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The Changing Arctic: With Great Access Comes Great Power

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 46 DL – PCEMI 46 AD

2019 – 2021

SOLO FLIGHT

THE CHANGING ARCTIC: WITH GREAT ACCESS COMES GREAT POWER

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THE CHANGING ARCTIC: WITH GREAT ACCESS COMES GREAT POWER

The Arctic region is undergoing a period of rapid change. Environmentally, the melting sea ice means that there is greater access to the region than ever before. Because of this, the Arctic region is witnessing an increase in economic activity that can potentially change the global economic landscape. New economic activity and access will inevitably increase military Arctic presence to provide security and constabulary services to monitor and maintain geopolitical equilibrium among Arctic states. Since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic region is characterized by low tension and predictability. However, the Arctic is not immune to the rise of global Great Power Competition. Traditional Arctic peoples and nations, such as Canada, Russia, United States (U.S.), Iceland, Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), Sweden, and Finland, remain the region's key stakeholders. New actors are also becoming more involved in Arctic affairs than before, most notably, the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) demonstrated far-reaching Arctic ambitions in recent years. Although China is 900 miles (1448.41 km) from the Arctic, in 2018, it announced its view that it is a "Near-Arctic State" with the expectation that it is a partner and stakeholder in Arctic affairs.¹ This new designation as a Near-Arctic state was not well-received by Arctic nations, fearing that China will challenge the rights and interests of the Arctic states and raise the risk of military conflict in the region.² China's ambitions for the Arctic region serve a vital role in China's Belt Road Initiative. Due to its geographic and strategic location, the Arctic presents a potential geopolitical flashpoint in the long term, as tensions over access and sovereignty are likely to occur despite its history of collaboration and coordination between Arctic states.

¹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (Beijing: The State Council, 2018), http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.

² Sanna Kopra, "China, Great Power Responsibility and Arctic Security," in *Climate Change and Arctic Security*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 34.

CHINA'S ARCTIC AMBITIONS

China's Arctic ambitions are a part of its more significant aspiration as a global power. In the past decades' China has developed from an isolated communist state to an (emerging) global power that influences all sectors of politics or economic life, including regional affairs in the Arctic.³ In 2018, China published *China's Arctic Policy* as its first-ever white paper on a region outside its territory.⁴ In this White Paper, China attempts to cultivate an image of a benevolent near-Arctic state. China also stated that the Arctic is a key to China's position as a global power player and attempts to redefine the region as a global common. In addition to defining itself as a regional stakeholder, it also outlined its policy goals: "to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic."⁵ While China is careful in their White Paper to stress that they intend to follow current Arctic norms since they lack any actual sovereignty claims, it also stresses its intent to play a role in the region and is expected to be treated and respected as a regional partner by Arctic nations.⁶ This expectation may lead to tensions among Arctic partners.

China also uses its White Paper to redefine the Arctic from an area governed by regional states to a global commons with global participants. China outlines this argument by stating, the "Arctic situation now goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature, having a vital bearing on the international community as a whole, as well as on the survival, the development, and the shared future for mankind."⁷ By shifting the Arctic from a regional to a

³ Sanna Kopra, "China, Great Power Responsibility and Arctic Security"... 34.

⁴ Adam Lajeunesse, "Finding "Win-Win" China's Arctic Policy and What it Means for Canada." *The School of Public Policy Publications (SPPP)*, (2018), 1.

⁵ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy...*

⁶ Adam Lajeunesse, "Finding "Win-Win" China's Arctic Policy and What it Means for Canada." ... 1

⁷ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy...*

more globalized understanding, China as a global player justifies its goals and presence in the Arctic, especially in Arctic waterways.

The Polar Silk Road

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative is one of the critical pillars of China's national strategy. Branded as a pursuit in global cooperation and development, it serves to unite China's various regional economic initiatives into one platform, focused on infrastructure connectivity, trade, industrial investment, energy resources, financial and environmental cooperation.⁸ Crafted around geographic routes, the Belt and Road Initiative creates economic arteries that fuel China and, eventually, the world's economy.

