

# The Three-Fold Path of the Snow Dragon

## China's Influence Operations in the Arctic

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### Abstract

This article argues that, since 2013, China's involvement in Arctic affairs has accelerated, and Beijing has begun to assert its political and economic ambitions more formally in its white papers, *Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative*, *China's Arctic Policy*, and *China's National Defense in the New Era*. Simultaneously, China has been conducting influence operations targeting Arctic governance regimes, scientific research, and economic investment in pursuit of long-term strategic objectives. These Chinese influence operations utilize the strategy of the “three warfares”—public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare—to set the conditions such that the consequences, the attainment of long-term strategic objectives, are a natural outcome from its engagement. China's three warfares strategy is designed to cultivate influence through governance, scientific, and economic vectors to construct, support, and set the conditions for the emergence of political power and lay the groundwork for future operations in the Arctic.

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In 2005, the People's Republic of China (PRC) first released public statements indicating its aspiration to become a polar great power with the ability to project influence and power globally from the Arctic to Antarctica.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced the One Belt, One Road initiative, an ambitious transnational infrastructure investment and construction program that has since become known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the PRC published *Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative*, laying out Beijing's intention to establish a maritime economic passage to link mainland China to Europe via the Arctic Ocean. In 2018, the PRC announced its ambition to establish a trans-Arctic shipping route, called the Polar Silk Road (PSR), as part of the BRI.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, Beijing assessed the Arctic region as a “global strategic commanding heights” and an important passage of “geostrategic value.”<sup>4</sup> The PRC utilizes the “three warfares” strategy—public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare—to conduct influence operations in the Arctic.<sup>5</sup>

For the North, the Chinese enterprise of influence operations focuses on three overlapping Arctic areas of interest: the participation in Arctic affairs and governance, scientific research activities and expeditions, and economic investment in critical infrastructure along the PSR.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of these influence operations is to promote narratives of China as an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs, committed to scientific collaboration, research and exploration in the Arctic, and investment in the economic development and prosperity of all Arctic states and that China should be considered an equal partner as a near-Arctic state.<sup>7</sup> These international and domestic narratives, propagated through repetition and presence, aim to secure Beijing a greater political economic advantage, to secure and maintain access to Arctic natural resources, and to shape and align Arctic states to China's interests. The purpose of this article is to frame Chinese influence operations in the Arctic through the concept of the three warfares strategy and understand how these operations serve China's Arctic narratives, support wider political and economic interests, and further advance long-term security and development strategic objectives. To that goal, the article will provide essential context involving official positions and policies, followed by an introduction of how China employs the three warfares into its priority Arctic national interests.

## **Key Policies and Positions**

### ***China's Defense Strategy***

In 2019, the PRC published the *China's National Defense in the New Era* white paper, outlining defensive national security policies and key objectives in order to safeguard China's sovereignty, security, and development interests.<sup>8</sup> Three key national defensive aims in the white paper are of particular importance for understanding Chinese influence operations in the Arctic: (1) the safeguarding of maritime rights and interests, (2) safeguarding overseas interests, and (3) supporting economic and sustainable development. According to the white paper, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established development milestones for People's Liberation Army (PLA) to achieve that involve requirements to improve strategic capabilities by 2020, complete modernization by 2035, and transform into a "world-class" military by the centennial founding of the PRC in 2049.

The PLA is not an institution outside of the CCP, such as the military in the United States system is, rather the PLA an extension of the Party. The PLA function is to protect and preserve the dominance of the CCP inside China, to pursue the Party's directives and interests, and to achieve the CCP's strategic objectives. In the white paper, the CCP has identified overseas interests as a crucial part of

China's national interests. The mission of the PLA is to effectively protect the security, rights, and interests of overseas Chinese citizens, organizations, and institutions by addressing deficiencies in overseas operations and support, build maritime forces, develop overseas logistical facilities, and enhance capabilities to accomplish CCP strategic objectives. According to the PRC, the PLA also conducts overseas support operations focused on vessel protection, maintains the security of strategic sea lines of communication, provides overseas noncombatant evacuation operations, and protects maritime rights throughout the globe.

