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Shaping China's Engagement with the Arctic: Nationalist Narratives and Geopolitical Reality

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ABSTRACT

Nationalist narratives and geopolitical reality have played an opposite role in shaping China's engagement with the Arctic, with the former pushing it forward while the latter pushing it back. Specifically, Chinese nationalist narratives on strong feelings of love for and pride in the Chinese nation not only initiated but also facilitated China's engagement with the Arctic. Moreover, the 'China Dream', an official narrative put forward by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, has driven the country to undertake proactive measures to engage with the Arctic, among others, including self-ascribing China as a 'Near-Arctic State' and self-designating the 'Polar Silk Road'. In stark contrast, however, the geopolitical reality featured by Arctic countries' policies to push back China's activities in this region has stymied its ambition to attain great power status in the Arctic.

Introduction

China's engagement with the Arctic can be traced back to 1925 when China, under the Beiyang Government (北洋政府), joined the Spitsbergen Treaty at the invitation of France.¹ However, this treaty had been completely overlooked by the Chinese until 1991, when Gao Dengyi (高登义), a Chinese atmospheric physicist, in a joint scientific exploration to the North Pole with scientists from Norway, the former Soviet Union and Iceland, was surprised to find the original text of this treaty in which China had been one of the signatories in 1925.² Thus, it is no surprise that the Arctic had not been on the agenda of Chinese foreign policy until the mid-1990s, when China began to officially engage with this region.³ Such engagement has been taken to 'a new level' since 2005.⁴

Against this backdrop, the literature on China's engagement with the Arctic and its motivations for doing so has been growing.⁵ One argument is that China has potential economic interests in the Arctic, such as shorter shipping routes and natural resources, especially energy. For instance, Li Zhenfu (李振福) points out that maritime shipping routes have been an

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¹The Spitsbergen Treaty is also named the Svalbard Treaty. See Duan Xin, 'Zhongguo Jiaru "Sipici beiergen qundao tiaoyu" shishi kaosu [Historical Facts of China's Involvement in Spitsbergen Treaty of 9 February 1920]' (2019) 2 Yunnan Shifan Daxue Xuebao – Zhexue Shekui Kexueban [Journal of Yunnan Normal University – Humanities and Social Sciences] 109–18.

²Ibid; Gao Dengyi, 'Wo yu "Siwaerba tiaoyu" qingyuan [My Tryst with the Svalbard Treaty]' (2 February 2018) <http://blog.sciencenet.cn/blog-1275197-1098918.html> accessed 20 March 2022.

³Liu Jin, 'The Arctic White Paper and the Development of China's Position towards the Arctic' (9 July 2018) http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2018-07/09/content_40413210.htm accessed 5 August 2019.

⁴Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge University Press 2017), 104.

⁵Brady summarized such literature between 2009 and 2014. See Ibid 12.

important motivation behind China's engagement with the Arctic.⁶ Similarly, Linda Jakobson argues that 'The prospect of the Arctic being navigable during summer months, leading to both shorter shipping routes and access to untapped energy resources, has impelled the Chinese Government to allocate more resources to Arctic research'.⁷ In the same vein, Gang Chen underscores that 'The melting of the ice in the Arctic Ocean attracts China because an ice-free Arctic environment will not only provide shorter shipping routes but also access to untapped energy and mineral resources'.⁸ By the same token, Marc Lentignes argues that China's engagement with the Arctic has been driven by this region's potentially lucrative raw materials, including fossil fuels, minerals and metals, as well as the shorter shipping route, especially the Northeast Passage via the northern Siberian coast once the ice melts as a result of global warming.⁹

However, some scholars challenge the economic motivation argument. For instance, to counter this, Christopher Weidacher Hsiung contends that China's Arctic oil and gas interests are modest due mainly to the challenges and high costs of oil and gas production in this region and China's increased import options across the world.¹⁰ To challenge the shorter shipping-route argument, Linyan Huang et al. conducted a survey among Chinese shipping companies and found that these companies seemed not to be interested in the Arctic shipping route because of four factors: 1) the high investment cost of the purchase of ice-strengthened ships, 2) market constraints like just-in-time and ship size that limit economies of scale, 3) the Arctic market is too small to establish a profitable route to enable a quick return on investment in ice-strengthened ships, and 4) physical risks and insurance costs.¹¹

Another point of view is that China has sought multiple goals in its engagement with the Arctic. For example, Malte Humpert and Andreas Raspotni note that China's participation in Arctic affairs has been motivated by its desire to serve both economic interests, such as resources and shorter shipping routes to Europe through the Arctic, as well as its political interests in enhancing its influence over global affairs through its participation in governing Arctic affairs.¹² Likewise, David Curtis Wright highlights that 'China is interested in the Arctic primarily for its natural resources and navigation routes', in addition to the prospect of influencing Arctic affairs.¹³ Nong Hong finds that 'The interests of China range from participating in Arctic governance affairs and accessing potential resources to exploiting shipping opportunities and undertaking polar research'.¹⁴ Camilla Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko identify four drivers behind China's engagement with the Arctic, that is, to build a solid Chinese polar research capacity, to gain access to energy resources and minerals, to develop Arctic sea routes, and to secure China a say in the evolving Arctic governance regime.¹⁵

⁶Li Zhenfu, 'Beiji hangxian de Zhongguo zhanlv fenxi [Analysis of China's strategy on Arctic route]' (2009) 1 *Zhongguo Ruanke Xue* [China Soft Science Magazine] 1–7; Li Zhenfu and Liu Chao, 'Beiji hangxian duiyu Zhongguo de tidu yingxiang fenxi [A Gradient Analysis of the Influence of the Arctic Route on China]' (2015) 6 *Heping yu Fazhan* [Peace and Development] 82–100.

⁷Linda Jakobson, 'China Prepares for an Ice-Free Arctic' (*SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, March 2010) <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/insight/SIPRIInsight1002.pdf>> accessed 5 August 2019.

⁸Gang Chen, 'China's Emerging Arctic strategy' (2012) 2(2) *The Polar Journal* 361.

⁹Marc Lantaigne, 'China's Emerging Arctic Strategies: Economics and Institutions' https://rafhladan.is/bitstream/handle/10802/8476/ChinasEmergingArcticStrategiesPDF_FIX2.pdf?sequence=1> accessed 5 April 2020.

¹⁰Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, 'China and Arctic Energy: Drivers and Limitations' (2016) 6(2) *The Polar Journal* 243.

¹¹Linyan Huang, Frederic Lasserre and Olga Alexeeva, 'Is China's Interest for the Arctic Driven by Arctic Shipping Potential?' (2015) 32(1) *Asian Geographer* 66.

¹²Malte Humpert and Andreas Raspotnik, 'From "Great Wall" to "Great White North": Explaining China's Politics in the Arctic' (17 August 2012) <https://www.openbriefing.org/docs/chinas-politics-in-the-arctic.pdf>> accessed 20 March 2018.

¹³David Curtis Wright, 'China's Growing Interest in the Arctic' (2013) 15(2) *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 50–70.

¹⁴Nong Hong, 'Emerging Interests of Non-Arctic Countries in the Arctic: A Chinese Perspective' (2014) 4(2) *The Polar Journal* 272.

