

Selling the 'Near-Arctic' State

China's Information and Influence Operations in the Arctic

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Executive Summary

For years, official statements from the People's Republic of China (PRC) have asserted that China is a 'Near-Arctic state' with the right to a greater role in Arctic governance.* Such assertions have generated a great deal of Western concerns, understandable when viewed within the context of Beijing's aggressive behaviour towards its immediate neighbours, its growing military, and powerful economy. Unlike its near-abroad, however, China cannot assert itself as directly or forcefully in the Arctic, lacking as it does any significant regional presence or power projection capability. Rather, China's Arctic presence manifests primarily in its relationships with, and influence over, the Arctic states. As such, its behaviour and influence strategy differs along national and regional lines.

This report is an examination of those interests and priorities and the influence strategies and avenues used by China to achieve its objectives. China's approach remains adaptive, ranging 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. Despite this, there are core themes which run throughout the Middle Kingdom's push to sell itself and its vision in and for the North. Tracking government statements, state media, and Chinese experts, these core messages are clear. China is always presented as a benevolent partner with much to offer, though with clear costs to crossing it or refusing to cooperate. Chinese interests are naturally described as legitimate and its activities beneficial, while criticism of that presence can only be described as unjustified and/or racist. In recent years (and in particular following Russia's invasion of Ukraine) these central narratives have expanded to more directly challenge the United States in the region, with Chinese messaging now routinely describing the Americans as bringers of war and instability.

Always present in its messaging, either implicitly or explicitly, is China's emphasis on respect. China respects Arctic state sovereignty, but it demands reciprocal respect for its own sovereignty – a concept that transcends traditional Westphalian definitions to encapsulate any internal behaviour of the Communist Party.

Unlike Russian narratives in the Arctic, which consist primarily of disruptive and corrosive messages intended to destabilize Arctic societies, Chinese narratives have traditionally not sought to disrupt local societies or create fissures. Rather than dividing and breaking, China seeks to join and influence.

The growth of China's influence and presence in the Arctic has been impressive, yet also overblown by many Western commentators. China is not the regional peer that it makes itself out to be. It has also failed to achieve many of its influence objectives as its soft power has collapsed over the past several years. In the face of these difficulties, China's messaging strategy continues to evolve as it seeks to calibrate a recognized need for collaboration with underlying insecurity over any perceived slight and implicitly assumed superiority over smaller Arctic states.

How this strategy evolves in the future will depend heavily on China's broader relationship with the West and its behaviour globally. Success in the Arctic will continue to depend on China's ability to sell its 'win-win' narrative, a task that is becoming more difficult as its broader relationship with the West sours and its ties with Russia grow. To

* More recently, the Chinese government has backed away from this phrasing, though still asserts the basic principle.

understand this process and these relationships, this report adopts a country-by-country approach to China's Arctic interests and influence. Each chapter adopts a similar framework, laying out the political, economic, and strategic objectives as well as the relevant messaging, directed towards each Arctic state. While only a snapshot of an evolving set of relationships, understanding China's tactics, priorities, and core messaging is essential to grasping the true meaning of its aspirations for and in the region.

Introduction¹

The rise of China and the shift towards a multi-polar world have dominated international relations discourse over the last 20 years,² prompting various regional narratives that seek to frame and understand specific Chinese intentions and capabilities. One of the most dramatic of these has been the polar narrative of China's rising interests as a 'near-Arctic state' and its future designs for the region, which have become a staple of the burgeoning literature on Arctic security and governance over the last 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 in order to facilitate its access to the resources needed to fuel—and the new sea routes needed to connect—its growing and informal global empire.

For years, official statements from People's Republic of China (PRC) state 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*)³ with the right to a greater role in Arctic governance, thus defining the region as a global commons rather than a strictly regional space.⁴ 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 *Guangming 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."⁵ In so doing, the concept advances the "community of human destiny"⁶ in the polar regions. This term is an increasingly dominant frame in Chinese messaging, which encompasses 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 centre of world civilization).⁷

The Arctic thus fits within China's broader global agenda, which seeks to advance economic growth, assert regional and global leadership in evolving economic and security architectures,⁸ and legitimize China's role in "contributing our share to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind" (to quote former vice foreign minister Le Yucheng).⁹ 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 qianguo*) by 2030, hence its perceived need to be "dominant in the polar regions."¹⁰ There are several Chinese concepts and frames used to describe what the Arctic is to the world, including a 'global commons' (全球公域, *quanqiu gongyu*), 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*).¹¹

As Danish analyst Patrik Andersson astutely observes, "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 China's discursive strategy as it argues for the rights of a 'non-Arctic state' to participate in Arctic affairs.¹² Through its 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 China’s own narrative about its Arctic presence. However, we argue that, in mischaracterizing China as a peer or near-peer competitor in the Arctic,¹³ Western commentators run the risk of advancing China’s ‘three warfares’ (三战, *sān zhǒng zhàn fǎ*) strategy aimed at “undermining international institutions, changing borders, and subverting global media, all without firing a shot.”¹⁴

The Middle Kingdom and the Arctic

There is ample background material on China’s rising Arctic interests over the past two decades. The Arctic states rebuffed what Western commentators saw as an initial Chinese push to internationalize the circumpolar North in the late 2000s. Accordingly, China recalibrated its approach in the early 2010s, furnishing the Arctic states with messaging about respect for sovereignty and sustainable development—all of which they wanted to hear—while amplifying climate change science as the key issue on which China could build its influence.¹⁵ While the Chinese impulse to internationalize the Arctic is still there, it is less overt in and central to its current approach.¹⁶ 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 *status quo* in the Arctic—a region of limited consequence to it compared to other parts of the world—and arguably much to lose. Furthermore, it is an accredited Observer to the Arctic Council, a position which, although representing a much lower status than those of the Arctic states, acknowledges a modest place in regional governance and dialogue.¹⁷ So, too, does its signature on the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement reached in 2018.¹⁸

China’s overarching approach to the Arctic region is framed by its 2018 Arctic White Paper, a document that 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ This narrative is common to Chinese messaging around the world. Its purpose is to blunt foreign criticism while facilitating investment, scientific collaboration, and the entrenchment of Chinese facilities and programs in foreign states. This ‘win-win’ approach towards the Arctic is designed to facilitate access to shipping routes, Chinese foreign direct 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, which could one day form an important part of a BRI ‘Polar Silk Road’ (PSR).²¹ Today, however, many of these resources are economically unviable while polar ice continues to obstruct potential shipping lanes creating critical uncertainty and unreliability. As such, China’s short-term Arctic interests are more modest than many Western commentators suggest.²² Nevertheless, some critics assert 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.²³

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 Arctic White Paper, Beijing articulates its entirely reasonable interest in polar research and science (particularly relating to climate change), as well as its 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, its participation in regional governance fora befits a rising global power aspiring to enhance its status and influence in international affairs. Western commentators’ tendency towards 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 warnings 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 contributions to the Arctic emphasize the value of foreign investment to advancing resource development projects, scientific cooperation, inclusive governance, and opportunities to draw Asian states into Arctic ‘ways of thinking.’²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 that China behaves according to the established norms, as it has generally done to date in the Arctic.²⁶

While China’s positive Arctic narratives and potential value to the Arctic states secured it a degree of regional acceptance in the 2010s, its recent shift to a more aggressive form of ‘wolf warrior diplomacy,’ coupled with its significant human rights violations, has led to a discernible shift in how Arctic states perceive it and its presence. Chinese soft power across the democratic Arctic has fallen precipitously in recent years, while the latest 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 US’s 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.”²⁷ The *Arctic Strategy* (2019), released by the Department of Defense (DoD), 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.”²⁸

In a 2020 reflection on why Arctic states continue to express concerns about China’s intentions in the Arctic, international legal scholar Nengye Liu suggests that the rationale is deeper than a mistrust of the Chinese regime. “Most suspicions about China’s role in the Arctic,” he argues, “stem from the concern that China may break the rules,” such as by claiming areas of the Arctic that are under national jurisdiction or by violating international law, as it has done in the South China Sea. Instead, Liu suggests that:

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 [the 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.²⁹

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

In a nuanced study of foreign policy hierarchies in China, Andersson differentiates between the Chinese classifications 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 on the basis of its self-declared ‘near-Arctic state’ status. Rather, China assumes access based on bilateral investment cooperation or otherwise in line with recognized international law.

With cynicism about China’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 it 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 as a preferred partner for development in all of the Arctic states except Russia. 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.

Previous Reports and Studies

In addition to the deluge of academic books and articles published on China and the Arctic over the past decade, many reports have appeared on China's Arctic interests, ambitions, and implications. These vary in quality, with many failing to acknowledge or engage with previous research and scholarship (apart from extracting evidence from published work). Although it is beyond the scope of this report to provide a full accounting of all of these reports, we identify four general categories—all of which have informed our analytical approaches.

The first category of reports includes those that provide a general overview of China's Arctic interests. Linda Jakobson's reports on *China Prepares for an Ice-Free Arctic* (2010) and *China's Arctic Aspirations* (with Jingchao Peng, 2012), both published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), set the standard for benchmarking China's nascent Arctic policy formulation and its changing narratives. Her work explains China's interests in regional economic opportunities, its use of diplomatic and scientific engagement in seeking to become part of the Arctic order and to influence governance discussions and decisions, and its insistence that Arctic states must balance their own interests and the common interests of the international community.³² Subsequent general reports outlining China's Arctic interests have raised similar points, with many intimating that they are revealing novel insights into China's political, economic, scientific, and environmental interests and ambitions, when these have already been well covered in existing literature. Others focus on specific subjects, such as shipping,³³ great power rivalry,³⁴ marine scientific research,³⁵ and China's economic and investment footprint in the Arctic.³⁶

The second category of reports adopt a subregional focus. For example, Stéphanie Pézard, Stephen Flanagan, Scott Harold, Irina Chindea, Benjamin Sacks, Abbie Tingstad, Tristan Finazzo, and Soo Kim produced *China's Strategy and Activities in the Arctic* as a collaborative effort between the RAND Corporation and the Swedish Defence Research Agency (*Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut*, or FOI) in 2022. This extensive report raises the potential implications of Chinese investments and activities in the Arctic for the rules-based order and for regional and transatlantic security, with a particular focus on the North American Arctic. It also assesses risks to the Arctic by looking at security, political, socio-economic, and environmental issues arising from Chinese activities elsewhere around the world. The authors find that "Chinese investments and presence in the North American sections of the Arctic remain fairly limited," owing to "Arctic factors of resilience" in the United States, Canada, and Greenland. They also discern various gaps in resilience, including uncertainty about Russia's relationship with China, Greenland's desire for independence, the challenges with effectively tracking Chinese investment and influence, and China's potential to "realize it is often its own worst enemy in the Arctic" and course correct.³⁷ Oscar Almén and Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, in their June 2022 report for FOI on China's economic influence in the Nordic and Russian Arctics, find that "Chinese actors have had many intentions and expended much effort in attempting to invest in the Arctic, but few of these plans have actually resulted in completed deals." They also show how China has employed punitive economic methods against some Nordic governments in seeking to advance its political goals, and they warn against specific investments that could have negative consequences on national security.³⁸

The third category is comprised of reports that explicitly focus on analyzing Chinese discourse about the Arctic to discern ambitions and risks. A prime example is the Brookings report on *Northern Expedition: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions* (2021), produced by Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang. Examining China's

internal discourse, the authors observe that China speaks with “two voices on the Arctic: an external one aimed at foreign audiences that emphasizes science and cooperation and an internal, often cynical voice that emphasizes the Arctic as a frontier for resource exploitation and competition between the great powers, with science and diplomacy often serving supporting roles for Beijing’s military and economic ambitions.” The report also insists on “the seriousness of China’s aspirations to become a ‘polar great power,’” pointing to its political, military, scientific, and economic activity, as well as its coercive behaviour towards Arctic states (with case studies of Sweden, Norway, and Iceland).³⁹ Other reports take a more sectoral approach, such as focusing on “hawkish” Chinese discourses about Arctic militarization,⁴⁰ economics and institutions,⁴¹ science as a means of “normalizing” China’s presence in the Arctic,⁴² governance,⁴³ and emerging Sino-Russian cooperation in the region.⁴⁴

The fourth category are reports that analyze China’s polar aspirations through the lens of a particular Arctic state. In the best example, scholars Timo Koivurova, Liisa Kauppila, Sanna Kopra, Marc Lanteigne, Mingming Shi, Malgorzata Smieszek, and Adam Stepien comprehensively assess Chinese interests and actions in the Arctic from the viewpoint of Finland in *China in the Arctic and the Opportunities and Challenges for Chinese-Finnish Arctic Cooperation* (2019). After framing China’s changing role in global affairs and its interests, role, and presence in the Arctic using the four priority areas in China’s 2018 White Paper, the authors provide a detailed overview of diverse Chinese-Finnish interactions, including investments in northern Finland and cooperation in areas of Finnish Arctic expertise and research. In their analysis, they highlight three particular dimensions of concern and risk:

First, there are anxieties related to the perception of Chinese investment and economic, scientific and other forms of co-operation as constituting instruments of increasing Chinese influence. There are anxieties about Chinese investors and operators, (and similarly any single major foreign investor) gaining too strong a long-term influence on the regional economy in Lapland, and China as a whole gaining too great an influence on the Finnish national economy. This would also translate to Finland’s higher level of exposure to fluctuations in the Chinese economy. Second, there are concerns related to the environmental and social performance of Chinese actors as investors or business partners. The impacts of Chinese investments on the local business landscape and labour market need to be assessed for each project. There is no single pattern of Chinese investors and companies’ behaviour. Moreover, issues related to intellectual property rights remain problematic. Third, local actors, who are often strongly in favour of Chinese investments, have misgivings that plans announced by Chinese investors often remain unimplemented or ephemeral.⁴⁵

The report notes how the grand visions articulated in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Polar Silk Road plans have not yet been implemented, but the authors caution that “Finnish decision-makers have to apply particular scrutiny in the case of investments that would give Chinese companies influence over the construction and use of critical infrastructure such as railways or airports.” The report presents a balanced assessment of prospective benefits and risks, makes a case for heightened cultural awareness, and emphasizes the importance of vigilance when exploiting the “notable potential for enhancing collaboration between Chinese and Finnish actors.”⁴⁶

Other country-specific reports adopt a more equivocal stance on whether China’s Arctic interests should provide a basis for cooperation or alarm. These are often reflective of the think tanks or organizations from which they

emanate. For example, Nong Hong's *China and the United States in the Arctic: Exploring the Divergence and Convergence of Interests*, an October 2022 report released by the Washington-based Institute for China-America Studies, promotes "greater collaboration and mutual understanding" in the US-China relationship. It does just that, asserting that "China and the United States should aim to achieve cooperative activities [in the Arctic], particularly on research field[s], which could play a useful role in stabilizing the troubled state of their current ties."⁴⁷ A specific report on Alaska released by the Center for Arctic Policy Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks is even more insistent that "to address the increasing uncertainties for future bilateral economic cooperation imposed by the ongoing trade war, Alaska and China need to work together at different levels," despite "potential geopolitical and economic risks."⁴⁸ On the other hand, reports released by the Washington-based Heritage Foundation,⁴⁹ the Ottawa-based Macdonald-Laurier Institute,⁵⁰ and Strider Technologies⁵¹ warn against Chinese motivations and frame the Arctic as a battleground for strategic competition.

China and Arctic Influence: A Country-by-Country Approach

The following report adopts a country-by-country approach to understanding China's Arctic interests and influence. Each chapter adopts a similar framework, laying out China's political, economic, and strategic objectives. We then look at Chinese messaging directed towards each Arctic state, as well as Chinese media and expert commentary about that state. Our analysis focuses on the period up to February 2022, when Russia launched its brutal, unprovoked full invasion of Ukraine. Accordingly, statistics cited in this report are from the 2021/22 timeframe, and the status of projects cited herein also reflect this time period. While some aspects of the Chinese influence and information space have changed in light of heightened geopolitical competition spilling over into the Arctic region, we believe that our analysis provides a robust benchmark to assess continuity and change since that time.

Our methods involved a qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official statements, press releases, government-backed media (including the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News), and speeches by Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials (including ambassadors and other embassy staff). Members of our research team collected data in both English and Chinese, as well as in other languages where applicable.