### ***China's Arctic Strategy***

In 2018, the PRC published *China's Arctic Policy* white paper, outlining China's policy goals, principles, policies, and positions on Arctic affairs, governance and international cooperation, scientific exploration, and exploitation of resources. The white paper describes China as an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs; committed to scientific collaboration, research, and exploration in the Arctic; and invested in the economic development in all Arctic states and asserting China should be considered an equal partner as a near-Arctic state. Changing conditions in the Arctic, claims the white paper, have a direct impact on China's climate, ecological environment, and economic interests; thus, Beijing proposes China should have rights and privileges in the Arctic analogous to those nations having territories within the Arctic Circle. The PRC assessed the current situation in the Arctic "goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature, having a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole, as well as on the survival, the development, and the *shared future for mankind*."<sup>9</sup>

According the *Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China, and NATO* report, the PRC assesses Arctic issues have global implications and international impacts, and "States from outside the Arctic region do not have territorial sovereignty in the Arctic, but *they do have 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 [United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea] and general international law." Thus, Beijing holds Arctic exploration, exploitation, and development of Arctic natural resources as key strategic objectives for China's future energy, economic, and development needs, while portraying China as having "shared interests with Arctic States and a shared future with the rest of the world in the Arctic."<sup>10</sup>

## ***Polar Silk Road***

In 2013, President Xi announced the ambitious and global initiative currently referred to as the BRI. The PRC stated goal of the BRI is to promote policy coordination, the connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, “unimpeded” trade, financial integration, and “people-to-people bonds.”<sup>11</sup> China encourages countries along the BRI routes to “align their strategies,” to further “pragmatic cooperation”, and to build “unobstructed, safe and efficient maritime transport channels.”<sup>12</sup> The BRI promotes cross-border marine spatial planning to establish common principles, implement technical standards, and for the PRC to provide technical assistance to partner countries.

In 2013, China was approved for observer status by the Arctic Council.<sup>13</sup> Since 2013, China’s involvement in Arctic affairs has accelerated, and Beijing has begun to assert its political and economic ambitions more formally in published government documents. In 2017, the PRC published *Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative*, which stated Beijing’s priority to establish a maritime economic passage to link China to Europe via the Arctic Ocean. In 2018, the *China’s Arctic Policy* white paper announced the establishment of the PSR as part of the BRI. The PSR focuses on the development of two Arctic shipping routes: the Transpolar Sea Route (TSR), bisecting the Arctic Ocean from the Chukchi Sea to the Greenland Sea, and, most predominately, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along the northern coast of Russia from the Chukchi Sea to the Barents Sea. Three strategic objectives for the PSR aim to achieve, to include “sustaining economic development,” “[d]efending national sovereignty, security, and development interests,” and “[r]eforming the global system to align with PRC interests.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Sino-Arctic Shaping Efforts**

### ***China’s Influence Operations in the Arctic***

According to the Army Techniques Publication 7-100.3: *Chinese Tactics*, the PRC strategic objectives can be understood in two basic categories: security and development.<sup>15</sup> The PLA’s security objectives include protecting the CCP, defending China’s territorial sovereignty, and deterring attacks against China, Chinese peoples, and Chinese interests by state and nonstate actors. The PLA development objectives include the protection of PRC economic interests, ensuring freedom of navigation for Chinese military and civilian vessels, procuring natural resources, and establishing new markets. The PRC influence operations in the Arctic are best understood through the three warfares strategy to support, reinforce, and achieve the PRC strategic objectives.

According to Stephan Halper in *China: The Three Warfares*, a report to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, these warfares are three mutually reinforcing strategies focused on public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.<sup>16</sup> *Public opinion warfare* represents information operations designed to support PRC interests and operations by shaping public discourse, influencing political positions, and building international sympathy. *Psychological warfare* is defined as information operations targeting a specific audience intended to influence that audience's behavior and are integrated deception operations into conventional and unconventional warfare. *Legal warfare* comprises information operations using domestic and international laws, rules, and norms designed to support PRC political and economic interests through valid legal frameworks and unbalance potential opponents. These Three Warfare strategies are indirect methods are designed to influence a targeted population's perceptions, assessments, and decision making, to facilitate actions by the targeted population that are favorable to China's long-term strategic objectives.<sup>17</sup>

