

High Seas Triggering Arctic Security? An Analysis of Chinese Academic Discourse on the Central Arctic Ocean

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The Central Arctic Ocean is the marine area within the Arctic Ocean beyond national jurisdiction where, according to UNCLOS, no state is allowed to advance any sovereign claims. Today, the protection of marine ecosystems, exploitation of Arctic natural resources, commercial and fishing opportunities are all drivers which attract major powers' attention. The recently-signed Treaty on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (2023) and the Agreement to prevent unregulated fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean (2018) have drastically changed the maritime regime in the Central Arctic Ocean. They both provide more room for non-Arctic stakeholders to participate in the management of the Central Arctic Ocean and they induce a profound reflection on how it will influence the strategies of Arctic and non-Arctic states.

Despite a good amount of literature in the English language that has shared skepticism over China's role in the Arctic, the limitation of China's investment in the Arctic region has stimulated a reconsideration of China's threatening role. However, it has mostly overlooked the evolution of the domestic debate and its potential to influence the domestic decision-making apparatus.

This paper aims to fill this gap by shedding light on how the Chinese domestic academic debate addresses the Central Arctic Ocean. Geopolitical purposes, military means, economic opportunities, environmental issues and governance are all themes that emerge from the analysis. The investigation focuses on the period 2014-2021. It draws the evolution of the topics discussed and offers a reflection on future actions the Chinese leadership might consider.

1. Introduction

In the last two decades the Arctic region has been experiencing renewed attention not only from the Arctic states, but also from stakeholders located well below the Arctic Circle. Non-Arctic states have been particularly active in releasing their official Arctic strategy and engaging in Arctic affairs to improve their regional influence. Interests are multifaceted and include military and environmental security, the accessibility to Arctic natural resources and new shipping route opportunities. The United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines the

portion of the sea that is not included in the exclusive economic zone, in the territorial sea nor the internal waters of a state, nor in the archipelagic waters of an archipelagic state as “High Seas” that are open to all states. The Central Arctic Ocean (CAO) is one of those areas that, in the recent past, due to its inaccessibility for the most significant part of the year, was a no-priority matter for great powers. However, the rising potential for easier access to Arctic untapped natural resources along with the opportunities to develop shipping routes in the Nordic waters are attracting major powers’ attention. It is estimated that the Arctic Ocean may experience ice-free summers before 2050 (ESA, 2020), making the CAO a precious resource for fisheries. In 2018 Canada, Norway, Russia, the United States, Iceland, China, Japan, South Korea, Denmark and the EU signed the Agreement to prevent unregulated fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean (CAO Agreement). More recently the Treaty on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ Treaty) has been adopted at the UN level. It provides holistic management measures for ocean life, to conduct environmental assessments and to establish marine protected areas on the high seas. While I acknowledge the relevance of such a Treaty in establishing a global governance approach to tackle global challenges and manage marine areas beyond national jurisdictions, the articles analyzed in this paper were published before the BBNJ Treaty’s adoption and therefore much of the discussion has a speculative nature.

Within this framework, China has worked to enhance its position within Arctic governance, and its proactivity has generated many different reactions from Western and Arctic countries. A good amount of the literature published in English language shares scepticism over China’s interest and activities in the Arctic, however most-recently published reports show how speculative rhetoric does not match reality on the ground. Here, I draw attention to the debate within Chinese academia. Among Chinese scholars, what has prevailed is the discourse of the “common good” (Brady, 2017: 33-34). Recently Kossa (2020) has noticed how, besides the traditional actors, the policy decision-making process has to some extent valued non-traditional actors, such as China’s large state-owned enterprises, subnational governments and research institutions. The article aims at enlarging the debate about China’s Arctic engagement also on a domestic level in order to shed light on non-traditional Arctic actors to influence the decisions-making process and to provide insights about China’s posture in the future.

In the first part I illustrate the research question, methodology and data. The second section offers an overview of perspectives on China’s engagement in the Arctic, starting from China’s threat theory to the recent reconsideration of China’s massive presence in the region. In the third section, I first frame themes and categories I have derived from the articles analysed, and then discuss the emerging topics. The six categories that I have conceptualised are: participation in international agreements; geopolitical dimension; endorsement of Chinese leadership concepts; Arctic governance; economic opportunities and environmental dimension. In the discussion session I have grouped some of the categories because of the horizontality of discussed themes. As one of them, governance-related themes are widespread as “institutional complexity that marks polar governance follows inevitably from the enmeshment of change in polar regions in wider and often global environmental, economic, political, and legal processes” (Stokke, 2022: 251). Specifically, I have grouped participation in international agreements with Arctic governance and endorsement of Chinese leadership concepts with economic opportunities. The geopolitical and environmental dimensions are discussed independently.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1: How do Chinese scholars frame the Central Arctic Ocean?

RQ2: How is Chinese academic debate focused on the CAO different from the one in the English language?

1.3 Data and Method

In this article, I employ qualitative content analysis on journal articles extracted from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), one of the leading academic source databases. Alexeeva and Lasserre (2012) stated how on Arctic issues, priority was given to the natural science field. This paper aims to expand knowledge on political and international relations issues related to the CAO as a source of security, political and economic matters.

Empirical data consist of 36 Chinese language-based journal articles selected from two main disciplines: Chinese and International Politics and International Law in 2014–2021. First, I used the keyword "Central Arctic Ocean" as the primary filter. Due to the limited number of articles, I enlarged the research to the "Arctic Ocean", including articles that cover matters related to areas under national jurisdiction. Such a decision helped me work on a more consistent dataset and better correlate the academic debate with official China's Arctic policy, which looks at the Arctic as a mixture of areas under and beyond national jurisdiction. I selected this timeframe because it falls in the period between the acceptance of China as a permanent observer in the Arctic Council and before the breakout of the war in Ukraine, which profoundly changed the political assets in the Arctic, prioritizing traditional security in the academic discussion.

In the content analysis, meaning units and themes consist of inductive and deductive open coding that helped me mix previous research with new and most recent insights and enabled me to individualize an evolutionary trajectory of patterns and trends along the suggested timeframe. I have endorsed a bottom-up process in building categories starting from meaning units, framing them into main themes and grouping themes into categories (Appendix 1-2). Therefore each category includes themes that emerged from the grouping meaning units. The final discussion reflects the interconnectivity between scientific knowledge, Arctic governance and geopolitical and commercial issues.

2. Perspectives on China's Arctic Engagement

Throughout the centuries the Arctic Ocean has been an important destination for explorers, and by the end of the 19th Century the North polar region was extensively explored (World Ocean Review, 2019). However, until the Second World War, the CAO was not considered a priority to any state agenda, as it was perceived mostly as a frozen zone and potentially lifeless (Sorlin, 2018). In the Cold War period, the Arctic region was a place of substantial military deployment by the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1958 the UN Convention on the Continental Shelf, paired with UNCLOS (1982), provided the legal framework to administrate seabed, living and non-living resources and the water column.

The thawing of the North polar ice cap has come to be a game-changer.