1 | Iceland

Iceland's Arctic policy is centred on principles of multilateralism, peaceful cooperation, and environmental stewardship. These Arctic objectives are extensions of Iceland's broader foreign policy, which centres on advancing global peace, democracy, human rights, and equality.⁵² Iceland's official Arctic policy is contained in the October 2021 *Iceland's Policy on Matters Concerning the Arctic Region*, which continues to emphasize long-standing Arctic objectives, such as promoting the Arctic Council, resolving differences based on international law and diplomatic engagement, and avoiding militarization in the region.

This instinctive push towards multilateralism—along with more pragmatic economic considerations—made Iceland an early supporter of China's push to build an Arctic presence. Iceland was a backer of China's application to become an Observer of the Arctic Council, and it remains one of the most vocal advocates of increased economic and scientific cooperation with outside stakeholders such as China.

In line with a broader trend across Europe, Icelandic popular impressions of China have soured in recent years. This likely stems not from any particular fear over Chinese action in the Arctic, but from broader concerns about Chinese human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as well as its increasingly aggressive economic and foreign policy. Support for more Chinese investment in Iceland has therefore shrunk. So, too, has overall Icelandic support for engaging with China in the Arctic, with 60% of Icelanders identifying China's growing Arctic influence as either a 'high' or 'medium' threat.⁵³

Despite this declining trust and interest in engagement, Iceland remains one of the Arctic states most interested in working with China on joint scientific and cultural projects, and it continues to welcome Chinese investment, particularly in the fields of green technology and offshore resource development.

Political Objectives

Arctic experts have assessed Iceland as being one of the Arctic countries most vulnerable to Chinese influence and coercion. A small state with a population of only 366,425 and a GDP of only \$21 billion (roughly half that of Wyoming),⁵⁴ Iceland has been one of the Arctic states most welcoming and supportive of China's role in the Arctic—and most anxious for Chinese investment.

In the early 2010s, that relationship was rapidly consolidating, largely spurred by Chinese assistance during the 2008 financial crisis. At the time, Iceland's economy was heavily finance dependent, and, as a result of the crisis, three of its largest commercial banks defaulted. Iceland initially turned to the EU for financial assistance, but it withdrew its application to join the union over fishing quotas.⁵⁵ Instead, Iceland accepted significant assistance from China, involving a \$500 million currency swap in 2010.⁵⁶ Connected to this assistance was Iceland's enthusiastic support of China's entry into the Arctic Council as an Observer and the signing of a free trade agreement (FTA) in 2013. This was the first FTA between China and a European state. The negotiators highlighted Arctic cooperation, and the FTA was followed by a formal statement on bilateral cooperation, in which "the two sides agreed to further enhance their exchange and practical co-operation on the Arctic, marine, geothermal, geo-scientific, environment protection,

climate change and other issues.”⁵⁷ Leading up to the FTA, the two countries also signed smaller bilateral deals. Most notable was a 2012 framework accord on Arctic cooperation, focused on polar science and investment.⁵⁸ Iceland also broke with the EU in agreeing to recognize China as a market economy.

In the 2010s, signs of China’s presence and influence in Iceland expanded dramatically. High-level diplomatic visits were common. The former president of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, made four visits to China, while Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Premier Wen Jiabao visited Iceland in 2002 and 2012, respectively. Icelandic prime ministers Davíð Oddsson and Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir also visited China in 1994 and 2013, respectively. China moreover maintains far and away the biggest foreign embassy in Reykjavík, capable of supporting 500 diplomats and staff.⁵⁹ The two countries also launched the China-Iceland joint northern lights research station (later renamed the China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory) at Kárhóll in Reykjadalur in 2016, at a cost of roughly \$2.4 million to China.⁶⁰ These investments were matched with seemingly ambitious economic tie-ups, including the 2014 partnership between Iceland’s Eykon Corporation and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) to explore for hydrocarbons on the island’s northeast continental shelf. That partnership dissolved after disappointing initial survey results.

China’s political interest in Iceland is likely defined by its broader objective of inserting itself as a major player into Arctic affairs, with a legitimate stake in regional governance. Iceland, weakened by the financial crisis, was the Arctic state most willing to welcome China (and other Asian investors) into the region and begin that process of legitimatizing China as a ‘Near-Arctic’ state. Sino-Icelandic relations were facilitated further by the fact that Iceland was the Arctic state with the strongest predisposition to welcome non-Arctic states into regional fora and governance mechanisms. Icelandic officials are even said to have encouraged China in the early 2000s to apply for observer status in the first place.⁶¹ In this respect, China’s attention yielded results. On the same day that Iceland and China signed the FTA, the two sides issued a joint statement in which Reykjavík affirmed its support for China’s application for Observer status in the Arctic Council.⁶²

Iceland clearly took the lead in acting as a membership broker among the Arctic Council states and—along with the other Nordic countries—smoothed China’s entrance into the region’s premier international forum.⁶³ Also on the same day as these announcements, Iceland launched the Arctic Circle Assembly, a high-level government-business-academic forum which is far more inclusive than the Arctic Council, and which China has long used as one of its principal tools for engaging in Arctic policy discussions, explaining its position on Arctic affairs, and testing and refining its evolving Arctic policy.⁶⁴

While China’s warm political and economic relations with Iceland certainly enhanced China’s regional influence and smoothed its ascension into a number of Arctic influence and governance fora, it lost momentum by the late 2010s. In a recent report for the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), Rebecca Wolfson and her co-authors make the point that “China’s actual investment activity in Iceland is much like the PRC’s 500-person embassy in Reykjavík—much discussed but not yet substantial.”⁶⁵ The same could be said for the political relationship, which has remained friendly but has not advanced or provided China with any significant additional influence in recent years. China’s massive embassy sits mostly empty, currently housing only seven accredited diplomats.⁶⁶

Economic Objectives

Trade and Investment

China's initial surge in interest in Icelandic resources and investment potential never materialized into anything significant. Indeed, several major planned investments have come to nothing. In 2012, the Chinese state-owned enterprise Sinopec and the Icelandic Orka Energy announced plans to invest more than \$100 million into geothermal energy research. In 2014, Iceland's national energy authority, Orkustofnun, granted an offshore oil exploration licence to a consortium of CNOOC (60% share), Eykon Energy (15% share), and the Norwegian firm Petoro Iceland (25% share).⁶⁷ Neither project has proceeded. In part, Iceland's regulatory standards have limited Chinese activity. For instance, Iceland's environmental and safety standards have reportedly stymied CNOOC's offshore ambitions.⁶⁸

An in-depth CNA report undertaken in early 2021 shows Chinese acquisitions and investments to be practically nonexistent since the early 2010s. There have been no completed Chinese investments in Icelandic firms over the past decade, and the major offshore exploration partnerships have not materialized.⁶⁹ While there has been no foreign direct investment, Chinese firms have made a small number of transactions in Iceland and signed a few agreements that could lead to future economic activity. This adds up to \$1.7 billion, spread across ten transactions from 2010 to 2020, primarily in the energy and mining sectors.⁷⁰

One of the areas where the Chinese have continued to show interest and push for partnerships is in the renewable energy sector—and geothermal energy in particular. This was highlighted as a priority in the two states' 2013 cooperation agreement.⁷¹ While Sinopec's ambitious early investments were premature, it has made progress using Icelandic technology and expertise to build systems for Chinese use. The Chinese-Icelandic geothermal joint venture Sinopec Green Energy Geothermal Development Co. (SGE) is a clear example of a successful partnership. This company is a joint venture between Iceland-based Arctic Green Energy (46%) and Sinopec (54%). Today, SGE is the world's largest geothermal district heating company, with operations in the Chinese provinces of Hebei, Shandong, and Jiangsu and a 35% market share in China.⁷² It operates the Sino-Icelandic Geothermal Technology R&D Center, established in Beijing in 2019, which develops new geothermal technologies and processes for use in China and internationally.

This cooperation is a mutually advantageous process. Iceland provides technology and highly experienced specialists in well drilling, research, and technical support. Moreover, each year Iceland hosts young researchers from China for advanced training in environmental sciences, geothermal utilization, and reservoir engineering as part of the six-month UN University Geothermal Training Programme. In return, Iceland gains access to an enormous geothermal market, estimated to be worth \$11.3 billion.⁷³

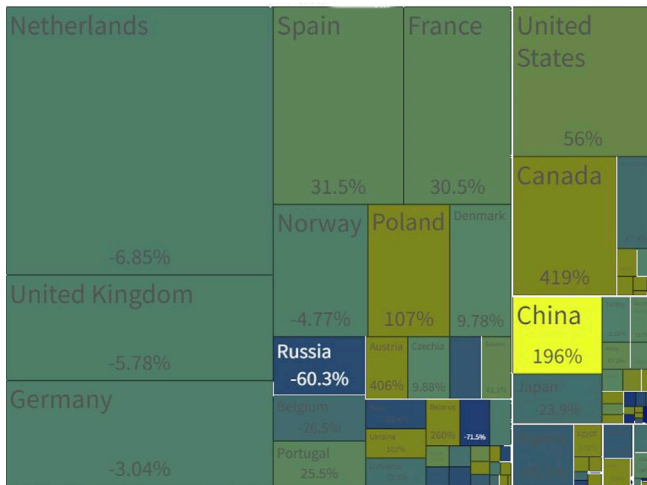


Figure 1: Icelandic trade growth in the five years leading up to the pandemic

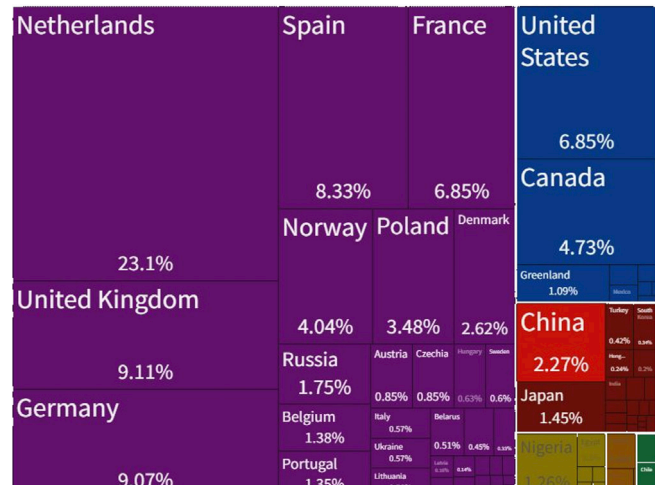


Figure 2: Icelandic trade by value, 2019

Source: OEC. Simoes, A. J. G., & Hidalgo, C. A. (2011, August). *The economic complexity observatory: An analytical tool for understanding the dynamics of economic development. In Workshops at the twenty-fifth AAAI conference on artificial intelligence.*

A second major Chinese-Icelandic business partnership to emerge is in the green methanol sector. Jiangsu Sierbang Petrochemical Company and Carbon Recycling International (CRI) of Iceland have formed a \$35 million cooperative project in Lianyungang City, Jiangsu Province, to build a new green methanol apparatus with an annual output of 100,000 tons of low-carbon methanol gas from the waste gas of the Sierbang industrial facility. The facility will use Icelandic technology and Chinese raw materials. To highlight the project’s importance, Ambassador Jin Zhijian, together with Icelandic Foreign Minister Guðlaugur Thór Thórdarson and Icelandic Ambassador to China Thorir Ibsen, attended the September 2021 signing ceremony.⁷⁴

China’s partnerships in Iceland follow a similar pattern to elsewhere in the Nordic countries. Well-resourced Chinese companies with access to the large Chinese market partner with smaller local firms with specialized technologies or designs.

Trade between Iceland and China has also increased since the FTA was signed. For Iceland, one of the main priorities has been gaining access to the Chinese seafood market. Fisheries are an important economic driver in Iceland, and Reykjavík had notable success in securing an agreement in 2019 permitting imports to China of all Icelandic farmed fish species. In the year after the signing of the FTA, up until the COVID-19 pandemic made trade flows unpredictable, trade with China increased by 196%. While this is healthy growth, it should be put into perspective: in absolute terms, the increase is worth only \$90 million, while total exports to China still account for less than 3% of the island’s total exports by value.⁷⁵

Tourism is another emerging economic connection. In recent years, tourism generally has come to play an important role in Iceland’s economy. Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector had grown to provide 39% of the country’s export revenue and 10% of its GDP, while employing 15% of its entire workforce.⁷⁶ Chinese tourists are a growing customer base for Iceland, just as they are across the Arctic. In 2018, there were roughly 90,000 Chinese

visitors to the island, and, by 2020, that had increased to 130,000—with further increases expected after the pandemic.⁷⁷ While Chinese tourists do not, by themselves, represent economic leverage, Beijing’s ability to blacklist states could, in theory, cause a significant disruption to this important Icelandic industry. Given that the total tourist visits to Iceland (all overnight visitors) reached just under 500,000 in 2020, the loss of 130,000 Chinese visitors would represent a serious threat to the island’s economy. While this is a hypothetical scenario, there is precedent for China using tourism as a lever during political disputes. Both Norway and Sweden have been targeted in the past, as well as, most recently, Canada. Following the arrest of Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver in 2018, Canadian tour operators focusing on Asian travellers reported a significant drop in business in Arctic bookings, based on the souring international relations.⁷⁸

Shipping and the Belt and Road Initiative

Like all Arctic states, China has pushed for Icelandic participation in the Polar Silk Road initiative (the Arctic extension of the broader Belt and Road Initiative).⁷⁹ What precisely that participation would look like is uncertain; however, China’s former ambassador to Iceland, Jin Zhijian, was a strong proponent for expanding Iceland-China relations into the BRI framework. Here, Jin mentioned potential partnerships and investments in “connectivity, business and trade, green development, innovation industries, third-party market and people-to-people exchanges.”⁸⁰

Normally, BRI investments relate to infrastructure, and China promotes the idea that Iceland could become a logistical hub on the Polar Silk Road.⁸¹ This proposal makes a certain degree of economic sense. Over the long term, if the Arctic Ocean is rendered navigable by climate change, the most direct route between Asia and the Atlantic Ocean would be over the pole, rather than through the Northwest or Northeast Passages. In such a scenario, Iceland might serve as a transshipment hub, where ice-strengthened ships discharge cargo to be picked up by warm-water vessels, which can be operated more efficiently in the Atlantic.

Over the last decade, Iceland and China have made clear their principal desires to grow their shipping industries and interests in the Arctic. In 2018, Gu Shixian, then the Icelandic ambassador to China, told Chinese state media that “even without the help of icebreakers, ordinary ships can pass through the Arctic shipping lanes for a longer period during the year. We are following the progress of Chinese companies, including China Shipping, in this area.”⁸² The theoretical feasibility of that route was demonstrated in August 2012, when the Chinese icebreaker *Xue Long* transited the Arctic Ocean to make its first official visit to Iceland (or to any Arctic state).

How a Chinese BRI investment might unfold can be seen in the 2017 Icelandic announcement of plans to construct a new deep-water port on its northeastern coast. Known as the Finnafjordur Project, this port could have a strategic location at the North Sea terminus of the Northern Sea Route and the ‘over the top’ route, which could displace the NSR as the preferred route for transit shipping in an ice-free (or reduced) future. Initial press reporting suggested that the German port developers were soliciting China-based investors and would seek a large shipping company like the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) to serve as an ‘anchor tenant’ for use of the port.⁸³

The development of Finnafjordur (with or without Chinese participation) or any other transshipment facility remains an uncertain (and even unlikely) long-term projection. To date, there has been no Chinese participation in infrastructure

or shipping projects. Despite the lack of concrete investment, Iceland's signing onto the BRI project would still have political value for China. It would represent Arctic-state acceptance of Chinese investment and legitimize the Polar Silk Road concept. Iceland's minister for foreign affairs has stated that the island "is following closely and with an open mind the development of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on the 'Polar Silk Road.'"⁸⁴ However, the Icelandic government has so far not decided on whether to sign the Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI, as proposed by China.⁸⁵

Strategic Objectives

Iceland's location in the middle of the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap has imbued it with great strategic importance for the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since the Cold War, the island has been a lynchpin in the alliance's defence of the Atlantic sea lines of communication. The Iceland Air Defence System (IADS) includes an air surveillance system of four radars and the NATO Control and Reporting Centre, CRC Keflavik. These ground units feed the Recognized Air Picture (RAP) into the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System, overseen by the Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) at Ramstein, Germany. These four huge three-dimensional radar systems have a coverage of 250 nautical miles.⁸⁶ NATO forces also use the Keflavik air base to launch fighter air patrols of the Norwegian Sea and P-8 antisubmarine warfare aircraft over the transit routes that Russian submarines would need to take to reach the Atlantic Ocean.