China views the northern economic artery, or Polar Silk Road, as an ocean-based economic shortcut between Europe and China. This Arctic route reduces the mileage to Europe and the United States East Coast by about 40% and transport costs by 20%-30% compared to reaching the two destinations via the Suez Canal or the Panama Canal.⁹ Additionally, the Arctic route allows China to avoid other geopolitically tense routes such as the Suez Canal and U.S. Navy ships in the Straits of Malacca.¹⁰ After the blockage of the Suez Canal in late March 2021, this northern alternative route is even more imperative to China.

While the northern route allows China to bypass geopolitically sensitive areas, access to the Arctic brings other geopolitical issues, such as navigation in the Arctic waterways. Clearly

⁸ Huping Shang, *The Belt and Road Initiative: Key Concepts*, (Singapore: Springer Singapore Pte. Limited, 2019), 2.

⁹ Jianglin Zhao, ed., *21st-century Maritime Silk Road Initiative: Aims And Objectives, Implementation Strategies And Policy Recommendations*, (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2020), 195.

¹⁰ Stefan Lundqvist, *et al.*, "Conflict Prevention and Security Cooperation in the Arctic Region: Frameworks of the Future," (U.S. Naval War College, 2020), 24.

stated in their White Paper, "China attaches great importance to navigation security in the Arctic shipping routes."¹¹ The definition of Arctic waterways is an ongoing debate. The two most important Arctic routes, The Northwest Passage (NWP) through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along the northern Russian coastline, remain an open debate among Arctic nations. The Transpolar Route that crosses the North Pole is another option, but not one consistently devoid of sea ice at this time. Canada classifies the NWP as "internal waters, allowing Canada unlimited rights to restrict other nations' vessels."¹² The United States and other maritime powers maintain a different view and view it as an international strait through the NWP that bisects Canadian territory. This view minimizes Canada's rights to regulate transit through the NWP. Currently, the issue remains unresolved, but both nations have found acceptable workarounds to avoid conflict. With increased Chinese traffic in the NWP, this sovereignty issue could reignite. In their 2018 White Paper, China walks a fine line stating that the Chinese government respects Canadian sovereignty "in the water's subject to [Canada's] jurisdiction."¹³ The potential for sovereignty issues to be a flashpoint for conflict is explored later in this paper.

The NSR along Russia's northern coast provides China sea access to Northern Europe. Although still difficult to navigate, the melting sea ice creates new economic opportunities that Russia is developing along the NSR. Although China stated its intent to observe current norms in the Arctic waterways, it also demonstrated its willingness to ignore regional norms in other parts of the world, such as the South China Sea. Disputes over Freedom of Navigation and state

¹¹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy...*

¹² Hannes Gerhardt, Philip E. Steinberg, Jeremy Tasch, Sandra J. Fabiano, Rob Shields. "Contested Sovereignty in a Changing Arctic." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100, no. 4, (2010): 995. DOI: 10.1080/00045608.2010.500560.

¹³ Adam Lajeunesse, "Finding "Win-Win" China's Arctic Policy and what it Means for Canada."... 5.

sovereignty have plagued the South China Sea in recent years. Fears that these issues may develop in the Arctic are an ongoing concern for Arctic nations.

Global Investor in a Harsh Region

In addition to the Polar Silk Road, China expanded its influence in the region by seeking investment opportunities in Arctic nations to build stronger relationships and influence. The Arctic is a harsh environment that is difficult to access and maintain a steady population and logistical supply. Former Canadian Prime Minister Diefenbaker notes that "[project] costs can be 250% higher than comparable southern projects"¹⁴ The U.S. Navy notes that in the Arctic, "conventional capital is scarce, opening up greater opportunities for direct investment and lending from Chinese state-controlled or affiliated sources."¹⁵ Chinese government-backed economic and scientific research investments dot the Arctic region from Iceland to Greenland to Canada to Russia, providing opportunities for China to influence Arctic affairs.