¹⁵Camilla T. N. Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, 'Emerging Chinese—Russian Cooperation in the Arctic' (*SIPRI Policy Paper 46*, June 2017) <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/emerging-chinese-russian-cooperation-arctic.pdf>> accessed 17 April 2019.

Similarly, P. Whitney Lackenbauer et al. explore China's multiple ambitions in the Arctic, such as scientific research, maritime shipping, energy resources as well as political influence.¹⁶

In contrast, other scholars argue that China has strategic interests in the Arctic region. For instance, Wright focuses on the strategic dimensions of China's Arctic interests, with extensive translations from Chinese scholars writing from different perspectives and directions.¹⁷ Rob Huebert sounds the alarm that East Asian engagement, and especially that of China, with the Arctic has been motivated by a desire to challenge the sovereignty of the Arctic countries such as Canada.¹⁸ Xia Liping argues that the ice sheet melting in the Arctic could cause extreme weather events and natural disasters in China, which would negatively impact on China's ecological security and food security.¹⁹ In the same vein, Anne-Marie Brady argues that China has both traditional and nontraditional security interests in the polar regions, including economic, political, military and strategic interests.²⁰

Still others argue that China seeks status in the Arctic. For example, Mia M. Bennett argues that China, as 'an extraregional state' of the Arctic, has been motivated not only by economics but also other factors such as concern for global prestige.²¹ Similarly, Brady underscores that China has been motivated by its desire to be a 'polar great power' in the international system.²²

Thus, the existing literature has largely focused on China's national interests when accounting for the rationale behind its engagement with the Arctic, be it economic benefits, influence over Arctic governance, national security or higher status. However, the literature has ignored how China's nationalist narratives—a domestic factor and the geopolitical reality in the Arctic—an international factor have interplayed to shape China's engagement with the Arctic.

To answer this question, this article argues that China's nationalist narratives and the Arctic geopolitical reality have played an opposite role in shaping China's engagement with the Arctic, with the former pushing it forward while the latter pushing it back. More specifically, Chinese nationalist narratives on strong feelings of love for and pride in the Chinese nation not only initiated but also facilitated China's engagement with the Arctic. Moreover, the 'China Dream', an official narrative put forward by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, has driven the country to undertake proactive measures to engage with the Arctic, among others, including self-ascribing China as 'a Near-Arctic State' and self-designating the 'Polar Silk Road'. In stark contrast, however, the geopolitical reality in the Arctic is that China does not have any territorial sovereignty in this region, so the Arctic countries have adopted policies to push back China's activities, which has already stymied China's ambition to attain great power status in the Arctic.

To test this argument, the rest of this article proceeds as follows. It first explores how nationalist narratives had initiated China's engagement with the Arctic at the beginning of the 1990s. Next, it displays how nationalist narratives not only paved the way for, but also facilitated China's official engagement with the Arctic from the mid-1990s. Then, it details how the 'China Dream', an official narrative put forth by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, has stimulated the country to undertake proactive measures to engage with the Arctic since 2012. Furthermore, it examines how the Arctic countries have pushed back China's engagement with this region, followed by a brief conclusion.

¹⁶P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Adam Lajeunesse, James Manicom and Frédéric Lasserre, *China's Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada* (University of Calgary Press 2018).

¹⁷David Curtis Wright, 'The Dragon and Great Power Rivalry at the Top of the World: China's Hawkish, Revisionist Voices within Mainstream Discourse on Arctic Affairs' (*Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, September 2018) https://www.cgai.ca/the_dragon_and_great_power_rivalry_at_the_top_of_the_world accessed 10 December 2021.

¹⁸Rob Huebert, 'The Shipping News Part II: How Canada's Arctic Sovereignty is on Thinning Ice' (2003) 58(3) *International Journal* 295–308.

¹⁹Xia Liping, 'Beiji huanjing bianhua dui quanqiu anquan he Zhongguo guojia anquan de yingxiang [Impact of the Arctic Environmental Change on Global Security and China's National Security]' (2011) 1 *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [*World Economics and Politics*] 122–33.

²⁰Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, 60–61.

²¹Mia M. Bennett, 'How China Sees the Arctic: Reading between Extraregional and Intraregional Narratives' (2015) 20(3) *Geopolitics* 647.

²²Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*.

Nationalist Narratives Initiated an Unofficial Engagement (1990–1995)

The initiation of China's engagement with the Arctic started in the early 1990s. This coincided with the reemergence of Chinese nationalism which, according to Suisheng Zhao (赵穗生), has been driven by China's 'bottom-up societal force', exemplified by China's national pride and interests that resulted from its two-decade-long fast economic growth on the one hand and from 'the patriotic education campaign in Post-Tiananmen' by the Chinese government on the other.²³ Chen Zhimin (陈志敏) points out that Chinese nationalism 'in the early 1990s witnessed new developments. A bottom-up form of nationalism appeared', that is, the Chinese people exhibited strong nationalistic feelings about the greatness of China.²⁴ It is these strong nationalistic narratives about China as a great nation that has stimulated certain Chinese individuals to initiate China's engagement with the Arctic starting in the early 1990s.

After his surprising discovery of China's signatory status to the Spitsbergen Treaty, as mentioned above, Gao Dengyi started to seek domestic and international support for the establishment of a scientific research station on the Svalbard Islands. Domestically at first, he resorted to China's South Pole Office, but he was rebuffed. And then he turned to the Chinese Academy of Sciences where he got financial support from a research project titled 'Investigation and Research on Station Construction on Svalbard'.²⁵ On the international front, under Gao's leadership, in 1991 the China Association for Scientific Expedition signed a Memorandum of Intent with the University of Bergen, a Norwegian university, to establish multiple cooperation areas, including the North Pole.²⁶ In May 1995, Gao and four other members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences visited Norway to discuss with the Norwegian Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Environment, the Polar Research Institute and the University of Bergen, the establishment of a Chinese Arctic station.²⁷

Wei Menghua (位梦华), a researcher at the Institute of Geology, China Earthquake Administration, was another important individual who pushed the Chinese government to engage with the Arctic. Specifically, in October 1992 Wei first put forward the suggestion to the Chinese government that it should engage with the Arctic.²⁸ In his policy recommendation, Wei not only stressed the great importance of the Arctic for China's military strategy, economic interests and scientific development, but also stated that China, as a country in the northern hemisphere, should enter the Arctic as soon as possible so as to have a voice in the decision-making of international Arctic affairs, which would safeguard China's right to make contributions to the peaceful use of the Arctic by the Chinese nation.²⁹ Wei also introduced the background to his policy suggestion, that is, international engagement with the Arctic had already taken place in 1990 when the Arctic countries, including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the United States and the former Soviet Union, established the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC) and held its first meeting in Oslo in January 1991, when the committee accepted France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom as its new members.³⁰ Against this backdrop, Wei suggested to the Chinese government that China should follow suit by engaging with the Arctic as soon as possible so that China would not lag behind those countries in this region.³¹

As a follow-up to the above policy recommendation, in July 1993 Wei urged the Chinese government to organize an expedition to the Arctic:

²³Suisheng Zhao, 'A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China' (1998) 31(3) *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 287–302; Suisheng Zhao, 'Foreign Policy Implications for Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn' (2013) 22(82) *Journal of Contemporary China* 536.

²⁴Chen Zhimin, 'Nationalism, Internationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy' (2005) 14(42) *Journal of Contemporary China* 49–50.

