

Revisiting the Arctic Region's Cooperative Network: The Role of China

Maria Lagutina, Yana Leksyutina, and Alexander Sergunin

The Arctic governance system, which has been relatively settled over the past decades based on a fragile balance of interests and obligations of the Arctic Council member states, is now undergoing a rigorous endurance test. The short-term hang-up of the multilateral cooperation regime due to the de-facto freezing of Russia's activities in the Arctic Council is being overlaid by long-term structural shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the macroregion. There is a growing contradiction between the responsibility of the Arctic states for the environmental situation and the sustainable development of national Arctic territories and the search of non-Arctic countries, primarily China, for bolstering their interests in the Far North in terms of intensifying their research and economic activities in the Arctic. The new normal economic and political reality requires a revision of the rigid Arctic region's cooperative network through engaging non-Arctic stakeholders in joint searching for niches for collaboration in the already established relations of the Arctic states and sectors of the Arctic economy. Attempting to contribute to the convergence of positions of the two sides, the chapter summarizes China's fundamental interests in the development of international cooperation in the Arctic, analyzes China's current research, economic, and infrastructural projects in the High North, and outlines niches for China's involvement in the advancement of the Arctic agenda. Potential areas of tensions and cooperation in China's bilateral relations with the key Arctic players are identified.

Introduction

The Arctic region is playing an increasingly significant role in international affairs due to its vast reserves of natural resources, the shift of global energy production towards the North, its transport and logistics potential, the vulnerability of its ecosystems to climate change, and its importance in the global agenda for sustainable development. The geopolitical priorities of individual Arctic nations are shifting towards enhancing their economic presence in the area, while non-Arctic nations are seeking to increase their role in governance, regulation, and development in the Arctic. Some member countries of the Arctic Council either openly express their dissatisfaction or have concerns about the increasing economic presence of non-Arctic states in the region.

Such heterogeneous factors increase the uncertainty of interaction with the countries in the region for China. Due to the increasing importance of the Arctic in world politics, China recognizes its role as a significant contributor to the development of the region (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2018). China's activities in the Arctic cover all key aspects, including climate

Maria Lagutina Ph.D., is a Professor at Saint Petersburg State University, Russia.

Yana Leksyutina, Ph.D., is a Professor at Saint Petersburg State University, Russia.

Alexander Sergunin, Ph.D., is a Professor at Saint Petersburg State University, Russia, and Nizhny Novgorod State University, Russia.

change, environmental protection, scientific research, construction of ice-class vessels, developing innovative equipment for high polar latitudes, shipping, and resource exploration.

The growing importance of the Arctic for China is evident from the increasing number of scientific publications on this issue. In general, international research on China tends to focus on macro-regional geopolitical aspects rather than the geographically-focused economic and geographical dimensions of cooperation in Arctic development. Many authors, including Peng and Wegge (2015), Leksyutina (2021), and Bai and Zhu (2023), discuss aspects of China's political engagement with Arctic countries in the context of the Arctic Council as an observer state, without emphasizing economic factors that influence the interests of collaborating countries. While other scholars (Melia et al., 2017), although they acknowledge that economic motivations underlie collaboration in the Arctic, focus on the institutional policies and management of the region by a group of countries rather than on the regional aspects of development and deployment of productive forces with China's involvement. In studying Chinese companies' involvement in the development of economic and transportation corridors in the Arctic, Bertelsen and Gallucci (2016) focus on the possibilities of navigating along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), without considering the integrated development of the territories adjacent to the NSR or other potential sea routes in the Arctic Ocean and North Atlantic waters.

The geopolitical concepts behind China's current Arctic policy are discussed by Lu (2010), Bennett (2015), and Bai and Zhu (2023), among others. However, the topic is still underdeveloped and is evolving. Chinese publications focus on China's preparedness and need to take advantage of the emerging opportunities in the Arctic, and to pursue its foreign policy more actively in that direction. At the same time, topics related to adapting cooperation mechanisms to changing conditions in the economic landscape of the Arctic are not well represented in contrast to research in political science (Wang, 2016; Lim, 2018), resource development, and transport routes (Meng et al., 2017; Deng, 2018; Zhu et al., 2018; Yang & Zhao, 2019). Additionally, ecology and climate change are important topics (Liu et al., 2016; Wang, 2023). In terms of politics, Chinese scholars focus mainly on the multilateral aspect of China's engagement with the Arctic Council (Bai and Zhu, 2023), where the realization of China's interests is often hindered by the unified stance of the member states. Such a focus underscores the relevance of studying bilateral interactions between China and Arctic states.

Despite the lack of comprehensive research on China's involvement in international cooperation in the Arctic, its interest in the region is growing and has become an integral part of its strategic discourse. China's current Arctic policy aligns with its goal of becoming a major maritime power, as outlined at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012. At the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017, President Xi Jinping presented a multi-dimensional diplomatic approach to the development of the country, which corresponds to China's geopolitical and economic goals in the Arctic region.

Given the growing significance of the Far North for Beijing, this study summarizes China's fundamental interests in the development of international cooperation in the Arctic, analyzes China's current activities in the region, and outlines niches for China's involvement in the advancement of the Arctic agenda.

