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Research Report

China's Arctic turn: Reasons, developments, perspectives

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SWP Comment

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China's Arctic Turn

Reasons, Developments, Perspectives

Michael Paul

Apart from several infrastructure projects which ultimately failed, and a surprise visit by the icebreaker *Xuelong* off the Greenlandic capital, Nuuk, the People's Republic of China has long maintained a cautious and reserved presence in the Arctic in the shadow of Russia and its fleet of icebreakers. But in July and August 2024, three icebreakers – *Xuelong 2*, *Ji Di* and *Zhong Shan Da Xue Ji Di* – made China's growing presence felt in the Arctic for the first time ever. Beijing is thus signalling more ambitious intentions, and the construction of a heavy icebreaker could enable China to establish a permanent presence in the Arctic Ocean. This development reached a peculiar climax in October 2024, when the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti ran the headline: "The Arctic is becoming Chinese." What are the reasons and implications of China's Arctic turn?

State and party leader Xi Jinping announced China's ambition to become a "major polar power" in 2014, following the People's Republic being granted observer status in the Arctic Council the year before. Xi explained that the goal of becoming a polar power was an important component of becoming a great maritime power. This ambition reflects the new self-confidence of the People's Republic and its global reach. China has diverse interests, including strategic interests in the Arctic and Antarctic. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Arctic Ocean is considered the third Silk Road corridor – after the land corridor through Central Asia and the maritime Indo-Pacific Sea route to the European Mediterranean.

As with other applicants, China's scientific engagement was one of the reasons

why the Arctic states supported its admission as an observer state in 2013. According to this argument, China wants to create an opportunity for cooperation through science and research. Its arrival in the Arctic appears to be a simple and inevitable consequence of the country's growing global interests. Others emphasise that China has been active in the Arctic for a long time, and that it was only the global community's growing interest in China and the Arctic that has brought this to light. According to that line of thinking, the country's interests have changed less than external perceptions have. In reality, for example, the current level of Chinese investments in the Arctic is not very remarkable. Iceland's former president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson (1996–2016) commented that, with the



exception of the Russian Arctic, where China is increasingly present, it is very difficult to find a single example of a major Chinese investment. One reason for this is that most Arctic states have rejected such projects, like the recent engagement of China's state-owned shipping giant COSCO in Kirkenes, which wants to become the European Singapore in an ice-free future. This makes Chinese-Russian cooperation in the Arctic all the more important, as it links an emerging world power with the largest Arctic player, which is increasingly falling into the role of junior partner, and thus into a position of dependency. In addition to long-term interests, one of the main factors for the increased activity and interest in the Arctic is Russia's weakness as a result of its war of aggression against Ukraine.

China is one of the few beneficiaries of the war. This is leading to Russia's diminished junior role, as Vladimir Putin's submissive behaviour during Xi's visit to Moscow in March 2023 revealed: In the pursuit of more power, Putin has weakened his country. In exchange for supporting the war, China can now acquire oil and gas more cheaply, gain better access to natural resources and acquire sensitive Russian military technology. It can also expect a friendlier Russian attitude to its ideas of Arctic governance as well as to its steadily growing presence in politically sensitive geographical areas, such as the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and the Northern Sea Route (NSR).

China's Arctic diplomacy

Beijing has visibly strengthened its diplomatic presence in northern countries since 2014; the People's Republic has the largest embassy in Reykjavik. The government's White Paper on the Arctic, in which China describes itself as a "Near Arctic State", emphasises the foundations of Arctic governance, such as the Arctic Council, the Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Polar Code. They serve as starting points for more far-reaching ambitions.

Beijing sees the Arctic as a geopolitically important area that will gain significance in the long term. As in the Pacific, Beijing can test its global ambitions and see whether new norms will be accepted there. As an observer country to the Arctic Council, China is "overwhelmingly the most active". Because the Arctic is not as regulated as the Antarctic, it provides a good testing ground. However, the approach to the Arctic (internationalisation) vs. the South China Sea (nationalisation) is being met with resistance from the Arctic states. Attempts to acquire land in Finland, seaports in Norway and Sweden, or airports in Greenland and associated infrastructure projects have also all failed. Although the level of Chinese direct investment in Russia is increasing, it remains at a low level in the non-Russian Arctic. However, Chinese investors close to state interests continue to try to buy land in the Arctic, most recently in June 2024 in Søre Fagerfjord, south of Longyearbyen on the Svalbard archipelago. Oslo prevented this due to security concerns. Many such unsuccessful ventures have been documented as "lively debates" continue in China about the benefits of such acquisitions. Military applications would also contradict the declared goal of "peaceful development".

The precarious balance between the Arctic states and an emerging superpower is also evident in science diplomacy. Whereas the Arctic states want to integrate and socialise the People's Republic without conflict through research cooperation, China is striving to expand its position as an independent player without raising concerns in the Arctic states. China has maintained a research station in Ny-Ålesund on Svalbard since 2004. In 2018, Iceland and China opened the joint research station China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) in Karhóll. There they operate the China-Iceland Arctic Observatory (CIAO). The proposal for a similar project in Greenland was rejected by Denmark for security reasons. Chinese investments in expensive research infrastructure have not only been welcomed in Iceland, but also establish a presence and build trust. China needs both in order to

gain influence. However, China's activities are now also being viewed more critically in Iceland, because China's scientific presence is not without intent. In terms of the strategy of civil-military fusion, it serves to further its military ambitions, for example in the form of oceanographic and hydroacoustic investigations, similar to those previously carried out in the South China Sea.