The new perception of the CAO as an essential living environment and the lack of scientific data, led Arctic and non-Arctic states to sign an agreement to prevent unregulated fishery in 2018 (Dodds, 2019). While Balton (2021) underlines how important it is for the states to learn more about the ecosystem and the obligation to create a Joint Program of Scientific Research and Monitoring for the CAO, Liu (2021) stresses that even though China's delegation presence was "under-the-radar", it marked the first time that China sat equally with the Arctic states in the negotiation process.

As a non-Arctic state, science has offered China space for engagement in Arctic governance. However, when looking at China's Arctic engagement, the perception of China is deeply influenced by China's threat theory which considers China as seeking a level of hegemonic power that menaces US leadership in the Asia-Pacific region as well as globally (Broomfield, 2003). From a realist perspective, China's soft power strategy has been shadowed by a step-by-step military build-up specifically designed to improve Chinese capabilities in the Northern Sea Route (Robinson, 2013). In the last US Arctic Strategy (The White House, 2022), concerns about China are focused on the increased investments, expanded scientific activities and the use of scientific engagements to conduct dual-use research with intelligence or military applications in the Arctic.

Many academics circumscribe the whole discourse from a geoeconomic perspective. Jakobson (2019) underlines how China's economy depends on foreign trade, and the shortage of the North East Passage might have substantial commercial implications. Lanteigne (2020) expands the interest in accessing fossil fuels and raw materials to not be singled out in the economic development led by major powers and Arctic littoral states. Pursiainen et al. (2021) also identify that geoeconomics in China's foreign policy and fostering economic growth is directly linked to strengthening domestic stability.

Lackenbauer et al. (2022: 86) highlight how Arctic commentators define Chinese investment as a "trojan horse to secure access to the Arctic, which the People Republic of China can then exploit for its strategic purposes". The authors assess how China is not even a near-peer of the Arctic states and commentators have often overstated the scale of Chinese investments in the region. A perception that two recently published reports have questioned. Pezard et al. (2022) and Stünkel (2022) share the idea about the limitation of massive Chinese presence due to the prudence shown by governments and sub-national actors in welcoming Chinese investments, as well as solid factors of resilience, geopolitical pressure and local pushbacks. An exhaustive study on Arctic policies shows how out of all the Arctic policies released by non-Arctic states, China's has been the most discussed. China's policy contains a strong commitment to maintaining peace and stability and endorses environmental protection. The study concludes that comparing the analysis and de facto priorities, China's main goals for the Arctic include governance, international and global cooperation and sustainable development (Heininen et al., 2020).

Much of the skepticism related to China's Arctic engagement is also related to the renewed cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, which is mainly built on energy-related agreements. Despite a considerable increase in imports coming from the Yamal LNG shipped through the Northern Sea Route, which enabled China to become the world largest importer of LNG surpassing Japan (Humpert, 2023), many scholars share doubts about the solidity of such a relationship. MacDonald (2021) advocates for Western countries to refrain from adopting strategies based on the assumption of a deep-aligned Sino-Russia axis and to treat China and Russia as distinct regional challenges that

require specific policies. In the light of China's role as a Russia's strategic partner, Kobzeva and Todorov (2023: 7) clarify that within the current Arctic regime complex, China does not have an opportunity to make critical changes as it has already obtained legitimate status that allows participation in regional rulemaking, however "promising fields for China's rulemaking for the Arctic are management of the shipping and fishing in high seas areas".

3. Categories and themes that emerged from the Chinese academic discussion about the CAO

In this section, I conceptualise and analyse categories and themes that emerged from the academic debate. The tables help to catch the discussion's evolution over the years, which will be discussed in the next section.

Categories:

1 - Participation in international agreements: It refers to negotiations of recently-signed international agreements relevant to the Arctic region, such as the BBNJ Treaty and the CAO Agreement.

2 - Geopolitical dimension: It includes reference to security, national interests, military activities related to the CAO.

3 - Endorsement of Chinese leadership concepts: It complies with concepts and projects created, implemented and outspoken by the Chinese leadership in the public debate.

4 - Arctic governance: It relates to Arctic-relevant treaties, agreements and international platforms.

5 - Economic opportunities: It includes commercial and economic opportunities related to the maritime, energy and transportation sectors.

6 - Environmental dimension: It looks at protection and conservation of the natural Arctic environment.

	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Chinese and Int. Politics	2	1	4	3	2	1	4	2
International Law	1	4	2	2	2	4	1	2 ¹

Figure 1. Articles extracted and analyzed from the CNKI

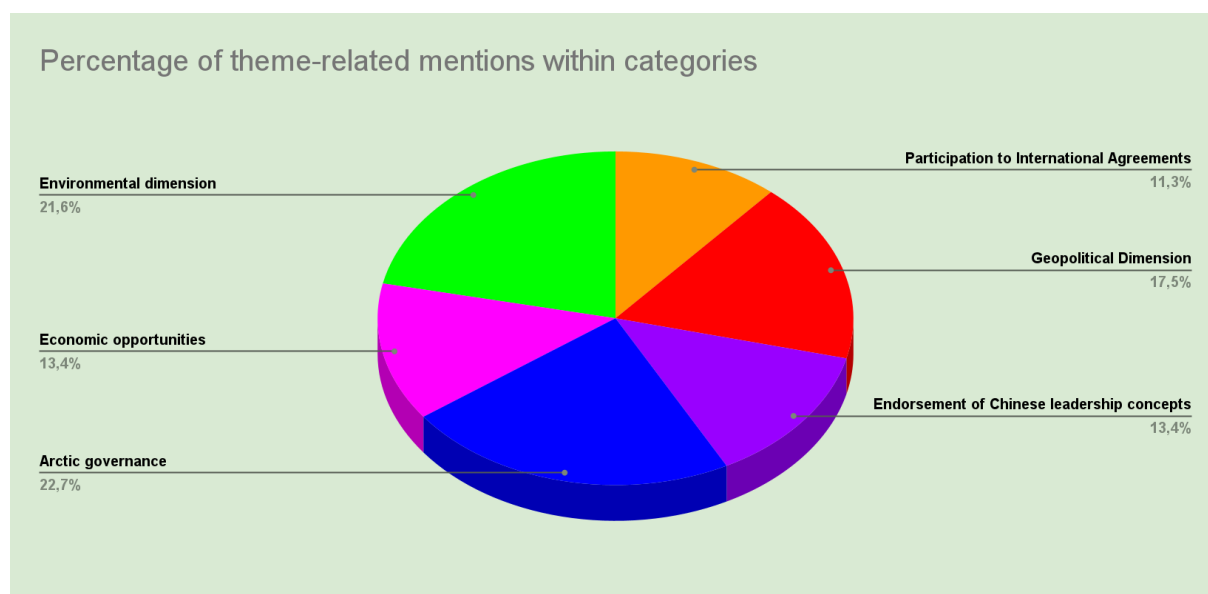


Figure 2. Categories and percentage of theme-related mentions in the Chinese academic discourse about the CAO. Source: Author

3. 1 Participation in international agreements

Themes and mentions

Themes	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
US leading role in negotiating int. agreements	1	1	1			1		
China needs to have a more active role and strengthen Scientific research			2	1		1		
A5+5 mechanism as a good example of shared governance		1				2		