The Road to the Arctic

In the international arena, China first expressed its interest in addressing Arctic issues in 1925, when it joined the Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920. It granted all participating countries the right to conduct economic and scientific research on the archipelago and its waters. According to the Treaty, China has equal rights to fishing, navigation, and hunting in the waters of the Spitsbergen (Svalbard) archipelago. It also has the right to conduct any type of activity on the archipelago, including commercial and industrial activities. At the same time, due to China's geographical remoteness from the Arctic, it did not actively participate in the Arctic agenda. Thus, China's first expedition to the North Pole only took place in 1951. In 1964, China established the State Oceanic Administration, one of whose tasks was to organize expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic. However, as suggested by Xu (2016) and Karandasheva (2019), before the launch of the opening up of economic policy in the 1980s, this task had not been fully implemented due to the underdevelopment of capabilities of Chinese research institutions and lack of expertise in polar issues.

Systematic studies of Arctic ecology and environment started in 1982, when China signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In 1981, China established the National Antarctic Research Committee, the first scientific research institute dedicated to coordinate polar operations and to be responsible for scientific research and logistics in polar regions (Zou, 1993). This was followed by the establishment of the Polar Research Institute of China in 1989. The institute's work is dedicated to preparing polar expeditions, as well as managing scientific laboratories, Chinese Polar Science Database, polar information network, National Polar Archives of China, as well as publishing specialized journals.

Since the late 1990s, China has been financing a program of scientific research in the Arctic region. In 1996, it became a member of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), which led to the involvement of Chinese scientists in a variety of projects under the Arctic's Role in Global Change Program.

Significant efforts have been made to create a fleet of vessels capable of operating in polar conditions and to develop techniques for exploring and developing marine resources and habitats. In 1994, the Xue Long icebreaker was introduced into the Chinese fleet, and in 2012, it sailed along the NSR from Qingdao, China, to Iceland in just 90 days. The Xue Long then returned through the Suez Canal and Indian Ocean to Shanghai. In 2019, a second icebreaker, the Xue Long 2, which was designed by the Finnish engineering company Aker Arctic but was built by and launched from the Chinese Jiangnan Shipyard (Shanghai).

In order to study the Arctic region and the northern trade routes in more detail, China established the Yellow River Station in the Spitsbergen Archipelago (Svalbard) in 2004.

One of the notable elements of China's maritime policy is the goal of building China into a "maritime great power" (Sheng, 2024). It was declared for the first time at the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. As a result, various projects and programs were launched to develop new sea routes and waterways, including the Arctic Ocean. Somewhat later, the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration was established as part of the government structure, responsible for implementing various programs in polar regions. In 2009, China applied for

observer status with the Arctic Council, and its admission as a permanent observer in 2013 was confirmed at the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Kiruna, Sweden.

In 2018, the State Council of the People's Republic of China (2018) published the China's Arctic Policy (The White Paper). This document outlines the principles of China's approach to the Arctic and its plans for implementing its policy in the region. The policy emphasizes the importance of Chinese capital, technology, and knowledge in expanding sea routes and promoting social and economic development in the Arctic region. China is also focusing on cooperation with Arctic countries to ensure environmental management and the development of renewable energy. The country is investing in research on the ecological development of biological and mineral resources, as well as management of Arctic ecosystems. China's Arctic strategy outlines a wide range of research areas that the country prioritizes in the Arctic, including geology, geography, hydrology, meteorology, biology, ecology, geophysics, marine chemistry, and the study of sea ice. It emphasizes that China respects the sovereignty of the Arctic countries over mineral resources in their territories. It also notes that China, as one of the largest trading and energy-consuming countries, can be significantly impacted by the exploration and development of Arctic energy resources. However, China is also interested in cooperating with these countries to develop environmentally friendly energy sources such as geothermal and wind power.

According to the White Paper, China's priorities in the Arctic include participation in international governance based on the principles of the UN Charter and the UNCLOS. China also supports the promotion of peace and stability in the region, as well as respect for the boundaries of international waters and their common heritage. China's stance on Arctic affairs is based on its interpretation of the UNCLOS, which it sees as the fundamental international document governing navigation issues in legal regime of the Arctic. Under this interpretation, China has no right to develop resources on the Arctic continental shelf. Instead, China emphasizes the importance of scientific research and exploration in the region as a means to strengthen its position.

In 1999, China organized its first scientific expedition to the Arctic to study climate change in the region and its impact on China. Since then, Chinese researchers have carried out several expeditions to various parts of the Arctic Ocean. Investigations focused on studying climate change in the Arctic and its impact on climate change in China, oceanography, sea ice, observations of atmospheric, marine and oceanic processes associated with extensive melting of sea ice, “water-ice-steam” transformations of marine systems and accelerated change of marine environment, marine hydrology, meteorology, chemistry, biology, ocean acidification, plastic waste, formation of rocks and magma and the geomorphic features. In 2023, the 13th Chinese Arctic Expedition reached the North Pole for the first time aboard the Xue Long 2, China's first domestically built scientific icebreaker. The expedition studied volcanic activity in the area of the Gakkel Ridge, which affects the formation of ice in the Arctic and, in turn, global climate change (CGTN, 2023).