²⁵For details about the process of Gao Dengyi's efforts in this regard, see Gao, 'My Tryst with the Svalbard Treaty'.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Wei Menghua, 'Guanyu kaizhan Beiji kaocha yanjiu de jianyi [Suggestions on conducting research on the Arctic expedition]' (1993) 7 *Keji Daobao [Science and Technology Review]* 30.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

Bipolar affairs are sensitive and complex. Although specific exploration activities can be undertaken by non-governmental organizations, in the context of international politics, such activities cannot completely avoid the obvious political color after all, and their influence always transcends natural science and involves international politics, economy, military, and other fields. Therefore, the general guidelines and policies related to the Arctic expedition must be under the control of the government . . . Nowadays, the era of pure Arctic exploration has long passed. At a time when the current international 'Arctic fever' is likely to be set off, it is suggested that the central government and relevant departments pay attention and correctly guide it.³²

In addition, Wei put forth some detailed suggestions to the Chinese government on how to organize a comprehensive scientific Arctic expedition, including not only the specific time, route and equipment but also the budget and the agencies to be involved.³³ When it came to how to choose an appropriate route for China's expedition, Wei wrote:

Since 1990, at least 10 expedition teams in the world have successfully reached the North Pole, eight of which entered the North Pole from Canada. We [China] are an Asian country, and this is the first scientific expedition for us. If we [the Chinese] take the route that foreigners have traveled many times, it obviously has no practical significance. Therefore, it is recommended that we start off from the Asian coast and then travel north along longitude 120° east to make a road that no one else has traveled before.³⁴

Regarding the budget, Wei pointed out that the expedition might cost US\$1 million, which would have been a huge financial burden for the Chinese government in the early 1990s. So Wei suggested to the Chinese government that it should be easy for it to raise funds from the private sector and organizations based on the fact that the expedition was a major event related to the long-term interests of 'the whole China, the whole nation, and even China's future generations', so the Arctic expedition should be very attractive for 'the descendants of the Chinese nation at home and abroad' who would be willing to make contributions to finance such an endeavor.³⁵

Two years later, in April 1995, thanks to Wei's suggestions, the Chinese Association for Science and Technology and Chinese Academy of Sciences organized China's first ever scientific Arctic expedition, which was carried out by a team made up of Wei and six Chinese scientists and funded by a private Chinese company.³⁶ When Wei and his team arrived at the North Pole on 6 May 1995, they planted China's national flag at the North Pole, which, according to a Chinese commentator, 'marks the beginning of a new stage of the Chinese nation's scientific research on the North Pole'.³⁷ This expedition's scientific research results were presented at the second conference of the IASC on 21 December 1995, which paved the way for China's membership in this international organization in 1996.³⁸

In sum, China's engagement with the Arctic was initiated by Chinese nationalist narratives on a strong nationalistic desire to ensure that China would not lag behind other countries in this region. In other words, the initiation of China's engagement with the Arctic was not derived from official activities orchestrated by the Chinese government.

³²Ibid.

³³Wei Menghua, 'Guanyu zuzhi shenru Beijidian zonghexing kexue kaocha de jianyi [To Organize a Comprehensive Scientific Inspection of the North Pole]' (1993) 7 *Keji Daobao* [Science and Technology Review] 29–30.

³⁴Ibid. 29.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Zhongguo Nanji Cehui Yanjiu Zhongxin (Chinese Antarctic Center of Surveying and Mapping), 'Zhongguoren de Beiji kaocha huodong [The Activities of the Chinese Expeditions to the Arctic]' (28 April 2008), http://pole.whu.edu.cn/cacsm/gb_article.php?modid=04010> accessed 7 November 2020.

³⁷Chen Yang, 'Renlei shehui yu Beiji [Human Society and the Arctic]' (1995) 8 *Kexue Zhiyou: Shang* [Friends of Science: Part One] 32–33.

³⁸Ibid.

Nationalist Narratives Facilitated Official Engagement (1996–2012)

As mentioned above, in 1996 China successfully joined the IASC and became its 16th member, being the first developing country to obtain membership in this organization. With this membership, according to Chinese scientist Qu Tanzhou (曲探宙), China could now have a say in the Arctic's scientific affairs.³⁹ China thus began its official engagement with the Arctic.

By the early 2000s, the Chinese public had already started to link China's Arctic engagement with Chinese national prestige. For instance, a news commentary asserted that 'in the new round of competition to conquer the North Pole, national glory and adventurous sporting spirits have surpassed commercial interests'.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Chinese public had also come to realize that China's engagement with the Arctic had lagged behind some countries. According to the same news commentary, for example:

Since the beginning of purposeful Arctic exploration, it has been almost completely dominated by the Europeans. It wasn't until the 1980s that the Chinese nation finally raised its head and cast its sights on the distant horizon. In the short ten years since the reform and opening up, the footprint of our Chinese nation has rapidly extended to all corners of the world, including the remotest Antarctic continent. However, until now, the Chinese still have not a footprint at the top of the earth—the North Pole which covers around one-seventh of the earth's surface.⁴¹

These nationalist narratives played a significant role in facilitating China's official engagement with the Arctic. Specifically, in July 2002, funded by two private Chinese companies, Xinjiang Yilite Jituan (新疆伊力特集团) and Hunan Mulin Jituan (湖南沐林集团), an Arctic scientific expedition team composed of 25 scientific researchers set out for the North Pole with the aim of establishing China's first Arctic research station on the Svalbard Islands in Norway in accordance with the right it accrued as a signatory to the Spitsbergen Treaty of 1925, that is, China had the right to freely enter and leave those islands as well as to engage in commerce, resource development and scientific investigation activities on these islands.⁴² After selecting the site for China's first research station on the Svalbard Islands, this team held a ceremony to raise China's national flag on that site, with the team members singing China's national anthem. Gao Dengyi, the leader of this scientific expedition team, excitedly exclaimed: 'From now on, Chinese scientists who are interested in Arctic scientific research will have their own Arctic scientific research base. This is a major event in the history of China's Arctic scientific research'.⁴³

Furthermore, the Chinese government turned to the Chinese public to name this first research station. On 12 January 2004, the State Oceanic Administration held a press conference announcing that the construction of China's Arctic scientific research station was about to be completed and the Chinese government asked the general public to give a name to the station. Sina.com, one of the most popular commercial news sites in China, was put in charge of this process, and the deadline for nominations from the public was 20 January 2004.⁴⁴

³⁹Zhang Xueying, 'Jidi kekao, yuanyang xunzong [Polar Scientific Research, Pursuit of the Ocean]', *Jinri Zhongguo (China Today)*, 30 August 2012 http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctchinese/reports/article/2012-08/30/content_479160_4.htm accessed 7 November 2020.

⁴⁰Tongxiang Beiji de zuji: xin yilun zhengfu beijidian de jingzheng [Footprints to the North Pole: A New Round of Competition to Conquer the North Pole] *Reminwang (People.com)*, 29 August 2003 <https://tech.sina.com.cn/other/2003-08-29/1412227102.shtml> accessed 7 November 2020.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Woguo jiang zai Beiji jian kekaozhan [China will Build a Scientific Research Station in the Arctic] (23 July 2002) <http://www.cctv.com/lm/671/12/40333.html>; 'Zhongguo Yilite-Mulin Beiji kekaodui jin chufa qu jian shouge Zhongguo Beiji kekaozhan [China's Yilite-Mulin Arctic Research Team Set Off Today to Build China's First Arctic Research Station]' (25 July 2002) <http://news.sohu.com/52/81/news202308152.shtml> accessed 7 November 2020.