Source: Author

Gui Jing (2021) argues that the combination of the CAO Agreement and the BBNJ Treaty will shape the future international legal order for Arctic high seas fisheries. While the BBNJ Treaty was still in the negotiation process, he acknowledges its potential to put an end to the "fragmented" 碎片化 (suipianhua) management of the high seas and to "not undermine the existing regime" 不损害现有机制 (bu sunhai xianyou jizhi) (Gui Jing, 2021: 75). He states that China's active involvement in negotiating both agreements represents a good point to increase engagement and negotiation practices further. Tang Yao (2020) underlines how China is a newcomer to the international law system and how the final CAO Agreement resulted from the interaction and interpretation of various actors within different platforms. Even though China joined almost all

the relevant scientific meetings, he individualises a two-fold issue: the gap between China and other states' willingness and ability to conclude the Agreement as the US emerged as a leading party; and China's failure to use the relevant international regimes, mechanisms and organisations, such as the AC and the Food Agricultural Organization (FAO). Meng Linghao (2019) is more sceptical about the potential of the CAO Agreement. He individualises gaps in the participant issues, non-party compliance issues, the sunset clause of the Agreement, and the transnational approach. He recommends China to have a more active role when negotiating the content of conservation and management measures concerning the parties' fisheries to safeguard future interests in the region. When discussing the management of the CAO, Bai Jiayu and Li Zhuang (2017) advance the concept of shared governance. They acknowledged the cooperation progress in managing high seas fishery resources in the CAO, recognising the US initiative since 2010 to set up meetings among the Arctic five senior officials and scientists. While the US advocated for a legally binding agreement, participants advanced different needs related to the economic structure and interests. China valued the precautionary approach as it does not mean a blanket ban and is not the same as closing fishing grounds. Their recommendations for China are to enhance international cooperation, actively participate in scientific research in marine biological resources, give a full play to its role in the AC and to uphold participation in the management of high seas fishery resources. The need to strengthen scientific research on biological resources in the CAO can enable China to advance more specific conservation and management measures, as the extent of scientific research capacity will determine the country's voice in Arctic governance (Tang Jianye, 2016).

Bai Jiayu and Sui Jiabin (2018) analysed the progress of the delimitation of the continental shelves and underlined how negotiation is the primary force for maritime delimitation. Authors underline how China can actively participate in global issues and put forward recommendations to improve its potential negotiation regarding sovereignty established by international law and to prevent Arctic states from arbitrarily extending the limits of the continental shelf. The US has led the discussion for the CAO Agreement and the Joint Statement, which led to the creation of A5+5 mechanism², a landmark event in high seas fisheries governance and the first step for a broader international agreement. The Joint Statement creates room for negotiations and opportunities to cooperate open to non-Arctic countries (Zhao Ningning and Wu Leizhao, 2016, Pan Min and Xu Liling, 2016).

Zhao Long (2020) values the A5+5 mechanisms as a critical paradigmatic innovation for China to participate in Arctic governance since it allowed it to reach an intraregional consensus between the Arctic five and the other five non-Arctic littoral entities. The author not only acknowledges the leading role of the US in drafting the Agreement but also underlines that its negotiation took place outside the paradigm of the AC.

3.2 Geopolitical Dimension

Themes and mentions

Themes	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Militarization			2		1		2	1

Geopolitical relevance of Continental Shelf		1		2			1	1
Russia's maritime power				2			1	
Comparative discourse to the South China Sea	1			1				

Source: Author

When discussing the near-Arctic states concept advanced by China in its official policy, Li Zhenfu (2021) suggests the necessity to frame it on the regional scale of geo-security, with a level of analysis that perceives the Arctic as a region based on factors derived from the interconnectedness and interactivity of regional threats and threats that pertain to the military, ecological, environmental, energy, economic and trade spheres.

While the geo-security scale shows how the shift of the security dimensions from the military to the environment is also discussed among Chinese scholars, militarisation, framed in the traditional logic of deterrence, still represents a key driver of security. By expanding the concept of security to the environmental dimension and elaborating its relevance in the Arctic region can help in differentiating China's positioning in the Arctic and in the South China Sea, where China's engagement is often discussed to sustain China's threat theory. Wang Lijiu and Xu Xiaotian (2019) underline how Russia's deployment of military is a deterrent for US-led Nato and a guarantee for the maintenance of geostrategic security. Li Jianfu (2019: 100-101) focuses on the "non-offensive" militarisation 非攻军事化 (feigong junshihua), stating that "military presence" does not create tension but "increases opportunities for comprehensive cooperation" 军事存在[...]能为建立全面合作 (junshi cunzai[...]neng jianwei quanmian hezuo). The remilitarisation issue is strictly connected to the Ukraine crisis of 2014, which works as a boundary. While prior to the Ukraine crisis, the remilitarisation of the Arctic would have shaped an "all against all" 一切人反对一切人 (Yique ren fandui yiqie ren) scenario, after the Ukraine crisis, the focus of security was on the deteriorating relations with Russia. However, according to the author, none of the Arctic five believes that remilitarisation would have ever led to aggressiveness and expansion.

Li Anmin and Zhao Fulin (2017) discuss how militarisation is increasing and represents a threat to China's security. Russia focuses on military force as a necessary guarantee to pursue national interests; Canada's multilateral activities aimed at asserting its sovereignty will represent a threat to future shipping routes; Denmark repeatedly sent warships to assert its sovereignty on Hans Island disputed with Canada³, and Norway is also increasing its military presence. Overall the Arctic has become more hostile (Li Anmin and Zhao Fulin, 2017).

The right to continental shelf extension and access to natural resources emerges as content with high geopolitical relevance. Potential disputes arise from the many submissions claiming the extension of the continental shelf, which can make the work of the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) more complicated and slower (Fang Yinxia and Yin Jie, 2020, Chen

Kunfeng et al. 2018). Fang Yinxia and Yin Jie (2020) built their analysis on the comparison with the claims in the South China Sea, explicitly referring to the cases of Vietnam and Malaysia presenting a submission to the CLCS to which China has strongly reacted, stating that it violates sovereignty rights in the area. The authors' recommendations then focus on the need to closely monitor further development to assist with future assessments violating China's rights. Bai Jiayu and Sui Jiabin (2018) stress how bilateral negotiations have been prioritised when addressing disputes. However, they underline how national interest is the driving force when considering fisheries resources and exploiting natural resources. Moreover, the CLCS's power is limited to the approval or rejection of submissions; it is not an arbitrary body and does not have the power to mediate disputes between states (Li Xuejie et al. 2014).

