Chinese Positioning in the Melting Arctic

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The article could argue that China's Arctic involvement, while framed as cooperative under its "Polar Silk Road" strategy, is primarily driven by the economic opportunities and geopolitical leverage presented by a warming Arctic. China's growing influence as a global sea power may not be constrained by its observer status within the Arctic Council and the current legal framework governing Arctic security. Future ambitions could lead to collaboration, competition, or an eventual reshaping of the regional governance system.

This article emphasizes the duality of China's position—as both an economic partner and a potential disruptor to the status quo—while addressing the underlying uncertainties about its long-term intentions in the Arctic.

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The Arctic, long the domain of ice and isolation, is transforming into a stage for geopolitical posturing (Badina & Pankratov, 2022). Warming nearly four times faster than the global average, the melting Arctic has unlocked new trade routes, untapped energy reserves, and fresh geopolitical tensions. As the ice thaws, the waters heat up—politically and economically: the Arctic region, if available to international shipping routes, could realize the connectivity of maritime trade routes between Asia, Europe and North America. (Wang et al., 2018)

At the forefront of this evolving drama is China, a self-styled "near-Arctic state," . As one of the 13 non-arctic states participating as an observer on the arctic council since 2013, China's position here reflects the communicated interests of the Arctic Council itself, which aims to "enhanced cooperation in the circumpolar North...and promote cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States" (International Cooperation in the Arctic, n.d.) leveraging its Polar Silk Road strategy to position itself as an indispensable player in this high-stakes region.

China's 2018 "Polar Silk Road" strategy, an extension of its Belt and Road Initiative (later termed Global Development Initiative (Wu, 2023) , is not quite a trade blueprint. It's a carefully crafted narrative of cooperative ambition, with promises of sustainable development and scientific research. By pledging to "participate in the protection and utilization of the Antarctic," China has secured its observer status on the Arctic Council since 2013, emphasizing collaboration and support for global governance and international rule of law. Similar to the Global Develompment Initiative, however, the offer of development and collaboration is used to to capitalize on a region's vast potential for natural resources. The Arctic region has .

Make no mistake—this isn't purely altruistic. For Beijing, the Arctic represents connectivity. The prospect of slashing trade route times between Asia, Europe, and North America by as much as 50% isn't just a logistical win; it's a strategic coup. Reduced costs for Chinese exports could reshape global trade, elevating China's maritime dominance and diminishing reliance on volatile chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca.

So far, China's ambitions in the region remain mostly non-aggressive. The narrative around China's position in the arctic seems to be "'framed as a potential alternative governance framework to the regional status quo centered around the Arctic Council" (Eiterjord, 2023). China projects a narrative that it should take an active role in the Arctic to "coordinate conflicts ", "explore the Arctic climate governance model" and invest in research to "strive to be at the forefront of climate governance" (Chen, 2023). China's narrative positions itself as a cooperative partner while subtly challenging

the Arctic Council's governance (Eiterjord, 2023). By framing its role as one of a global climate custodian and scientific leader, China sidesteps territorial claims while carving out influence. This narrative allows Beijing to hedge against legal scrutiny, portraying itself as a benefactor of Arctic stability rather than a competitor for dominance.

Critics, however, remain unconvinced. Cassotte el al. and Stünkel argue that China' "assertive behaviour towards the Arctic environmental ocean" is non-congruent with the reality of trade and investor realities, meaning that China should not be considered as a significant threat to for Arctic security (Cassotta et al., 2015). China's recent trade battles with Norway and the slow advance with investments into critical port infrastructure (Braw, 2025) suggest that the strategy is long term and the quest for resources and trade superiority will not bow to international rule of law. In other words, China's bark in the Arctic may be louder than its bite—for now.

But that doesn't mean the risks are nonexistent. History shows that regions with burgeoning trade routes and resource wealth rarely remain free of conflict. As thawing ice uncovers oil reserves and valuable underwater minerals, disputes over sovereignty and governance will intensify. The Arctic Council's cooperative framework, while robust, is not immune to fragmentation if national interests clash.

So, is China a friend or a foe in the Arctic? The answer, as with most geopolitical quandaries, is both. Beijing's Polar Silk Road offers immense opportunities for economic and scientific collaboration, but it also serves as a calculated move to reshape Arctic governance in its favor. As the ice retreats, the world must decide whether China's growing presence in the Arctic is a stabilizing force or the first ripples of a deeper geopolitical storm.

The Arctic is no longer a frozen frontier—it's a global crossroads. While tensions between most actors remain low, the potential remains high for intensified geographic disputes as climate change frees the Arctic trading routes. And in this new race for influence, China is moving steadily, strategically, and, perhaps, unstoppably forward.

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