To sum up, by now China has not only formulated its Arctic strategy, but also supported it with its practical actions in the field of economics, transport infrastructure and Arctic research.

Formats of Collaboration

China has a limited set of tools for direct action in the Arctic and does not have access to decision-making processes like those of the Arctic Council countries. Instead, China is pursuing its goals

and interests through multilateral and bilateral agreements, as well as by promoting the concept of the near Arctic state in order to establish its own identity in the region.

Multilateral

Arctic Council

Today, international cooperation in the Arctic is facilitated by regional international organizations. Among these, the intergovernmental Arctic Council is a region-forming establishment that has been shaping the Arctic agenda since 1996. China has been a permanent observer of the Arctic Council for over a decade. The key criteria for being an observer at the Arctic Council include recognition of the sovereignty and jurisdiction of Arctic states, Indigenous peoples rights, as well as international maritime law as the basis for responsible management of Arctic resources. Observers can participate directly in working groups and may be invited to special meetings when necessary, depending on the consensus of the eight member states. At meetings of the Arctic Council bodies, observers are allowed to make a written or oral presentation on an issue under discussion, as well as participate in the debate.

On the one hand, by joining the Arctic Council, China has gained access to participating in Arctic affairs and activities. On the other hand, the procedural conditions applied to observer members do not allow China to be an equal member of the Arctic Council along with the other Arctic countries. However, China's importance in today's global political and economic landscape makes it difficult to ignore its opinion. As a permanent observer, China has the opportunity to share its views with the member states of the Arctic Council and, thus, take an active part in shaping and implementing the regional agenda.

Given the current "frozen" state of the Arctic Council, non-Arctic countries, including China, could partially compensate for the lack of cooperation with Russia by their activity in the working groups of this forum. Moreover, at the end of February 2024, it was decided to resume cooperation in an online format within the framework of specific projects of the Council's working groups. China could use this opportunity to enhance its role in the Council's project activities and strengthen its reputation as a responsible Arctic player (especially in the field of Arctic science diplomacy).

However, one should not overestimate the importance of China's position in the Arctic Council or the importance of the Council itself for China. The Council was created by the Arctic countries and, above all, for the Arctic countries themselves. From their point of view, granting membership to non-Arctic countries would mean the loss of the Council's identity. Hypothetically, it is possible to imagine a higher status of China in some new organization that could be created by Russia in the event of its withdrawal from the Arctic Council and which would operate in parallel with or instead of this institution (if it were dissolved). Most member countries, especially the United States, are not interested in strengthening China's political influence in the Council and its economic influence in the Arctic in general. The Arctic Council is not a universal platform to solve all economic, social, and political issues in the region. Decisions made within the Council are advisory. Issues such as the development of natural resources, the construction of infrastructure, and the operation of shipping routes are outside the scope of the Council. Each Arctic country decides these issues independently (and/or in the frame of various international legal regimes and bodies, other than the Arctic Council). In this regard, while the permanent observer status in the

Arctic Council is important for China from a political perspective, many practical aspects of cooperation are governed by bilateral agreements with Arctic nations.

Arctic Circle

Recently, it seems that a new wave of cooperation in the Arctic is emerging. This cooperation should be characterized not as purely international, but rather transnational. Not only China, but other countries outside the traditional circle of the Arctic Council members, such as India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, are becoming increasingly involved in shaping the agenda for the Arctic. Additionally, various non-state actors, including non-governmental organizations and commercial companies, are also playing a significant role. Given this trend, there is a clear need to formalize their cooperation within more flexible and informal associations that can act as alternatives to the Arctic Council. These associations would allow for a more inclusive and balanced approach to Arctic affairs, taking into account the diverse interests and perspectives of all stakeholders. One example of a different format of interaction is the Arctic Circle, an Arctic cooperation forum that brings together, first and foremost, non-Arctic countries as well as all interested parties to discuss current Arctic issues. The Arctic Circle provides a platform for international dialogue and collaboration in the Arctic region, involving executive authorities, organizations, companies, universities, research institutions, environmental groups, Indigenous communities, and others interested in Arctic development. For China, the Arctic Circle serves as a platform to clarify its position on current Arctic matters, complementing its participation in the Arctic Council, in which permanent observers cannot fully participate in discussions.

At the same time, it should be remembered that the Arctic Circle was created on the initiative of two Arctic countries (the then President of Iceland and representatives of the state of Alaska), its main assemblies are held in October each year in Reykjavik (that is, in the capital of the Arctic country), and it does not have any authority to make any decisions at all. This forum is a purely discussion platform, in terms of its status it can in no way be compared with the Arctic Council.