Academics also focused on how the changes happening in the CAO are relevant to other stakeholders and their Arctic strategies. Wang Qian (2018) states that the shrinking of the ice of the Arctic Ocean produces benefits and weaknesses for Russia's sea power. Reduced ice might ease operation along the Northern Sea Route and communications between the Eastern and Western fleets, consistently enhancing Russia's maritime power. Conversely, it makes detection from the enemy easier, reducing the underwater nuclear deterrence capability. Moreover, Northern territories are more exposed to the threat of superior maritime power of strategic rivals. The strategic relevance of the Arctic waters for Russia is twofold: on one side, the Arctic is the base for future national transport arteries, and its waters are a permanent strategic barrier. From the 21st Century, competition between Arctic States has increased and Russia has demonstrated its value through military exercises. In its 2014 Strategy for Development and National Security of the Russian Arctic Region until 2020, the control over the NSR is pivotal and the acquisition of the continental shelf is not only framed under national development but enlarged to strengthen its geopolitical influence in the region (Lu Junyuan, 2015).

The Arctic occupies a strategic position in terms of military and national security for Arctic and non-Arctic states. As major players in the Arctic, Russia and the US retain military presence as a tool to gain power and leadership and increase chances to enhance national security. China's General National Security Law deals with traditional and non-traditional security challenges: the Arctic falls into the "New Strategic areas" for national interest, which should be preserved (He Jian and Liu Lei, 2015). The development of the Arctic might represent problems for China's national security as the domination of the Arctic sea routes will become a geopolitical target, especially in those countries that compete for hegemony (Lu Junyuan, 2014).

Zhao Long (2018) analysed Russia from a cooperative perspective. He investigates features related to the joint building of the Polar Silk Road with Russia. The author recognises that at a geopolitical level, what happens in the Arctic has an impact not only on a regional level but also on the international order. Constraints of such a collaboration derive from the problematic normalisation of US-Russian relations and claims that go over the national jurisdiction (e.g. extensions of the continental shelf). According to the author, China should avoid any sovereignty-type dispute and keep endorsing Arctic governance and promoting cooperation.

3.3 Endorsement of Chinese leadership concepts

Themes and mentions

Themes	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Community of a shared future	1		3	1			1	
Win-Win solutions					2	1		
Relation with BRI				1				
Shared Maritime destiny		2					1	

Source: Author

The concept of a "community of common destiny" was first mentioned by former Chinese Communist Party's General Secretary Hu Jintao. Xi Jinping has slightly modified it into the concept of a "community of a shared future" (人类命运共同体, *renlei mingyun gongtong ben*) which is not only targeted to neighbouring countries but extended at a global level (Jin, 2013).

Jiang Xiumin and Chen Jian (2019) envision the concept of a community of destiny as the final and ideal destination of the community of interests, where parties share trust and consensus on each other's future and destiny. The integration of Eurasian economies through the blue economic corridors (BEC)⁴ will allow the building of a community of human destiny and, through maritime partnerships, will share mutual benefits and jointly overcome difficulties. Li Jianfu (2019) conceptualises the concept of the common interest of humankind by universalising the beneficial effects of Arctic development. Despite some trigger points, he argues that the current legal and institutional framework makes more room for collaboration rather than confrontation. As a common property of humankind, the Arctic development should be open to any country interested. Wu Junsong (2020: 26) extends the concept of common destiny to maritime destiny. He proposes China as the "initiator" 发起人 (*faqiren*) of the Arctic Ocean Blue Economic Passage (AOBEP) project. Although the project is still in its creative phase, the concept of a common maritime destiny allows all parties to share benefits. The author calls China to adopt a series of measures to promote development and accelerate bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Arctic Ocean coastal states. Meng Linghao (2019: 84) stresses how to realise the concept of building a community of human maritime destiny 构建人类海洋命运共同体 (*goujian renlei haiyang mingyun gongtongti*) China should closely monitor further steps related to the joint scientific research and monitoring programme within the CAO agreement. He Jian and Liu Lei (2015) perceive the integration of the three Arctic shipping lanes⁵ in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road as a way to link the concept of community of destiny with the concept of common security, which is key for China as well as for Russia, US and Canada.

Li Zhenfu (2021) endorses the concept of a community of human destiny in the context of avoiding military conflicts in the Arctic as he perceives militarisation as the greatest threat to Arctic geo-security. Bai Jiayu and Sui Jiixin (2018) suggest that China should use either its status as an Arctic stakeholder or act in line with the principle of community of human destiny to promptly avoid any arbitrary process on the definition of limits of the continental shelf by Arctic coastal states. The integration of the Polar Silk Road into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can positively impact the future development of regional cooperation mechanisms as it might build a cooperative co-brokering and sharing-based system of common interests (Xia Liping and Xie Xie, 2018). Before the Polar Silk Road was formally announced, the Arctic shipping lanes and the BRI were already envisioned as a common ground for China and Russia to build an Arctic shipping community (Lili Fan, 2015).

Zhao Ningning and Wu Leizhao (2016) advocate for China to take the initiative for peaceful cooperation and a multi-win solution for the sake of humanity. Wang Meili and Wu Junsong (2019: 50) advocate for a stakeholder participation model for managing and governing high seas fisheries in the CAO, as the CAO's resources belong to humankind's common heritage. The authors recognise it might represent an external threat to governance and management traditionally led by the Arctic five or the Arctic eight and suggest that China should work on building a sharing and joint construction of the Arctic community of shared future "共商、共建、共享以及共筑北极命运共同体" 的先进理念 (gongshang, gongjian, gongxiang, yiji gong zhu beiji mingyun gongtongti de xianjin linian).

In managing the fisheries resources of the CAO from an international law perspective, China acknowledges the critical role of coastal states. However, cooperation between the Arctic five and the distant-water fishing nations is necessary for a win-win situation and the prerequisite to build a "harmonious Arctic" 和谐北极 (hexie beiji) (Zou Leilei and Huang Shou-Lin 2016: 11). Common governance arrangement for managing fisheries in the high seas in the Arctic is linked to the status of the Arctic Ocean, which is a global common rather than a semi-enclosed sea. Such a multilevel arrangement enhances the possibility of creating win-win solutions (Bai Jiayu and Li Zhuang, 2017, Xu Hong, 2017).

3.4 Arctic Governance

Themes and mentions

Themes	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Asian Cluster		1	2		1		1	
Arctic governance ensures China's rights					1		1	1
Fragmentation – Inadequate governance		1	2	1	2	3	3	

Source: Author

The CAO from the periphery of global affairs, is now at the centre of the global agenda because it is the source of the global greenhouse production with knock-on effects on the ecosystem and a future prospect for natural resource exploitation (Lu Hao, 2019: 10). The author analyses Japan's Arctic policy and defines China, Japan and South Korea as 'near Arctic Ocean countries' 进北冰洋国家 (Jin beibingyang guojia) that are geographically close to the region and have geo-economic and political interests. China's relevance within Japan's Arctic strategy lies on the increased investments that Beijing has set up for the Arctic shipping routes and the enhanced possibilities to exploit natural resources. Many academics have discussed similarities and shared interests among Asian countries: Zhao Long (2020) discusses how the AC limits Asian countries and how alternative platforms have become a relevant place to discuss Arctic issues; Jiang Xiumin and Chen Jian (2019) suggest China to enhance relations with Asian partners to build consensus over the economic opportunities linked to economy corridors; Xu Hong (2017) values the "mini-multilateral" mechanism of high-level dialogue on Arctic with Japan and South Korea aiming at coordinating, exchange policies and activities on international cooperation; Xiao Yang (2015) frames common situation for Asian observers countries which look at the Arctic as an internationalized Arctic.