In 2005, the PRC first released public statements indicating its aspiration to become a polar great power with the ability to globally project influence and power from the Arctic to Antarctica. According to leading China polar expert Anne-Marie Brady, "China's thinking on the polar regions and global oceans demonstrates a level of ambition and forward planning that few, if any, modern industrial states can achieve."<sup>18</sup> In 2020, the PRC published *Science of Military Strategy*, identifying the two polar regions as belonging to the "global strategic commanding heights" and as passages of important geostrategic value.<sup>19</sup> In the Arctic, establishing the presence of the PRC and maintaining access to the region are key political and economic goals Beijing aspires to reach as long-term strategic objectives by 2049.<sup>20</sup>

### ***The Three Warfares in the Arctic***

Since the introduction of the three warfares into the PLA lexicon in 2003, this strategy has advanced considerably and a useful theoretical framework for analyzing China influence operations in the Arctic.<sup>21</sup> According to a recent report by the China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Propensity, Conditions, and Consequences: Effective Coercion Through Understanding Chinese Thinking*, the Chinese strategic approach to strategy is to set the conditions such that the consequences, the attainment of long-term strategic objectives, are a natural outcome from the inherent potential of the situation.<sup>22</sup> China's engagement in the Arctic is designed to cultivate influence through governance, scientific, and economic vectors, in order to build political power and lay the groundwork for future operations in the region.<sup>23</sup> The three warfares are intended to construct, support, and set the condi-

tions for the emergence of political power.<sup>24</sup> This slowly emerging political power allows for the long-term development of forms of control—coercive capability, consensual inducements, and pursuit of legitimacy—in the Arctic.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Geopolitical***

China's three warfares strategy represents a tool meant to facilitate global Sino ambitions through specialized regional application, including the Arctic. Beijing's fundamental position on its need to be an equal governance actor in the Arctic exists through its global equities (great-power access) and concerns (climate-change impacts). Chinese global and Arctic legitimacy cannot be separated according to the regime, which presents advantageous geopolitical circumstances for China. China's ability to effectively compete in various sectors throughout the world allows Beijing to set conditions for additional influence that is often difficult to contest. For example, the PSR policy involving the Arctic is largely an extension of the multiregional BRI.

The three warfares strategy is most pronounced in the geopolitical arena, by penetrating bilateral and multilateral institutions, governance regimes, and decision making to facilitate positive legal, psychological, and public opinion effects to set conditions for China's long-term strategic objectives in the Arctic. Since 2013, Beijing has increased China's participation in Arctic affairs and governance as an observer to the Arctic Council; as a partner in the Arctic Circle Forum, hosting the organization's annual assembly in Shanghai in 2019; as a member of the Arctic Economic Council; as chair of the Pacific Arctic Group, organized under the International Arctic Science Committee; as a full member of the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum; and through China's permanent seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>26</sup> China's engagement in organizations, inside and outside the Arctic region, facilitates the building of bilateral and multilateral relationships that provide opportunities for generating influence and political power.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, the *Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean* (the CAO agreement) was negotiated and implemented among the Arctic coastal states of Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States and non-Arctic states with distant-water fishing capacity, China, the European Union, Iceland, Japan, and South Korea, aligning with Chinese policy positions and preferences outlined in *China's Arctic Policy* white paper. The CAO agreement is an example of legal warfare setting conditions for future operations in the Arctic with psychological and public opinion effects enabling those future operations. China's participation and ratification of the CAO agreement consolidated Beijing's long-term position in Arctic fisheries regimes and prevented restrictions on Chinese marine scientific research, while nurturing its environmental profile and strengthening perceptions of China as a power that can legitimately pursue scientific advance in the Arctic.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, China gains leverage as a responsible fisheries actor in the Arctic for the purposes of offsetting and/or distracting from other contested regions. At the very least, China establishes the official position of the state, which allows Beijing to maintain a position that Chinese-involved illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing violations are a substate actor issue. China's membership to the agreement yields other three warfares benefits, too. Through a multitude of working groups, task forces, and expert groups, Beijing is able to conduct influence operations targeting the bilateral and multilateral decision-making regimes that have positive psychological and public opinion effects that promote China's near-Arctic state narrative, legitimize the PRC's participation in Arctic affairs as an important stakeholder, and shape the policy discussions to achieve Chinese interests.<sup>29</sup> As far as Chinese society is concerned (public opinion), the regime is successfully fulfilling its duties as required by the self-proclaimed Middle Kingdom. Contrary to popular (Western) belief, most Chinese are generally satisfied with the geopolitical performance of Beijing. The Arctic regional pursuits of China—geopolitically—continue to fit within the larger national sentiment also. Lastly, China's strongest psychological warfare component geopolitically manifests through its consistent use of “peace” overtones involving its interests.<sup>30</sup> Such a premise presents difficulties for competitors to respond with counternarratives—by design. For the Arctic and its notable characteristic of cooperation, China's “peaceful” pursuits could be particularly problematic for the West.