Other Multilateral Formats

China is directly involved in a number of international organizations, including the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO, the Scientific Committee on Oceanic Research, the Committee on Marine Meteorology, and the International Maritime Organization. As a member of these organizations, China has joined several conventions, such as the Convention on the Facilitation of Maritime Traffic, International Convention on Preparedness, Response, and Cooperation in Cases of Oil Pollution and the Polar Code which regulates Arctic shipping. In addition, China is also a member of other organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the North Pacific Marine Scientific Organization. China participates in the preparation of various UN agreements on the protection and control of large-scale interzonal migrations of fish shoals. This has been reflected in its negotiation processes with Russia, the United States, and Japan, among others, on the development and protection of fish resources in the Bering Sea, as well as the signing of the Convention on the Conservation and Management of Pollock Resources in the Central Bering Sea. In 2018, China joined a multilateral agreement which introduced a ban on commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean for the 16-year period.

The PRC pays great attention to its Arctic science diplomacy and, for this reason, actively participates in international scientific organizations such as International Arctic Science Committee, International Arctic Social Science Association, Association of Polar Early Career Scientists, etc.

The China-Nordic Research Center (CNARC), which was established in 2013, aims to provide a platform for academic cooperation with Nordic countries. The CNARC primarily focuses on three research themes: 1) Arctic climate change and its global and regional impacts; 2) Arctic natural resources, shipping and economic cooperation, and 3) Arctic policy-making and international legal regime (Nielsson, 2023).

While China has launched extensive cooperation and exchange programs in the maritime sector with dozens of countries around the world, the key partners for China in the Arctic are eight members of the Arctic Council. By prioritizing collaboration with the Arctic countries, China aims to promote sustainable development, conservation, and protection of marine resources, as well as to promote peace, stability, and cooperation in the region.

Bilateral

United States

Initially, the United States had a positive attitude towards China's proposal to join the Arctic Council as an observer, as China was seen as a reliable partner in the region (Karandasheva, 2019). According to Wishnick (2017), it was expected that the interaction in the Arctic Council format could become another platform to involve China in addressing climate change issues. However, the historically difficult relationship between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region has had a negative impact on Arctic cooperation between the two countries. As argued by Konyshov and Kobzeva (2017), the potential hostility between China and the United States has a destabilizing effect on international relations in the Arctic.

According to the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (2022), in order to ensure the security of the country and its allies, the United States will work to contain threats to its territory and those of its allies (six Arctic Council countries, excluding Russia). This will involve strengthening the capabilities needed to protect American interests in the Arctic and coordinating with allies and partners on common security approaches. The goal is to reduce the risks of unforeseen escalation and ensure the safety of American people and territory in the region. The document states that, along with “expansionist” Russia, China is aiming to strengthen its presence in the Arctic through increased economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activity. Over the last decade, China has significantly increased its investment, focusing on extracting critical minerals, expanding its scientific research, and using these resources to conduct dual-purpose research with applications in both exploration and military operations in the Arctic region. China has also expanded its icebreaker fleet and sent military vessels to the Arctic for the first time. As a result, in the upcoming years, the United States will strive to maintain its influence in the region and manage tensions arising from increasing strategic competition in the Arctic, which, according to the document, are fueled by China's “aggressive efforts” to establish a stronger foothold in the area (White House, 2022: 6). This doctrine provoked a fierce counter-reaction from both Russian and Chinese policy-making and expert communities (Konyshov & Sergunin, 2023).

According to the Strategy-2022, despite the challenges that arise in Arctic cooperation, promoting international cooperation and governance remain key priorities for the United States in the Arctic. The document states that the US is committed to supporting the institutions that facilitate cooperation in the Arctic, such as the Arctic Council. The Strategy-2022 underlines that it is crucial to ensure that these institutions have the resources and capacity to address the increasing levels of political tensions in the region and adapt to the changing circumstances. In light of the rising uncertainty, it is even more important to maintain and strengthen existing cooperation mechanisms, including at the level of states. However, by boycotting the Russian Arctic Council's chairmanship (2021-2023) the US has undermined rather than strengthened regional institutions. Given the tense relations between some Arctic and non-Arctic countries, some regional players are now paying more attention to contact with subnational actors. As Bowman and Xu (2020) note, China's desire to directly cooperate with the State of Alaska as tensions with the US federal government remain high, especially in the area of trade.

Canada

Canada-China relations in the Arctic are primarily driven by trade and economic interests (Karandasheva, 2019). Despite the challenging conditions for extracting certain resources, Canada has rich deposits of coal, gold, uranium ore, forests, and clean drinking water reserves. An important factor in developing cooperation is the experience of Chinese companies in neighboring Greenland, where the conditions and some of the natural resources are similar to those in Canada.

In the early 2010s, Chinese oil companies such as the China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec) and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) invested more than \$100 billion in Canada's energy sector. By 2022, at least 27 Canada's public companies have shareholders with ties to China. Chinese firms have been involved in 89 announced acquisitions and investments in Canadian metals and mining companies in the 2010s worth of \$14 billion. Many deals involved companies tied to the 31 critical minerals identified by Canada (Lorinc, 2022).

However, as noted by Peng and Wegge (2015), already by 2015, the growing presence of Chinese capital in Canada began to raise concerns among businesses and the public due to the potential loss of control over natural resources in the long run. For example, in December 2020, the PRC mining company attempted to purchase a Canadian Arctic gold mine operated by TMAC Resources Inc. The agreement was blocked by the Canadian government over Arctic security concerns. The site of the mine is located 100 kilometers from a NORAD North Warning System radar station (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022).