Most of the discussion of Chinese academics focuses on the role of the AC and China's observer status. Xia Liping and Xie Xie (2018) value the AC as a key platform in the Arctic regional cooperation mechanism and in the role it can play in the realization of the Polar Silk Road in terms of guaranteeing and promoting its construction, guaranteeing Arctic navigation, providing the legal basis for the development of oil and gas resources and facilities related to scientific cooperation. The existing rule-based Arctic governance made up of UNCLOS, the Svalbard Treaty and the AC functions well and sufficiently ensures China's rights to freely travel in the Arctic Ocean (Xu Hong, 2017; He Jian and Liu Lei, 2015; Li Xuejie et al. 2014). However, a centrifugal tendency of Arctic observers to voice their rights through other platforms exists. China should consider interaction with other AC observer states and other stakeholders such as the UK and France (Xu Hong, 2017). Bai Juayu and Sui Jiabin (2018) individualize bilateral negotiations as the main guiding force for solving state disputes. Zhao Long (2020) underlines how observers are limited in their decision-making power in the AC.

Li Anmin and Zhao Fulin (2017: 38) define the "observer" status as not only awkward, but weak 所谓的 "观察员" 在北极理事会中不仅地位尴尬而且话语苍白无力 (suowei de guanchayuan zai beiji lishi hui zhing bujin diwei ganga erqie huayu cangbai wuli). They then compare the AC to the Monroe Doctrine, as the Arctic belongs to the Arctic states, and China will never have the same decision-making power. Xiao Yang (2015) also mentions the Monroe Doctrine regarding mutual opportunities between China and Canada. Strengthening such a relationship might help Canada in lessening dependence on the US, for China could be vital to have a broader reach in the AC. Limitations for China are also extended to the system of claim for extension of continental shelf, making it difficult to be integrated into the international mechanism of the Arctic route (Li Anmin and Zhao Fulin, 2017). However, Jie Yin et al. (2020) underline how Art. 238 of UNCLOS secures all the countries to conduct marine scientific research and the CLCS should prevent the arbitrary expansion of the continental shelf.

Many academics pay attention to the governance and management of the high seas fisheries. The current cooperative mechanism for high sea fisheries governance in the Arctic Ocean is

fragmented, with global treaties based on voluntary participation and bilateral and multilateral agreements limited to specific areas. This inadequate governance might lead to the tragedy of the commons (Bai Jiayu and Li Zhuang, 2017). The necessity for a regional management system for Arctic fishery management and specific governance related to the management of the CAO (Zou Leilei et al., 2015) is compared with the efficiency of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in making a pan-Arctic shipping regulation which has facilitated a unified Arctic management system, and with the Polar Code as the key to the sustainability of fishery (Zou Leilei and Fu Yu, 2017). The negotiation of the CAO Agreement intervenes as a key point of discussion. The Arctic five claim a leadership position in the management of high seas fisheries in the CAO (Zou Leilei and Huang Shuo-Lin, 2016, Li Fangfang, 2016, Zou Leilei et al. 2015). Tang Jianye (2016) agrees with the unique position of dominance the Arctic five have had in preventing unregulated fishing in the CAO. He focuses on the interim measure to deter possible unregulated fishing activities in the CAO and underlines that it cannot have a legally binding effect on third parties and it is inconsistent with UNCLOS. On the same line, Zou Leilei et al. (2015), refer to the principle of equity expressed in paragraph 3 of Art. 119 of UNCLOS which suggests that even if the Arctic five enjoy specific rights in the management of the CAO fishery, it does not mean that management of the high sea fisheries should be exclusively under their authority. The discrepancy of national strategies of Arctic countries was an impediment to the final CAO Agreement (Wang Meili and Wu Junsong, 2019, and Zou Leilei et al., 2015). For example, Nordic countries attached much importance to developing the potential of high sea fisheries. The authors advocate a stakeholder participation model whose legal basis is provided by UNCLOS, the Fish Stocks Agreement and the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishery (FAO) (Wang Meili and Wu Junsong, 2019). Pan Min and Xu Liling (2016) explore and value the potential of cooperation between the US and China through the AC to establish solid ground for cooperation. However, they underline the need for more space for opportunities for observer states to participate and they acknowledge the creation of the A5+5 mechanism as a basis for China to better cooperate in the management and governance of high seas fisheries in the CAO. Limitations of international law are also related to the difficulty of understanding the legal status of Arctic shipping lanes (Lili Fan, 2015 and Chen Kunfeng et al., 2018).

3. 5 Economic Opportunities

Themes and mentions

Themes	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Development of the Polar Silk Road - Northern Sea Route			2	4	1		2	2
Navigate Central Arctic Passage				1	1		1	1
Utilization of the North West					1		2	1

Passage								
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Source: Author

The core of the academic discussion about economic opportunities is centred on utilising Arctic shipping routes. They will offer a precious opportunity for China to lessen its dependence on importing oil from the Middle East and reduce the strategic vulnerability of the Malacca Strait (He Jian and Liu Lei, 2015). Li Anmin and Zhao Fulin (2017) identify the Northern West Passage (NWP) and the North East Passage and they discuss the Central Arctic Passage, that stretches from the Bering Strait directly to the Norwegian or Greenlandic Seas, as the shortest way between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic.

Xiao Yang (2015) underlines the commercial opportunities in the framework of Sino-Canada cooperation and looks at the Arctic route as a new channel for international trade. The value of the NWP relies on its suitability for container shipping, even though it is not the shortest way. The opening of the Arctic route will change China's reliance on energy imports from unstable ports around the world and alleviate the security dilemma linked to the Malacca Strait.

The development of the Arctic shipping lanes makes the Arctic a geo-economic frontier for China's interest related to the expansion of foreign trade, facilitating East Coast regional economic development and diversifying ocean transportation routes. Due to its location, the Central Passage will be even more important for China (Lu Junyuan, 2014). Chen Kunfeng et al. (2018) highlight how the control of shipping lanes is a matter of high economic value and highlight the advantage of crossing through international waters in the Central Arctic passage rather than through the NSR, where Russia requires foreign vessels to comply with Russian domestic law.

The Arctic shipping lane represents a key point for Russian development strategy. Despite limitations related to jurisdictions, safety, lack of infrastructure and the harsh environment, the Arctic shipping lane represents an excellent opportunity for China in terms of expanding maritime trade and helping in financing needed infrastructure (Lili Fan, 2015) and for increasing polar tourism (Xiao Yang, 2014).

Russia's interest in opening the NSR is a matter of national strategy, and it collides with China's interest in offering mutual support in Arctic scientific research and opening operations along the NSR (Wang Lijiu and Xu Xiaotian, 2019). The shrinking of the ice cap offers Russia economic-related advantages: development of the NSR; the shift of the Eurasian trade; increasing Russian population benefiting from the sea, and the ease of the harsh climate that so far has impeded the exploitation of natural resources (Wang Qian, 2018). China is envisioned as the leading partner for Russia in the Arctic for the possibility to develop the blue economy by linking the Polar Silk Road with the NSR to reconfigure the Eurasian transport pattern (Zhao Long, 2018). China's increased attention on its maritime strategy focuses on developing blue economic corridors and the one through the Arctic matches with Russia's willingness to develop the NSR (Jiang Xumin and Chen Jian, 2019).