### *Scientific Research*

The three warfares strategies are the most subtle in the realm of scientific research, by maintaining China's presence in the Arctic region through expeditions, facilities, and collaboration with Arctic states, Beijing slowly develops positive psychological and public opinion effects inside and outside the region to set the conditions for legal participation in the geopolitical arena and support China's long-term strategic objectives in the Arctic. Public opinion, legal, and psychological aspects of the three warfares strategy have been shaped by mostly contemporary Arctic-related developments. In 1993, China purchased an icebreaker from Ukraine, upgraded the vessel for polar conditions, and named it the *Xue Long*, translated as the *Snow Dragon*.<sup>31</sup> In 1999, China launched its first national scientific research expedition to the Arctic into the Bering and Chukchi Seas. In 2019, a second polar-capable icebreaker, the domestically built *Xue Long 2*, entered into service, and China is reportedly planning to build a third polar-capable icebreaker.<sup>32</sup> Since 1999, the Chinese National Arctic Research Expeditions (CHINARE) have conducted 12 expeditions into the Arctic, with the *Xue Long* and *Xue Long 2* as the primary research vessels. In 2004,

China built its first Arctic research center, the Yellow River Station, in Ny-Ålesund, Norway. Since 2004, China has built a satellite ground receiving station in Kiruna, Sweden, in 2010; a second remote-sensing satellite ground station near Kiruna in 2016; and the China–Iceland Arctic Science Observatory station in Kárhóll, Iceland, in 2018. Additionally, China unsuccessfully pursued scientific research stations in Canada and Greenland.

China's scientific development interests invest heavily in bilateral and multilateral cooperation, focusing significantly in forums that allow for non-Arctic state participation, that can bolster China's image as an extraregional Arctic power protecting the common interest, raise its environmental profile, and legitimize its participation in the Arctic governance regimes.<sup>33</sup> Public sentiment and academic commentary within the PRC highlights the importance of China as a scientific and technological power that must play an active, preemptive, and vigilant role in exploration, exploitation, development, and governance in Arctic affairs.<sup>34</sup> China's science diplomacy is an example of psychological and public opinion warfare setting conditions for future operations in the Arctic with legal effects enabling legitimization for those future operations. Through scientific exploration and cooperation, Beijing can conduct influence operations utilizing its scientific expedition platforms and research facilities to normalize China's presence in the Arctic, to gain acceptance or indifference from Arctic states to its presence in the region, and to solidify the PRC's self-narratives as an important stakeholder and near-Arctic state.<sup>35</sup>

Gaining increased access into the Arctic for scientific purposes remains an important regime endeavor and facilitates other access goals. However, China also knows how to establish its own access and influence. The opening of the China–Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) in Shanghai is an excellent example. This institute allows China to attract international participation while having significant control over agendas and interests. The organization also helps to strategically improve China's legitimacy and need to be an Arctic governance actor.

Public opinion warfare is relatively straight forward. Negative climate-change impacts on China allow Beijing to pursue scientific access with almost default Chinese social acceptance and support as a natural expectation. As a result, psychological and legal warfare are areas where China might maintain more focus and resourcing.

