

Why China Is Not a Peer Competitor in the Arctic

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC) asserts that it is a “near-Arctic state” and an “important stakeholder in Arctic affairs” with the right to a greater role in Arctic governance. China's interests in and future designs for the region have become a staple of the burgeoning literature on Arctic security and governance, seemingly legitimizing China's claim to be a core actor in the circumpolar North. This article questions such narratives, which tend to echo Beijing's own narrative about the importance and significance of China's Arctic presence. We contend that, although the Arctic fits within Beijing's broader global agenda of shaping the international system, China is not a peer or even near-peer of the Arctic states in an Arctic context. In overinflating the importance of China as a regional actor, commentators have often overstated the scale of Chinese investment and other forms of engagement in the Arctic. China's push into the Arctic has met far more resistance, and its presence remains far more tenuous, than Beijing advertises.

The rise of China and the shift toward a multipolar world has dominated international relations discourse over the past 20 years,¹ prompting various regional narratives that seek to frame and understand specific Chinese intentions and capabilities. One of the most dramatic of these has been polar narratives of China's rising interests as a “near-Arctic state” and Beijing's future designs for the region, which have become a staple of the burgeoning literature on Arctic security and governance over the past decade. Many of these Arctic narratives are defined by suspicion and even fatalism stemming from assumptions that an increasingly powerful China seeks to undermine the sovereignty of Arctic states and co-opt regional governance mechanisms to facilitate Beijing's access to resources to fuel and new sea routes to connect China's growing, informal, global empire.

For years, People's Republic of China (PRC) official statements and state-run media have asserted that China is a near-Arctic state (近北极国家, *jin beiji guojia*) and an “important stakeholder in Arctic affairs” (北极利益攸关者, *beiji*

liyi youguanzhe)² with the right to a greater role in Arctic governance, defining the region as a *global commons* (全球公域, *quanqiu gongyu*) rather than a strictly regional space.³ Lacking a geographical connection to the Arctic, China legitimizes this status through extensive scientific research, investment, and economic development in the North. In an illustrative article for the *Guanming Daily* in April 2021, Dong Yongzai, a research associate at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Academy of Military Science, echoes a common theme in Chinese political, academic, and media commentary: namely that China “should play a constructive role in improving the rules of polar governance, promoting peace and stability in the polar regions, and safeguarding the common interests of all countries and the international community.”⁴ In so doing, Beijing advances the “community of human destiny” in the polar regions.⁵ This phrase is an increasingly dominant frame in Chinese messaging, which encompass the idea that China must be more active in shaping global affairs as it seeks to realize the “Chinese dream” of what Xi Jinping refers to as the “great rejuvenation”—essentially, China's return to the center of world civilization.⁶

The Arctic thus fits within Beijing's broader global agenda, which seeks to advance economic growth, assert regional and global leadership in evolving economic and security architectures,⁷ and legitimize China's role in “contributing our share to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind,” to quote Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng.⁸ China self-identifies as a “polar power” (极地大国, *jidi daguo*) that aspires to become a “polar great power” (极地强国, *jidi qiangguo*) by 2030, hence Beijing's perceived need to be “dominant in the polar regions.”⁹ Chinese concepts and frames that describe what the Arctic is to the world include *global commons*, a “shared heritage of mankind” (人类共同遗产, *renlei gongtong yichan*), a “window for observing global warming” (全球变暖的窗口, *quanqiu bian nuan de chuankou*), and a “treasure trove of resources” (资源的宝库, *ziyuan de baoku*).¹⁰ As Danish analyst Patrik Andersson astutely observes, though, “most of these concepts or ideas did not originate in China, nor is China the only country that promotes them,” but they form part of a Chinese discursive strategy as it argues for the rights of a “non-Arctic state” to participate in Arctic affairs.¹¹ Through Beijing's regional strategy, China hopes to secure competitive advantage and access without derailing other strategic objectives (particularly economic ones) and relationships with Arctic states. Behind this messaging, however, China's push into the Arctic has met far more resistance, and its presence remains far more tenuous than Beijing advertises. Ironically, this fact is commonly overlooked in the West, which tends to echo Beijing's own narrative about China's Arctic presence. In mischaracterizing China as a peer or near-peer competitor in the Arctic, however, Western commentators run the risk of advancing China's “three war-

fares” (三战, *sān zhǒng zhàn fǎ*) strategy aimed at “undermining international institutions, changing borders, and subverting global media, all without firing a shot.”¹²