While important to NATO defence, Iceland has no clear strategic value for China, which does not operate military forces in the Atlantic or Arctic Oceans. More unconventional issues of security, which indicate ulterior Chinese motives or longer-term strategic intent, have, however, arisen.

As is the case elsewhere in the Arctic, security experts frequently point to Chinese civilian-led projects as having potentially dual-use military applications. In Iceland, the Polar Research Institute of China financed the construction of the China-Iceland research station, which began operating in 2018. The location of the facility raised some concerns. For instance, Pascal Heyman, a former official at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, cautioned that it may give China the ability to track NATO flights and movements in the GIUK Gap.⁸⁷ There is no evidence that this is the case, however, and the facility is jointly managed with Icelandic scientists.

A more curious occurrence, commonly held up as a potential Chinese effort to secure land in Iceland for (still unknown) strategic purposes, is the case of Huang Nubo. In 2011, Huang, a Chinese propaganda official-turned-billionaire businessman, proposed, through his company Zhongkun, to purchase 100 square miles of Icelandic land with the backing of the state-run China Development Bank. The official plan was to build a \$200 million leisure complex, which would include a golf course, villas, and, oddly, a private airfield on some of Iceland's coldest, remotest, and windiest land. Local residents scoffed at the suggestion that one could play golf on such harsh and gusty terrain, which incidentally also held the record for the country's lowest temperature ever recorded.⁸⁸ The proposal shocked Iceland, and the interior minister stated that "it never seemed a very convincing business plan," concluding that "one has to look at this from a geopolitical perspective and ask about motivations."⁸⁹ The project suffered from bad timing as well, as Icelanders were worried that foreign buyers in general would take advantage of the country's weakened economic state. One theory is that this was a feint to see whether such a sale would even be allowed.⁹⁰

Upon review, the Icelandic government rejected the investment because of regulations regarding property purchases by non-European Economic Area (EEA) entities. The fact that the project made no economic sense and engendered widespread fear that it was essentially a “clandestine effort to build an Arctic port” did not help.⁹¹ Huang initially sought an exemption from Iceland’s foreign ownership rules, but despite the support of many members of Iceland’s government, he was unsuccessful. To get around these obstacles, his company and locals supportive of the deal came up with an interesting arrangement. Seven municipalities surrounding the land would create a private company to buy the land, with the help of a Chinese loan. The land would then be leased to an Icelandic company that Huang Nubo would control, allowing him to build his complex.⁹² That plan also fell through due to government restrictions and a significant amount of internal political pressure.

China’s Messaging Strategy in Iceland

Diplomatic Messaging

One of China’s principal vehicles for messaging in Iceland is its embassy, which has been extremely active in its messaging efforts in recent years. Former ambassador Jin Zhijian liked to use the Icelandic media as a platform for both defending China from perceived slights and advancing China’s narratives surrounding the Arctic (and beyond). Specifically, the Chinese embassy frequently publishes open letters in the Icelandic newspaper *Fréttablaðið*—a daily with a circulation of roughly 75,000. Based on Chinese embassy website announcements, it has published 14 letters or sponsored articles in that one paper from 2020 to 2021.

China’s authorized, government narrative is clear from these publications and hews closely to its messaging in other Nordic countries. As elsewhere, China emphasizes the need for a healthy relationship to “give priority to each other’s national interests and common interests in handling bilateral relations without being influenced by any third party.”⁹³ The issue of ‘national interests’ is an important one. It refers to the need for Iceland to avoid interfering in areas of Chinese internal interest—most notably, questions like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. References to ‘third parties’ are also common and track China’s growing desire to avoid being excluded from the Arctic by American pressure.

From an economic perspective, China’s overarching message in Iceland is similar to its messaging in Scandinavia. An embassy-penned letter from 2021 notes that China is willing to provide “convenience” for Icelandic companies to invest in China and hopes the Icelandic side will adhere to the market economy principle and continue to provide a “fair business environment” for Chinese companies to invest in Iceland. China also appreciates Iceland’s open attitude towards China’s participation in Arctic affairs.⁹⁴ The reference to ‘market economy’ has become more noticeable in recent years across Chinese messaging in the Arctic as the United States and its allies seek to exclude Huawei and other state-owned technology companies from critical infrastructure.⁹⁵ The right of Chinese companies to participate and invest in the Arctic is also a common theme that is only gaining more prominence.

Chinese embassy publications have also been a vehicle for rebutting American and European accusations of genocide in Xinjiang and attacks on democracy in Hong Kong. In so doing, they have followed the general trend in Chinese diplomacy towards acidic and aggressive ‘wolf warrior’ attacks on the West.⁹⁶ A good example is the embassy’s response to Iceland’s decision to sanction Chinese citizens connected to human rights abuses in Xinjiang. In a fiery

rebuttal, the ambassador accused the Icelandic government of attacking China: “based on nothing but lies and disinformation, Iceland follows EU’s unilateral sanctions on relevant Chinese individuals and entity [*sic*], citing the so-called human rights issues in Xinjiang. This move breaches international law and basic norms of international relations, and severely undermines China-Iceland relations.”⁹⁷

Some of these sponsored letters appear little different from similar pieces in Chinese state-owned media. For instance, a signed article by then-Ambassador Jin Zhijian, titled “China’s Development: An Opportunity Rather Than a Threat for The World,” announced that:

...politicians in the US and the Western Countries have kept voicing vicious attacks against China’s political system and hyping up the Communist Party of China (CPC) as a global threat, claiming that the policy of engagement with China has become a total failure. Their allegations are fanfare for ideological confrontation and the Cold War mentality, advocating for a joint response of the western world to the “China threat.” Such false statements not only discredit the history and misread China, but also poison the atmosphere of international cooperation and harm the interests of all parties.⁹⁸

From an Arctic perspective, these open letters have also provided illuminating insight into Chinese objectives. On October 12, 2019, *Morgunblaðið* published a signed article by Ambassador Jin titled “China Is an Important Force For Development In The Arctic.” This publication advances the Chinese ‘win-win’ narrative, but it also aggressively challenges the then-Trump administration’s position on China’s Arctic presence. The letter notes that, “in the past one year or so, with the new changes in the Arctic region, some people have been recklessly hyping up the so-called China’s influence or even ‘threat’ in the Arctic region, with remarks in disregard of facts and full of Cold-War mentality.” The reference to a ‘Cold War mentality’ can be found in official Chinese communications and messaging across the Arctic states, as Beijing seeks to portray American concerns as outdated and paranoid.

What are Iceland’s two greatest challenges at the moment?

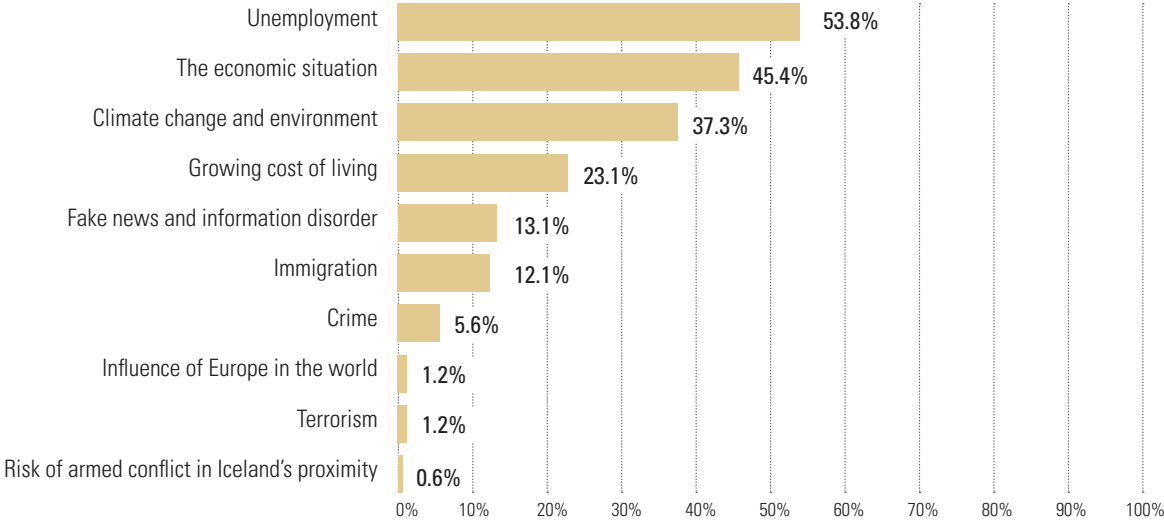


Figure 3: Icelandic concerns over the environment

Source: *Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, Pragmatic and Wary of Change: Icelanders’ Views on International Cooperation; Reykjavík: Institute of International Affairs, University of Iceland, 2021.*

To highlight the advantages brought by China, the embassy notes that China and Iceland “share common interests and similar positions in Arctic affairs,” notably “the adverse effects of climate change on the Arctic environment, ecology, fisheries, and local people’s lives.” In response, China suggests taking steps towards “strengthened environmental protection, sustainable development and international cooperation for peace and stability in the Arctic.”⁹⁹

An important theme in Chinese diplomatic messaging in Iceland is the environment. This is an important topic across the circumpolar Arctic, but it makes far more appearances in the messaging to Icelandic audiences than to those in the other Nordic states. This is likely connected to China’s economic interests in the country, which are overwhelmingly tied to green energy technology partnerships and (potential) resource development. However, it may also stem from a sensible recognition that Icelanders prioritize environmental issues. A 2021 survey conducted by the University of Iceland placed climate change and the environment in the top three greatest challenges faced by Iceland.¹⁰⁰

Given China’s poor environmental track record and high carbon emissions, this green-washed messaging seems a poor fit, though it makes sense from a tactical perspective. This green theme is likely to continue, with even more emphasis placed on China’s environmental responsibility if Chinese companies feel the need to curry local support for offshore development or local shipping infrastructure.

The Arctic Circle Assembly

One of the most important venues for Chinese engagement on Arctic issues has been the Arctic Circle Assembly (ACA), a forum hosted annually in Iceland for Arctic and non-Arctic states, as well as academics, businesses, and non-governmental organizations, to discuss Arctic issues. Icelandic President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson launched this highly influential forum in 2013, just one month before the Arctic Council members again considered China’s Arctic Council Observer application at the Ministerial Meeting in Kiruna. With Grímsson’s details about the new forum remaining vague at the time, his assertion that “China, India, Singapore and other countries far from the Arctic Circle could be part of a new global forum to widen the discussion about the fate of the planet’s Far North” stoked concerns that new institutions, competing with the Arctic Council, could emerge if the Council did not respond positively to China’s (and others’) demands for inclusion.¹⁰¹ In this sense, Iceland provided China with critical leverage at a pivotal moment.

Over the past nine years, China has been a regular and active participant at the ACA, using the event to test policy ideas while building its own legitimacy as an actor in Arctic governance. By far the most interesting use of that venue for Chinese Arctic diplomacy was in 2015, when then-Vice Foreign Minister (now Secretary-General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) Zhang Ming outlined his six-point plan for the Arctic. This important speech highlighted all of the major objectives that would frame China’s 2018 Arctic policy and define Beijing’s approach in the years ahead, including further exploration and research in the region, the protection of the Arctic and the “rational use” of its resources, respect for the rights of Arctic nations and Indigenous persons, respect for the rights of non-Arctic states and the international community, the construction of a “multi-tiered Arctic cooperation framework for win-win results,” and upholding international law in the region, particularly through the Spitsbergen Treaty, UNCLOS, and the United Nations itself.¹⁰²

At that same meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (appearing by video) described China as a ‘Near-Arctic State’ (近北极国家), pointing to the country’s long history of Arctic interests, stretching as far back as its signing of the Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Treaty in 1925. His aim in doing so was to highlight and legitimize the growing role of China in the region, and the ACA provided an excellent platform to launch what would become one of China’s most important Arctic narratives.¹⁰³

Also of particular note was a breakout session during the 2017 Arctic Circle Conference titled “Research Infrastructure in Greenland—Status and Visions,” where possible new research facilities were discussed. There, Yong Yu, a junior scholar with the Polar Research Institute of China, gave a presentation on “China’s Plans Concerning Establishment of a Research Station in Greenland,” suggesting that a station could be set up in northern Greenland or possibly in the western part of the island. This was likely a trial balloon to test the political waters on a potentially controversial topic.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, the ACA’s October 2018 meeting included a panel on “China and the Future of the Arctic: Belt and Road,” testing the Arctic states’ response to that important topic. In May 2019, the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources even hosted an Arctic Circle China Forum in Shanghai, where discussion panels addressed a wide range of themes, including “Arctic governance and ocean cooperation,” “Arctic geopolitics,” and “trans-regional cooperation for a sustainable Arctic.”¹⁰⁵

In recent years, China’s role at the ACA has been far more muted. Its presence at the 2019 event was unusually low-key, partially due to the fact that, after the Shanghai meeting, there was a concern about Beijing having overplayed its hand. This quiet approach was also most likely tied to the collapsing diplomatic relationship with Canada and fears that an incident might arise.¹⁰⁶ There was little Chinese participation at the 2020 or 2021 events, mainly due to quarantine restrictions.

Educational Partnerships

China and Iceland have developed modest educational partnerships, including a small number of university exchanges. Formal partnerships have been established between Bifröst University and the University of Jinan, while the Northern Light Confucius Institute was founded in 2008 with an agreement between the University of Iceland, the Chinese Department of Education, and Ningbo University. The student exchange programs have never developed into major programs, with less than 50 Chinese students travelling to Iceland every year since 2014.

Chinese Exchange Students in Nordic Countries

| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|---------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Denmark | 1036 | 1178 | 1295 | 1261 | 1386 |
| Iceland | <50 | <50 | <50 | <50 | <50 |
| Finland | 1963 | 1806 | 1788 | 1609 | 1644 |
| Norway | 1198 | 1200 | 1079 | 1107 | 1212 |
| Sweden | 1398 | 1560 | 1603 | 1614 | N/A |

Figure 4: Chart from Andreas Bøje Forsby (ed.), *Nordic-China Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities*

Source: *Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, NIAS Reports 52, 2019, 6.*

Iceland's Confucius Institute has been more active. Between 2008 and 2017, the Institute has taught Chinese to nearly 3,000 Icelanders—almost 1% of the whole population of Iceland.¹⁰⁷ Like other such institutes around the world, its official purpose is to “facilitate and promote Chinese language, culture and social studies.”¹⁰⁸ More broadly, it serves as an important facilitator for Chinese soft power. Charge d’Affaires of the Chinese Embassy Zhong Xuhui illustrated this in 2016, when he lauded the centre for training “cultural ambassadors to work for further enhancing the understanding and friendship between the Chinese and Icelandic peoples.”¹⁰⁹

Building this ‘understanding’ of China normally relates to innocuous cultural or artistic displays and events, but it also connects to China’s broader economic and political objectives. For instance, in June 2019, the Institute hosted the “Chinese and Nordic Cultures Conference in Light of the Belt and Road Initiative.” Here, Chinese economic partnerships and the BRI were presented as ‘win-win’ opportunities for Iceland, and Ambassador Jin Zhijian delivered the opening speech.¹¹⁰

Chinese Media and Expert Commentary on Iceland

Iceland has never featured prominently in China’s internal discussions of the Arctic. A survey of Chinese academic output between 2017 and 2021 identified 128 academic articles with an Arctic focus; of these, Iceland is a major topic of discussion in only one (concerning tourism and the Belt and Road Initiative). Iceland’s Arctic Policy is also discussed in five papers about cooperation between China and the Nordic countries more generally.¹¹¹ This survey is not exhaustive but is certainly illustrative of Iceland’s low priority within expert communities.