⁴³Wuxing hongqi zai Beiji piaoyang [Five-Starred Red Flag Flying in the North Pole] <http://www.cctv.com/lm/233/31/21532.html> accessed 7 November 2020.

⁴⁴Guojia Haiyangju Jidi Kaocha Bangongshi (Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration), 'Zhongguo Beiji Huanghezhan ming tongguo Xinlang zhengji chansheng [The Name of China's Arctic Yellow River Station was Resulted from Sina's Solicitation]' (28 July 2004) <https://tech.sina.com.cn/other/2004-07-28/1458394480.shtml> accessed 7 November 2020.

According to Sina.com, within the eight-day nomination period more than 3,000 names were submitted by the general public to Sina.com. From those names, Sina.com chose 30 candidate names to submit to the Chinese government.⁴⁵ On 28 July 2004, the inauguration ceremony of China's first Arctic research station was held at the Arctic Research Base of Spitsbergen in Norway-New Ålesund and the name for this station that the Chinese government chose was 'China Arctic Yellow River Station'.⁴⁶ The reason for choosing this name, according to Chen Weihua (陈伟华), the person who first proposed this name to Sina.com, was 'The Yellow River was the mother river of the Chinese nation and gave birth to the Chinese nation. It can be said that the Yellow River is equivalent to the Chinese nation, so it is worth commemorating'.⁴⁷

From then, the Chinese government started to organize and carry out some state-sponsored scientific Arctic expeditions. For instance, from July to September 1999 and from July to September 2003, with the approval of the State Council, China's first and second official scientific Arctic expeditions were organized and jointly carried out by the State Oceanic Administration, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Land and Resources, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Education, the China Meteorological Administration and the State Bureau of Surveying and Mapping.⁴⁸ In April 2005, China held the Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW) in Kunming, which was the first time this highest-level Arctic scientific research conference was held in Asia. At this ASSW, China became a member of the New Alesund Scientific Management Committee.⁴⁹ China applied three times, in 2006, 2009 and 2011, to become an observer in the Arctic Council, but its efforts were unsuccessful due to strong opposition from the organization's members, especially Russia and Canada.⁵⁰

During this period, the Chinese government also initiated top-level official diplomatic visits to the Arctic countries. For instance, in April 2012, then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Iceland, which was the first visit by a Chinese premier since the establishment of the two countries' diplomatic relations 41 years ago.⁵¹ In June 2012, then Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Denmark, which was the first visit of a Chinese President to this country since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1950.⁵²

In short, between 1996 and 2012 Chinese nationalist narratives played a crucial role in facilitating China's official engagement with the Arctic, including preparing for China's scientific Arctic expeditions, establishing China's first scientific research station in the Arctic, as well as pushing the Chinese government to deepen its engagement with this region.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Li Bin, 'Zhongguo shouge Beiji kekaozhan Huanghezhan luocheng yunying [China's First Arctic Research Station, the Yellow River Station, has been Built and Operating]' (*Xinhua*, 30 July 2004) <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2004-07-30/20343249884s.shtml>> accessed 19 December 2020.

⁴⁷Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration, 'The Name of China's Arctic Yellow River Station was Resulted from Sina's Solicitation'.

⁴⁸Zhongguo de Beiji kaocha [China's Arctic Expedition]', *Xinhua*https://travel.sohu.com/00/00/travel_article15500000.shtml> accessed 7 November 2020.

⁴⁹Zhao Ning, 'Jiedu "Jidi mima" juanke "Zhongguo yinji" [Decipher the "Polar Code" and Engrave "China's imprints"]', *Zhongguo Haiyangbao* (*China Ocean News*, 15 January 2019) <https://m.huanbao-world.com/view.php?aid=77005>> accessed 7 November 2020.

⁵⁰Liu Zhonghua, Sun Wei and Qing Mu, 'Zhongguo chengwei Beiji Lishihui zhengshi chengyuan weici dengle qinian [China has Waited for 7 Years to become a Formal Observer of the Arctic Council]', *Huanqiu Shibao* (*Global Times*, 16 May 2013) <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJAwjl>> accessed 11 November, 2020.

⁵¹Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MOFA), 'Zhongguo tong Bingdao de guanxi [China's Relations with Iceland]' (February 2018) http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_678964/sbgx_678968/> accessed 7 November 2020.

⁵²MOFA, 'Zhongguo tong Danmai de guanxi [China's Relations with Denmark]' (February 2018) http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679062/sbgx_679066/> accessed 7 November 2020.

The 'China Dream' Promotes High-Profile Official Engagement (2012 Onwards)

Since Xi Jinping came into power in late 2012, Chinese nationalist narrative characterized by the 'China Dream' has led the Chinese government to enhance its high-profile official engagement with the Arctic. More specifically, shortly after becoming the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central Committee in November 2012, Xi Jinping visited the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibition at the Chinese National Museum, where he proposed for the first time the concept of the 'China Dream', defined as 'the realization of a great rejuvenation is the greatest dream of the Chinese nation in modern times'.⁵³ Stimulated by this strong nationalistic desire to restore its position of greatness in history, China has undertaken proactive measures to promote its high-profile engagement with the Arctic.

Enhancing Its Scientific Research in the Arctic

During this stage, China took its scientific research in the Arctic to a new level. Specifically, since 2017 China has regularized its official Arctic scientific expedition as an annual activity.⁵⁴ As well as its research expeditions in the Arctic, China has actively engaged in cooperation in scientific research with the Arctic countries. For instance, in 2016 and 2018 China and Russia conducted two joint Arctic scientific expeditions, in addition to creating a joint Arctic research center for studying mineral and biological resources and the changing ecosystem in accordance with an agreement signed between Russian and Chinese representatives of two major oceanological institutes in April 2019.⁵⁵ On 18 October 2018, the China-Iceland Joint Aurora Observatory was officially opened, which was established under an agreement between the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannis) and the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) as a platform for Arctic research cooperation between Icelandic and Chinese research institutions.⁵⁶ Moreover, to facilitate cooperation between scholars from China and Nordic Arctic states, China not only proposed but also established a China-Nordic Arctic Research Center in Shanghai in December 2013, aimed at supporting joint research on climate change, Arctic economic development and shipping.⁵⁷

Self-Ascribing 'Near-Arctic State' Status

Geographically speaking, China is not adjacent to the Arctic: the shortest distance between Chinese territory and the Arctic is 900 miles (or 1,448 kilometers).⁵⁸ Although China eventually became an observer of the Arctic Council in 2013, it has obviously not been content

⁵³Xi Jinping, 'Chengqianqihou jiwangkailai jixu chaozhe Zhanghuaminzu weida fuxing mubiao fenyong qianjin [Inherit the Past and Usher in the Future, Continue to March Courageously towards the Great Rejuvenation Goal of the Chinese Nation]' (*Xinhua*, 29 November 2012) http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/29/c_113852724.htm> accessed 8 November 2020.

⁵⁴'Guojia haiyangju: woguo Beiji kekao pinci zengzhi meinian yici [State Oceanic Administration: China's Arctic Expedition Frequency Increased to Once a Year]' (*Xinhua*, 10 October 2017) http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-10/10/c_1121781250.htm> accessed 8 November 2020.