Threat = Capability + Intent and Opportunity

Beijing’s overarching approach to the Arctic region is framed by China’s 2018 *Arctic White Paper*, a document which harmonized years of political statements into a coherent (albeit general) set of regional ambitions. This policy focuses on four key areas: shipping, resource development, regional governance, and science. Underlying these specific priorities is an ever-present and overarching theme of respect and participation: respect for China’s interests in the Arctic and for the involvement of non-Arctic states in the region. It asserts that China is an important actor with a say in regional development and governance, as well as a responsible and reliable partner for Arctic states.

Chinese strategic messaging with respect to the Arctic promotes an image of China as a peaceful and friendly world power seeking “win-win” economic cooperation.¹³ This narrative is common to Chinese messaging around the world. Beijing’s purpose is to blunt foreign criticism while facilitating investment, scientific collaboration, and the entrenchment of Chinese facilities and programs in foreign states. This supposed win-win approach toward the Arctic is designed to facilitate access to shipping routes, Chinese direct foreign investment in energy and mining projects, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects, and (potentially dual-purpose) scientific research. The Arctic still holds the *promise* of resources and shipping routes that could one day be important as part of a global BRI as a Polar Silk Road (PSR).¹⁴ Many of these resources are still not economically viable, however, and polar ice continues to obstruct potential shipping lanes and present uncertainty for shipping interests. As such, China’s short-term Arctic interests are more modest than many Western commentators suggest.¹⁵

China’s interests and activities in the Arctic are not inherently illegitimate. Academics, strategic analysts, journalists, and pundits continue to debate the underlying motives and long-term desires behind China’s growing Arctic investments. In its 2018 *Arctic White Paper*, Beijing articulated its entirely reasonable interest in polar research and science (particularly relating to climate change), as well as vested interests in natural resources and prospective Arctic shipping routes (which are to be expected from a resource-hungry country dependent upon maritime commerce). Furthermore, Beijing’s participation in regional governance fora befit a rising global power aspiring to enhance its status and influence in international affairs. Western commentators’ tendency toward outrage or alarm at China’s interests in Arctic resources and shipping routes is understandable given Beijing’s broader challenge to the rules-based international order, but many of these warn-

ings imply that China should not act out of rational state self-interest. These Western assertions—that China should simply stay out of the region—also fail to acknowledge that country’s legitimate—versus *undesirable*—interests in Arctic affairs, and by extension those of other non-Arctic states. When Western commentators highlight the primacy of upholding the rules-based order, they must also extend rights within that order to competitors like China.

Optimistic views of China’s potential contribution to the Arctic emphasize the value of foreign investment to advance resource-development projects, scientific cooperation, inclusive governance, and opportunities to draw Asian states into Arctic “ways of thinking.”¹⁶ Positive relations with Arctic states are inherently predicated on China respecting Arctic state sovereignty in the terrestrial and maritime domains, as well as coastal state sovereign rights to exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and extended continental shelves. This is consistent with international law, which China promises to respect in its 2018 *Arctic White Paper*.¹⁷ China’s growing interest in polar scientific research can contribute to enhanced international understandings of Arctic dynamics, particularly in the natural sciences. Heightened but appropriate Chinese involvement in Arctic governance, with due respect for Arctic states, can bolster regional stability provided China behaves according to established norms, as it has done to date in the Arctic.¹⁸