According to many analysts (Dobson, 2017; Lajeunesse, 2018), Chinese initiatives in the Arctic should be welcomed, but should be approached with caution. The strategic orientation of Canadian Arctic policy is expected to shift towards a more careful approach towards Arctic Council observers and non-regional actors in the region. This shift is due to China's increasing interest in the Arctic and the need to ensure security in international relations (Viakhireva, 2019). Pressure on the Arctic NATO allies from the United States, which considers Russia and China to be serious threats to Western interests in the Far North, also plays a role in tightening Canada's position on cooperation with China in the Arctic.

There are also growing environmental concerns about Sino-Canadian energy cooperation in the Canadian society. According to some accounts, the logic of a Canada-China energy-environment

nexus is that Canada's energy relations with China should not be treated simply as trade to increase its market share beyond North America. Rather, the supply of Canadian oil and natural gas in the form of LNG should be linked to overall Chinese efforts in reducing the use of coal (Jiang, 2022: 28).

Denmark/Greenland

Chinese business circles are showing special interest in Greenland, the Arctic autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark. Chinese enterprises in Greenland are primarily involved in the extraction of minerals which are in growing demand in China, including uranium and rare earth metals. The biggest project was the exploration of Kvanefjeld site in a form of China-Greenland-Australia partnership. Sichuan Xinhai Mining has invested in a major international mining project on the Greenland iron ore site Isua. Other Chinese companies, such as Jiangxi Zhongrun Mining and Jiangxi Union Mining, were also involved in the project. Greenland also attracted investments of Sinosteel and China Communications Construction Company, as well as Inner Mongolia Baotou Steel Rare Earth. Chinese energy firms are interested in investing in the onshore oil and gas exploration projects. Greenland has significant potential as a transportation and logistics hub for the sea routes connecting the markets of Asia and North America (Yang, 2017). A number of researchers (Zeuthen & Raftopoulos, 2018; Chalenko, 2022; Chen, 2022) suggest that the rapidly growing mining industry in Greenland, fueled by Chinese investment, could contribute to the territory's increased economic development and growth. However, some countries, such as the United States and the European Union, have expressed concerns about Chinese companies' involvement in the development of rare earth minerals in Greenland (Olsvig, 2022; Christiansen, 2023). They fear that this could lead to China monopolizing all stages of the supply chain for rare earth elements, which are crucial raw materials for high-tech industries and strategic industries important for national security.

As a result of security and environmental concerns most of the above projects, including Kvanefjeld uranium and Isua iron ore projects were cancelled (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022).

Finland

Over the last two decades, relations between China and Finland were intensifying in various fields, including transport, bioenergy, tourism, information, and telecommunication (Koivurova et al., 2019). There were two investment projects related to the biorefinery and biofuel production in Kemijärvi (Boreal Biorex Ltd.) and Kemi (Kaidi company). In Lapland, Chinese investors were participating in two projects related to tourism and entertainment.

In 2018, the Finnish Meteorological Institute and China signed an agreement on the joint construction of an Arctic Space Center in Sodankylä in order to develop cooperation in the field of satellite imagery and data exchange related to the cryosphere. The parties agreed to jointly use information received from satellites for climate research, environmental monitoring, and navigation in Arctic waters. However, due to China's intention to place its own satellite station in Sodankylä, the cooperation was terminated by Finnish authorities in order to ensure national security. This decision was made to protect Finland's interests and ensure that no sensitive information would be shared with a country that may pose a potential threat.

There was a discussion about the possibility of China's participation in the construction of railways to connect Finland with seaports in the Arctic, such as Kirkenes in Norway. However, in 2019, a

joint Finnish-Norwegian working group concluded that the creation of an “Arctic railway corridor” would be commercially unprofitable in the foreseeable future, and this project was postponed indefinitely (Final Report of the Joint Working Group, 2019).

China also planned to join the Arctic Connect project initiated by Finland in 2015 to link Europe and Asia through a subsea fiber optic cable on the seabed along the NSR. However, this project was put on hold because of the growing geopolitical tensions between the West and Russia (Middleton & Rønning, 2022).

Iceland

One of the countries that China pays special attention in developing its Arctic diplomacy is Iceland, due to its geographical location, which makes it a promising transport hub for China-North America trade. In 2012, a number of agreements were signed between China and Iceland on container transportation, continental shelf development, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The China-Iceland free trade agreement came into force in 2014.

In 2011, a China-based businessman sought to purchase land in Iceland to develop a golf resort – this offer was ultimately rejected in part because of fears that an airfield or deep-sea port would be developed instead (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022).

Furthermore, the Chinese National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) became the first Chinese company to develop the Arctic oil and gas shelf projects in Dreki and Gammur, owning a 60% stake in a joint venture with Icelandic and Norwegian companies. However, the exploration of Dreki – the most promising site near Iceland’s coast – was cancelled when CNOOC decided that it too expensive and too risky. The exploration of Gammur, a relatively young sediment basin of about nine million years, has been put on hold pending environmental assessments. Whether CNOOC will be involved in exploring the site is not clear (Dams et al., 2020: 24).