However, Arctic nations are wary of Chinese-backed investments. Arctic nations fear that the region could see "debt trap" lending linked to badly needed infrastructure, like ports, airfields, roads, communications cables or towers, hospitals, or housing.¹⁶ With a limited number of access points in the Arctic, many of these infrastructure projects take a strategic dimension for Arctic nations. These investments can lead to "Chinese-built and operated ports in the Arctic might be predicated on their use as refueling stations for Chinese vessels," which Arctic nations may come to depend upon as well.¹⁷ This dependency would undermine state

¹⁴ Adam Lajeunesse, "Finding "Win-Win" China's Arctic Policy and what it Means for Canada." ... 3.

¹⁵ Stefan Lundqvist, *et al.*, "Conflict Prevention and Security Cooperation in the Arctic Region"... 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

sovereignty in the Arctic region as Arctic nations would need to rely on outside assistance to provide security and constabulary services within their waterways.

Arctic Hydrocarbons and Energy Reserves

Lastly, China's Arctic ambitions include access to the region's vast untapped hydrocarbon reserves. A 2008 U.S. Geological Survey reported the "extensive Arctic continental shelves might constitute the geographically largest unexplored prospective area for petroleum remaining on Earth"¹⁸ China needs continued access to these resources to fuel their economic growth. China connects access to these hydrocarbons to the Polar Silk Road in their White Paper by stating, "utilizations of sea routes and exploration and development of the resources in the Arctic may have a huge impact on the energy strategy and economic development of China, which is a major trading nation and energy consumer in the world."¹⁹ Additionally, hydrocarbon exports and the Chinese market are critical for Russian economic growth as well. Continued access to these resources and maintaining an Arctic presence, both geographically and diplomatically, is key to China's global ambitions.

POTENTIAL FOR CHINA'S ACTIVITIES TO BE A FLASHPOINT

With the end of the Cold War, many international relations scholars announced the end of an era of Great Power Competition. However, in 2021 it appears that the last decades were a short interlude to a new era of competition with new players. Like previous eras of Great Power Competition, few parts of the world are left unaffected. During the Cold War, the Arctic was a critical location between the Soviet Union and the United States. With the melting sea ice and

¹⁸ U.S. Geological Survey, *2008 Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 1.

¹⁹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy...*

the opportunity to shorten commercial travel and fewer costs, the Arctic region is becoming another critical area for influence and competition in the growing strategic rivalry between the United States and China. Strategic thinkers in the West view China's economic engagement as a possible precursor to much more invasive political and strategic ambitions, giving way to a permanent security presence.²⁰ Could this increased presence in the region create a flashpoint in the Arctic?

Greater Access To The Region Has Opened It To New Problems

For the first time, the Arctic has access, availability, and competition for resources. The strategic calculus for the Arctic region has changed. The Arctic provides a faster commercial shipping route and a wealth of untapped hydrocarbons to fuel China's economy. Although commodities boom and bust over time, the Arctic's increased appeal is unlikely to wane.

The Arctic could become another global flashpoint for conflict similar to the South China Sea. The Arctic could be a victim of China's opaque South China Sea policies, where mistrust of China's activities in the South China Sea breeds mistrust in China's intentions and activities in the Arctic. Currently, the South China Sea is fraught with militarization and competition for territorial claims.²¹ Like the South China Sea, the Arctic is not immune to Freedom of Navigation disputes. China may also seek to expand the rights to innocent passage through both the NSR and NWP. Increased traffic into these shipping routes may challenge the current Arctic norms of innocent passage, which still do not have unanimous approval.

²⁰ Yun Sun, "Defining the Chinese Threat in the Arctic," *The Arctic Institute* (7 April 2020): <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/defining-the-chinese-threat-in-the-arctic/>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Additionally, China cannot operate alone in the Arctic region, but it could expand its mutually beneficial relationship into other areas by allying with Russia. The strategic international energy corridor from the NSR through the Bering Strait is critical to fuel China's economy. China could support Russia's attempts to turn the NSR into essentially a toll road by requiring payments for pilots and icebreaker escorts in return for Russia supporting China's efforts to do the same in the South China Sea.²² However, this support could cause a chain reaction in other critical maritime transit bottlenecks that China may be unwilling to undermine as it would inhibit further growth of their Belt and Road Initiative.