While Beijing’s positive Arctic narratives and potential value to the Arctic states secured China a degree of regional acceptance in the 2010s, its recent shift to a more aggressive form of *wolf warrior diplomacy*, coupled with significant human rights violations, have led to a discernible shift in how Arctic states perceive China and its presence. Chinese soft power across the democratic Arctic has fallen precipitously in recent years, while recent American strategic documents have elevated China to the status of a primary threat to the Arctic. This messaging is informed by the framework established in the United States’ 2017 *National Security Strategy* and 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, both of which identify strategic competition with China and Russia as “the principal challenge to long-term U.S. security and prosperity.”¹⁹ The US Department of Defense’s (DOD) *Arctic Strategy* (2019) declares that “in different ways, Russia and China *are* challenging the rules-based order in the Arctic.” The report asserts that “China is attempting to gain a role in the Arctic in ways that *may* undermine international rules and norms, and there is *a risk that* its predatory economic behavior globally *may* be repeated in the Arctic [emphasis added].” Identifying China’s Arctic interests as “primarily focused on access to natural resources and the opportunities offered by the Arctic sea routes for Chinese shipping,” the *Arctic Strategy* notes that China is “increasing its presence through economic outreach, investments in Arctic states’ strategic sectors, and scientific activities.”²⁰

Expressions of concern by Western commentators usually cite unofficial statements from Chinese commentators, who describe the existing Arctic governance system as insufficient or unfair and call for fundamental revision—a direct contradiction of the messaging in China’s official policy. One dominant Western school of thought asserts that China is adopting a clandestine “bait and switch” strategy designed to secure entrance into Arctic state markets as an investor but with the real goal of securing political influence.²¹ Commentator Roger W. Robinson, Jr., posits that China’s Arctic strategy is “based on a term used in the confidence racket—the ‘long con,’” with significant Chinese soft-power investment in climate research and multilateral fora designed to disarm other Arctic actors before Beijing turns “the dial to its hard strategy” to secure Arctic energy and fishing resources and shape “the rules and political arrangements governing the use of strategic waterways now gradually opening due to melting ice” for its benefit.²² Such narratives reflect deep-seated mistrust of the communist political system and of Beijing’s geopolitical ambitions.

In a recent reflection on why Arctic states continue to express concerns about China’s intentions in the Arctic, international legal scholar Nengye Liu notes that the rationale is deeper than a mistrust of the Chinese regime: “Most suspicions about China’s role in the Arctic stem from the concern that China may break the rules,” such as claiming areas of the Arctic under national jurisdiction and violating international law as it has done in the South China Sea. Instead, Liu suggests,

The root of anxieties from Arctic states regarding China’s rise, which they may or may not be conscious of, is not about rules at all, but order. The existing rules-based order in the Arctic, underpinned by UNCLOS [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea], has a hidden power structure. Within this power structure, the Arctic states take the drivers’ seat or “stewardship” role in governing the region, which should of course be the case. A rising China, a major power from outside the region, will inevitably shake the existing power structure. A shifting order may then be legitimized by the future development of international law.²³

In this sense, China is not a peer competitor in terms of its actual *Arctic* capabilities but instead a rising global power that may wield its international influence to revise the regional power structure.

The Middle Kingdom and the Arctic

In a nuanced study on foreign policy hierarchies in China, Andersson differentiates between the Chinese classification of the Arctic as a “strategic new frontier” and as an “important maritime interest,” with each label assigning the region a different degree of importance.²⁴ Systematic surveys of Chinese academic and

media commentary confirm that northern shipping routes (and the Northern Sea Route [NSR], north of Russia in particular) are—by a wide margin—the most discussed elements of China’s Arctic interests. Of note, Chinese-language academic research and media commentary consistently assert China’s rights of passage through these Arctic waters.²⁵ Still, these rights are asserted as part of China’s global access to the world’s oceans, not as a particular Arctic right. Likewise, Beijing has not mounted any claim to sovereignty or sovereign rights over Arctic resources based on China’s self-declared near-Arctic state status. Rather, China assumes access based on bilateral investment cooperation or otherwise in line with recognized international law.