China and Iceland are working together to develop geothermal energy and extract ferrosilicon, which is essential for the production of solar panels (Samploon, 2021).

In 2018, they opened the China-Iceland Arctic Observatory at Karhóll in northern Iceland, making it the second largest Chinese research base in the Arctic after the Yellow River in Norway. The station provides a variety of research facilities for studying the northern lights, monitoring climate indicators, and exploring glaciers. It also allows for oceanographic, geophysical, and biological research.

For Iceland, the attraction of Chinese investment is a way to diversify its economic and trade links. The country's own resources are rather fragile, primarily in the areas of fishing, tourism, and geothermal energy. Due to the scarcity of these resources, Iceland has embedded its activities in the context of EU policy, including the development and exploration of Arctic resources. In this regard, an alternative source of financial support could be viewed as a way for the Icelandic government to leverage its position with both the EU and the United States (Auerswald, 2019) in pursuit of its interests in the region. This could include the possibility of attracting Chinese investment, which could help to diversify the economy and create new opportunities for growth.

Norway

The Nordic country with which China is seeking to develop full-scale relations, and which in turn supports China’s activities in the Arctic, is Norway. It officially supported China's quest to become

a full observer of the Arctic Council. Therefore, the Arctic-focused relations between the two countries have a relatively long history. The starting point for China's success in the Arctic was the establishment of its own research station Yellow River in the Svalbard Archipelago in 2004. At that time, China, having already been actively involved in Antarctic research, had accumulated experience and resources to establish a presence in the Arctic as well. China initially considered the station as an opportunity for international scientific collaboration with other countries in the region. It was built and operated by Norwegian partners, and currently serves as the home base for a growing number of Chinese scientists. Through participation in projects on the archipelago, China has built up a cadre of Arctic specialists and has been able to exchange scientific knowledge and technology with other nations. Various scientific institutions are involved in the implementation of projects at the station, including the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Polar Research Institute of China, and Second and Third Institutes of Oceanography. The station serves as a scientific platform for conducting geophysical, meteorological, oceanographic, and biological studies that help understanding climate change in the Arctic and the characteristics of mineral extraction. Attention is also given to studying economic, legal, and international issues related to the use of Arctic shipping routes, natural gas transport, and modeling indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of China's Arctic development (Konyshov & Kobzeva, 2016).

In the 2000s, Chinese companies focused on energy and natural resources sectors. For China, these sectors became entry points to the Norwegian market, and actually determined the access of Chinese companies to other industries, such as information technology and retail, in the 2010s (Gåsemyr & Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017). However, the amount of investment is still relatively low compared to other Nordic countries and Russia, at about \$7 billion. China primarily invests in the energy sector (Sinochem, \$105 million; COSL Norwegian and CNOOC, \$2.5 billion; ChemChina, \$640 million). China Invest Corporation has acquired a 30% stake in Gaz de France Suez, gaining access to the development of an oil field in the Barents Sea.

China and Norway have been cooperating on offshore wind energy since 2010, with Norway holding advanced offshore wind energy technology and expertise. A Memorandum of Understanding on Sino-Norwegian cooperation in the wind power sector signed between Innovation Norway and the Chinese Wind Energy Association in 2019 further promoted bilateral cooperation in the wind energy industry, particularly in the offshore wind energy sector (Wang, 2023).

There are joint projects in transportation (Grand China Logistics and HNA, nearly \$380 million), chemical industry (China Bluestar and ChemChina, \$2.0 billion), information technologies (Golden Brick, Qihoo, and Beijing Kunlun, \$575 million), and retail (Reignwood, \$105 million).

Sweden

The main areas of cooperation between China and Sweden in the Arctic are education and research (Think Arctic, 2022). The KTH Royal Institute of Technology has agreements with leading Chinese universities and research centers, which aim to exchange students and share scientific expertise (Vargö, 2019). In 2016, the Institute of Remote Sensing and Digital Earth of the Chinese Academy of Sciences established a ground-based remote sensing station in Kiruna, the northernmost city of Sweden, which significantly improved satellite data transmission efficiency and access to remote sensing data (Holz et al., 2022). China is also investing in renewable energy development in Sweden, with the China General Nuclear Power Group owning stakes in six wind energy projects in Sweden,

including a 75% share in the Markbygden Ett project that will become Europe's largest onshore wind farm (Duxbury, 2021).

Russia

Bilateral cooperation between Russia and China has been developing rapidly. Due to the sanctions regime imposed on Russia, which intensified significantly after 2022, the country has shifted its Arctic policy towards the East, focusing on cooperation with China (Filippova, 2023). This shift was further reinforced by the suspension of cooperation with Russia by other Arctic states in the Arctic Council, which Russia chaired from 2021 to 2023. Russia's recent withdrawal from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council will only increase China's presence in Russia's Arctic agenda.