⁵⁵Xie Chuanjiao, 'Sino-Russian Expedition Provides Arctic data' (*China Daily*, 31 October 2018) <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201810/31/W55bd9016fa310eff30328591e.html>>; Pavel Devyatkin, 'Russian and Chinese Scientists to Establish Arctic Research Center' (*The North News*, 15 April 2019) <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-and-chinese-scientists-establish-arctic-research-center>> accessed 8 November 2020.

⁵⁶'China-Iceland Arctic Observatory Formally Opened' (*Arctic Portal*, 18 October 2018) <https://arcticportal.org/ap-library/news/2059-china-iceland-arctic-observatory-formally-opened>> accessed 8 November 2020.

⁵⁷Huang Xing, 'Zhongguo—Beiyou Beiji yanjiu zhongxin chengli [China-Nordic Arctic Research Center was Established]' *Zhongguo Kexuebao (China Science Daily)*, 11 December 2013) <http://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2013/12/286095.shtm>> accessed 8 November 2020.

⁵⁸Michael R. Pompeo, 'Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus' (6 May, 2019) <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus>> accessed 8 November 2020.

with this status.⁵⁹ Accordingly, China has tried to ascribe itself the unique status of ‘a Near-Arctic State’.

The concept of China as ‘a Near-Arctic State’ was first proposed by Lu Junyuan (陆俊元), a Chinese scholar, in 2010.⁶⁰ According to Yang Jian (杨剑), a researcher at Shanghai International Institute, this concept has two meanings: first, it means that China is a non-Arctic state that has neither territory nor sovereignty in the Arctic, except for some legitimate rights in the Arctic in accordance with international law; second, it signals geographical closeness between China and the Arctic; that is, China is a country with huge territory located in the northern hemisphere on which the Arctic climatic system has a significant impact. The natural environmental system in the Arctic is closely linked to the operation of China’s ecosystems and impacts the stability of China’s ecosystem and the security of China’s agricultural production.⁶¹ Moreover, this concept implies that there is a difference between China and other non-Arctic states that are further away from the Arctic, the purpose of construction of this term being to narrow the ‘identity distance’ with those Arctic states so as to overcome the disadvantage of the reality that China is a non-Arctic state.⁶²

Another Chinese scholar, Dong Limin (董利民), straightforwardly points out that such a self-ascribed status faces challenges due to the long distance between China’s border and the Arctic Circle, so this concept cannot guarantee the legitimacy of China’s participation in Arctic affairs.⁶³ According to Dong, so far only China and Britain have claimed to be near-Arctic states; other states such as Japan, South Korea, Germany and France have shown indifference to this claim. Thus, it would be very hard for China’s self-ascribed ‘Near-Arctic State’ status to gain recognition from the international community.⁶⁴ Despite this, the Chinese government adopted this concept in its *China’s Arctic Policy*—the first White Paper on its policy towards the Arctic issued in January 2018, in which the Chinese government claims that ‘Geographically, China is a “Near-Arctic State”, one of the continental States that are closest to the Arctic Circle’.⁶⁵

In addition to ‘Near-Arctic State’ status, China has also tried to portray itself as ‘an important Arctic stakeholder’, a term coined by some Chinese scholars, which has been frequently used in Chinese diplomatic rhetoric since October 2015.⁶⁶ For instance, at the third Arctic Circle Assembly meeting held in October 2015, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) officially claimed in his video message to this meeting that ‘China is an important Arctic stakeholder’, which was clarified in detail by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang

⁵⁹Liu Zhonghua and Shang Lu, ‘Zhongguo chengwei Beiji Lishihui zhengshi guanchayuan [China becomes a Formal Observer of the Arctic Council]’, *Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily)*, 16 May 2013) <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0516/c83083-21501270.html> accessed 19 December 2020; Sheman X. Lai, ‘China’s Arctic Policy and Its Potential Impact on Canada’s Arctic Security’ (*The Canadian Naval Review*, 17 April 2019) <http://cimsec.org/chinas-arctic-policy-and-its-potential-impact-on-canadas-arctic-security/40180> accessed 19 December 2020.

⁶⁰Lu Junyuan, *Beiji Diyuan Zhengzhi yu Zhongguo Yingdui [Arctic Geopolitics and China’s Response]* (Shishi Chubanshe 2010), 338–40.

⁶¹Yang Jian, ‘Zhongguo de Beiji zhengce Jiedu [An Interpretation of China’s Arctic Policy]’ (2018) 3 *Taipingyang Xuebao [Pacific Journal]* 3.

⁶²Dong Limin, ‘Zhongguo “Beiji liyi youguanfang” shenfen jiangou—lilun yu shijian [The Construction of China’s Identity of “Arctic Stakeholder”]’ (2017) 6 *Taipingyang Xuebao [Pacific Journal]* 68.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid. 69.

⁶⁵Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (IOSC), *China’s Arctic Policy* (26 January 2018) http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm accessed 2 June 2019.

⁶⁶Wang Xinhe, ‘Guojia liyi shijiao xia de Zhongguo Beiji shenfen [Chinese Arctic Identity from the Perspective of National Interests]’ (2013) 5 *Taipingyang Xuebao [Pacific Journal]* 81–89; Sun Kai, ‘Canyu shijian, huayu hudong yu shenfen chengren—lijie Zhongguo canyu Beiji shiwu de jincheng [Practice of Engagement, Discourse Interaction and Identity Recognition: Understanding China’s Participation in Arctic affairs]’ 2014 (7) *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi [World Economics and Politics]* 42–62.

Ming (张明) in his keynote speech at this assembly.⁶⁷ In November 2015, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei (洪磊) reiterated this concept at a regular press conference, which was claimed once again by Gao Feng (高峰), China's special representative for climate change negotiations, at the fourth conference of the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2016.⁶⁸ Moreover, at the Fourth International Arctic Forum (AIF) held in Arkhangelsk, Russia, in March 2017, Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang (汪洋) also claimed that 'China is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs', and 'China is willing to and able to play a greater role in Arctic development and cooperation'.⁶⁹ According to Elizabeth Wishnick, "'Arctic stakeholder" is the best descriptor for China's Arctic identity, in that the term situates the country as a legitimate participant rather than an external player and opens the possibility for China to be a responsible and cooperative partner'.⁷⁰

Self-Claiming Its Rights in the Arctic

Under its *China's Arctic Policy*, the Chinese government has claimed certain rights in the Arctic based on international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Spitsbergen Treaty. More specifically, although China acknowledges that it does not have territorial sovereignty in the Arctic, it claims rights in respect of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines in the high seas and other relevant sea areas in the Arctic Ocean, and rights to resource exploration and exploitation in the Area, pursuant to treaties such as UNCLOS and general international law.⁷¹ In addition, as a signatory to the Spitsbergen Treaty, China enjoys 'the liberty of access and entry to certain areas of the Arctic, the right under conditions of equality and, in accordance with law, to the exercise and practice of scientific research, production and commercial activities such as hunting, fishing, and mining in these areas'.⁷² Moreover, *China's Arctic Policy* insists that China, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, 'shoulders the important mission of jointly promoting peace and security in the Arctic'.⁷³ Furthermore, China states its goal in the Arctic is 'to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic, so as to safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic, and promote sustainable development of the Arctic'.⁷⁴ The White Paper also underscores that China is capable of claiming its rights to 'utilize sea routes and explore and develop the resources in the Arctic'.⁷⁵ Simply put, the claims made in *China's Arctic policy* are a de facto

⁶⁷MOFA, 'Wangyi buzhang zai disanjie Beijiquan luntan dahui kaimushi shang de shipin zhici [Video Message by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly]' (17 October 2015) <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/chn/gxh/zlb/ldzyjh/t1306854.htm>>; MOFA, 'Waijiaobu fubuzhang Zhangming zai disanjie beiji quan luntan dahui Zhongguo guobie zhuanli huiyi shang de zhuzhi fayan [Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming at the China Country Session of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly]' (17 October 2015) https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_chn/ziliao_611306/zyjh_611308/t1306852.shtml> accessed 10 December 2020.