All known Arctic resources lie within well-defined national jurisdiction, while national shipping routes depend on Canadian and Russian cooperation.²³ This can lead to further tensions as Chinese investments into local infrastructure give them a foothold that will be difficult for Arctic nations to manage, leaving China with a degree of *de facto* control of the Arctic that could undermine national sovereignty.²⁴ While China has stated it is willing to play by current international norms, it will likely seek to influence those norms in its favor in the future. Additionally, China has a partiality to bilateral talks rather than resolving conflicts through existing international frameworks, which gives China an advantageous negotiating position, especially with smaller Arctic states.²⁵ Although China stated that they would be willing to behave within established regional norms, they have also demonstrated they are willing to ignore them when it suits their interests, like in the South China Sea.

²² Andrew E. Kramer, "In the Russian Arctic, the First Stirrings of a Very Cold War," *The New York Times*, 22 May 2021.

²³ Adam Lajeunesse, "Finding 'Win-Win' China's Arctic Policy and what it Means for Canada." ... 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ Stefan Lundqvist, *et al.*, "Conflict Prevention and Security Cooperation in the Arctic Region"... 24.

Concern for Chinese investments in the region would provide China financial leverage over small Nordic economies that China could use for further political advantage. For example, China expressed its displeasure with Norway awarding the 2010 Nobel Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo by limiting diplomatic contact and trade relations.²⁶ Regular economic ties were not restored until 2016, when Norway issued a statement promising to avoid antagonizing China in the future.²⁷ This example demonstrates how losing access to the lucrative Chinese markets can put Nordic countries at a disadvantage if their economic ties are too dependent on Chinese approval.

Arctic Exceptionalism and Chinese Ambitions Minimize Hostility In The Short Term

Despite these scenarios, the Arctic is unlikely to be a flashpoint in the short term. Firstly, the Arctic has a unique history that other regions lack. Since the end of the Cold War, Arctic nations have established broad consensus-building around various regional issues that cross many geopolitical divides. By treating regional issues through regional forums, Arctic Exceptionalism allowed Arctic nations to develop a unique diplomatic environment built on collaboration.²⁸ It is important to note that these efforts were made by traditional Arctic states, not by near-Arctic states. Multiple years of confidence-building in the region are an essential factor that even China was careful to note by stating its intention to abide by established regional norms.

²⁶ Andreas Østhagen, "Norway's Arctic Policy: Still High North, Low Tension?" *The Polar Journal*, (2021): 11, DOI: 10.1080/2154896X.2021.1911043.

²⁷ Stefan Lundqvist, *et al.*, "Conflict Prevention and Security Cooperation in the Arctic Region" ... 25.

²⁸ Heather Exner-Pirot, "Between Militarization and Disarmament: Challenges for Arctic Security in the Twenty-First Century." in *Climate Change and Arctic Security*, ed. Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020.), 103.

Secondly, Russian national interests may thwart China's Arctic vision as it is one of the rare opportunities where Western states and Russia have similar goals. Like Canada, Russia is outspoken on defending its unique position as an Arctic littoral state. Additionally, Russia does not take challenges to its perceived sphere of influence lightly, as the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate. It is unlikely that Russia will allow another state to supersede or challenge Russian sovereignty in the Arctic. The Arctic relationship between Russia and China is mutual. Russia needs a market to sell its hydrocarbons, and China needs access to the Arctic to continue its long-term ambitions of being a global player. Given Russia's expansive Arctic coastline and history of protecting its historic sphere of influence, it is unlikely that Russia will provide the absolute "in" China desires in the region. Russia has not championed many of China's Arctic ambitions beyond mutual economic opportunities.

However, China could trip a regional crisis if its activities in the South China Sea escalate the same way the West reacted to the Russian incursion in Ukraine in 2014. Regional cooperation forums such as the Arctic Chiefs of Defense visits were put on hold after 2014 and still not resumed as of Spring 2021.²⁹ Although the region was compartmentalized from the conflict, the diplomatic spillover into the Arctic is not a new phenomenon and could create an Arctic flashpoint for other regional conflicts such as a South China Sea scenario.