Arctic states rebuffed what Western commentators saw as an initial Chinese push to internationalize the circumpolar North in the late 2000s. Accordingly, Beijing recalibrated China’s approach in the early 2010s, furnishing the Arctic states with messaging that they wanted to hear about respect for sovereignty and sustainable development and amplifying climate change science as the key issue on which China could build its influence.²⁶ While the Chinese impulse to internationalize the Arctic is still there, it is less overt and central to Beijing’s current approach.²⁷ After all, pushing for regional change beyond the tolerances of the Arctic states would risk major trading relationships. Furthermore, rhetoric questioning the sovereignty or sovereign rights of Arctic states over maritime jurisdictions runs contrary to Chinese efforts to nationalize the East and South China Seas. Accordingly, China has little to gain from upsetting the Arctic status quo—a region of limited consequence to it compared to other parts of the world—and arguably much to lose. Furthermore, China is an accredited observer to the Arctic Council, which, although a much lower status than the Arctic states, provides Beijing a modest place in regional governance and dialogue.²⁸ So too does China’s signature on the Central Arctic Ocean fisheries agreement reached in 2018.²⁹

Over the past decade, the rise of Chinese wolf warrior³⁰ and hostage diplomacy³¹ illustrates Beijing’s willingness to play by international rules only until those rules no longer serve China’s interests. Beijing’s diplomatic practices in the Arctic states now cover a spectrum of behavior from positive reinforcement to coercive tactics, with differing levels of aggression dependent upon the overall tenor of the bilateral relationships and the diplomatic personalities involved, rather than Arctic-specific dynamics or drivers. Nevertheless, we note a discernable increase in Chinese assertiveness in its diplomatic messaging over the past five years. In Sweden, for instance, a formerly constructive relationship based on investment and trade took a sharp turn in 2019 following Swedish criticism of China’s extrajudicial arrest of a Swedish bookseller named Gui Minhai. In an interview with Swedish radio, Chinese Ambassador Gui Congyou warned that,

“for our friends, we have fine wine. For our enemies, we have shotguns” (朋友来了有好酒, 坏人来了有猎枪, *péngyǒu lái le yǒu hào jiǔ, huàirén lái le yǒu lièqiāng*).³² Similar clashes—at varying levels of vitriol—have taken place following Arctic state criticism of China in Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and Canada.

With cynicism about Beijing’s respect for the rule of law or the existing international system, it is difficult to believe that China’s actions in the Arctic will be completely benign if it perceives that Beijing can secure an advantage by breaking the rules—and can get away with it. The significant decline in Western Arctic state public opinion with respect to China in recent years suggests that China’s more aggressive tact is not having the intended effect of shaming or coercing the Arctic states to bow to Beijing’s whims. Instead, this wolf-warrior approach has undermined the win-win narrative that the Chinese sought to foster, while eroding popular support for China in all the Arctic states except Russia as a preferred partner for development. It has also eroded the credibility of the notion that China is an Arctic peer rather than an external actor with a circumscribed set of rights in the region that can only be exercised within the sovereign jurisdictions of the Arctic states with their consent.

An Economic Peer Competitor?