Li Jianfu (2019: 97) shares some scepticism about the Arctic being fully navigable because of the extreme weather conditions, polar nights and lacking infrastructure. However, cooperation is emphasised over confrontation for facilitating the "gold rush" 但开发北极资源的 "淘金热" 则

重点强调合作而不是对抗与竞争 (Dan kaifa beiji ziyuan de "taojin re" ze zhnogdian qiangdiao hezuo er bu shi duikang yu jingzhen).

Xia Liping and Xie Xie (2018) highlight how future commercial opportunities in the CAO will be incorporated into the Polar Silk Road and require China to develop large ice-class fishery vessels to conduct exploratory fisheries and cooperate with other countries to collect scientific data.

3. 6 Environmental Dimension

Themes and mentions

Themes	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
Space/Need for Cooperation	3	2	3	1	2	1	2	
Global range of Arctic environmental changes	1	1	2	1	1			1
Scientific research	2	1	1	1	1		1	

Source: Author

Zhao Long (2018) stresses how the natural ecosystem in the Arctic is closely linked to the function of China's and to the security of agricultural production. Li Anmin and Zhao Fulin (2017) state that China should study the role of the Arctic region in global climate since the Arctic is an important region for the exchange of atmospheric and oceanic material energy and an amplifier of global climate change. Lu Junyuan (2014) notices how the natural and social environment in the Arctic regime is undergoing profound changes. He individualizes three main strategic implications for China: the development of Arctic sea routes will change the world of oceanic transportation providing China with new economic opportunities for foreign trade and regional development; new economic opportunities will come also from exploitation of natural resources; the Arctic becoming a geostrategic region. Wang Meili and Wu Junsong (2019) agree in considering the role of the Arctic region in influencing the global climate, marine safety and marine biodiversity. Foreseeing competition in fishing and its potential damage to the marine ecological environment and global biodiversity, the authors value the interdependence of development and management from the natural perspective, a reason why all countries should pay attention to the environment protection of the CAO.

Narrowing down the discussion to the environment in the CAO, three main perspectives emerge: the urgency for China's improvement of scientific research, the need to be part of the CAO's management and governance system and how its management meets national interests.

Meng Linghao (2019) highlights China's less attention to Arctic scientific research compared to the Antarctic and values the joint research programme in the management of the CAO as a way to further grasp the status of ecological environment in the Arctic region. Gui Jing (2021) focuses on conservation and sustainable use of biological resources and biodiversity understood through

international legislation and specific management tools. He encourages China to give a full play of scientific research as the establishment of marine protected areas and the process of the agreement itself is strongly based on the best scientific knowledge.

Many other scholars deepen the discussion about the existing link between scientific knowledge and participation in management and governance of the CAO. Bai Jiayu and Zhuang Li (2017) analyse the shared governance of the high sea fisheries when CAO Agreement was under negotiation and underline how during the formation stage of management tools, China needed to increase efforts and expand the scope of scientific research on the Arctic Ocean environment, improving existing model of scientific enquiries. Xu Hong (2017) stresses how China is involved in global climate mechanisms such as environmental protection conventions and it shares the principle of “scientific conservation and rational utilization” of CAO fishery resources. He then encourages multi-stakeholder participation in the Arctic cooperation and pushes China to actively participate in fields of environmental protection. Li Zhenfu (2021) agrees on the potential damage that Arctic warming will bring to global ecological security and only by incorporating non-Arctic states into Arctic governance mechanisms can lead to effective solutions. Some authors underline how the management of the CAO represents a direct matter of national interest. Tang Yao (2020) calls for China’s close attention to the management of CAO as a matter of national interests. Much of the discussion looks at Arctic shipping routes. Xia Liping and Xie Xie (2018) suggest that China should participate in the rule-making of the Arctic regional cooperation mechanism to safeguard its national interests which include the realization of the Polar Silk Road and oil and gas exploitation. According to them, China should comply with conventions for ships sailing in the Arctic waters and play an active role in shaping environmental protection in the governance and development of Arctic hydrocarbon resources through soft law. Jian He and Lei Liu (2015) envision the scenario of the Arctic Ocean becoming a busy waterway that will cause environmental degradation. While they value the role that IMO plays in international maritime safety and in marine environmental protection, they conclude that China needs to mobilize military and logistic support to adapt the natural environment of the Arctic Ocean to make full use of the NSR.

Some authors speak about the environmental dimension in terms of the opportunity that the blue economic corridors give to cooperation in marine protection. While Zhao Long (2018) values marine cooperation, Jiang Xiumin and Chen Jian (2019) label the environmental dimension under the development of the blue economic corridor as a “strategic value”. Wu Junsong (2020) perceives environmental protection under the realm of interdependent issues rather than domestic or international issues which call for every country to be responsible for maintaining protection of marine environment and how China can actively promote environmental protection through the implementation of the Arctic blue economic corridor. Lu Hao (2019), who focuses on Japan’s Arctic strategy, also looks at the environment of the Arctic Ocean as a strategic value for its enormous potential in terms of resources and energy.

Some authors focus on the environmental protection of other Arctic states’ strategies. Wang Lijiu and Xu Xiaotan (2019) highlight Russia's active participation in the AC in the adoption of important cooperation documents (e.g. the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement in 2011). The authors identify the role that Russia has had in providing fruitful results in the field of climate change, resource investigation and exploitation and the potential for scientific cooperation with China in the Arctic and Antarctic. Li Jianfu (2019) stresses how the Arctic legal framework provides

plenty of room for cooperation in the protection of marine environment and underlines how Russia agreed to solve international issues and maintain close cooperation with Western countries also after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2014. From a different perspective, Lu Junyuan (2015) considers environmental requirements along with the world energy market, technical expertise and risks, one of the constraints that the development of oil and gas has to face. Xiao Yang (2015) highlights how environmental protection is highly addressed in the Canadian Arctic strategy, especially in the light of the shipping lanes' development and its potential to environmental degradation. Canada has promoted environmental cooperation with neighbors and considers the AC the main permanent and multi-disciplinary body where they develop environmental protection strategies. According to the author, obtaining Canada's support will enable China to have its voice heard in the AC and increase the chance to give a full play in its economic, scientific and technological sectors as both countries share common interests in scientific research and marine environmental management. The AC is also perceived by Pan Min and Xu Lilin (2016) to be the platform to further develop China and US cooperation on environmental protection.

