China's Strategic Ambitions in the Arctic

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The Arctic as a Rising Political Arena

In recent years, the Arctic has emerged as a critical focal point of international politics. Once perceived as a remote and inhospitable expanse of ice, the region is undergoing a dramatic transformation due to the profound impact of manmade climate change and its strategic position. Melting ice is creating new maritime trading routes, making untapped resources available for exploration, and intensifying geopolitical competition in the Arctic. These developments are governed by international legal frameworks such

as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which plays a crucial role in regulating maritime boundaries and resource rights in the Arctic. A diverse group of states, each with distinct strategic interests, is competing for influence in the Arctic, while simultaneously navigating existing regulations (like UNCLOS) and multilateral institutions that govern Arctic affairs. This region has become one of the world's most dynamic and rapidly evolving geopolitical arenas. Climate change is accelerating its transformation, reshaping strategic priorities.

Competition revolving the Arctic was historically dominated by Arctic states, which are connected to the Arctic by cultural legacy or directly neighbour the region. However, the spectrum of nations interested in expanding their influence on this newly emerging political arena is broadening rapidly to include some of the key players in global politics. Among them is China, regardless of its geographically distant location, almost 1,500 km away from the Arctic. Thus, what motivates a state that does not have any historical, cultural, or geographical ties to the Arctic to be this interested in a region that was long regarded as frozen, strategically marginal frontier?

Before analysing China's current strategic posture in the Arctic, it is crucial to examine how its engagement with the region has developed over time. Understanding the historical progression of China's Arctic policy provides critical insights into the motivation and methods that led to its current ambitions.

Chinese strategic efforts: a decade of expansion

The earliest signs of Chinese ambitions in the Arctic arose as early as 1999, when Chinese scientists undertook first research trips to the Arctic, using the icebreaker Xue Long, a ship acquired from Ukraine in 1994. These efforts were accelerated through large investments in Arctic infrastructure (such as the Yellow River Station in Norway in 2003) and participation in climate research projects (like the MOSAiC Expedition).

In 2013, one decade after China first stepped foot in the Arctic, the country was admitted as an observer to the Arctic Council by the Arctic states. The main driver of adding them to the list of observers, which includes multiple European and Asian Nations, was the acknowledgment of China's growing scientific and economic engagement and ambition to support multinational efforts in the region.

Following the admission as an arctic observer, China declared itself a "Near-Arctic-State" in its 2018 white paper on Arctic policy, cementing its position in the Arctic and emphasising its interest in establishing itself as a global key player. The White paper outlines China's strategic and economic interests, while providing a framework to guide both relevant government institutions, as well as private enterprises in their interactions with the Arctic region.

But why does China's interest matter? What sets it apart from other actor's interests? To answer these questions, we will take a deeper look into Chinese economic and strategic interests.

To what extent are China's Arctic ambitions economically motivated?

The above question may appear informal, yet it remains the most straightforward way to confront an unavoidable reality. As outlined in one of our past briefs, further exploration of the Arctic region offers access to untapped mineral resources, including what is believed to be the largest known reserve of natural gas on the planet. These resources are at the centre of attention of most stakeholders in the Arctic – among them, China.

Countries with export-driven economies, such as China, may additionally be interested in the further development of new trade routes, like The Northern Sea Route (NSR), which would potentially reduce transit time from Asia to Europe by approximately 30%. This is particularly relevant, when taking the European demand for Chinese made products into consideration, with many consumers in the West criticizing long delivery times from Asia. With the NSR reducing the distance between Shanghai and Rotterdam by 7 days (from 27 days to 20), such a route could be of immense strategic interest to China.

It is no surprise that, in 2017, China has expanded its Belt and road initiative – a project spearheaded by the People's Republic that aims to further strengthen global connectivity and increase China's exports. By investing into infrastructure projects in the energy and ports sector in Russia, the Chinese initiative has grown to include routes through the Arctic.