Since the mid-2010s, China has been investing heavily in LNG production projects in the Russian Yamal. Chinese companies own 29,9% in Novatek's Yamal LNG plant and 20% in its other Arctic LNG-2 plant. China has helped Russia create a fleet of ice-class tankers to transport LNG from Yamal to East Asia (Duran, 2020).

Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era (Xinhua, 2023), signed during President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in 2023, emphasizes the importance of preserving the Arctic as a region of peace, stability, and constructive cooperation. Russia and China advocate for the continued development of the Arctic region, emphasizing the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the region. Among the most significant areas of cooperation identified in the statement, President Putin highlighted the development of the NSR as a strategic priority. This includes China's commitment to work with Russia to develop the transit potential of the route, as well as Russia's willingness to establish a joint working group to promote the development of this important waterway. The development of the NSR holds significant importance for both China and Russia. For China, it represents an opportunity to diversify its trade and transportation routes, while for Russia, it is essential to modernize its infrastructure and increase cargo turnover along this route (Erokhin et al., 2022). The goal is to transform the NSR from a national transportation artery into an international multimodal transport corridor, attracting external investments and promoting economic growth in the region. At the same time, it is important for Moscow to introduce high ecological standards and reduce safety and environmental risks in the NSR water area, in other words, to follow the 'blue economy' model (Tianming et al., 2021). It should be noted that both countries are eager to apply this model to their marine economies and this area could become another venue for their bilateral cooperation.

Also in 2023, Russia and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding on strengthening law enforcement cooperation at sea between the Federal Security Service of Russia and the Maritime Police Department of China. For the first time, the Chinese delegation was able to participate as observers in the large-scale Arctic Patrol 2023 exercise in the Barents Sea. Most experts (Wanden, 2023; Borozna, 2024) agree that the continued boycott of cooperation with Russia by Arctic states will lead to closer cooperation with China, deepening Sino-Russian relations and increasing China's presence in the region.

Near-Arctic State or Stakeholder in Arctic Affairs?

China's efforts to develop its Arctic diplomacy, both in multilateral and bilateral formats, are driven by the country's overall strategic orientation to strengthen its foreign policy and increase the role

of one of the largest economies in the future system of international relations (Zuenko, 2024). This evolution of China's understanding of its role in global governance can be seen through the development of two key concepts put forward by China in its 2018 White paper: “near-Arctic state” and “important stakeholder in Arctic affairs”. These concepts, which describe China's position in the Arctic region, have been widely used in international scientific and public discourse since the publication of China's Arctic Policy in 2018.

However, the “near-Arctic principle” did not become an innovation of the White Paper 2018. In the early 2010s, an alternative approach was proposed to the traditional sectoral principle for territorial delimitation in the Arctic (which benefits mainly Canada and Russia). This approach can be applied not only to Arctic countries but also to so-called near-Arctic countries (Lei, 2021). According to a number of Chinese scholars, including Lu (2010), Liu (2012), and Ma (2019), among others, the criteria for determining a country's proximity to the Arctic region include geographical location (relative proximity to the Arctic Circle), transportation infrastructure (close and convenient maritime access to the Arctic Ocean), the impact of the Arctic on that country (its territory is subject to a direct and significant influence from the Arctic environment), and the connection between the country's economy and the Arctic economy (its economy and trade are closely tied to Arctic resources and waterways). Based on these criteria, near-Arctic states include not only China, but also its neighbors such as Japan and South Korea, as well as several European countries like the United Kingdom, Netherlands, and Germany. For example, Japan uses the term “Non-Arctic Coastal State” to justify its interests in the Arctic region.

According to Lei (2021), the near-Arctic principle was proposed in order to demonstrate respect for the historically established rights of Arctic countries and to condition the participation of new players in Arctic affairs, while increasing the openness and democratic nature of Arctic governance. The concept of a “near-Arctic state” suggests building a hierarchy, with the goal of getting closer to the “privileged” Arctic states and distancing oneself from non-Arctic countries that do not meet certain criteria (Lu, 2010). Some authors, such as Minenkov (2005) and Gong (2018), describe this approach to Arctic diplomacy as a desire to create a new collective identity that redefines China's and other near-Arctic nations' positions in the Arctic and contributes to a more open and equal international relations system in the region.

As a result, China has managed to achieve a fair degree of recognition of its near-Arctic status. Although China is not an Arctic country, it has certain legal rights and interests in the Arctic region, including fishing in waters beyond national jurisdiction (foreign countries can fish both in the territorial sea and exclusive economic zones upon permission of a coastal state) and conducting scientific research and environmental monitoring. This recognition is based on the principle that China should have access to these areas for legitimate purposes, such as scientific research and environmental monitoring (Lei, 2021). As mentioned above, Beijing also is a party to a number of international legal regimes, including the 1920 Spitsbergen Treaty, 1994 Convention on the Conservation and Management of Pollock Resources in the Central Bering Sea, 2018 agreement on commercial fishery ban in the Central Arctic Ocean, and the IMO Polar Code, which provide this country with some additional legitimacy in Arctic affairs.