### *Economic*

Through the BRI, specifically the PSR policy in the Arctic, China's three warfares strategy represents a complex challenge to Arctic states with significant investment needs relative to their development strategies and the most direct tool for China to set conditions for influence and build political power. Beijing advo-



cates for the exploration, extraction, and exploitation of Arctic resources by Arctic and non-Arctic, and China is best situated to leverage its advantages of capital, technology, and domestic market to develop these resources.<sup>36</sup>

The three warfares strategies are the most acute in China's investments in critical infrastructure and resource extraction industries, by providing well needed capital to Arctic state development, incentivizing and solidifying cooperation, maintaining access to resources and routes along the PSR, and facilitating the emergence of Arctic state asymmetric dependency on China in support of Beijing's long-term strategic objectives in the Arctic.

Since establishing the PSR in 2018, Beijing has increased its utilization of a multitude of economic tools, most particularly foreign direct investment, to advance China's interests and influence in the Arctic region.<sup>37</sup> In the CNA report, *Exploring the Relationship between China's Investment in the Arctic and Its National Strategy*, such investments have concentrated heavily in resource extraction industries of oil, natural gas, minerals, and rare earth elements and critical transportation infrastructure—namely tunnels, bridges, rail, and port and airport facilities. Through private PRC-based companies and state-owned enterprises, China can provide guidance and regulations to encourage, restrict, or prohibit particular investments and to ensure consistency with Chinese national interests and long-term strategic objectives. These investment projects have either been completed or attempted in multiple Arctic states, particularly Norway, Iceland, and Greenland, but most predominately in Russia. China has made significant investments in Russia's oil and gas industry, such as Yamal LNG, a liquified natural gas facility along the NSR, and China continues to be Russia's primary foreign investor following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.<sup>38</sup> Aside from Russia, China has concentrated its influence operations efforts on the smaller Arctic states of Iceland and Greenland. Since 2008, both countries were particularly politically and economically vulnerable to foreign investment: the Icelandic economy fell into deep economic depression following the global financial crisis, and Greenland adopted the Self-Government Act, allowing for greater autonomy to negotiate agreements with foreign states, independent of the Kingdom of Denmark.<sup>39</sup> China has been developing bilateral commercial and economic relations within Iceland and Greenland, investing in joint energy and minerals exploitation and taking advantage of Iceland's bankrupt finances and Greenland's ambitions to gain independence from Denmark.<sup>40</sup>

China's economic investments in Arctic state's critical infrastructure and resource extraction industries are examples of psychological and legal warfare setting conditions for the emergence of asymmetric dependency between underdeveloped Arctic states and China with positive public opinion effects by advancing the image of China as important stakeholder, invested in the common good, and reliable partner

in the Arctic. China's economic investments allow Beijing to conduct influence operations that have long-lasting structural impact by leveraging economic investment power to cultivate dependency on China for Arctic states' future development strategies, to secure and maintain access to Arctic resources along the PSR, to promote China as a trusted partner and its near-Arctic state narratives, and to legitimize China's participation in Arctic affairs and governance.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Since 2005, China has aspired to become a polar great power and has proven its ambition to project influence and power globally from the Arctic to Antarctica. Through the BRI and the PSR, Beijing has utilized elements of the three warfares strategy to conduct influence operations in the Arctic region, focusing on three overlapping Arctic areas of interest to promote China's increasing role and participation in Arctic affairs and governance, its leadership in scientific research activities and expeditions, and its economic investment in critical infrastructure along the PSR. The goals of Chinese influence operations are to propagate and promote China as an important stakeholder, scientific expert, trusted partner, and near-Arctic state; to shape Arctic states' perceptions of China's intentions; and to secure greater political and economic position to meet long-term strategic objectives by 2049.

The use and effectiveness of the three warfares strategy, as applied to the Arctic region, remain uncertain given these remain relatively early in their development. Given emergent globalization circumstances, the pace of China's interests pursued through influence strategies seems nominal perhaps. At the same time, Chinese state-related behavior in the Arctic remains under close scrutiny from the West. This consideration to the *Three Warfares in the Arctic* hopefully provokes interest to follow the topic and maybe even continue studies and research on ways in which to understand Chinese Arctic influence methods and goals. ☆

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## Notes

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