Sino-Russian cooperation

When Xi presented the Belt and Road Initiative in October 2013, this project had two eponymous aspects: A belt would encircle the Eurasian continent, and a (water) road would stretch from the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal to Europe. The additional polar route is intended to increase the national security of supply with fossil energy from the Russian Arctic, as almost 80 per cent of oil imports are transported via the Strait of Malacca. The sea route through the Arctic Ocean enables transit traffic without ships having to pass through this strait, which can be blocked by the United States in the event of a conflict. However, this also applies to the Bering Strait. It is therefore more of a diversification of geostrategic dependencies. In China's project, Russia acts primarily as a willing supplier of raw materials and is a recipient of valuable investments, for which it must meet high standards.

However, the income from Chinese energy imports is clearly not enough for the Kremlin. Russia is also using old tankers that are unsuitable for the Arctic to circumvent sanctions. Around 80 per cent of Russian crude oil exports are transported by Putin's "shadow fleet". After the ships have picked up oil or gas, their trail usually disappears, either by being reloaded at sea or transponders being switched off. The first accident occurred in July 2024, when the *Ceres I* collided with another tanker in the South China Sea, apparently due to an incorrect location.

China not only gains more access, but even partial control over Russia's NSR.

During the state visit to Beijing in March 2023, it was decided to create a joint umbrella organisation for shipping traffic in the NSR. The cooperation agreement in the NSR between the China Coast Guard and Russian border guards in Murmansk in April 2023 is based on this; the Murmansk Memorandum mentions joint efforts in the fight against terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling and illegal fishing. The first joint patrol in the NSR took place in October 2024. China's Coast Guard stated that this first operation had "effectively expanded the scope of the Coast Guard's maritime deployment, thoroughly tested the ships' ability to carry out missions in uncharted waters, and strongly supported active participation in international and regional maritime governance". If more and more Chinese ships are using the NSR, is it now an international waterway that is also open to other countries? Its opening raises many questions that are neither pleasant nor easy for Russia. Added to this is the opening of the Pacific Arctic to Chinese commercial activities in the home port of the Russian Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok, which acts as the Pacific gatekeeper of the NSR, like Murmansk and the Northern Fleet in the Arctic—North Atlantic area.

Arctic security policy

China's Arctic White Paper makes no mention of military security. However, as the Communist Party of China's army, the armed forces are an integral part of China's ambitions to become a "great polar power".

The ability of China to project its maritime power to the North American coast was demonstrated by five warships when they crossed US waters in the 12-mile zone off Alaska for the first time in September 2015 — the first "Freedom of Navigation" operation in Chinese history. In the same year, a naval task force visited Denmark, Finland and Sweden for the first time. Since 2021, Chinese warships have repeatedly cruised off the Alaskan coast — in September 2022, three warships operated along



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with five Russian ships almost 160 kilometres from Kiska, an Aleutian Island. Among them was the Type 055 *Nanchang* guided missile destroyer, which is armed with up to 112 cruise missiles or hypersonic anti-ship missiles. North America is no longer a sanctuary, and such an action is recognised as an attack possibility. US President Donald Trump's strange observation that "you don't even need binoculars – you look outside. You have China ships all over the place" is a product of those operations.

Particular attention is being paid to Chinese-Russian military cooperation. However, bilateral relations at the civilian and military levels are as close as they are contradictory. For the Chinese military, Russia's armed forces have been an important source for providing doctrinal, operational and military technology experience since Soviet times. They still have an edge, which they gained over decades from dealing with the United States as a potential adversary.

In 2023, a US study team found that, although political and military consultation mechanisms had developed between Russia and China, military-technical cooperation and joint military activities had not expanded. Joint projects include a conventional submarine, tactical missiles and Russian support in the development of an early warning system for missile launches. With the exception of aircraft engines, China can now produce nearly all of its military equipment itself.

Chinese and Russian long-range bombers patrolled the Arctic Ocean near the US state of Alaska in July 2024. Two Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers and two Chinese Xian H-6 bombers took off from the Russian airport Anadyr in Chukotka and undertook patrol flights over the Chukchi Sea, the Bering Sea and the North Pacific. There had already been speculation years before that such joint patrols along the Alaskan coast would be conceivable in the event of a deepening of bilateral relations.

The US Navy also expects "increasing Chinese naval deployments in, under and over Arctic waters". Beijing could use submarines in the Arctic – North Atlantic area to secure its position as a global military power and directly threaten the United States from the Arctic. However, this would not only shake Russia's supremacy, but could also provoke worrying military countermeasures from the United States.

Perspectives

The opening of the Pacific Arctic to Chinese activities is intended to meet the Kremlin's economic needs, but it creates another front against the West. For the United States, it raises security policy questions regarding the Aleutian Islands and the North Pacific sea route through the Bering Strait. It also affects Japan due to Russian bases on the Kuril Islands, which have become more heavily armed in recent years. The NSR will therefore not be a central trade artery for the time being, but instead a precarious tanker route for a fossil empire that is continually generating conflicts.

The Atlantic and Pacific Arctic regions are increasingly linked by different conflicts and risks of escalation. North Korea's support for Russia in Ukraine is intended to compensate for deficits, but it puts China in a difficult position because it strengthens the rapprochement of north Asian states with NATO. Thus, the Arctic offers the United States, after decades of neglect, an area of opportunity and even new cooperation. A future trilateral partnership between the United States, Canada and Finland could give the United States a chance to increase its presence in the Arctic by building and acquiring icebreakers with Arctic partner countries.

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