Arctic commentators have spilled a remarkable amount of ink on China’s Arctic economic aspirations when compared to actual Chinese investments in the region. The main argument has been that Chinese investment is a trojan horse to secure access to the Arctic, which the PRC can then exploit for its strategic objectives. This relates to the complex relationship between the Chinese central state’s foreign policy and industrial development priorities and decisions. Academic debate continues about the extent to which Chinese companies follow their own agendas as they advance government policies and how closely aligned (or fragmented) the Chinese commercial and government actors are with respect to the Arctic. Nevertheless, securing access to *strategic* and *critical* resources, controlling strategic infrastructure, and asserting influence over states or local populations through economic tools all serve China’s strategic interests—in the Arctic as elsewhere.³³

That stated, commentators have a strong propensity to focus on *potential* Chinese investments. Sober analysis, however, reveals that the Arctic states have not blindly or naïvely accepted Chinese investments, and recent trends suggest a strong sentiment against attempts by Chinese actors to acquire land or strategic infrastructure in the Arctic.³⁴ A telling example is Chinese real estate tycoon Huang Nubo’s failed 2014 attempt to buy a 218 km² parcel of land near Longyearbyen on Svalbard, ostensibly to build a resort for Chinese tourists. Likewise, Chinese state-owned company General Nice Group’s attempt to purchase a for-

mer naval base in Greenland failed three years later. In 2020, state-owned Shandong Gold Mining announced a deal to buy TMAC Resources and the Hope Bay mining project in Nunavut, Canada. A Canadian review deemed it a national security risk, culminating in a formal rejection in December 2020. These examples are illustrative of a wider trend of growing caution among Arctic states and recognition of the security risks posed by Chinese investment in resource development projects and infrastructure. However, displeased with these outcomes, Beijing has been unable to force China's way in.

As the circumpolar North steadily pushes away from China's win-win narrative, Russia remains the one Arctic state still willing to embrace it. Until 2014, Russia was wary of Beijing's self-described Arctic role, particularly China's desired place in regional governance structures.³⁵ In the wake of Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions, Moscow turned to China for the investment and markets needed to advance Russia's vital Arctic resource projects. Moscow has had some success, most clearly the Yamal LNG project, which is partially owned by China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC) (20 percent) and the Silk Road Fund (9.9 percent). Moscow has also highlighted Russia's growing access to Chinese markets and capital to counter the perception that Western sanctions have been successful in damaging or isolating the Russian economy.

While China's role in Russia's Arctic economy has certainly grown since 2014, this is not representative of a broader or systemic Chinese integration into the region. Chinese multinational oil companies are loath to run afoul of Western sanctions, and China's embrace of Russia has not stopped those firms from discreetly pulling back from new projects. Despite Beijing's official position in opposition to sanctions, the Chinese government seems to recognize the difficulties that it can cause multinational companies. In March, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly summoned officials from the three major energy companies (Sinopec, CNPC, and China National Offshore Oil Corporation [CNOOC]) to review their business ties with Russia and "urged them not to make any rash moves buying Russian assets."³⁶

Relying on Chinese companies for Arctic development presents other problems for Russia. While Chinese companies are still engaged in many of these projects, those state-owned enterprises do not bring the same capabilities as Western partners. From a technological point of view, Russia cannot reliably substitute that lost cooperation with Chinese equivalents. Russian experts have pointed to the partially Chinese-owned Arctic LNG 2 (CNOOC 10 percent / Polar Silk Road 10 percent) project as the most affected by the loss of Western engineering and technological support. Professor Natalia Zubarevich of Moscow

State University made it clear that Russia should not count on China providing these critical technologies.³⁷

A transactional need to avoid conflict and advance resource projects (for Russia) and shipping (for China) has driven Russia and China's cooperative approach to Arctic investment and development. More broadly, the Arctic is an area where the two powers can demonstrate a degree of solidarity as part of their continuing economic and strategic conflict with the United States and the West more broadly. Nevertheless, deep differences remain—and are likely to become harder to disguise as Chinese activity in the region increasingly intrudes in traditional Russian spheres of interest. After all, China does not—and cannot—accept Russian sovereignty and control over much of the maritime space that Russia claims as internal waters.³⁸ Connected to this are questions of China's near-Arctic identity, its economic development, and its shipping activity in the region, which challenge Russian sovereignty and can be perceived as usurping Russia's role in the Arctic as Moscow becomes increasingly tied to, and dependent upon, China. Russia will tolerate China as a partner, but not a peer, in Arctic development. The latter would erode Moscow's strident attempts to legitimize Russia's perceived position as the primary Arctic power.³⁹