Where Iceland is mentioned in expert commentary, the tone is always positive. Chinese scholars see the bilateral cooperation between the two countries as successful and likely to continue, having achieved good progress in areas such as geothermal energy, scientific research, as well as business and trade. The political relationship is also seen in a positive light, and Chinese scholars are confident about the current and future prospects for China-Iceland cooperation in the Arctic. Iceland’s low priority in internal discussions is likely owed to the lack of serious Chinese investment, infrastructure, or strategic interests in the country. Iceland is, however, one of the few Arctic countries that has not suffered a precipitous decline in relations with China in recent years.

As is the case with the expert community, the Chinese media does not prioritize Iceland in its coverage. In a survey of 206 Chinese-language media articles on the Arctic between 2017 and 2021, only six focused on Iceland to any extent. Where Iceland is mentioned, it is to highlight its welcoming of China into the Arctic and the benefits of cooperation with China. For instance, in a 2018 exclusive interview with the Nordic branch of the *People’s Daily Online*, the new Icelandic ambassador to China, Gunnar Snorri Gunnarsson, expressed optimism about Iceland-China Arctic cooperation and proposed new ideas for cooperation.¹¹² In the same vein, the China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory has been covered as an example of China’s productive role in the region.¹¹³

Conclusions

China initially received a warm welcome from the Icelandic government and successfully leveraged that relationship to smooth its path into regional governance fora. Its cordial relations and multiple high-level political visits have also had a certain intangible value, legitimizing China's place as a 'Near-Arctic State' and providing supporting evidence for the country's broader assertion that it offers 'win-win' cooperative relationships with its Arctic partners.

In spite of this, China has achieved relatively little of substance in Iceland. Going forward, China will also face the same headwinds that it does in every other Arctic country (apart from Russia): a poor public image, a lack of trust, and an increasing local awareness of the dangers of bilateral ties. Indeed, China's reputation in Iceland has been declining in recent years. In 2015, a survey showed lukewarm Icelandic support for engagement with China, with 32% supporting more cooperation and 34% opposed (with 34% neutral).¹¹⁴ A 2021 poll conducted by the Institute of International Affairs at the University of Iceland shows a clear shift from lukewarm indecision to outright opposition.

These survey results show Chinese investment to be extraordinarily unpopular, with 68.6% of Icelandic participants being in favour of "protecting" the Icelandic economy, against the mere 11.2% who are in favour of increased Chinese investment. It should be noted that a plurality of Icelanders has an aversion to foreign direct investment in general; however, concerns over foreign investment run far lower than those over China-specific investment.

Interestingly, Icelanders are also overwhelmingly willing to sacrifice investment and economic gains for their 'political values,' such as their respect for human rights. While this survey was taken in the fall and winter of 2020, this can already be seen in Iceland's imposition of sanctions in response to Chinese human rights violations in Xinjiang.

Cooperation with China generally is also seen in a poor light. The vast majority of respondents with an opinion on Chinese engagement in Iceland support less or similar levels of engagement. Considering that the current level of economic, political, and cultural engagement is extremely low, this is a telling answer. Along these same lines, more than 60% of Icelanders identify China's growing Arctic influence as a 'high' or 'medium' threat.

It should be noted that American power and influence in the Arctic is also seen as a similarly serious threat, while Icelandic interest in expanding cooperation with the United States is not much higher than with China. This is a surprising hostility given America's role in the defence of Iceland, the large number of tourists visiting the island, and the role the US plays in the Icelandic economy. The timing of the survey can explain some of this. It was conducted during a time (the fall/winter of 2020) in which America's image abroad was defined by Donald Trump. It is also likely that President Trump's informal offer to purchase neighbouring Greenland and his subsequent spat with Denmark three months earlier made a significant and negative impact on Icelanders' impressions of the US. While the US's reputation will likely recover as its government approaches the Arctic and international relations differently, China seems unlikely to engage in any significant course correction—either domestically or internationally.

China's influence in the world is increasing. In your opinion, should Iceland ...

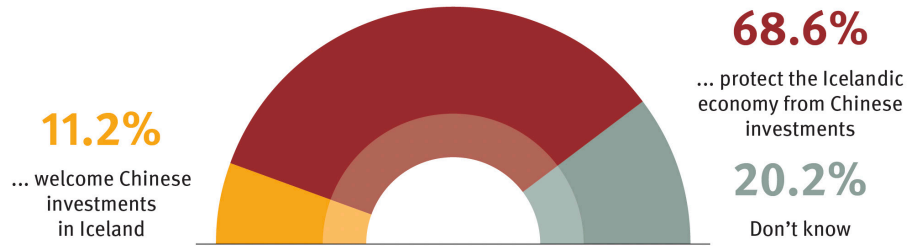


Figure 5: Icelandic opinion on Chinese investment *Source: Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, Pragmatic and Wary of Change*

What is your general attitude towards foreign investment in Iceland?

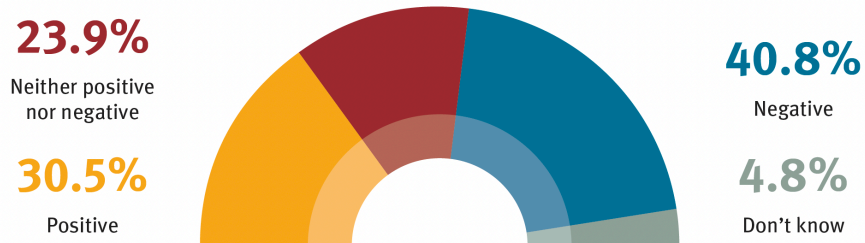


Figure 6: Icelandic opinion on foreign direct investment *Source: Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, Pragmatic and Wary of Change*

Should Iceland more strongly defend its political values against China, even though this may come at the expense of its economic interest?

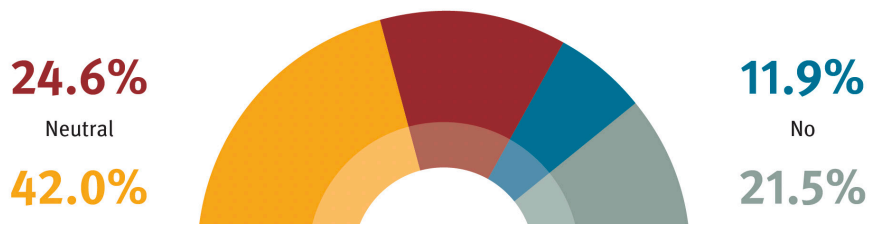


Figure 7: Icelandic opinion on China and political values *Source: Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, Pragmatic and Wary of Change*

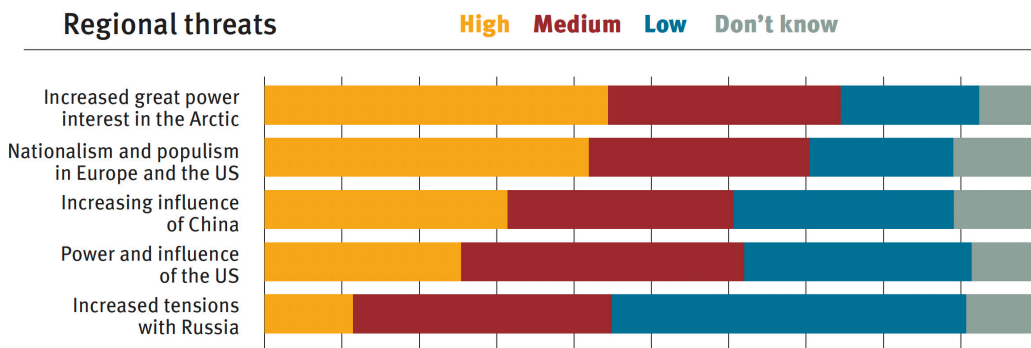


Figure 8: Icelandic perceptions of regional threats

Source: Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, Pragmatic and Wary of Change

Should Iceland cooperate more or less with these (groups of) countries in the future?

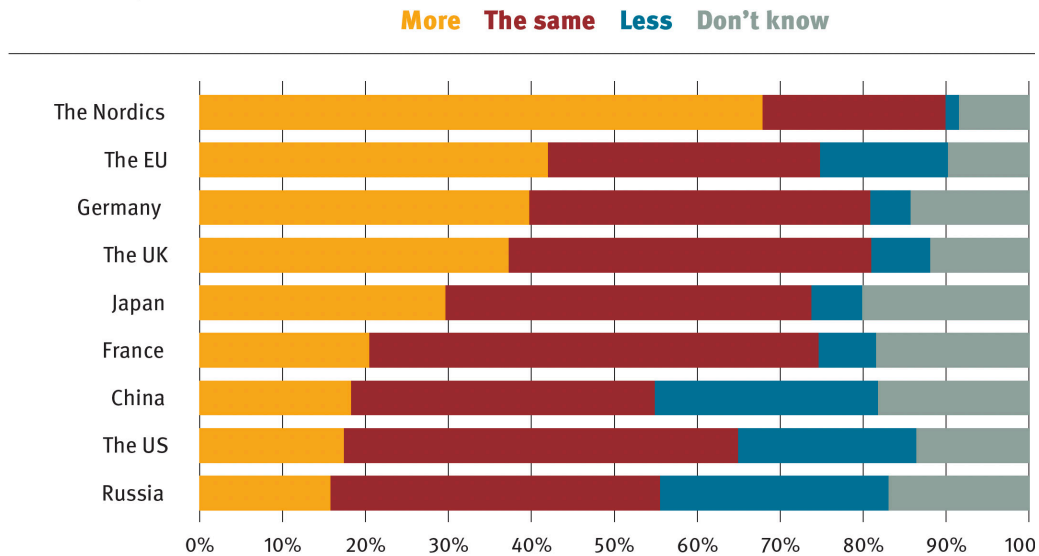


Figure 9: Icelandic perceptions of cooperation

Source: Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, Pragmatic and Wary of Change

2 | Canada

Canada's relationship with China has undergone a significant shift over the past five years, from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's optimistic attempts at a free trade deal in 2015, to the increasingly bitter diplomatic and trade disputes of the early 2020s. This shift has been driven by China's increasingly aggressive posturing in its own neighbourhood and its shifting diplomatic approach towards Canada. The decisive turn in Sino-Canadian relations was the December 2018 arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou, in response to an American extradition request for fraud and conspiracy to commit fraud in circumventing US sanctions against Iran. China's response to this arrest included the arbitrary detentions of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, as well as the arbitrary death sentence of Robert Schellenberg. Trade sanctions also followed, including, most significantly, China's suspension of canola seed imports from two Canadian companies.

Hopes for an improvement in relations came when Meng, Spavor, and Kovrig were all returned to their home countries in September 2021, following a deferred prosecution deal with the US Justice Department which freed the Huawei heiress.¹¹⁵ Lasting damage had been done, however, as these three years of political crisis and trade sanctions threw into sharp relief the long-term, strategic challenge facing Canada: that China seeks to use its growing military, political, and economic heft to re-shape the international environment to be more accepting of the Chinese Communist Party and its authoritarian model. China is clearly willing and able to punish countries with whom it disagrees—Canada being one among many. This realization, more than the detention of the two Michaels itself, has driven a re-evaluation in Canada. In September 2021, Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau told the news media that Canada's "eyes are wide open" when it comes to normalizing its relations with China, and that Canada is now following a four-fold approach to China: "coexist," "compete," "co-operate," and "challenge."¹¹⁶

Canada's relationship with China must also be seen within the broader contexts of the China-US geostrategic rivalry and the US's concerns regarding China that are shared across the political spectrum. China, in turn, sees the US as trying to contain China, with Canada being a willing partner in these efforts.¹¹⁷ Ottawa's participation in American 'freedom of navigation' voyages through the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea has, in China's eyes, made Canada's role in the US-led effort to contain China even clearer.

Despite this worsening relationship, the Canadian government recognizes that it must continue to work with China on global issues such as climate change, trade, and global public health. China is also an important market for Canadian commodity and agri-food exports, and its growing consumer market offers further opportunities for Canadian businesses. As such, Canada's general approach to China mimics those of many other Western states: growing caution and suspicion and a significantly reduced willingness to collaborate on business and scientific ventures, while recognizing the impossibility of ignoring China's economy and increasing global importance.

Political Objectives

China's diplomatic objectives in Canada are not primarily focused on the Arctic, but Arctic issues do intersect with Beijing's economic, environmental, political, and strategic interests. The Arctic is central to Canada's national identity, prosperity, security, values, and interests. The Canadian Arctic covers 40% of Canada's territory and is home to more than 200,000 inhabitants, more than half of whom are Indigenous.

In its Arctic policy statements, Canada has consistently committed to asserting its international leadership to ensure that the Arctic remains a region characterized by peace, stability, and low tension, where states can exercise their sovereign rights and responsibilities. While strategic competition outside of the Arctic is likely to continue to complicate relations between China and Canada (and its Western allies), a core debate within Canada is whether it can balance its sovereignty, sovereign rights, and national interests with China's global interests in the Arctic region.¹¹⁸

In recent years, senior officials in the Canadian defence and security community have begun to openly discuss China as a threat to Canada's security and interests in an Arctic context. In March 2021, for example, Deputy Minister of National Defence Jody Thomas told the Ottawa Conference on Security and Defence that, as melting ice opens up the Arctic Ocean, Beijing has set its eyes on the Northwest Passage for new shipping routes and resource extraction, including fish, fossil fuel, and minerals. "We should not underestimate at all that threat of resource exploitation in the Arctic by China in particular," she was reported to say. "China has a voracious appetite and will stop at nothing to feed itself, and the Arctic is one of the last domains and regions left and we have to understand it and exploit it and more quickly than they can exploit it."¹¹⁹

Economic Objectives

China is Canada's third-largest trading partner, after the US and the EU, with Chinese investment in Canada being traditionally concentrated in the natural resources sector. However, in recent years, there has also been growth in the non-resource sectors.¹²⁰ The Canadian government's general position is that the country remains open to Chinese investment, so long as it brings a net benefit to Canada and is not injurious to national security. Canada's *Investment Canada Act* (ICA) is the legislative tool for carrying out reviews to ensure that these interests are met. While the Liberal government's *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* offers contradictory messaging about Canada's Arctic development model,¹²¹ it has the stated objective of empowering Northern communities that, with the 2017 *Pan-Territorial Vision for Sustainable Development*, could attract investors seeking to develop resource extraction facilities in the region.

The Canadian government continues to weigh the threats and opportunities that China's Arctic interests, investments, and activities pose for Canada and its allies in the short and longer terms. Extensive Canadian national media coverage of Shandong Mining's 2020 attempt to purchase northern gold miner TMAC Resources, and the result of the national security review,¹²² reinforced concerns about Chinese influence, which weigh heavily on Canadian regulators.

Investors interested in undertaking challenging projects in Northern Canada, particularly Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), are forced to navigate Canada's increasingly scrutinous regulatory system amid China-Canada tensions, while also negotiating with local and Indigenous stakeholders where environmental and community impact concerns play important roles. Consequently, investors require a high degree of political competency to successfully navigate these complex processes. In many cases, the hostile political climate has made Chinese investment impossible.

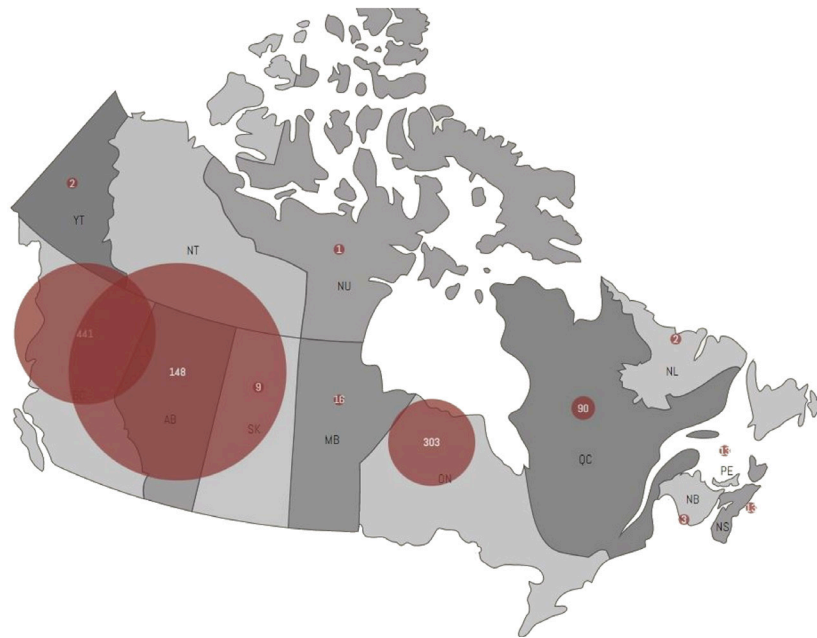


Figure 3: The vast majority of Chinese investments in Canada have been located outside the Arctic. This map shows foreign direct investment (FDI) by number of investments

Source: China Investment Tracker

Mineral Extraction

Investments in mining dominate China’s economic interests in the Canadian Arctic. This is not surprising: given the limited economic diversification in the Canadian Arctic, there are few other industries in which China can be expected to invest. China currently has a small footprint in Northern Canada, its companies owning only one mine and two advanced development projects in the region (defined as north of 60°).