⁶⁸MOFA, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on November 20, 2015' (20 November 2015), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1316837.shtml>; MOFA, 'Waijiaobu qihou bianhua tanpan daibiao Gaofeng shuaituan chuxi disijie Beijiquan luntan dahui [The Special Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Climate Change Negotiations Gao Feng Led a Delegation to Attend the Fourth Arctic Circle Assembly]' (26 October 2016) https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1408828.shtml>; 'Gao Feng tebie daibiao zai disijie Beijiquan luntan dahui kaimushi shang de fayan [Speech by the Special Representative Gao Feng at the Opening Ceremony of the Fourth Arctic Circle Assembly]' (*Arctic Circle*, 2016) <http://www.arcticcircle.org/assemblies/2016/videos>> accessed 10 December 2020.

⁶⁹MOFA, 'Wang Yang Attends the 4th International Arctic Forum' (30 March 2017) http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1451907.shtml> accessed 10 December 2020.

⁷⁰Elizabeth Wishnick, *China's Interests and Goals in the Arctic: Implications for the United States* (U.S. Army War College Press 2017), 30.

⁷¹IOSC, *China's Arctic Policy*.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

declaration to the international community that China should be given its rightful place in Arctic affairs.

Jointly Initiating a New Institution for Arctic Governance

China, Japan and South Korea jointly established ‘the Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic’ in 2016. These three countries have held the dialogue four times, that is, in April 2016, June 2017, June 2018 and July 2019 respectively.⁷⁶ And it was announced that the fifth dialogue was scheduled to be held in Japan in 2020, but, due to the pandemic, this dialogue has not taken place by the time of writing.⁷⁷ According to Lanteigne, ‘Although this area of trilateral cooperation remains nascent, the initiative underscored Beijing’s commitment to develop Arctic collaboration on the East Asian regional level and to also press the idea that Arctic affairs could and should also be addressed by states outside of that region’.⁷⁸ This strategy can be seen as China’s attempt to legitimize its participation in Arctic affairs, which is identical to what Hedley Bull described decades ago: ‘One of the means by which the great powers can seek to legitimise their role is by co-opting the major secondary powers, which are by definition their major potential rivals, as junior partners in their system of global management’.⁷⁹

Self-Designating a Development Model for the Arctic

China has created a ‘Polar Silk Road’ for the development of the Arctic, which has become a part of its broader ‘Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)’ – an inter-connectivity with the infrastructure development project aimed at connecting China and Asia and Europe.⁸⁰ In practice, it took several years for China to formulate the ‘Polar Silk Road’. As early as January 2013, China issued its ‘12th Five-Year Development Plan for National Maritime Economy’, which not only mentioned the Arctic in its foreword, but also devoted a whole chapter to polar affairs in general and Arctic affairs in particular, especially in terms of the investigation and research into the use of the Arctic sea routes and regularization of China’s Arctic expeditions.⁸¹ In June 2014, the *Strategic Review 2013*, a report issued by a Chinese military think-tank, emphasized the Arctic’s strategic value in ocean shipping and resource development, viewing the Arctic high seas as the common heritage of mankind and positing China’s

⁷⁶Joint Press Release of the First Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic Among the Republic of Korea, Japan, and the People’s Republic of China’ (*Arctic Portal*, 28 April 2016) <https://arcticportal.org/ap-library/news/1742-joint-press-release-of-the-first-trilateral-high-level-dialogue-on-the-arctic-among-the-republic-of-korea-japan-and-the-people-s-republic-of-china>> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘The Second Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic’ (7 June 2017) https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001618.html> MOFA, ‘Joint Statement the Third Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic’ (8 June 2018) https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1567103.shtml> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Korea, ‘The Fourth Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic, Busan, June 25–26, 2019’ (27 June 2019) http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=320574> accessed 21 December 2020.

⁷⁷‘Hanmei: Hanguo wajiaobu zhuban de disilun Zhong Ri Han Beiiji shiwu gaojibie duihua zai Han juxing [Korean Media: The Fourth Round of China-Japan-Korea High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic Affairs was Hosted by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs]’, *Jidi yu Haiyang Menghu* (*Polar and Ocean Portal*, 11 July 2019) <http://www.polaroceanportal.com/article/2758>> accessed 21 December 2020.

⁷⁸Marc Lanteigne, ‘Not Stopping Cold: China’s Emerging Strategies in the Arctic’ (December 2016) 6, < https://www.irsem.fr/data/files/irsem/documents/document/file/364/OBS_Chine_201612-NA13-Chine%20Arctique.pdf accessed 21 December 2020.

⁷⁹Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (4th edn, Palgrave Macmillan 2012), 222.

⁸⁰For more details about the BRI, see Hong Yu, ‘Motivation behind China’s “One Belt, One Road” Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank’ (2017) 26(105) *Journal of Contemporary China* 353–68; Fuzuo Wu, ‘India’s Pragmatic Foreign Policy toward China’s BRI and AIIB: Struggling for Relative and Absolute Gains’ (2020) 29(123) *Journal of Contemporary China* 354–68.

⁸¹The State Council, ‘Guojia hangyang shiye fazhan “shierwu” guihua [The Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the Development of China’s Maritime Industry]’ (25 January 2013) http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2014-09/02/content_2744175.htm> accessed 12 November 2020.

right to share Arctic resources as an ‘important strategic interest’.⁸² In June 2017, China’s National Development and Reform Commission and State Oceanic Administration jointly issued ‘the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative’, in which a blue economic passage was envisioned leading to Europe via the Arctic Ocean.⁸³ In this official document, China put forward the idea of building a ‘Polar Silk Road’ for the first time. One month later, in July 2017, Xi Jinping met with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev during his official visit to Russia, Xi proposed that Russia and China should jointly build the ‘Polar Silk Road’.⁸⁴

China officially announced the ‘Polar Silk Road’ in *China’s Arctic Policy* and put forward its aim to ‘facilitate connectivity and sustainable economic and social development of the Arctic’, while the way to build it is ‘through developing the Arctic shipping routes’ with all parties in the Arctic.⁸⁵ Simply put, China sought international cooperation to build a ‘Polar Silk Road’ or ‘blue economic passage’, linking it with Europe through the Arctic Ocean, which is to be included in the BRI.⁸⁶ Thus, *China’s Arctic Policy* officially announced the inclusion of the Polar Silk Road in its BRI. The White Paper claims that ‘China’s capital, technology, market, knowledge and experience is expected to play a major role in expanding the network of shipping routes in the Arctic and facilitating the economic and social progress of the coastal States along the routes’.⁸⁷ To build such a road, the Chinese government encouraged its enterprises to participate in the construction of infrastructure for those routes and conduct commercial trial voyages.⁸⁸ A Western commentary on this ‘Polar Silk Road’ suggests that it is ‘set to project China’s alleged “wisdom in global governance” and to showcase China’s benevolent contribution to the international order as part of China’s alternative global governance model’.⁸⁹ Three Chinese scholars echo this view by pointing out that the real goal of the ‘Polar Silk Road’ is to reshape the Arctic’s international cooperative mechanisms.⁹⁰ In other words, China is employing the ‘Polar Silk Road’ to reshape Arctic governance.