While Beijing's Arctic messaging highlights China's role as a leading investor and partner in Arctic development, the reality has been somewhat different for Russia. Despite targeted Chinese investments in projects highlighted as politically important by both leaderships, there remains more rhetoric than actual money. Many joint projects have been announced, but few have moved forward, with substantive cooperation generally held back by red tape, poor infrastructure or economics, and corruption.⁴⁰ Some of the most promising infrastructure projects have also stalled, including China's Poly Group's proposal to invest USD 5.5 billion in the port of Archangelsk.⁴¹ In short, Chinese capital is clearly not as anxious to rush into Russian projects as Russian state media makes it seem. As Yun Sun, the co-director of the Stimson Center's East Asia Program, astutely notes, much of the enthusiastic rhetoric since 2017 about Sino-Russian cooperation with respect to the NSR does not match reality: "Concrete, substantive joint projects are lacking, especially in key areas such as infrastructure development," she notes, owing to "divergent interests, conflicting calculations and vastly different cost-benefit analyses." From a Chinese viewpoint, Russia has touted joint development of the NSR based on strategic and political rationales rather than "practical economic ones," the latter of which remain dubious. Diverging ideas about "what constitutes mutually beneficial compromises . . . will be the biggest obstacle to future progress" between the two countries, Yun anticipates, and "expectations and assessments of the impact of Sino-Russian cooperation specifically

on the Northern Sea Route should be focused on moderate, concrete plans rather than glorified rhetoric.⁴²

The Kremlin views the Arctic, including the NSR, as being firmly within Russia's sphere of influence; the region is central to Moscow's core national security concerns and an important pillar of Russia's economy and future development. Given these views, Russia will react strongly to any influenced perceived to threaten that position.⁴³ To date, many Russian experts claim that their government does not accept the Polar Silk Road moniker, which uncomfortably subsumes the NSR into a China-sponsored initiative.⁴⁴ Moscow has adopted a cooperative position, given Russia's need for Chinese investment in the region, but it refuses to consider China a peer.

China as Military Peer Competitor in the Arctic?

The Arctic is not as central or important to China as the writings of many Western Arctic commentators might suggest. Beijing's main preoccupations are still closer to home. Taiwan still represents the PLA's main *strategic direction*, with other clear priorities including the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and China's borders with India and North Korea.⁴⁵ The PLA's priorities, as expressed by its shipbuilding and force design, certainly demonstrate this focus on China's near-abroad (Taiwan and taking full control of the disputed waters of the South China Sea in particular). In short, the closer a region is to China, the more important it is to Beijing, with Chinese strategists viewing the world as a series of concentric circles of decreasing priority. Beyond Asia, Chinese attention is given to Africa, Europe, and then the Americas. While this means China will risk undertaking provocative actions closer to home, such as military exercises near Taiwan or the PLA's construction and fortification of artificial islands in the South China Sea, it does not mean China will do so in the comparatively distant Arctic.⁴⁶

Given the small Chinese footprint in the Arctic and *hypothetical* military threat in or through the Arctic, what accounts for the vigor with which many political and academic commentators insist that the United States and its Arctic state allies must mount a military response to China in the region? Narratives tend to conflate the more hypothetical risk that China poses as an international actor in the Arctic with the real risk that Beijing already poses as a regional actor in the Pacific. The danger is that over-inflated or misplaced fears about China's military threat to and in the Arctic may prove to be a strategic distraction, diverting Arctic states' attention and defense resources from elsewhere.⁴⁷ In this sense, prematurely elevating China to military peer or near-peer competitor status in the Arctic can divert attention from parts of the world where the PRC's capabilities and interests actually warrant such status.