However, due to its rather vague definition, the concept of a “near-Arctic country” has difficulties in establishing these standards. As a result, the concept is perceived ambiguously in international scientific and public discussions. In particular, Ruan (2016) notes that without a clear definition of

the “near-Arctic” status, it is difficult to determine the rights of certain countries to participate in Arctic affairs. Therefore, it is essential to standardize the definition of a near-Arctic state and establish unambiguous criteria for determining a country's Arctic adjacency. Currently, a geographical location beyond the Arctic Circle is used as a clear criterion to classify eight countries as Arctic nations. Due to the lack of a clear definition of such a belongingness to the Arctic, the term “near-Arctic state” simply means that China has a strong interest in the Arctic environment and other Arctic issues, but it is unable to provide sufficient support for its rights and interests in the region based on international law.

Due to the ambiguity of the term “near-Arctic state”, Chinese political and scientific discourse has recently shifted towards a more accurate and rational perception of China's role in the Arctic as an “important stakeholder in Arctic affairs”, the concept which was also used in the 2018 White paper (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2018). The concept of stakeholders has been adopted by political science from the sphere of corporate governance, where stakeholders include consumers, business owners, shareholders, and governments, who all play a role in managing economic, social, and political processes and can be affected by their developments (Ayuso et al., 2014). Being stakeholders, these actors can protect their rights in civil and international courts, giving the term “stakeholder” a certain legal meaning. According to several Chinese scholars (Wang, 2013; Sun, 2014; Li, 2020; Lei, 2021), this term has more legal certainty than the term “near-Arctic state” because it directly indicates that China has the legitimate right to be involved in Arctic affairs. In addition, the stakeholder principle provides a basis for multiple countries' participation in the Arctic agenda. Issues related to managing and developing the Arctic are of global significance (climate, ecology, biological resources, indigenous communities, transcontinental routes, and territorial development). Only by recognizing and respecting the concerns of all parties involved and working together common challenges can be addressed more effectively and shared development goals can be pursued.

As noted by Don (2017), the concept of an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs not only blurs the boundaries between Arctic and non-Arctic countries, but also levels the differences between state and non-state actors. This collective identity allows for the inclusion of international organizations, such as those with the participation of China, in the “stakeholder” group. This approach can lead to a broad international consensus on important issues on the Arctic agenda (Ruan, 2016). By implementing the stakeholder concept, China believes that it is in no way undermining the established governance structure in the Arctic. Its participation in Arctic governance is not interference in the internal affairs of Arctic countries, but rather a reflection of its concern for the Arctic as a global issue and its efforts to address these challenges. China always underlines that its involvement in the governance of the Arctic region is based on respect for the sovereignty of Arctic states, respect for the inalienable rights of Arctic Indigenous Peoples, and consideration for the interests of non-Arctic countries and the common interests of the international community. China tries to demonstrate that it supports research and understanding of the Arctic to establish an optimal regional governance system and a multilevel structure for Arctic cooperation that takes into account the interests of all parties involved.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that both concepts are based on China's assumption that the Arctic is the humankind's “common heritage” or “global commons” – the concepts which are not supported by the Arctic coastal states, including Beijing's “strategic partner” Russia.

Conclusion

In its evolution, China's Arctic diplomacy has gone through several stages, from formally expressing interest in exploring the region a century ago, to becoming an important stakeholder in the Arctic agenda, covering a wide range of political, environmental, economic, social, and cultural issues. China's official position is that it sees the sustainable development of the Arctic as linked to the common destiny of humanity, where all countries have the right to participate. A peaceful, secure, and sustainable Arctic is in the interests of both the Arctic region and its people, as well as the wider international community. Both Chinese diplomats and academic community stress that in the face of global challenges to sustainability, achieving global prosperity cannot be achieved at the expense of any country. Instead, it is necessary for the entire world to join forces to work together. China - through different formal and informal channels - signals that it is not a direct competitor of the Arctic nations, but rather an important stakeholder and collaborator in the protection of the environment and development of Arctic regions. Beijing demonstrates that it is prepared to share opportunities, address challenges, and work with Arctic nations, non-Arctic countries, and other stakeholders to promote cooperation, enhance exchanges, and achieve shared goals in areas such as climate change, research, environmental conservation, shipping, and sustainable growth.

China's modern Arctic policy includes various measures, such as the development of an Arctic discourse and identity, the articulation of its interests as an important stakeholder in the region, the aggregation of interested actors under the concept of near-Arctic countries, participation in various international legal regimes and the lobbying of its interests on multiple international platforms. Although there are some restrictions, such as China's role as an observer in the Arctic Council and opposition to expanding China's presence in the region by the United States, we have to admit that China is nonetheless becoming an integral part of the international system in the Arctic. China's involvement in the Arctic dialogue is creating a new political reality that is pushing regional players to work more closely together on both a bilateral and multilateral level. Hopefully, this could lead to the development of a more comprehensive and balanced approach to the management and conservation of the Arctic. In the current situation of global geopolitical turbulence, it is very important that not only China behaves in the Arctic in accordance with internationally accepted standards, but also that the Arctic states do not allow unfriendly actions against it and focus on Beijing's integration into the regional system of international relations, rather than on its exclusion or discrimination.

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