The only Chinese-owned mine operating in the Canadian North is the Nunavik Nickel project on the Ungava Peninsula in northern Quebec. The mine produces nickel, copper, platinum, and palladium and is owned by Canadian Royalties Inc., a subsidiary of Zhongze Holding Group Co., Ltd. (ZHG). In 2014, Jilin Jien Nickel Industry Co. (part of ZHG) spent \$735 million building the mine and the accompanying infrastructure. The first mineral shipment was sent to China through the Northwest Passage that same year.

Chinese companies also own two major development properties. The Selwyn lead and zinc project—one of the largest undeveloped zinc-lead deposits in the world—is owned by Yunnan Chihong Zinc and Germanium Co., a state-owned firm. The project is managed by Selwyn Chihong Mining Ltd., a Canadian subsidiary. Low resource prices have slowed development, and no significant progress has been made since 2015.

A larger development project is owned by Chinese state-owned MMG. The Izok Lake project includes plans for a mine and mill at Izok Lake in the Northwest Territories (NWT). If built, the mine would be one of the largest copper and zinc mines in the world, capable of producing 180,000 tonnes of zinc and 50,000 tonnes of copper in concentrate per year. Ambitious plans for extensive infrastructure, including a port, were halted in 2013 in the face

of declining resource prices. Since then, MMG has sought financial support from the Canadian federal government to develop the necessary resources. In 2019, the governments of Canada and the NWT pledged \$61.5 million towards the first phase of that development: the construction of a road to Grays Bay on the Northwest Passage. MMG management called this a “game changer” and expressed its thanks to the Canadian government.¹²³ Further support from the Kitikmeot Inuit Association in 2021 suggests that the road could soon go to an environmental review. Major infrastructure projects in northern Canada are always unpredictable, and there is no guarantee that the Grays Bay road will be built or that it will lower costs sufficiently to enable MMG to develop its projects.

The Izok Lake project faces other points of friction aside from uncertain economics. The infrastructure necessary to bring it to fruition runs across two major caribou ranges and core calving grounds. The prospect of development has already led to pushback from hunters and trappers over the potential impact of the road and mines on local wildlife. Many Aboriginal groups rely on the Bathurst caribou, from the Dene in the Northwest Territories to the Athabasca Denesuline in Saskatchewan. About a dozen outside groups have written to the Nunavut Impact Review Board to ask that the project be reviewed by a federal environmental assessment panel that would include Aboriginal groups from outside the territory.¹²⁴

Generally speaking, China’s investment record in the Canadian North is not strong. While the Nunavik Nickel project continues to operate profitably and government funding may facilitate MMG’s operations, China has also seen significant failures. The Wolverine mine in Yukon is a clear example. Purchased by state-owned Jinduicheng Molybdenum Group Co., Ltd., for \$113 million in 2008, the zinc, copper, and lead concentrate mine was put into production in 2012 and closed in 2015. Called an “irresponsible mining venture” by one Yukon judge, the assets were taken over by the territory in 2018 after the Yukon Zinc Corporation declared bankruptcy and transferred from its Chinese parent to Minquest, an American holding company.¹²⁵ During the restructuring, Jinduicheng Canada paid local contractors only 11.5 cents on the dollar, leaving several Yukon companies with significant losses.¹²⁶ In 2018, the Yukon government stepped in to mitigate the environmental damage, and it expects to spend in excess of \$10 million in the 2021-2022 fiscal year on the mine.¹²⁷

In subarctic Quebec, the Bloom Lake iron ore mine was also shut down in 2015, leading to a \$4.5 billion write-down for the mine’s owner, Cliffs Natural Resources. Chinese steelmaker Wuhan Iron and Steel owned a 19.9% stake in the project, for which it paid \$240 million in 2009.¹²⁸ The Lac Oteluk iron ore project in northern Quebec was also funded by Wuhan Iron and Steel through a joint venture from 2012 to 2015. The Chinese steelmaker owns 60% of the project and financed the majority of its \$120 million in expenditures. This project has also failed and was placed in care and maintenance in 2016.¹²⁹

In 2012 and 2013, the Chinese SOE Hebei Iron & Steel Group, one of the world’s top steel producers, invested \$181 million to acquire a 25% joint venture stake in the Kami iron ore project located near the Labrador/Quebec border, as well as a 19.9% stake in Alderon Iron Ore Corp., the Vancouver-based operator of the Kami project. The partnership was intended to bring additional financing from Chinese banks; however, it, too, was soon abandoned after global iron ore prices dropped in 2014. The company defaulted in 2020, despite efforts to secure a last-minute investment from another Chinese firm.¹³⁰

With the exception of Jilin Jien Nickel Industry's investment in the Nunavik Nickel project, all Chinese investments in the Canadian Arctic and subarctic have either failed or been in stasis for many years. It is no surprise, therefore, that the trend in Chinese investment has slowed since 2016. The failed acquisition of a northern gold mine in 2020 may have marked a decisive break. In May 2020, state-owned Shandong Gold Mining Co. Ltd. announced a deal to buy TMAC Resources and the Hope Bay mining project in Nunavut for \$230 million.¹³¹ While gold is not a strategic resource, the deal faced a national security review from the Canadian government under the *Investment Canada Act*, after receiving added scrutiny in accordance with the April *Policy Statement on Foreign Investment Review and COVID-19*.¹³² This review considered whether the transaction could be injurious to Canadian national security and culminated in a formal rejection of the bid in December 2020.

All details on this review are classified. However, the Canadian concerns likely extend beyond control over a gold deposit. Hope Bay sits on a large bay along the most trafficked path of the several routes that make up the Northwest Passage. The acquisition would also have left a company, owned by the Chinese government, as one of the main investors in the region and the employer of 70 Inuit workers (and 322 workers in total). This is a sizable number given the populations of the local communities, namely Cambridge Bay (1,766) and Kugluktuk (1,491).

The Chinese media has paid relatively little attention to Canada's rejection of Shandong's bid. The Chinese *Observer News* wrote that "the excuse of "national security" has become a "magic weapon" for some Western countries to suppress and restrict Chinese companies." With specific reference to Canada blocking Chinese companies in the name of "national security," Chinese Vice Minister of Commerce and Deputy International Trade Representative Wang Shouwen clearly pointed out, in October 2021, that unilateralism and protectionism are critical to the global economic recovery and fight against the epidemic. China, he said, is firmly opposed to suppressing and restricting companies from other countries in the name of "national security."¹³³

Rejecting Chinese investment carries clear political risks for the Canadian government. The northern territories rely on resource development. Both Yukon and the Northwest Territories have shares in royalties through devolution agreements with Ottawa, while Nunavut is negotiating a similar arrangement. Local Inuit associations have a stake in development as well. The Hope Bay mine, for instance, is situated on Inuit-owned land and is thus subject to the impact and benefits agreement reached between TMAC and the Kivalliq Inuit Association (KIA), a designated Inuit organization which stood to gain as much as \$400 million CDN in royalties and other payments over the lifespan of the mine.¹³⁴ Employment in the mines is also important for local communities, particularly in Nunavut, where unemployment reached 14% in 2020.¹³⁵

As is the case elsewhere in the Arctic, local communities place understandably greater value on this investment than on broader questions of national security. Leona Aglukkaq, a former federal cabinet minister and TMAC board member, argued in favour of the Shandong deal, stating that "the benefits are too great to pass up."¹³⁶ In the case of Hope Bay, this balancing act—between national security and local development—was avoided, as the cancellation of the Shandong deal was followed by Canadian mining company Agnico Eagle's offer to purchase TMAC Resources. Future rejections of Chinese investment are unlikely to have such a convenient conclusion.

Tourism

After investment in extractive industries, China's most significant economic interest in the Canadian North is tourism. Chinese tourists contributed \$7.3 million to the economy of northern Canada in Q3 2018, or around 4.4% of the total foreign tourist spending in the region, making China one of the top three source countries for tourists to the North. This revenue has also shown remarkable growth. The number of Chinese tourists visiting the NWT rose from 1,800 in 2013 to over 20,000 in 2018, an increase of over 1,000%.¹³⁷

Eager to capture a larger share of Chinese tourist wealth, each of the three territories sought to build relationships wherever possible. In September 2015, and again in February 2016, China's Ambassador Luo Zhaohui visited the Northwest Territories and Yukon to discuss, among other things, promoting tourism. Representatives from the NWT government also learned to use Chinese social media service WeChat, and they also attended trade shows in Beijing and Shanghai in June 2018.¹³⁸

This growing tourism business was, however, decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the souring Sino-Canadian relations. International travel restrictions naturally resulted in a dramatic decrease in Chinese tourism. Even before those restrictions came into force, a decrease in Chinese interest was visible following the arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou by Canadian authorities. Following that arrest, then-Heritage Minister Mélanie Joly cancelled her trip to China, and an NWT trade mission was cancelled over Premier Bob McLeod's concerns about the plight of the 'two Michaels.' Canada's federal tourism agency, Destination Canada, also suspended ads on Weibo.¹³⁹ Data released by the Canada China Business Council showed that 20% of businesses in both countries reported postponements or cancellations due to these tensions, and one quarter of Chinese respondents reported cancelling or postponing travel plans to Canada.¹⁴⁰ The results of a *Global Times* (the English-language mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party) survey from January 2022 allege that Canada is now the least popular Western country amongst Chinese respondents (with only 0.4% saying that they like Canada).¹⁴¹

Infrastructure and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Canada has not taken an official position on China's Belt and Road Initiative, but it has called on Beijing to address the concerns raised by the international community around transparency, governance, and financial sustainability in future BRI projects. While Global Affairs Canada notes that recipient countries generally welcome funding from China for much-needed infrastructure, there are questions about China's geopolitical motives, as well as concerns over whether BRI projects are economically and financially sound, whether China is practicing 'debt-trap diplomacy,' and whether BRI projects conform to global standards on environmental protection and labour. Canada's official engagement regarding the BRI is limited to the inaugural meeting of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in May 2017 in Beijing.¹⁴²

While shipping routes across the Eurasian Arctic factor heavily into China's signature Belt and Road Initiative, the Northwest Passage has less direct relevance, and China has undertaken no significant infrastructure work in the Canadian Arctic to date.

Arctic Fisheries

While China has no commercial fisheries in the Arctic, it is the largest market for Canada's small Arctic commercial fisheries, which export more than 90% of their production.¹⁴³ Despite their small scale, fisheries in the Canadian North have grown steadily over the past decade and are considered to be a key component of a diversified Arctic economy,¹⁴⁴ with the Nunavut Fisheries Association estimating that fisheries have an economic impact of \$112 million on that territory's GDP. Northern Canadian fisheries supply Chinese markets with frozen turbot, shrimp, and Arctic cod.¹⁴⁵ Although there is no evidence of malicious Chinese actors influencing Indigenous organizations and fishing companies at present, they could seek to do so in the future (as well as striving to influence political processes in a bid to increase quotas).¹⁴⁶ Chinese actors might also wish to amplify Canadian activist scholars who criticize Canada's Arctic fisheries management as an example of "internal colonialism."¹⁴⁷

In 2019, Canada and China both signed the agreement to prevent unregulated high seas fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean (CAOFA), which came into force in June 2021. This agreement prohibits commercial fishing in the high seas portion of the central Arctic Ocean for a period of at least 16 years (with possible extension in five-year increments thereafter unless any party objects), until a joint program of research and monitoring demonstrates that there are fish stocks "that could be harvested on a sustainable basis and the possible impacts of such fisheries on the ecosystems of the Agreement Area."¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, these scientific activities are of direct interest to China. Furthermore, the Agreement requires the use of Indigenous and local knowledge in the joint research program and related work, and it guarantees the participation of Arctic Indigenous peoples in the implementation of the Agreement. Even though Canadian Inuit do not engage in high seas fishing, China could seek to influence Canadian Indigenous groups to promote its interests in securing access to a future Central Arctic Ocean fishery.

Strategic Objectives

China has no clear military interests in Canada's Arctic, which is reflected in its strategic messaging to date. Beijing's external-facing discourse reveals a tendency to tread carefully in engaging the region, in particular by underscoring the country's potential as a partner in scientific, economic, and political development in the circumpolar North. Despite this, its increasingly pronounced enthusiasm for the region's economic potential, especially in the areas of shipping and resource extraction (energy, mining, and fishing), also intersect with potential future strategic military interests.¹⁴⁹ Nevertheless, China's calls for peaceful development and deeper cooperation with Arctic partners are aligned with its strategic economic development goals.

To date, China has chosen not to display its military capacity in the circumpolar Arctic as part of its international deterrence posture (outside of the subarctic Aleutians and Baltic). Given that there is no indication that China seeks overt military competition or conflict in the region, there is little worry of kinetic military action by that country against Western countries. Most Canadian commentators now agree that the core geostrategic drivers affecting Arctic security do not relate to disputes over territory or resources, but that 'spillovers' and generally worsened East-West relations create additional challenges.

Security concerns related to the potential Chinese ownership of geographically strategic areas in the Canadian Arctic are well documented. One dominant school of Canadian thought emphasizes a clandestine Chinese ‘bait and switch’ strategy designed to secure entrance into the Canadian market as an investor but with the real goal of securing political influence.¹⁵⁰ The *Canada-US Joint Action Plan on Critical Minerals Collaboration (2020)*, which seeks to lessen the reliance on Chinese-produced rare earth metals used in technology and military manufacturing, also invites scrutiny of Chinese investments in resource development in the Canadian Arctic.¹⁵¹

Shandong Gold Mining’s 2020 attempt to purchase TMAC provoked security concerns amongst Canadian observers, given the TMAC mine’s strategic location along the southern route of the Northwest Passage and its proximity to Cambridge Bay, a regional hub with a main North Warning System (NWS) site and the Canadian High Arctic Research Station (CHARS). Southern Canadian observers in particular voiced concerns about the deal, expressing worry that Shandong Gold’s motivations reflected Beijing’s long-term political/strategic interests as much as economic considerations.¹⁵² In October 2020, the Canadian government announced that it was conducting a national security review under the *Investment Canada Act*,¹⁵³ which examined those aspects of the proposed transaction that could be injurious to Canadian national security. On December 21, 2020, the Canadian federal cabinet (the Governor in Council) formally rejected the deal, but it did not disclose the reasons behind the decision.¹⁵⁴

The results of the national security review of Shandong’s potential purchase of the Hope Bay mine demonstrate the Canadian federal government’s concerns regarding allowing a Chinese state-owned mining company to secure a footprint and operate a docking and ore-loading facility in a strategically significant Arctic location. China’s history of dual-use port infrastructure certainly impacted this decision.

Cyber and Telecommunications

Ottawa acknowledges that cyber-espionage, cyber-sabotage, cyber-foreign influence, and cyber-terrorism pose significant threats to the country’s national security, interests, and economic stability, and it identifies China as a leading source of those threats. Chinese actors carry out network operations for intelligence purposes, can conduct destructive operations of sabotage and deterrence, and target research institutions and companies with access to advanced technology. The latter category includes advanced Canadian research and development in satellites, autonomous underwater vehicles, and other technologies with Arctic applications.