Ma Yingjie and Ji Lei (2021) offer a deep analysis of China's environmental rights in the Arctic. The authors share the opinion of Arctic marine environment being a matter of global security and agree about Arctic environmental issues to be addressed jointly, both inside and outside the region as China is also vulnerable to the Arctic ecosystem. However, they underline how obligatory and non-obligatory provisions related to the marine environment do not provide extra-territorial countries, such as China, with interest and rights in relation to the environmental condition of the Arctic Ocean, but only with the legal basis for international organizations and extra-territorial countries to urge Arctic Ocean coastal countries to fulfil their obligations to the disclosure of the marine environment. The authors identify some obstacles that affect the realization of China's environmental rights in the Arctic Ocean: the insufficient theoretical research on Arctic environmental rights and the lack of a strong support of national science and technology. Moreover the authors underline the lack of a favorable identity for participation in Arctic environmental affairs, a matter that was already discussed by Ningning Zhao and Wu Leizhao (2016). The authors then conclude that knowledge of environmental conditions depends on cooperation with Arctic countries. China should build a "Arctic environment community" and build consensus on the value of environmental governance.

4. Discussion

4.1 Participation in International Agreements & Arctic Governance

The discussion among Chinese academics mainly focuses on the two most recently signed international documents about the Central Arctic Ocean: the CAO Agreement and the BBNJ Treaty. In the debate, the intersection of science and governance clearly emerged. While the recent adoption of the BBNJ Treaty still impedes catching reactions and perspectives of its adoption, it is fair to say that the negotiation phases of the CAO Agreement often collide with Chinese scholars' critical stance about China's role in Arctic governance. Many scholars agree on the US leadership negotiating process and a strong willingness in its implementation, proven by the adoption of domestic measures oriented toward banning illegal fishing. While in the first years of negotiation emerged a heavy critique towards the leadership position of the Arctic five, the creation of the A5+5 mechanism was perceived by many scholars as an innovative paradigm and an example of a shared governance system that might enhance China's position. What is important to note is that

the CAO Agreement was not negotiated under the auspices of the AC, as it was for the adoption of the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic in 2011, for the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic in 2013 and for the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation in 2017. Some can argue that it shows a weakening position of the AC as the main platform for discussion related to the Arctic environment. However, the creation of an alternative channel of discussion reinforces the idea of a global Arctic and it confirms the cooperative approach employed by Arctic states which is not anchored to the exclusivity concept, but it values the position and the interest of non-Arctic states. The role of the AC is widely discussed among Chinese academics. While UNCLOS's stewardship safeguards rights in the Arctic region, opinions on the AC, widely recognized as the leading international platform to discuss Arctic issues, are only sometimes aligned. The hardest critics are related to the observer status that would not give China sufficient space to have a decisive role, not even in the future. In order to enhance such a position, academics agree on the necessity for China to strengthen its scientific research capability and participation in the framework of international agreements or in the AC working groups.

4.2 Geopolitical Dimension

Chinese domestic discourse takes a more militarised and securitised approach which accepts geopolitical and geoeconomic competition due to failed governance (Parsons, 2022). My analysis shows that security and military concerns are oriented towards cooperative diplomacy to stabilize the political and relational situation. Domestically, geopolitics and security are primarily interpreted through the traditional lens, prioritizing military deployments and capabilities as regulatory elements of states' relations. Militarisation and deterrence are framed as stabilizing tools, and military deployments are justified as necessary for civil purposes in harsh conditions. Room for shifting the security concept from the military to the environmental dimension is mainly proposed as advice to the political class to improve China's position in the Arctic governance and sustain China's self-definition as a near-Arctic state. By framing China's Arctic interest in relation to the geo-security dimension helps in expanding the security concept from military to environment, energy and economics, clarifying also existing differences between China's engagement in the Arctic and the South China Sea, lessening the threat perception.

Discussion on submission for the continental shelf extension emerges as a critical issue. While authors agree on its geopolitical relevance and the impact that many submissions may have on the work of the CLCS, academics' recommendations are oriented to enhance China's position about legit rights, act following international law, and avoid sovereignty-type disputes. Among Arctic stakeholders, Russia emerges as a key player. Here the CAO plays a double role: on one side, it influences Russia's maritime sea power; on the other, it provides opportunities for opening commercial exchanges mainly between China and Russia. Chinese academics deeply analyzed how the NSR is a vital issue for Russian national strategy. However, while older articles show greater attention to security issues as it might pose challenges for China's national security, most recent articles devote attention to economic opportunities that cooperation along the NSR might bring for Russia and China's East Coast regional development. The trend of economic value the NSR development might signify for China emerges in the economic opportunities category, and it is accompanied by a gradual assimilation to the Polar Silk Road project and a decreasing attention to the North West Passage and the Central Arctic Route. This finds its explanation in the contextual

difficulty in navigating the waters of the CAO and in the alignment of Sino-Russian interests in developing the NSR. It also comes from a more explicit China's strategy for the Arctic, which, besides the release of the official policy in 2018, has been strengthened by the strategic agreement Russia and China signed in February 2022, in which both sides agreed on intensifying practical cooperation for the sustainable development of the Arctic and on the development and use of the Arctic routes (Official Internet Resources of President of Russia, 2022).

4.3 Endorsement of Chinese Leadership Concepts & Economic Opportunities

Two main concepts of Xi Jinping's era emerged in the discussion among Chinese academics: the community of shared destiny 人类命运共同体 (*renlei mingyun gonggongti*) and the win-win solution. What Parsons (2022: 13) defines as the Political Convolution (“The country seeks to destabilize governance mechanisms enough to place itself within the realm of relevant actors[...] creating new form of institutional design”) is partly echoed by the endorsement of the concept of community of shared destiny which, on one side advocates for global governance mechanisms addressing universal challenges, and on the other, proposes China as the “initiator” or as the thruster of the economic benefits. The proposition of the community of a shared future is simultaneously developed under the governance and the economic sphere. The global perception of the Arctic pushes scholars to question the leadership position of Arctic states and to strongly advocate for alternative co-governance mechanisms which involve a broader number of stakeholders. The A5+5 mechanism under the CAO Agreement represents a replicable example of cooperation between Arctic coastal and non-Arctic states. As for the geopolitical dimension and militarisation, the endorsement of the community with a shared future looks at enhancing cooperative attitudes with a stabilizing role, which does not necessarily call for destabilizing governance mechanisms, but increases China's space to manoeuvre through economic partnerships. The concept of a win-win solution has a double role of stabilizing the political environment and enhancing economic ties. The economic-shared benefits are based on the advantages that climate change-induced phenomena may generate in the region. Namely, the possibility to develop the Arctic blue economic corridor because of the gradual melting of the Arctic ice cap. The justification for creating such a project lies in the example provided by the Belt and Road Initiative as a China-led project aimed at creating standards, shared and mutual benefits and win-win situations. Most of the debate is based on the status of the CAO in international law as a global common, which gives equal rights to any country and impedes any sovereignty claim.