Within the Chinese bureaucracy, the polar regions are formally categorized as maritime affairs. Accordingly, Beijing's emerging Arctic strategy is part of China's maritime strategy, and policy documents show that China's growing Arctic interests reflect the growing importance that Beijing attaches to maritime affairs.⁴⁸ China's rapid economic rise has fueled its military modernization, but sober analysis shows that very little of this effort has been applied to the Arctic.⁴⁹ China began commissioning a series of ice-capable patrol boats in 2016, though these were not designed for polar ice conditions. China also has two icebreakers that can work through up to 1.5 meters of ice. These, however, are unarmed.⁵⁰ The so-called *icebreaker gap* between China and the United States is more the result of commentators attempting to shame US decision makers into recapitalizing America's own fleet than about Chinese scientific vessels posing threat. China has few aircraft that could reach the Arctic, and the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) nuclear submarine fleet is small and ill-equipped for under-ice operations.⁵¹ Ultimately, we see China's ability to project military power into the Arctic as minimal—a fact unlikely to change in the foreseeable future because of the limited strategic gains to be had in the region compared to commensurate energies invested in other parts of the world.⁵²

A rational calculus of the threat that the Chinese military might pose to Arctic states yields modest risks in even the worst-case scenario. In 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo decried China's "pattern of aggressive behavior" around the world and raised the prospective of PLAN submarines operating under the ice-cap.⁵³ However, as Adam Lajeunesse and Tim Choi have argued, the use of North American waters by Chinese submarines for regular operations is unlikely given the lack of attractive targets in the region, the danger of moving ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) through the Bering Strait, the geographical constraints on Chinese sea control or denial of the region, and the limitations of the Northwest Passage as a route to move joint forces to Asian theaters.⁵⁴

A preoccupation with Chinese icebreakers or even submarines as capabilities designed to challenge Arctic sovereignty or launch attacks against the Arctic states may miss the larger picture. Growing strategic competition between China and the United States affects all the Arctic states, but the epicenter of their competition remains the Indo-Pacific region. The danger in overestimating China's Arctic military capability is that such a narrow fixation draws resources away from the real center of gravity in Sino-Western competition. Along these lines, Beijing may anticipate that any display of Chinese military interest or capability in the region will draw a disproportionate response from the Arctic states. Accordingly, the Arctic may present an enticing opportunity for China to feign strategic interest and bait Arctic states to over-invest in or over-commit capabilities to that region rather than

elsewhere in the world. In short, the Arctic offers potential advantage as a diversionary theater.⁵⁵ In contrast to other commentators' representation of the Arctic as a theater of primary and particular interest for the Chinese,⁵⁶ we suggest that Chinese strategy and behavior in the Arctic are best appreciated as a part of a global expansion of soft power with specific interests centered around economic and long-term governance objectives.

Conclusions

China is a strategic competitor both globally and regionally, but Beijing is not a peer or even near peer in an Arctic context. To suggest that China enjoys such status plays into Beijing's desired narrative about its place as a near-Arctic state with rights and interests throughout the region. Rather than casting China as this regional peer competitor and fixating on China as a direct military threat to Arctic state sovereignty or security, analysts should focus on how Beijing's Arctic strategy reflects its *global* objectives. China does not have unlimited resources, and the level of Beijing's direct investment in the Arctic has been overstated—particularly when it comes to northern infrastructure development. Although few Chinese projects have actually materialized, Western media and experts have inadvertently played into the narrative that China is a key (and even essential) economic player across the Arctic, relying on superficial information and media releases to reinforce China's claims to relevance. Furthermore, China is certainly not a peer to the United States or any other Arctic coastal state in the maritime domain. Its scientific research icebreakers do not have the same presence, impact, and capabilities as the Arctic state fleets, and its knowledge of the region naturally lags those states' considerably—even though China has effectively leveraged its reputation and limited activities to “normalize” its regional presence.⁵⁷