Building cyber resilience in the Canadian Arctic falls within the purview of various actors, including the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Communications Security Establishment (CSE), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and other key government partners. There is no polling or survey data to indicate the extent to which Northern Canadian citizens and institutions are aware of the risks associated with adversarial information operations.¹⁵⁵ There is evidence of cyberattacks being tested in the North: a major ransomware cyberattack crippled the Government of Nunavut’s essential electronic communications for two weeks in 2019, affecting public services throughout the territory.¹⁵⁶

At the federal level, there are strong indications of Chinese interference in Canadian federal elections. The Canadian research group DisinfoWatch released findings in late November 2021 concluding that, “after analysing available

open-source data and consulting with key stakeholders, we believe that the timing and content of narratives indicate the likelihood of a coordinated influence operation targeting Chinese-Canadian voters.” The operation resembles the disinformation attack modes identified during the January 2020 Taiwanese elections, wherein Beijing used private chat platforms and the Beijing-controlled social media giant WeChat to influence voters. The primary target of the operation in Canada was the Conservative Party, notably the popular Metro Vancouver MP Kenny Chiu, who ended up losing the riding of Steveston-Richmond East to the Liberal candidate by 3,000 votes after being barraged with false allegations that a proposed foreign agents registration law would single out Chinese-Canadians, suppress the Chinese diaspora in Canada, and force ethnic Chinese people to register under the law.¹⁵⁷ The Conservative Party believes that China’s Communist regime targeted 13 ridings in total with misinformation and disinformation messaging on WeChat and Weibo, and that “potential foreign government-paid campaign workers ... were getting brown envelopes of cash to do stuff for other campaigns.”¹⁵⁸

Given the small Chinese-Canadian population in the Canadian Arctic, a coordinated campaign seeking to influence opinion and behaviour among the 1,000,000 members of the Chinese diaspora community in Canada is unlikely to have a major influence on elections in Canada’s three northern territories or on Canadian Arctic policy. It may, however, put pressure on political elite opinion in Ottawa, particularly if any measures that seek to constrain Chinese influence activities are labelled as ‘anti-Asian’ racism.¹⁵⁹

Telecommunications gaps in the Canadian Arctic are well documented. Canada’s northern policy notes how many communities in the region rely exclusively on satellite for access to internet services. Accordingly, a key Canadian political objective has been to ensure “fast, reliable, and affordable broadband connectivity for all” Arctic residents.¹⁶⁰ This has raised questions about the attractiveness of potential Chinese investment in the sector. For example, Huawei Canada’s July 2019 announcement that it would partner with a northern telecom company and an Inuit development corporation to extend high-speed 4G wireless services to 70 communities in the Arctic and northern Quebec by 2025 generated worries about whether this would give a Chinese company a monopoly over communications in remote Arctic communities.¹⁶¹

The security of 5G wireless systems has been at the forefront of Canadian media stories, with Canada’s Five Eyes partners all making public announcements on how they plan to protect 5G wireless telecommunications networks (and the US strongly encouraging countries to carefully weigh the security considerations of 5G technology). Technical, economic, and security experts at the Departments of Public Safety, Global Affairs, National Defence, and Innovation, Science and Economic Development are all involved in an ongoing review. Canada views this issue as an important element of its key bilateral relationships and notes that ensuring “Canada’s 5G technology is compatible with US and allied telecommunications systems is key to securing our shared critical infrastructure and advancing our economic interests.”¹⁶²

In December 2021, China’s ambassador to Canada, Cong Peiwu, warned that Canada would face consequences if it blocked Huawei from participating in its 5G internet network (as the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand have already done). In May 2022, the Trudeau Liberals announced a complete ban on Huawei (and ZTE) equipment from Canadian telecommunications networks. The Chinese response remains to be seen; however, Cong made it clear that Canada “will pay a price for their erroneous deeds and actions.”¹⁶³

The Northwest Passage

Chinese media and academic research have highlighted the Northwest Passage as a potentially useful route for navigation. This has obvious, long-term economic and strategic implications. The rationale for China's interest is clear, from a strictly geographic perspective, as the various Arctic routes offer significant advantages over the traditional sea lanes around the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Horn, and the Suez or Panama Canals. While the Northern Sea Route (NSR) has received the most Chinese interest, the Northwest Passage could—theoretically—offer a better alternative for ships travelling from China to the US eastern seaboard or parts of Western Europe. Shorter routes offer shorter transit times and therefore reduced crew and fuel expenses, as well as the ability to maintain a trade route with fewer ships.

In June 2017, China identified the Arctic as one of the three key shipping routes of the BRI, and, in its 2018 Arctic White Paper, China formally calls for a 'Polar Silk Road' to link its Arctic resource interests with the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁶⁴ China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) "for national economic and social development and the long-range objectives to the year 2035" also calls for pragmatic participation and cooperation in the Arctic and on the building of a Polar Silk Road.¹⁶⁵

| Origin-Destination | Panama | Northwest Passage | Northeast Passage | Suez and Malacca |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Rotterdam-Shanghai | 25,588 | 16,100 | 15,793 | 19,550 |
| Bordeaux-Shanghai | 24,980 | 16,100 | 16,750 | 19,030 |
| Marseilles-Shanghai | 26,038 | 19,160 | 19,718 | 16,460 |
| Gioia Tauro (Italy)-Hong Kong | 25,934 | 20,230 | 20,950 | 14,093 |
| Barcelona-Hong Kong | 25,044 | 18,950 | 20,090 | 14,693 |
| New York-Shanghai | 20,880 | 17,030 | 19,893 | 22,930 |
| New York-Hong Kong | 21,260 | 18,140 | 20,985 | 21,570 |
| Rotterdam-Los Angeles | 14,490 | 15,120 | 15,552 | 29,750 |
| Lisbon-Los Angeles | 14,165 | 14,940 | 16,150 | 27,225 |

Figure 4: Distances between major ports, by the different Arctic routes. Dark grey indicates the shortest routes, while light grey indicates those that are nearly as short

Source: Lackenbauer et al., *China's Arctic Ambitions*

While detailed studies of cost savings along the Canadian Arctic are less developed, Bin Yang of Shanghai Maritime University has estimated that transit along the Northern Sea Route could yield \$60-120 billion in savings per year for Chinese shipping firms.¹⁶⁶ Shou Jianmin and Feng Yuan, also of Shanghai Maritime University, point to potential savings of 10% in fuel and 25% in overall costs.¹⁶⁷

Despite these initial optimistic assumptions, no Chinese commercial vessel has yet transited the Northwest Passage. However, the Chinese icebreaker *Xue Long* did conduct marine scientific research along the route in 2017 in a voyage that was widely assumed to be a test of the future potential for commercial shipping¹⁶⁸ (as the scientific crew suggested when interviewed in Chinese media).¹⁶⁹

Geographically, Canadian waters seem to offer real advantages for Chinese shipping, but there are good reasons for Chinese ships to prioritize the NSR. The easiest and most travelled routes through the Northwest Passage have always been through Peel Sound and M'Clintock Channel, yet both of those passages restrict the draft of a ship, meaning that the economies of scale provided by the world's biggest cargo vessels cannot be realized. The deep-draft routes through the Prince of Wales and M'Clure Straits could handle even the 25-metre draft of an ultra-large crude or cargo carrier, but those are the areas with the most extreme ice conditions in the Canadian Arctic, and thus, even in the summer months, they are currently limited to Arctic Class 3 vessels.¹⁷⁰ Illustrating these hazardous conditions, the Canadian-owned shipping company Fednav ships iron ore from the Mary River mine on Baffin Island to China through the NSR, rather than the Northwest Passage. This means travelling roughly 18,500 kilometres, as compared to the 8,500-kilometre voyage through Canadian waters.

Shipping through the Canadian Arctic is governed by the *Canadian Shipping Act* and the *Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act*. This legislation is based on a Canadian legal claim that the waters within the archipelago are historic internal waters. In Canadian law, Canada's Arctic waters are defined by the straight baselines surrounding the Arctic Archipelago, drawn on January 1, 1986, to officially enclose the Arctic waters within as Canadian. The establishment of straight baselines represented the first official delineation and definition of the extent of Canada's Arctic maritime sovereignty; however, this was not a claim to sovereignty *per se*. Since the Arctic waters have long been considered 'historic,' the baselines only defined the waters over which Canada has long exercised sovereignty. Canada claims that this sovereignty dates to the late 19th century and is supported by a long history of government activity, which exercised authority over the region through the issuance of fishing licences and the application of Canadian laws. Canada also considers its position to be strengthened by the presence and activity of the Inuit since time immemorial.

Because Canada considers the Northwest Passage to be internal waters, Ottawa does not accept that the right of innocent passage exists. While Canada has signed UNCLOS and accepts the existence of transit passage through international straits, it asserts that there is no such right in the Northwest Passage because that passage is not a "strait used for international navigation." Specifically, the final wording of Part III, Article 8(2) of UNCLOS states that the passage regime would apply to "any areas of internal waters within a strait, except where the establishment of a straight baseline in accordance with the method set forth in Article 7 has the effect of enclosing as internal waters areas which *had not previously been considered as such* [emphasis added]."¹⁷¹ Since Canada enclosed the waters before ratifying the Convention, it claims that the provision does not apply. Canada has also sought to prevent this right of passage from emerging by employing historic title. If the waters had always been Canadian, then obviously no new rights could arise.

The United States does not accept this Canadian legal position. Since the 1950s, the US government has considered the Northwest Passage outside of Canada's territorial sea to be international waters. In 1969, the Nixon administration began referring to the passage as an international strait.¹⁷² This has been the US's position since that time.¹⁷³ In spite of this, a *modus vivendi* has existed since the 1950s, in which neither state seeks to raise the issue to the detriment of the other.

As China expands its presence and trade routes into the Arctic, its position on the status of the Northwest Passage will become increasingly important. To date, Beijing has not made a clear statement on the issue, preferring a calculated ambiguity.

Some commentaries in Chinese newspapers and political journals imply that China should enjoy rights of passage through the Arctic straits. However, what those 'rights' actually entail is rarely spelled out. Equally important, most Chinese scholars writing about potential transit are equally interested in Canadian or Russian regulation as an important enabling factor, indicating an implied respect for the Arctic states' rights to apply such regulation.¹⁷⁴

China's interest in the Northwest Passage was advertised in April 2016 when China's Maritime Safety Administration published a navigation manual for the region. Ministry of Transport spokesman Liu Pengfei was widely quoted in the Canadian media as saying that Chinese ships will sail through the Northwest Passage "in the future," and "once this route is commonly used, it will directly change global maritime transport and have a profound influence on international trade, the world economy, capital flow and resource exploitation."¹⁷⁵

While the publication of this shipping guide highlighted China's continued interest in the Canadian Arctic, it did not represent the threat to Canadian sovereignty anticipated by some in the Canadian media.¹⁷⁶ A fact-based document, the manual offers implicit support for Canadian sovereignty. When addressing shipping regulations, for instance, the Ministry authors write:

[As the] Canadian government considers the Northwest Passage as internal waters, foreign ships are obliged to apply for permit and pay relevant fees. Foreign ships should obey the "Canada Shipping Act, 2001" and the "Northern Canada Vessel Traffic Services Zone Regulations 2010 [translated from the original Mandarin].¹⁷⁷

In a later chapter, the authors remind ship owners that they are required to report to the Canada Northern Vessel Reporting System (NORDREG), that vessels carrying dangerous goods must apply for approval, and that "foreign ships should submit sailing plan[s] (SP) to Marine Communications and Traffic Services."¹⁷⁸ What emerges from this report is an implied respect for Canadian sovereignty, as the Northwest Passage is clearly being treated as waters over which Canada enjoys full jurisdiction, rather than as an international strait, in which case this level of reporting would not be necessary.

Critically, China's 2018 Arctic White Paper fails to clarify the country's position. In discussing the Northwest Passage and China's plans to use Canadian waters, the White Paper walks a fine line, stating:

China respects the legislative, enforcement and adjudicatory powers of the Arctic States in the waters *subject to their jurisdiction*. China maintains that the management of the Arctic shipping routes should be conducted in accordance with treaties including the UNCLOS and general international law and that the freedom of navigation enjoyed by all countries in accordance with the law and their rights to use the Arctic shipping routes should be ensured. China maintains that disputes over the Arctic shipping routes should be properly settled in accordance with international law [emphasis added].

In this crucial paragraph, the Chinese government states that it respects Canadian sovereignty “in the waters subject to [Canada’s] jurisdiction,” without specifying what those areas might be. It goes on to say that China “enjoys freedom of navigation” in accordance with UNCLOS—a reference to the right of transit passage through international straits, guaranteed in Article 38 of UNCLOS. While this phrasing could be seen to imply a Chinese assumption of free navigation through the region, that would not be the case if the Northwest Passage was seen as waters “subject to [Canadian] jurisdiction.”

What areas China believes are “subject to [Canadian] jurisdiction” are, therefore, up for debate. That ambiguity was certainly the intent, with the waters muddied just enough to allow China to skirt the issue, neither locking itself into a recognition of Canadian sovereignty nor offending a Canadian government that it may need as a partner in Arctic issues.

China’s reluctance to take a stance on the Northwest Passage has broader roots and implications as well. China may be unwilling to raise the issue of maritime sovereignty while it is defending a nebulous and as yet undefined claim to most of the South China Sea. While China’s legal position regarding the South China Sea shares no legal basis with Canada’s claim to the Northwest Passage, it would be politically awkward to defend that maritime claim while simultaneously challenging Canada’s far more legitimate claim in the Arctic.

Apart from the South China Sea, China also asserts sovereignty over bodies of water closer to home using straight baselines, which the US does not recognize based on their length. Most importantly, China employs a 121.7-mile-long straight baseline to enclose the strategically important Qiongzhou Strait, which separates Hainan Island from the mainland.¹⁷⁹ This line is only eight miles shorter than the longest Canadian Arctic line, which stretches across M’Clure Strait. From this perspective, a challenge to the Canadian baseline system might also create an awkward precedent.

Perhaps most importantly, Canada’s legal position on Arctic straits is often characterized as similar to Russia’s with respect to the Northern Sea Route.¹⁸⁰ China has avoided taking a firm position on the status of these Russian waters.¹⁸¹ For China, labelling the NSR an international strait would constitute a serious challenge to Russian sovereignty, which could lead to a withdrawal of Russian services along the route, limit Chinese investment opportunities in regional infrastructure, complicate China’s Polar Silk Road ambitions, and even damage China’s relationship with Russia more generally.

There is little evidence from Chinese scholars or experts that China is preparing for a more aggressive approach to Canadian jurisdiction, or to assert its rights to transit the passage. Relative to the NSR, the Northwest Passage receives little attention, and the research being undertaken appears to support continued cooperation with Canada.¹⁸² During *Xue Long’s* 2017 voyage through the Northwest Passage, assistant chief scientist He Jianfeng told *Reference News* that the Northwest Passage is a less attractive option for shipping than the NSR, and that the future use of the Canadian route will largely depend on the decision of the Canadian government.¹⁸³ Any official Beijing plan to challenge Canadian jurisdiction would have seen these senior scientists being briefed and provided with approved talking points.