4.4 Environmental Dimension

The environmental dimension occupies a relevant portion of the discussion in Chinese domestic discourse. One of the most discussed points is related to the repercussions that climate change in the Arctic has on a global-scale which induce all countries, including China, to advocate an improved role in the development and management of the CAO. However, how Ma Yingjie and Ji Lei (2021) state, obligatory and non-obligatory provisions related to the marine environment do not provide extra-territorial countries with interest and rights in relation to the environmental condition of the Arctic Ocean, but only with the legal basis to urge Arctic Ocean coastal countries to fulfil their obligations to the disclosure of the marine environment. Most of the debate among Chinese academics addresses the environmental dimension of the CAO as a strategic value and it is often linked to national interest that China could obtain by participating in its governance and management. Whether this pattern captures the existing link between scientific knowledge,

participation to governance, and national interest, this leading perspective can be identified as an area of pertinence in the articles analysed, which are more related to politics and governance. There is not a lot of discussion around the value and the necessity to endorse the precautionary approach, which is the core concept adopted in the CAO Agreement and in the BBNJ Treaty, nor is there a lot of attention on how degradation of the natural environment can affect Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic. Looking at areas to be improved, academics agree on enhancing China's scientific research and the necessity to establish a clearer environmental-related identity which might facilitate China's position in discussing marine and Arctic natural environments. The first issue has been already addressed in the last Chinese Communist Party Congress Report which includes an entire section dedicated to science and technology (科技 – keji). In the Report, they are both labeled as a “primary productive force” for China's transformation into a “modern socialist country” (Xi, 2022). It is also stated that China: “will increase investment in science and technology through diverse channels[...] We will expand science and technology exchanges and cooperation with other countries, cultivate an internationalized environment for research, and create an open and globally-competitive innovation ecosystem” (Xi, 2022). With regards to identity, perhaps being signatory parties of international treaties might not be sufficient. An active role within the mechanisms and management tools of the BBNJ Treaty, such as management of marine genetic resources, area-based management tools and environmental impact assessments provides a good opportunity for China to act in that way.

Conclusion

Chinese academic debate about the CAO offers a holistic picture of China's stance in the Arctic. The overlaps and connections between themes and categories discussed show how it nicely captures the complexities of China's engagement that range from governance, security, environment, diplomatic and economic to scientific means.

Cooperation over confrontation is a mantra that emerges from the debate. While acknowledging opportunities in terms of commercial exchanges and energy supplies (especially with Russia) and their geopolitical relevance for lessening dependence on unstable channels, the "gold rush" and the "Arctic race" narrative seems not to be as present as in the first 2000's Western literature.

Critiques of China's official policy are not absent. However, the debate shows a distinct alignment with Chinese leadership thinking and policies. Many academics strongly endorse Xi Jinping's philosophical concept of a community with a shared destiny and the win-win strategy. If the first one is oriented to justifying the Arctic region as a global space, the latter one opens the field for economic ties which, in the last years, have resulted in bilateral agreements with Arctic states. However, as Pezard et al. (2022) and Stünkel (2022) have highlighted, the threatening rhetoric about a profound Chinese penetration in the Arctic economy does not really match the reality. Framing security under the traditional lens of power politics and military deployments on the ground and looking at it as a stabilising tool to endorse cooperative behaviour, shows how the debate privileges investigation of how to enhance China's role in Arctic governance rather than focusing on environmental-related threats. This aspect clashes with China's advocacy for enhancing global governance based on the universal approach to transnational effects of climate change and induces reflections in light of the recent signing of the BBNJ Treaty. This is also amplified by the repeated perception of the environmental dimension as a strategic value, along with the limited

attention to the core principle of the precautionary approach and to the effect of climate change on Arctic Indigenous peoples.

While critiques of the Arctic governance range from China's limited space when negotiating relevant international agreements to the weak position as an observer state in the AC, scientific knowledge, scientific cooperation and specific expertise are often valued as the key to improving China's stance in the Arctic governance.

Suggestions and advice often appearing in the final section of the articles analysed suggest how Chinese academics might shape a bottom-up process of China's Arctic policy-making. As an enhanced global governance instrument in an area of international interest, the BBNJ Treaty might require China to keep acting in line with international law and have a more active role and propositional attitude, especially in scientific research. Due to the interconnection between scientific knowledge and China's stance in Arctic governance, I strongly encourage research investigating the role of Chinese scientists engaged in international scientific agreements and joint projects, as well as Chinese academics' influence on the decision-making process. Further research is also encouraged as the recent wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East have not only compromised the realization of ongoing projects, but have also jeopardized the cooperative framework established in the last two decades.

Notes

1. One article is in both the disciplines.
2. The mechanism includes: the Arctic five coastal states with China, Japan, South Korea, the EU and Iceland.
3. The dispute on Hans Island's sovereignty has been recently solved with an agreement between Canada, Denmark and Greenland in 2022.
4. The Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative proposed blue economic corridors, consisting of three parts, including channels: (1) connecting China-Pakistan, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, and then continuing to the Mediterranean Sea and into the Atlantic and Africa; (2) linking China, the South Pacific and then Australia; (3) starting from China to the north-west of Russia's northern coast, and then to the Nordic region and parts of Europe through the Arctic Ocean (Song and Fabinyi, 2022).
5. The North East Passage, the North West Passage and the Transpolar Route.

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Appendix 1

Category	Category	Category
Participation to International Agreements	Geopolitical Dimension	Endorsement of Chinese leadership Concepts



Themes	Themes	Themes
US Leading role in the negotiating international. Agreements	Militarization	Community of a shared future
China needs to have a more active role and strengthen Scientific research	Geopolitical relevance of Continental Shelf	Win-Win solutions
A5+5 mechanism as a good example of shared governance	Russia's maritime power	Relation with BRI
	Comparative discourse to the South China Sea	Shared Maritime destiny



Meaning Units	Meaning Units	Meaning Units
CAO Agreement, BBNJ Agreement, negotiation process.	regional security, near-arctic state status, threat, militarization, South China Sea, remilitarization, national interest, Sea Power, Maritime strategy, deterrence, nuclear deployments, claim, sovereignty, claim on extension of continental shelf.	Community of destiny, Shared future of mankind, interest of mankind, OBOR, win-win strategy, Polar Silk Road, BRI.

Appendix 2

Category	Category	Category
Arctic Governance	Economic Opportunities	Environmental dimension



Themes	Themes	Themes
Asian Cluster	Development of the Polar Silk Road - NSR	Space/Need for cooperation
Arctic governance ensures China's	Navigate Central Arctic Passage	Global range of Arctic environmental changes
Fragmentation - Inadequate governance	Utilization of the NWP	Scientific Research



Meaning Units	Meaning Units	Meaning Units
Non-Arctic states involvement in Arctic governance, Asian countries, fragmented governance, Arctic policies of Asian countries, Asian Cluster, A5+5 Mechanism, Ilulissat Declaration, Oslo Declaration, EEZ, Continental Shelf, CLCS, MPAs, bilateral negotiations, CAO Agreement, US leadership, leader status of A5, the exclusivity of A5, Fish Stocks Agreement, Code of Conduct of Responsible Fisheries.	Blue economic corridors, Arctic resources, gold rush, blue economy, exploitation, development, Polar Silk Road, Yamal LNG, fisheries.	Arctic Council, BBNJ Agreement, CAO Agreement, International Maritime Organization, global warming, changing climate, global environmental security, domestic environmental legislation, international environmental legislation.