Russia's recent re-militarization of the Arctic may change the dynamic in the region to previous Cold War conditions. If Russia finds a strong ally in China to support their militarization, it may open the door for further Arctic opportunity for China, but this is a gamble neither may be willing to make. For Russia, an increased Chinese presence in the region may

²⁹ Stefan Lundqvist, *et al.*, "Conflict Prevention and Security Cooperation in the Arctic Region" ... 45.

undermine Russia's dominance in its historic sphere of influence. Russia's continued denial of allowing China to station ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) from Russian ports in the Arctic demonstrates Russia's willingness to play gatekeeper.³⁰ For China, it must walk a fine line. In the short term, China needs Russian support to develop technologies and access to the region while developing its own Arctic technologies and trained personnel. However, a militarized Arctic does not support China's end goal of developing an Arctic Silk Road and expanding economic opportunities.³¹ So, while China may develop some influence in the region, it is likely that it will not achieve all of its goals due to the littoral states' unwillingness to allow China free reign over their national interests.

If other non-Arctic forums such as NATO seek to increase their presence or more international leadership in the Arctic, it will likely push China and Russia into closer Arctic ties. If Russia could not meet the perceived threats, it could look to Chinese investment to close that gap.³² This might pressure Russia to increase its military expansion in the Arctic. Russia's and NATO's relationship has not recovered from Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. The Western sanctions toward Russia after this event already initiated closer Sino-Russia relations. However, while Russia and China have mutual interests, they do not share the same vision for Arctic development.

Because of Russian gatekeeping, historical Arctic Exceptionalism, and Western nations' wariness of China's capabilities, the Arctic is unlikely to become a hotspot for global conflict in the short term. However, it will remain a geopolitical flashpoint as the sea ice continues to

³⁰ Stefan Lundqvist, *et al.*, "Conflict Prevention and Security Cooperation in the Arctic Region" ... 22.

³¹ Kobzeva Mariia, "China's Arctic policy: present and future," *The Polar Journal* 9, no. 1, (2019): 98, DOI: 10.1080/2154896X.2019.1618558

³² Stefan Lundqvist, *et al.*, "Conflict Prevention and Security Cooperation in the Arctic Region" ... 43.

diminish, providing faster, efficient access to global markets. In the short term, growing regional tensions do not support China's economic ambitions, and China is unlikely to encourage hostility. Arctic states may seek to minimize Chinese investments in the region if China's presence increases militarization by the United States and Russia or retribution to China's hostilities in the South China Sea. However, this may be difficult to accomplish in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous Arctic initiatives may no longer be the priority as nations seek to recover from the pandemic. In the long term, China may exploit unresolved issues over sovereignty and regional capability shortfalls for its own gains. This can cause geopolitical tensions as it will further bolster China's global interests in other regions such as the South China Sea.

CONCLUSION

The post-Cold War period is a brief intermission to the era of Great Power Competition. However, this new period may be less about the shortest path of nuclear missiles to military targets and more about the shortest path to economic markets.³³ Although current Arctic states see the benefit in maintaining a peaceful geopolitical ecosystem in the Arctic, non-Arctic (or Near-Arctic) influences could ignite a regional geopolitical flashpoint in the long term.

In order to deter China's Arctic expansion and potential *de facto* control, other Arctic nations such as the United States should increase their engagement in the region. Mariia Kobzeva noted the "declining U.S. participation in Nordic countries and the growth of Russia's military potential, may lend China the option to act as a kind of guarantor of [Arctic] security."³⁴

³³ Heather Exner-Pirot, "Between Militarization and Disarmament: Challenges for Arctic Security in the Twenty-First Century." ... 95.

³⁴ Kobzeva Mariia, "China's Arctic policy: present and future,"...97.

The United States and other partners could provide an alternative to China's investment opportunities by seeking mutually beneficial opportunities with other Arctic nations.

While other U.S. Arctic engagements seemed like a viable alternative option in 2019, when American criticism of China's Arctic policy peaked, it looks very different in 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic stressed every government budget and national economies. In a post-pandemic environment, the United States and other Arctic nations may be unwilling or unable to counter Chinese investments in the region as quickly as in the past. Furthermore, some smaller Arctic states may view the benefits of Chinese investments outweigh the risks of Chinese dual-use facilities allowing China to build its presence in the region. However, the short-term gains may not be worth the long-term strategic loss.

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