Symbolically Displaying Its Military Power in the Arctic

China has already begun to symbolically display its military capability to reach the Arctic region. For instance, in September 2015, five ships of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), including a replenishment vessel, an amphibious landing ship and three combat ships, made a visit to the Bering Sea off Alaska after a joint military exercise with Russia, which was detected by the US military.⁹¹ This was the first time the US military had observed Chinese naval ships in the Bering Sea, and the US Department of Defense (DoD)

⁸²Chen Zhou jiedu Zhongguo Zhanglve Pinggu Baogaobada hexin wenti [Chen Zhou Interpreted the Eight Core Issues of *China’s Strategic Review Report*] (26 June 2014) http://mil.cnr.cn/jmhdd/gfxgx/jsfsy/201406/t20140626_515736486_4.html> accessed 12 November 2020.

⁸³Full text: Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative’ (*Xinhua*, 20 June 2017) http://www.china.org.cn/world/2017-06/20/content_41063286_2.htm> accessed 2 November, 2020.

⁸⁴IOSC, *China’s Arctic Policy*.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Donald Gasper, ‘China and Russia Want to Develop Arctic Energy Resources Together, and US Disapproval may Not Deter Them’ (*South China Morning Post*, 12 September 2018) <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/asia/article/2163719/china-and-russia-want-to-develop-arctic-energy-resources>> accessed 12 November 2020.

⁸⁷IOSC, *China’s Arctic Policy*.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Gisela Grieger, ‘China’s Arctic Policy: How China Aligns Rights and Interests’ (*European Parliamentary Research Service*, May 2018) 4 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/620231/EPRS_BRI2018620231_EN.pdf> accessed 12 November 2020.

⁹⁰Xie Xiaoguang, Cheng Xinbo and Li Peishen, “‘Bingshang Sichou Zhilu” jianshezong Beiji guoji hezuo jizhi de chongsu [Rebuilding the Arctic International Cooperative Mechanism in the Construction of “Silk Road on Ice”]’ (2019) 2 *Zhongguo Hangyang Daxue Xuebao*– Shehui Kexueban [*Journal of Ocean University of China*– Social Sciences] 13–25.

⁹¹Andrea Chen, ‘Chinese Navy Sends Washington a Message by Patrolling Near Largest US State Alaska’ (*South China Morning Post*, 4 September 2015) <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1855448/chinese-navy-sends-america-message-patrolling-near>> accessed 12 November 2020.

acknowledged that those ships were in international waters and did not pose a threat.⁹² According to some military observers, the PLAN's display was aimed at demonstrating its ability to operate near the US coast and the Arctic Ocean.⁹³ One month later, in October 2015, three of the PLAN's vessels—a missile destroyer, a missile frigate and a replenishment ship—visited Denmark, Finland and Sweden, three member countries of the Arctic Council, as a kind of military diplomacy by the PLAN.⁹⁴ This was regarded as the PLAN's desire to demonstrate its global capabilities as well as its interest in the Arctic region.⁹⁵ In fact, as early as 2009, Robert Ross had already noted the impact of the PLAN's naval nationalist narratives on China's policy-making.⁹⁶

To sum up, since late 2012, the 'China Dream', an official narrative of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, has driven China to undertake proactive measures to engage with the Arctic region, including the enhancement of its scientific research in the Arctic, self-ascribing 'a Near-Arctic State' status, self-claiming a number of rights in the Arctic, jointly initiating a new institution with Japan and South Korea for Arctic governance, developing the 'Polar Silk Road', as well as displaying its military might in the Arctic region.

Geopolitical Reality Has Pushed Back China's Engagement

As mentioned above, China does not have any territorial sovereignty in the Arctic, so it's no surprise that its proactive measures, driven by the 'China Dream' narrative, have encountered a lot of pushback from the Arctic countries.⁹⁷ According to Lu Junyuan, geopolitical competition between the Arctic countries themselves entered a new stage in the early 2000s when Norway, Denmark, Russia, the US and Canada promulgated their respective new Arctic policy between 2006 and 2009.⁹⁸ Although the US had ignored the Arctic since the end of the Cold War, being depicted as a 'reluctant participant' and a 'weaker' player in Arctic affairs, since the Obama administration, the US has begun to attach greater importance to Arctic affairs and has set up the strategic goal of reestablishing its leadership in the region.⁹⁹

US official documents have already sounded alarms about China's engagement with the Arctic. For instance, in its annual report to the US Congress on China's military in 2019, the US DoD 'included for the first time a section about the Arctic and warned of the risks of a growing Chinese presence in the region, including the possible deployment of nuclear submarines in the future'.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, in its 2019 Arctic Strategy, the US DoD regarded the Arctic as 'a potential avenue for expanded great power competition and aggression'.¹⁰¹

At the same time, the US has already taken measures to counter China's engagement with the Arctic. Rhetorically, the US flatly rejected China's self-ascribed 'Near-Arctic State' status.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴James Char and Richard A. Bitzinger, 'A New Direction in the People's Liberation Army's Emergent Strategic Thinking, Roles and Missions' (December 2017) 232 *The China Quarterly* 857.

⁹⁵Shannon Tiezzi, 'China's Navy Makes First-Ever Tour of Europe's Arctic States' (*The Diplomat*, 2 October 2015) <https://thediplomat.com/2015/10/chinas-navy-makes-first-ever-tour-of-europes-arctic-states/>> accessed 12 November 2020.

⁹⁶Robert S. Ross, 'China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response' (2009) 34(2) *International Security*, 46–81.

⁹⁷Ye Jiang, 'Shilun Beijing shiwu zhong diyuan zhengzhi lilun yu zhili lilun de shuangchong yingxiang [On the Double Influence of Geopolitical Theory and Governance Theory on the Arctic Affairs]' 2013 (2) *Guoji GuanCha [International Review]* 32–38.

⁹⁸Lu Junyuan, 'Beiji guoji xin Beijing zhengce de gongtong quxiang ji duice sikao [The Common Orientation of the Arctic States' New Arctic Policy and China's Countermeasures]', (2011) 3 *Guoji Guanxi Xueyuan Xuebao [Journal of University of International Relations]* 63–69.

⁹⁹The White House, 'National Strategy for the Arctic Region, (May 2013), 6–8, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nat_arctic_strategy.pdf> accessed 6 September 2020; Guo Peiqing and Dong Limin, 'Meiguo de Beijing zhanlve [US Arctic Strategy]' (2015) 6 *Meiguo Yanjiu [American Studies]* 47–65.

¹⁰⁰Somini Sengupta and Steven Lee Myers, 'Latest Arena for China's Growing Global Ambitions: The Arctic' (*New York Times*, 24 May 2019) <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/24/climate/china-arctic.html>> accessed 6 September 2020.