The one part of the Arctic where China may emerge as a peer competitor is in Russia—a scenario borne of Moscow's increasing dependency on Beijing. Across the democratic Arctic there have been multiple instances of Chinese investments derailed by grassroots activism and public opposition. This is less likely to be effective in Russia where state-owned or -controlled businesses and interests are less responsive to popular opinion, and where impressions of China are already very positive. China's influence in Russia is also unique in the sense that Moscow enjoys few alternatives to further cooperation. The decline in Chinese soft-power influence and economic engagement in recent years across the rest of the circum-polar North has been due, in part, to the importance of popular sentiment but also the fact that these states were not reliant on China for political and economic support. That is not true of Russia.⁵⁸

With the latest US *National Security Strategy* naming China as the primary threat to the international system, both the United States and its allies face considerable challenges and opportunities in confronting China as a near-peer competitor around the globe. US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) will play the lead defense-related role for the DOD, with support from US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and US European Command (USEUCOM), while the US Department of State continues to provide the primary national direction. Under these circumstances, the democratic Arctic must remain cognizant that China is *not* a near-peer in the Arctic. Advancing assumptions that it is only helps to advance Chinese influence internationally at the expense of the other Arctic states, including Russia. Acknowledging this reality helps check Chinese influence in the region—particularly over a Russia increasingly reliant on the Middle Kingdom.

While the Arctic continues to represent a strategic space from which to threaten North American security (as the Russians have demonstrated for decades), the region's value for China in the short to medium term may be to divert Arctic state attention and thus open space for Chinese freedom of maneuver elsewhere. In short, rather than framing the Chinese threat as a regional Arctic one, we suggest that the primary lens for strategic foresight analysis should remain on China's international aspirations of which the Arctic forms a modest and still marginal component. The Arctic states are the peers in the Arctic strategic equation, and however much China desires to become a polar great power, Beijing remains firmly in the second tier of Arctic stakeholders—and competitors. 🌐

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Notes

1. See, for example, Zheng Bijan, “China’s Peaceful Rise to Great-power Status,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 18–24; Daniel W. Drezner, “Bad Debts: Assessing China’s Financial Influence in Great Power Politics,” *International Security* 32, no. 2 (2009): 7–45; Wang Jisi, “China’s Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011): 68–79; and John Mearsheimer, “Can China Rise Peacefully?,” *National Interest* 25, no.1 (2014): 1–40.

2. Patrik Andersson, “The Arctic as a ‘Strategic’ and ‘Important’ Chinese Foreign Policy Interest: Exploring the Role of Labels and Hierarchies in China’s Arctic Discourses,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* (3 August 2021): 1–27, <https://doi.org/>.

3. Camilla T.N. Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, “Emerging Chinese–Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Possibilities and Constraints,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) *Policy Paper* 46 (Stockholm: SIPRI, June 2017).

4. Dong Yongzai, “Polar Security: A New Frontier for National Security,” [极地安全：国家安全的新疆域] *Guanming Daily*, 25 April 2021.

5. Sometimes translated to “community with a shared future for mankind” [人类命运共同体].

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45. Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 2 May 2019, iii, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

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55. Dean and Lackenbauer, “China’s Arctic Gambit?”

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57. Millard and Lackenbauer, "Trojan Dragons?"

58. Sergei Ivanov, Klára Dubravčíková, Richard Q. Turcsányi, et al., "Russian Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: A Suspicious Ally" (Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2021), <https://ceias.eu/>. While Russian perceptions are broadly supportive of this relationship, it is not a straightforward embrace of China. Russians approve of Chinese investment and the BRI; however, that support is not overwhelming. This lukewarm support indicates Moscow views China's money and markets as a necessity but also as a risk. If Chinese investment increases in the Russian Arctic in the wake of the broad Western pull-out, this may either cement China's position as Russia's investor of choice or exacerbate existing fears of overreliance on China. Much will depend on the conditions of China's future investment and whether Russians perceive themselves as being taken advantage of.

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