape navigation regulations. Other international platforms, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change are also good venues for China to play a more active role, since a new and updated climate change

regime is under discussion, and such forums necessarily include discussion about the Arctic.

CONCLUSION

China is keeping a close eye on the Arctic’s development, and increasingly participating in Arctic issues. It has legitimate and natural rights for its presence in the Arctic. The main purpose of China’s Arctic presence in the past two decades is to conduct scientific research on climate change and its potential impacts, especially for China. With the melting of the Arctic, and Arctic passages and resources becoming more accessible, it is also logical for China to look to the Arctic for economic opportunities.

Although there are some radical Chinese scholars whose writings have caused some international academics and media commentators concern, the Chinese government’s official standpoint is clear in its acknowledgement of the interests, rights and sovereignty of Arctic countries in the region. China is fully aware that only through international cooperation with Arctic countries and countries of common interest can it realize its interests in the Arctic. Thus, being a responsible stakeholder in the Arctic and a law-abiding user of Arctic passages and resources will be the only way forward. Because of China’s current and potential contributions to regional and global issues in the Arctic, it is also beneficial for Arctic countries to include China in the Arctic play for better governance outcomes for the Arctic region.

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The Centre for International Governance Innovation is an independent, non-partisan think tank on international governance. Led by experienced practitioners and distinguished academics, CIGI supports research, forms networks, advances policy debate and generates ideas for multilateral governance improvements. Conducting an active agenda of research, events and publications, CIGI's interdisciplinary work includes collaboration with policy, business and academic communities around the world.

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