In waters closer to home, China often relies on a quasi-civilian maritime militia to assert its excessive maritime claims. This provides plausible deniability of any rule breaking, while strengthening its position and establishing a precedent of use and occupation. A trend to monitor in the Arctic will be the presence of any such proxies. A concerning example from the summer of 2021 was the voyage of Chinese sailor Zhai Mo, who attempted to circumnavigate the Arctic Ocean aboard his sailboat. While officially a private citizen, Zhai has a history of asserting Chinese state sovereignty in disputed areas.¹⁸⁴

Curiously, Zhai's 2021 attempt to complete a non-stop, sail-powered circumnavigation of the Arctic received extensive coverage in English-language state-owned media in China, but it did not in Chinese-language media. Coverage was particularly heavy on China Global Television Network (CGTN), which had embedded cameras on board the ship and referred to Zhai as "our sailor." The day before his planned entrance into the Northwest Passage in September, the Chinese sailor had proclaimed that "the international community views the passage as a sea route for international navigation." Transport Canada tracked Zhai's voyage closely and consistently cautioned him against using the Northwest Passage, warning him that the route was off-limits to foreign pleasure craft due to an interim order from the Canadian government intended to limit the risk of introducing COVID-19 into remote Arctic communities.¹⁸⁵ In spite of these warnings, Zhai continued on, only changing his plans and rerouting to the Panama Canal after ice conditions made an Arctic transit impossible. CGTN reported that the ship had been "illegally stopped," citing the right of innocent passage.¹⁸⁶ Sources in Transport Canada, however, believe he was turned away by the embarrassing prospect (and explicit Canadian threat) of having to be rescued from the ice by Canadian forces.¹⁸⁷

China's Messaging Strategy in Canada

Our analysis reveals no evidence of a concerted, clandestine Chinese strategy to influence Canadian Arctic debates over the past several years. Instead, Chinese positions on Arctic affairs are shared in an overt manner using news media channels and official statements. This is consistent with China's strategies to *legitimize* and *normalize* its position as a 'near-Arctic state' and downplay its strategic interests in the region.¹⁸⁸

Given that China's preferred methods of influencing Canadian public opinion tend to target the Chinese-Canadian diaspora community, the small number of Canadians of Chinese descent living in the Arctic or engaged in Arctic policy debates means that this typical lever is unavailable.¹⁸⁹ Accordingly, Beijing's main information efforts vis-à-vis Canada with respect to Arctic affairs are likely to continue to be through official statements and state-controlled or state-influenced news media. Core themes are likely to several key objectives. The first is to deflect criticisms of China's human rights abuses. In pursuit of this, Chinese officials and media sources regularly condemn Canada and its allies (particularly the US and Australia) for serious human rights violations against Indigenous peoples. In September 2021, for example, Jiang Duan, Minister of the Permanent Mission of China to the UN Office in Geneva, declared that "the US, Canada and Australia have committed genocides and crimes against humanity by systematically implementing ethnic cleansing and cultural genocides toward indigenous people throughout history. The human rights of indigenous people have been seriously violated," he continued, "while discriminatory laws and policies against indigenous people are still in effect in these countries. Indigenous people's human rights in these countries have become a 'black hole.'" ¹⁹⁰

Pro-Beijing influencers also accuse Canadians of anti-Asian racism and cast decisions to counter Chinese influence operations, or to block Chinese investments on national security grounds, as examples of it.¹⁹¹ This is part of a wide narrative deployed across the West but with particular relevance to Canada, which has a large Asian population.

Chinese commentators will continue to insist that the US's stance on China is misguided and is inconsistent with Canada's national interests. As Shen Weiduo and Zhang Hongpei suggested in an October 2021 *Global Times* story, the US "always poses risks" to China-Canada relations, citing Chinese analysts who "cautioned that the US may continue to pose uncertainties and risks to China-Canada bilateral ties, and they called on Ottawa to refrain from blindly following Washington in its attempt to contain China."¹⁹² Similarly, Liu Dan's September 2021 article in *Global Times* on how the "US shadow darkens China-Canada relations" asserted that "Meng's case truly soured China-Canada relations. But this is not the only reason why Ottawa provoked Beijing on these issues. On the one hand, Ottawa has been facing pressure from Washington on its China policy. Canada may have made a choice to meet the US demands of its allies, trying to maintain a highly consistent position with Washington."¹⁹³ Stories also allege that Canada "suffered huge losses due to the damage to its ties with China," insisting that "the US will only use its allies or small countries to serve its 'major power competition' with China and Russia, but will never offer any significant support or at least pay for the losses of its followers caused by blindly serving the US 'major power competition strategy.'"¹⁹⁴

Chinese spokespersons call on Canada to treat Chinese firms "fairly, ... resist protectionism[,] and create a better environment for Chinese companies" (to quote Chinese Vice Minister of Commerce Wang Shouwen at the 43rd Canada-China Business Council business dinner in October 2021).¹⁹⁵ The Chinese Foreign Ministry also emphasizes that "the essence of China-Canada economic and trade cooperation is mutual benefit and win-win results," and that "the Canadian side should meet China half way, and create a favorable political environment for bilateral trade while also offering a fair, open, and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese firms in the country."¹⁹⁶

Canadian officials are aware of these narratives,¹⁹⁷ and CSIS notes that "foreign powers have attempted to covertly monitor and intimidate various Canadian communities in order to fulfil their strategic and economic objectives," targeting "members of vulnerable communities and groups who often lack the means to protect themselves." To date, there is no evidence of China's specific monitoring or intimidation of Arctic Indigenous peoples, although systematic research has not been conducted on potential Chinese influence activities aimed at politicians at the territorial/provincial and local levels in the Canadian North. (In other parts of Canada, Chinese influence operations often involve promises of lucrative investment projects and inflated financial deals).¹⁹⁸

Chinese Media and Expert Commentary on Canada

Chinese state-controlled media has paid very little attention to the Canadian Arctic. Overall, its approach to Canada has been to call for fairness and cooperation in investment, while criticizing Canada for being a lapdog for the US (particularly in the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in 2018). In Chinese-language media, China is presented as a growing Arctic power with legitimate interests in the region.¹⁹⁹ According to the *Global Times*, "China's deepening cooperation with regional countries is not a threat to the Arctic region but rather a mutually

beneficial combination of these countries' development need[s] and China's strength in production capacity."²⁰⁰ For its part, the US has "groundlessly criticized China's cooperation projects ... [and] contradicts Arctic countries['] appeal for peace, stability and development."²⁰¹

Although Chinese news media made limited mention of the Canadian Arctic compared to other jurisdictions from 2010-2019, it tended to emphasize the resource riches of the region, how Chinese companies could contribute to the development of Northern Canada, and Northern Canada's enthusiasm for Chinese investment (particularly in Yukon). Frequent narratives emphasized how Canada *needs* China in the Arctic to realize its development goals.

Diplomatic Messaging

China's diplomatic messaging in Canada has typically echoed its broader Arctic narratives, which espouse a cooperative, friendly China looking to engage in 'win-win' partnerships and business relationships rooted in "mutual respect and mutual benefit."²⁰² A December 2021 article in the Ottawa-based *Hill Times* newspaper by Ambassador Cong Peiwu insists that China is a peaceful nation focused on domestic defence, seeks "harmony" and "positive relationships," has no track record of starting wars or occupying foreign territory, and "is a promoter of world peace, a contributor to global development and an upholder of the international order."²⁰³

The tone of China's diplomatic messaging vis-à-vis Canada has distinctively soured over the last few years, primarily relating to the arrest of Meng Wanzhou and the two Michaels.²⁰⁴ Chinese officials accused Canada of "contempt for the rule of law" and of being an "accomplice" in "a grave political incident concocted by the US to suppress Chinese high-tech enterprises."²⁰⁵ Meng's release in September 2021 sparked an outburst of national pride in the Chinese news media, with Chinese officials portraying the outcome as a diplomatic victory for Beijing.²⁰⁶

The Chinese embassy has also expressed "strong dissatisfaction [with] and firm opposition" to the Canadian media using the COVID-19 pandemic to "smear and attack China," reiterating "the right of every sovereign state to choose its own development path" and insisting that "China has never exported its development model or engaged in ideological confrontation."²⁰⁷

China is also sensitive to critical statements from Canada on the South China Sea issue. For example, when the Canadian Senate voted to adopt a motion on the South China Sea by Senator Thanh Hai Ngo in 2018, a Chinese embassy spokesperson commented:

Currently, with the concerted efforts of China and the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] countries, the situation in the South China Sea is de-escalated and appeased, and continue[s] to improve....However, some outside forces are not willing to see the gentle breezes and calm waves in the South China Sea and try to stir up troubles and muddle the waters, so as to destroy the hard-won peaceful and stable situation of the region, and to destroy the friendly and cooperative relations among the countries in the region.

Canada is not a party to the South China Sea issue. Some people, knowing nothing or caring nothing about what really happened in the South China Sea, in the guise of respecting international laws and

safeguarding the freedom of navigation and overflight, groundlessly blames [sic] China and tries [sic] to get Canada into the trap. This is irresponsible. His purpose is nothing but casting shadows over the China-Canada relations which develop smoothly currently. But it will be futile and doomed to fail.²⁰⁸

Recently, Chinese officials have taken to issuing more direct warnings to Ottawa. In September 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Canada chose to release a summary of Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's conversation with the Venezuelan foreign minister, stating that "China always opposes power politics and fears no coercion" and that the Chinese government's stance on "protecting its citizens' legitimate rights and interests is unswerving and uncompromising."²⁰⁹ He warned Canada to "keep its eyes wide open" and adopt a "rational and pragmatic" policy towards China. "We always believe that relations between countries can only be developed on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit. China-Canada relations are no exception," Hua Chunying, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated at the same time.²¹⁰ In a condescending fashion, Chinese Ambassador to Canada Cong Peiwu urged the Canadian side "to seriously reflect on its mistakes, learn from its lessons, and work with the Chinese side to grasp the right direction for the development of China-Canada relations and bring the two countries' relations back on the right track as soon as possible."²¹¹

Cultural Engagement

China has worked to expand its cultural and social ties with Canada, but this has been focused primarily on southern Canada. The Chinese Ministry of Education-funded Confucius Institutes have no footprint in the Canadian Arctic, and there is no evidence of opaque funding arrangements between southern-based Confucius Institutes and education institutions in the Canadian Arctic.

Canada has sought to promote its Arctic cultures in China. For example, the Qaggiavut Society (of performing artists from Nunavut) participated in the first Canada-China Creative Industries Trade Mission to Shanghai and Beijing in April 2018, led by Canadian Heritage Minister Mélanie Joly (now Canada's foreign affairs minister). The Canadian delegation was matched with Chinese performing arts organizations, performing arts centres, arts investors, and artists in China, with the expressed intent of building cultural partnerships.²¹² The Qaggiavut Society's 2018 annual report indicated that it was "working to arrange Inuit performing arts tours to China for circus, theatre and music,"²¹³ but there is no indication that this has happened.

Educational partnerships are an important arm of Chinese influence, and Canada's intelligence community is attuned to issues related to Chinese thefts of intellectual property (IP) and influence in the Canadian university and college sectors. There is no open-source evidence suggesting any direct Arctic influence activities through education partnerships, although cases of IP theft in high-tech sectors such as satellites, underwater autonomous vehicles, and marine engineering point to an Arctic nexus.

Several Chinese institutions are now part of the UArctic (University of the Arctic) network, including Wuhan University, the National Marine Environmental Forecasting Center, Harbin Engineering University, the Harbin Institute of Technology, Fudan University, Dalian Maritime University, the Arctic Studies Center at Liaocheng University, and the Environmental Development Center (EDC), directly under China's Ministry of Environmental

Protection. The direct level of engagement between these universities and the 36 Canadian members of UArctic²¹⁴ requires more research and is the subject of a separate study. Chinese agents could direct information campaigns at Canadian academics to either promote pro-Chinese narratives or foment anti-Canadian, anti-American, and anti-Western narratives.

Engagement with Indigenous and Territorial Governments

Political frustration with the lack of Canadian investment in Arctic infrastructure and development, combined with a need for external investment to spur regional economic growth, has created an access point for Chinese influence in Northern Canada. Although our open-source research does not reveal any covert influence activities, Northern Canadian stakeholders have articulated mixed responses to China's overtures vis-à-vis the Canadian Arctic.

An article in the Canadian left-leaning *Walrus* magazine noted:

China's emergence as a major player in the Canadian Arctic doesn't alarm everyone. Speaking at a 2019 conference on Arctic affairs, then Northwest Territories premier Bob McLeod addressed the room: "Iqaluit to Oslo is 3,900 kilometres, compared to almost 6,000 from Toronto. And a 10,500 kilometre flight from Toronto to Beijing would be reduced to 6,600 kilometres from Inuvik." The message was clear: Canada's North was far more aligned with certain major global trading blocs than the rest of the country was. China was an opportunity, not a threat.

Indeed, many see China's interest as a pathway for Indigenous people in the North to gain more control over their economic futures. "If you are serious about Indigenous agency," says the University of Calgary's [historian Petra] Dolata, "then some of those communities will say, 'If the Chinese want to work with us, bring infrastructure here, we will happily do this.'" It has happened in Greenland, where Inuit groups have aligned themselves with Chinese investors instead of with Copenhagen. Now, it's happening across Canada's Arctic regions. "The Kitikmeot region has enjoyed a reputation of being open to business," Kitikmeot Inuit Association president Stanley Anablak notes. "But being open does not mean being naive or soft." Any Arctic investor, he explains, must adhere to not only Canada's and Nunavut's laws but also Inuit protections of the land. "The Kitikmeot regions compete with many other international mining districts for this investment. We are open to receiving investment whether it is from Canadian or foreign companies."²¹⁵

The response to China-based Shandong Gold Mining's attempt to purchase TMAC Resources and secure control of the Kitikmeot Hope Bay gold property in June 2020 is indicative of the diversity of opinion. Yellowknife Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Rylund Johnson strongly urged the Government of Canada to reject the purchase agreement, saying that "there is no benefit to the Inuit in having a Canadian colonizer swapped out for a Chinese one." Cathy Towtongie, MLA for Rankin Inlet North-Chesterfield Inlet, referred to the potential deal as "very troubling," but for a different reason. "There are two Canadians jailed in (China) over an issue of retaliation of Canada arresting an executive. Yet here in Nunavut, a mine is being sold," said Towtongie. "We ought to be more vigilant than just selling out." Minister of Economic Development and Mines David Akeeagok and John Main, MLA

for Arviat North-Whale Cove, both suggested that the Chinese could be allowed to operate in the region safely, relying on existing regulatory frameworks.²¹⁶

An editorial in the *Yellowknifer* newspaper in June 2020 asserted that the “purchase deserves careful scrutiny, which is why Canada has a robust review process,” while also highlighting “the central role mining plays in the interwoven economies of the North and the nation.” While it suggested that a Canadian (and ideally Indigenous) buyer would be preferred, “investment dollars are becoming few and far between when it comes to the North.” It concluded that “Shandong Gold Mining may cause eyes to roll, but with only economic uncertainty on the horizon, its proposed purchase can’t be discounted.”²¹⁷

In short, Chinese state-owned companies are not preferred partners, but they are often seen as the only viable partners for northern development. The Canadian government’s decision to block the purchase on national security grounds, and Canadian company Agnico Eagle’s deal to purchase TMAC,²¹⁸ resolved the immediate issue, but the underlying dilemmas with respect to Canadian Arctic economic futures and Chinese investment remain unresolved.

Responding to Northern Canada’s need for foreign direct investment and economic diversification, Chinese businesses have sought to engage with northern partners directly. There are strong indications that Indigenous peoples’ organizations have been open to these overtures. In early 2021, for example, Stanley Anablak, then the president of the Kitikmeot Inuit Association (representing Inuit in western Nunavut), told reporters that it did not matter whether investment for the major Grays Bay Road and Port Project came from Canada or from abroad. “Without this project, we will continue to be dependent on the [few] mines that can operate completely independent of regional infrastructure,” he explained. “We want to be more self sufficient. We need to be in charge of our own destiny.”²¹⁹ The depth to which individuals such as Anablak are aware of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy and unfavourable influence behaviour associated with infrastructure and resource development projects in other parts of the world remains unknown. Instead, Canadian commentators in closed discussions often reference Arctic Indigenous leaders as a potential target for influence activities.

Conclusions

To date, there is no evidence that Chinese influence efforts have been effective in swaying Canadian public, political, or expert opinion on Arctic affairs.

Northern Canadian interest in Chinese investment has also dimmed in recent years. A decade ago, when Chinese investment seemed to hold considerable promise, territorial governments actively courted Chinese partners. Chinese state media quoted premiers and high-ranking territorial officials lauding Chinese tie-ups and warmly welcoming more Chinese involvement. Territorial premiers, like representatives from other local Arctic jurisdictions, paid visits to China. This was particularly true for Yukon, which was an enthusiastic supporter of foreign direct investment during the 2012-2014 timeframe, while the Wolverine mine was being brought online. In recent years, this enthusiasm has faded amongst territorial officials.