¹⁰¹Department of Defense (DoD), *Report to Congress Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* (June 2019), 6, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>> accessed 6 September 2020.

For instance, the US former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo refuted this status at the Arctic Council foreign ministers' meeting in May 2019: 'Beijing claims to be a "Near-Arctic State", yet the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles. There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing'.¹⁰² Similarly, the US DoD Arctic Strategy strongly denied China's claim: 'Despite China's claim of being a "Near Arctic State", the United States does not recognize any such status'.¹⁰³

Through their actions, both the US and Denmark jointly stymied China's efforts to seek a footing in Greenland.¹⁰⁴ For instance, in 2016 Denmark turned down an offer from Chinese mining company General Nice Group to buy the US abandoned naval base on Greenland, worrying that China's acquisition of such a base might lead it to have a potential military foothold in Greenland.¹⁰⁵ In 2018, when China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) bid for the construction and renovation of Greenland's three airports, the US former defense secretary Jim Mattis was very concerned because of those airports' potential military applications, so the US DoD made a case to Denmark that the Danish government should fund the facilities so as to stop the Chinese company from obtaining them.¹⁰⁶ Under pressure from the US, the Danish government eventually agreed to grant loans for two of the three airports, with the US DoD funding the third airport's infrastructure.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Denmark, supported by the US, successfully barred CCCC from gaining access to the construction of Greenland's airports which, according to a BBC news report, makes it impossible for China to establish a base in the Arctic.¹⁰⁸ In spite of these two failed attempts, according to the US 2019 Arctic Strategy mentioned above, 'China also continues to seek opportunities to invest in dual-use infrastructure in the Arctic'.¹⁰⁹

Russia, the largest Arctic state in terms of territory, coastline and population, has regarded the Arctic as its own 'backyard', so it has been wary of China's involvement in Arctic affairs.¹¹⁰ As previously mentioned, Russia had strongly opposed the admission of China as an observer to the Arctic Council.¹¹¹ Although Russia has largely accepted China's presence in its energy projects in the Arctic region since 2014, when Western countries imposed heavy economic sanctions against Russia due to its aggressive policy toward Ukraine, it has continued to be suspicious of China's intentions in the Arctic because China's self-ascribed 'Near-Arctic State' status and self-claimed rights over Arctic sea routes and resources potentially pose challenges to Russia's own sovereignty and economic interests in this region.

¹⁰²Pompeo, 'Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus'.

¹⁰³DoD, *Report to Congress Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*, 5.

¹⁰⁴Drew Hinshaw and Jeremy Page, 'How the Pentagon Countered China's Designs on Greenland' (*The Wall Street Journal*, 10 February 2019) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-pentagon-countered-chinas-designs-on-greenland-11549812296>> accessed 14 November 2020.

¹⁰⁵Denmark Rejects Chinese Firm's Bid to Buy Abandoned Greenland Naval Base, to Avoid Upsetting US' (*Reuters*, 7 April 2017) <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/2085555/denmark-rejects-chinese-firms-offer-buy-abandoned-naval-base-and>> accessed 14 November 2020.

¹⁰⁶Dan Lamothe, 'Trump Administration's New Arctic Defense Strategy Expected to Zero in on Concerns about China' (*The Washington Post*, 15 March 2019) https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2019/03/15/trump-administrations-new-arctic-defense-strategy-expected-zero-concerns-about-china/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c577cd1069d7> accessed 14 November 2020.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸John Simpson, 'How Greenland Could become China's Arctic Base' (*BBC News*, 18 December 2018) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46386867>> accessed 14 November 2020.

¹⁰⁹DoD, *Report to Congress Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*, 5.

¹¹⁰Lincoln E. Flake, 'Russia and China in the Arctic: A Team of Rivals' (2013) 37(6) *Strategic Analysis* 681; Wang Peng, 'Eluosi "chongfan Beijing" qianghua junshi cunzai [Russia "Returns to the Arctic" Strengthens Its Military Presence]' *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (*China Youth Daily*, 24 January 2019) http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2019-01/24/c_1210046842.htm> accessed 14 November 2020.

¹¹¹Liu, Sun and Qing, 'China has Waited for 7 Years to become a Formal Observer of the Arctic Council'.

Accordingly, Russia 'is disinclined to treat China as an equal in the Arctic'.¹¹² Moreover, like the US, Russia has also employed diplomatic rhetoric and action to stymie China's ambitions in the Arctic. In diplomatic rhetoric, Russia has made it clear that if there are any breaches of behavior on the part of the observers of the Arctic Council, those countries' observer status 'can be reconsidered and even revoked'.¹¹³ In February 2020, Russia accused one of its top Arctic scientists of passing state secrets to China, which highlights the 'competition between Russia and China even after the two began to develop a strategic partnership in response to rising tensions with the West'.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

China's nationalist narratives and the geopolitical reality in the Arctic have interplayed to shape China's engagement with the Arctic. On the one hand, Chinese nationalist narratives not only initiated but also facilitated China's engagement with the Arctic. Especially, China's proactive measures driven by the 'China dream', an official narrative put forth by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, have already revealed its revisionist intentions in this region, that is, not only to seek its rightful place in Arctic governance but also to try to shape such governance in its own way.¹¹⁵ On the other, however, due to the fact that China does not have any territorial sovereignty in the Arctic, the eight Arctic countries have already become wary of China's engagement with this region to varying degrees. This wariness, and even suspicion, has led the US and Russia, as well as the rest of the Arctic states, to take counter measures to push back China's attempts to participate in Arctic affairs, including refuting its self-ascribed 'a Near-Arctic State' status as well as frustrating its efforts to obtain a footing in the Arctic.¹¹⁶ Thus, the Arctic geopolitical reality has largely stymied China's ambition to attain the status of an Arctic great power.¹¹⁷

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¹¹²Zhai Dongjing, 'Eluosi "Chongfan Beiji" jiang qi naru guojia anquan tixi [Russia 'returns to the Arctic' and incorporates it into its national security system]' *Zhongguo Guofangbao* [China National Defense News] (2 January 2019) http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2019-01/02/c_1210028967.htm accessed 14 November 2020; Flake, 'Russia and China in the Arctic', 681.

¹¹³Sørensen and Klimenko, 'Emerging Chinese—Russian Cooperation in the Arctic Possibilities and Constraints'.

¹¹⁴Henry Meyer and Stepan Kravchenko, 'Russia Accuses Leading Arctic Scientist of Spying for China', *Bloomberg* (15 June 2020) <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-15/russia-accuses-scientist-of-spying-for-china-interfax-says> accessed 14 November 2020.

¹¹⁵This echoes Suisheng Zhao's observation of China being a revisionist stakeholder, see Suisheng Zhao, 'A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order' (2018) 27(113) *Journal of Contemporary China* 643–58.

¹¹⁶Mikkel Runge Olesen and Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen, 'Intensifying Great Power Politics in the Arctic—Points for Consideration by the Kingdom of Denmark' (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019) https://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/3166021/Intensifying_great_power_politics_Arctic_DIIS_Report_2019_08.pdf accessed 15 November 2020.

¹¹⁷This conclusion is in stark contrast with Brady's view that China has become a great power in both the Antarctic and the Arctic. For more details, see Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*.

Notes on contributor

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