While China's ambitions in the Arctic appear far-reaching and well-structured, their organisation is increasingly tied to regional dynamics – particularly to Russia's role as a geographic and infrastructural gateway to the High North. Following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent deterioration of Russia's relations with most Arctic Council members, cooperative efforts in the region have significantly stalled. The breakdown of joint ventures, frozen infrastructure projects, and suspended scientific cooperation have all contributed to slowing down Chinese Arctic initiatives, particularly those aligned with the Polar Silk Road.

Chinese strategic interests in the Arctic: civilian infrastructure and new surveillance opportunities

Both the strategic location of the Arctic and the abundance of natural resources available in the region, are factors to consider when analysing a state's motivation to expand its sphere of influence in the Arctic. Among the various state actors with growing interests in the region, China stands out as a prominent example.

Building on the strategic importance of new Arctic trade routes and the Belt and Road Initiative's extension into polar regions, China's interests in the Arctic are increasingly shaped by dual-use infrastructure and enhanced military-technological capabilities.

Civilian projects – such as deep-water ports, fibre-optic cables and logistics hubs – not only support commerce and energy exports but also provide latent strategic value, potentially functioning as nodes for surveillance, data transmission, or rapid deployment in times of conflict. As Pezard, Chindea, Aoki, Lumpkin, and Shokh outlined in their article on China's activities in the Arctic, some of these threats could materialise more quickly than others. Sudden legislative changes could, for example, allow China to rapidly expand its data and information transmission activities, while mining and fishing activities would take longer to develop.

Furthermore, China's growing fleet of icebreakers (currently amounting to three active vessels) demonstrates not only scientific ambition but also a tangible symbol of sustained presence and maritime capability. The capabilities China is actively establishing in the Arctic, elevate the country's strategic position in the region, enabling it to deploy dual-use assets under the guise of civilian infrastructure projects.

Although the increasing presence of Chinese vessels and infrastructure in the Arctic may indicate China's efforts to expand its influence in the region, the issue also presents potential benefits that warrant consideration. China has participated in numerous research projects, focusing on the impact of climate change on the Arctic and projects focusing on marine ecology, proactively engaging with the region through scientific collaboration and environmental monitoring. These contributions could foster greater international cooperation in addressing the challenges facing both the Arctic itself and the players active in the region.

Russia's isolation since 2022 – a window of opportunity for China

Since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has been involved in an illegal war of aggression, leading to a significant loss of Russian diplomatic relations with Western partners and companies. This is particularly due to the sanctions imposed on Russia by both individual Western states and blocs of states such as the EU.

Due to the sanctions, Western companies are not permitted to invest in Russian infrastructure, including the ones in the Arctic. This de facto withdrawal of Western investors has opened a window for the People's Republic to significantly increase its influence in the region. Chinese companies cumulatively control approximately 30% of the Yamal LNG project and about 20% of the Arctic LNG-2 project, making China the second-largest investor in Russian Arctic projects after Russia itself.

This strong expansion of Chinese influence in the Arctic, with Russia as a gateway for the People's Republic, raises both strategic and military questions. Both logistical and energy infrastructure have the potential to be used by China as dual-use assets, especially in cooperation with Russia. As a result, the growing Sino-Russian presence in the Arctic challenges the existing balance of power in the region and prompts concern among Western nations about long-term security, access, and governance in this sensitive area.

This development puts China in a strong position towards both Western players and Russia itself. China may capitalise on prior Russian investments and finance new infrastructure to gain strategic knowledge and experience in dealing with the Arctic. The heavy reliance on Chinese investments has the potential to create an asymmetry between Russia and China, with Russia taking on a more complementary role within the framework of an increasingly proactive Chinese Arctic Policy.

How will China's participation in the Arctic develop?

There is no straightforward answer to this question, as the continuation of Chinese influence in the Arctic is heavily dependent on legislative developments. These developments involve various stakeholders – in the Arctic, both the individual Arctic states and international cooperation mechanisms, such as the Arctic Council, play key roles in shaping future developments. Additionally, international legal frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) are crucial in regulating access to maritime routes and natural resources in the Arctic.

However, there are some points that can be said with near certainty:

The Arctic has long ceased to be a frozen backwater. It is an emerging arena of global politics that will require adaptability and diplomatic skill. And China plans to be at the centre of this development.