Efforts to attract Chinese tourists have also decreased. In 2018, for instance, the Government of the NWT launched a trade mission to China to entice Chinese tourists to visit the territory. However, by February 2019, NWT Premier Bob McLeod had shifted positions and shelved a follow-up trade mission, owing to diplomatic tensions and the arrests of the two Michaels in China.²²⁰

China has not succeeded in moving the Canadian government's opinion towards its desired positions on the Arctic. Indeed, there has been a clear hardening of the Canadian government's position. In 2019, official statements indicated a desire to enhance dialogue with China on Arctic issues. A report from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on Canada's Arctic sovereignty in April 2019 recommended that the country "should engage with the Government of China to understand their growing interest in the Arctic," and that same year, Liberal MP and former parliamentary secretary Andrew Leslie (a former Canadian Army commander) led a delegation to China to express that "Canada welcomes the opportunity for further productive cooperation with China" regarding the Arctic. BBC News China suggested that this show of Canadian goodwill reflected "Canada's frustration with the US Government and its reluctance to be a victim of the US-China trade war."²²¹

This formerly accommodating position has changed. Prime Minister Trudeau and various Cabinet ministers in his government have very recently adopted tougher messaging. This suggests a newfound willingness to follow Canadian public opinion, which is increasingly hostile to the PRC. In a December 2021 interview, for example, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called on like-minded countries to "show a united front" against Beijing's increasingly "coercive diplomacy." He observed that democracies have "been competing and China has been, from time to time, very cleverly playing us off each other in an open market competitive way. We need to do a better job of working together and standing strong so that China can't, you know, play the angles and divide us, one against the other."²²²

China is likely to continue targeting the Canadian Conservative Party, which has adopted a stance that Chinese observers describe as being "exceptionally hostile" towards the PRC. During the 2021 federal election campaign, Canadian journalist Terry Glavin noted that Erin O'Toole's Conservatives laid out a series of measures that aimed to protect Chinese immigrants from Beijing's bullying and harassment. The Conservatives, Glavin wrote, vowed several policy initiatives, including sweeping sanctions on Chinese officials involved in the persecution of Xinjiang's oppressed Uyghurs and Tibetans, and the officials directly engaged in the vicious obliteration of democracy in Hong Kong. Finally, they pledged to hold the line against Chinese state-owned enterprises operating in Canada, vowed to bar Huawei Technologies from the core of Canada's 5G internet connectivity, and proposed an Australian-style foreign-agents registration law.²²³ In response, the Chinese state-run *Global Times* said that the Conservatives' critical election platform would "invite counterstrikes," and the Chinese ambassador in Ottawa accused the party of catering to "toxic" anti-China sentiments.²²⁴

3 | The Kingdom of Denmark

The Kingdom of Denmark's position as an Arctic state rests on its relationship with the large, self-governing island of Greenland and the subarctic Faroe Islands. Denmark ruled Greenland from the early 18th century until the beginning of 'home rule' in 1979. In 2009, Greenland approved the *Self-Government Act*, which transferred new areas of domestic responsibility to the Naalakkersuisut in Nuuk. The Faroe Islands have enjoyed home rule since 1948 and expanded these domestic responsibilities in 2005. Denmark retains control over Greenlandic and Faroese foreign, defence, and security policy, leaving it with authority over certain Chinese investments. Greenland and the Faroe Islands, meanwhile, retain control over trade and local partnerships. In practice, this has led to a shared responsibility for managing China's regional engagement.

In the past several years, Denmark's attention to China's Arctic interest has grown, with Copenhagen now fully alive to the threats posed by that Arctic ambition. This suspicion represents a significant shift. Once, broadly supportive of Chinese involvement in Greenland, Denmark was an early supporter of Beijing's application for accredited Observer status on the Arctic Council. Yet, China's soft power influence in Denmark has been collapsing in recent years, a trend that is directly reflected in Denmark's harder line on Chinese infrastructure investment in Greenland. In part, this collapse relates to the increasing Danish concern over China's behaviour in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and elsewhere, but it can also be traced to China's aggressive 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy in Denmark itself.

These concerns are calibrated, however, against Greenlandic priorities, which place local economic considerations over geopolitics. While some of Greenland's early optimism surrounding potential Chinese investment has waned, it has continued to push for Chinese trade and engagement. In an article for *The Wilson Quarterly*, Prime Minister Múte B. Egede wrote that "the main goal of The Government of Greenland's foreign policy is to translate foreign interest in the Arctic and Greenland into sustainable, socioeconomic development."²²⁵ Like Greenland, the Faroe Islands have sought to build greater trade links to China, while balancing the growing Faroese concern about China's aggressive and malign influence.

In recent years, the Kingdom's reaction to China's Arctic interests has been somewhat complicated by Greenland's growing interest in security, foreign, and defence policy, areas of jurisdiction belonging to Copenhagen. This desire for improved consultation and cooperation has registered in Denmark. During the 2021 Arctic Circle Assembly, Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod told his audience that security issues would be "dealt with together, on an equal footing." Recognizing the need to cooperate, Denmark has committed to sharing intelligence on and analysis of security issues in a "respectful, inclusive approach."²²⁶

The Kingdom therefore manages China's Arctic interests within this multilayered framework. That framework is shaped by the responsibilities outlined in the Danish constitution; however, it also takes into consideration Greenlandic (and, to a lesser extent, Faroese) desires to exercise more control over local security matters and broader foreign policy towards China. As such, China's path in the Kingdom is a complicated one, which has often confused Chinese actors seeking to understand Danish authorities and power relationships. China's relationship and influence operations are separated into distinct sections in this report to reflect the different approaches that the three constituent elements of the Kingdom have taken towards China, as well as their very different attitudes and priorities towards the Asian state.

Political Objectives

Denmark

China's political objectives in Denmark are as comprehensive and widely ranging as in any other part of Europe. Denmark has a "comprehensive strategic partnership" with China and an extensive history of diplomatic engagement on local and international issues. In May 2017, the two countries signed the China-Denmark Joint Work Programme and, in November 2021, agreed to renew the Work Programme "to accelerate [a] green transition," with a focus on the environment, water, agriculture, food safety, health, and maritime affairs.²²⁷ Despite this wide-ranging cooperation, the Arctic has played a very small role in that relationship. The Arctic was not mentioned in the 2008 partnership document, nor is it explicitly part of the extensive Joint Work Programme (or its 2021 renewal), which touches on no less than 58 different areas of cooperation.²²⁸

China's Arctic interests—as they relate to the Kingdom of Denmark—are largely managed on a more 'direct' basis between China and the local governments in Nuuk and Tórshavn, with Greenland being the clear priority. For the most part, the focus has been economic development, trade, and scientific and cultural cooperation. Nuuk, rather than Copenhagen, has jurisdiction over these areas under the *Act on Greenland Self-Government* (2009).

Historically, Copenhagen has not resisted or sought to disrupt this direct China-Greenland relationship. Danish governments have encouraged Greenland's outreach activities and commercial diplomacy in China, and Copenhagen has even reassured Beijing of its support for that direct relationship. This permissive attitude aligns with Denmark's broader approach, which has favoured the inclusion of non-Arctic states in circumpolar affairs. Copenhagen has also been conscious that Greenland sees China as a valuable source of trade and investment, and the Danes have been wary of causing a rift by blocking potential Chinese investment in Greenland. The current government of Mette Frederiksen has taken an even softer approach to Greenlandic autonomy and has been especially wary of acting too high-handedly.

China has taken this opening to enhance its economic and social influence in Greenland, though it has been cautious not to do anything that could be construed as damaging or disruptive to the complex and sometimes politically tense Danish-Greenlandic relationship. As such, Beijing's messaging has not advocated for Greenlandic independence in the same manner as Russian state narratives have.

Recently, China's engagement in Greenland and the Faroe Islands has been met with new resistance. Denmark's historically permissive policies have toughened as Danish popular opinion and government perceptions of China have soured. China's behaviour in and towards the South China Sea, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, as well as its 'wolf warrior' diplomacy in Denmark, has shifted perceptions of China as a cooperative partner.²²⁹ A growing American resolve to confront China in the Arctic has also led to Danish pushback against Chinese projects that it deems strategically threatening or unfavourable. This concept of 'threat' sometimes refers to military risks but is more commonly expressed in terms of threats to Greenland's economic sovereignty and control over strategic infrastructure.

China's Arctic-focused objectives have remained largely consistent in Denmark: namely, a free hand to invest in Greenlandic and Faroese infrastructure and resource projects. More broadly, China's political objectives in Denmark

mirror its goals in other European nations. While this includes traditional priorities, such as increased trade access and social and cultural exchanges, it has also increasingly come to mean stymying local criticism of China, within both government and civil society.

Greenland

China's political objectives in Greenland hinge on Beijing's desire to be accepted as a legitimate and essential actor in the circumpolar Arctic. Over the past ten years, China has paid Greenland considerable attention, relative to the island's small population and economy. This political relationship is based on the promise of trade, investment, and (more recently) tourism, and—from a Chinese perspective—access to resources. Overall, China's political message has been to present itself as a valuable and reliable partner that can support Greenlandic economic and social development.

Over the past decade, the Chinese have proceeded cautiously, seeking to insert themselves into existing political and economic dynamics, rather than subverting or upending long-standing Greenlandic relationships. The question of independence is a key example. While Russian messaging has at its core the strategic objective of fracturing Greenlandic relations with Denmark and NATO, Chinese narratives avoid the divisive issues of colonialism and separatism. While the strong support for Greenlandic independence amongst the local government and population would appear to be an obvious rift to exploit, China has chosen not to pursue this potential avenue thus far. This can be ascribed to its desire to avoid antagonizing Denmark and its general aversion to any precedent applicable to Taiwan, Tibet, or parts of China.

China also has objectives in Arctic Greenland that are distinct from those of Russia. While Moscow seeks strategic advantage in the North Atlantic through a fragmented NATO, China is still a relative newcomer to the region, with fewer diplomatic tools at its disposal and with few military interests there. As such, it appears to prefer a stable and predictable Greenland that is open to Chinese investment and partnerships.

In 2019, a delegation from the Chinese Defence Academy, visiting the Defence Academy in Copenhagen, articulated Beijing's position on Greenlandic independence with unusual clarity. During the visit, Major-General Li Quan told his Danish hosts that "we do not interfere in Denmark's internal affairs ... We pursue a one-Denmark policy."²³⁰ The political implications of Li's statements were likely deliberate, given that he has served as a political officer of the Academy of Military Sciences and its Institute of Defense Engineering.²³¹ The term 'one-Denmark' clearly references Taiwan and 'one-China.' All indications are that China has assiduously avoided upsetting the Danish-Greenlandic political connection, even though Denmark has actively sought (with US prompting) to limit Chinese influence on the island. This clearly signals its desire to avoid aggravating the delicate political structure in Greenland and to present itself as a partner that both Danes and Greenlanders can welcome.

China also has less obvious strategic reasons to be cautious of an independent Greenland. Many experts suggest that an independent Greenland would be administratively, strategically, and economically weaker. While Greenlanders have generally positive views of NATO,²³² the future relationship between an independent Greenland and the alliance remains uncertain. There is also uncertainty surrounding an independent Greenland's relationship

with the EU. European bans on seal skins have angered many Greenlanders, leaving little popular affection for the Europeans. Post-independence Greenland may therefore be more susceptible to Chinese influence. However, this theory overlooks the possibility that separation may push Greenland further from China. Chinese academics have (with some logical justification) cautioned that an independent Greenland might become a *de facto* part of the US, as the island compensates for its loss of Danish protection and trade by moving deeper within the American orbit.²³³

There are also indications that China has frequently experienced difficulty navigating the sometimes complex Danish-Greenlandic relationship, with its overlapping and occasionally competing jurisdictions and responsibilities. China is still learning how to work in this dynamic political environment, but it is clearly seeking to build a more 'direct' relationship with Greenland. It is doing so by taking advantage of Nuuk's desire to diversify its trade flows away from Copenhagen, while not blatantly crossing into Denmark's jurisdiction.²³⁴ This is a common theme in much of Beijing's Arctic policies. While state-to-state diplomacy is common, Beijing is still finding its footing in sub-state levels of governance.

In many ways, the existence of a relationship with Greenland is an objective in and of itself for China. As a self-described 'Near-Arctic State' and a great power wishing to display a more global presence, showing engagement in Greenland also demonstrates the validity of China's Arctic and global power.²³⁵ As such, its political engagement in Greenland is very broad. Chinese diplomats focus not only on trade and development but research, culture, and educational partnerships.²³⁶ For instance, the Chinese State Oceanic Administration (now defunct, after being absorbed by the Ministry of Resources) and the Greenlandic Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Church established an Arctic scientific research agreement in 2016 aiming to build networks and exchanges between China and Greenland.²³⁷ This agreement is largely dormant, however, owing to Danish concerns about dual-use projects. In 2018, Greenlandic minister Suka Frederiksen and the Chinese ambassador to Denmark issued a statement seeking to strengthen Sino-Greenlandic cooperation and exchanges in the areas of tourism, culture, and Arctic affairs.²³⁸ While these offer few tangible benefits to China, such agreements—over the long term and in combination with other circumpolar activities—provide justification for a broader Chinese role in Arctic governance.

While this expanding relationship is portrayed by China as being part of its constructive engagement in the Arctic and a 'win-win' for both parties, this influence could also play an important political role over the longer term. Greenlandic impressions of China are mixed and still forming. A closer relationship could lead to political influence, support for Chinese objectives on the Arctic Council, or impacts either to Greenland's relationship with Denmark or—in the event that Greenland becomes independent—the island's approach to the EU and NATO.²³⁹

The Faroe Islands

There is no clear Chinese political interest in the Faroe Islands. There is little political content in Chinese media (in either the English or Chinese language) on the Faroe Islands, and Chinese diplomatic engagement has been limited. As part of the Kingdom of Denmark, China's interests in the islands are represented by its embassy in Copenhagen. Media reporting and communications from the Chinese embassy indicate few meetings between the ambassador and Faroese representatives.

China has some economic interests in the islands, which are focused on its import of Faroese and Norwegian salmon (as several Norwegian seafood firms have branches in the Faroes) and its desire to secure markets for its technology. There is little evidence of politically motivated messaging tailored to a Faroese audience. The Faroe Islands are home to a strong independence movement, with about half of the population favouring eventual separation from Denmark. While Russian state media and proxy sites have targeted this potential rift, there is no indication that China has attempted to weaken Faroese-Danish ties or supports the Faroese separation movement. This difference in Chinese and Russian approaches reflects Beijing's lack of strategic interests in the North Atlantic, as well as its aversion to separatist movements in circumstances that could be analogous to its own domestic situation.

Economic Objectives

Denmark

Denmark and the local governments have jointly managed China's economic activity in Greenland and the Faroe Islands. In Greenland, Nuuk manages the approval and development of mines and other investments as per its powers under the *Self-Government Act*. China is increasingly concerned, however, by Danish interference, which has blocked several Chinese investments in strategic infrastructure on national security grounds. While the recent Sino-Danish Joint Work Programme renewal was being announced in November 2021, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated China's hope that Denmark would create an "environment for Chinese enterprises based on the principle of equity, transparency and non-discriminatory [sic]." This statement summarizes China's principal economic concerns in both Denmark and the Danish Arctic and stems from the exclusion of Huawei and other Chinese tech companies from the American and European markets.²⁴⁰ From an Arctic perspective, it also relates to Denmark's growing 'discrimination' against Chinese companies in Greenland and the Faroe Islands. While Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod told Minister Wang that Denmark "would not discriminate or differentiate against any company," it remains to be seen how the Kingdom interprets and applies the concepts of 'discrimination' and 'differentiation.'²⁴¹

Greenland

A clear theme of Chinese messaging in Greenland has been the desirability of China as a pragmatic trading partner and an investor to support the island's development of its natural resources. Over the past decade, trade has cemented China's influence in Greenland. Greenland has two major trading partners. Based on 2019 numbers from before the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, Denmark consumes 55% of the island's exports, while China takes 22%. Only 2% of Greenland's products find their way to the US. Essentially all of Greenland's exports to China (valued at \$270 million USD) are fish and crustaceans.²⁴² Just as importantly, that trade grew rapidly, up 322% from 2014 to 2019.²⁴³ Over that same period, trade with China drove roughly half of Greenland's total export growth.

This trade offers the Chinese important leverage, given that fisheries make up most of the Greenlandic economy and, along with investment in resources, dominate diplomatic conversations. With respect to investment, there

is a particular focus on the mining sector, which many policymakers in Greenland see as being the spearhead for greater economic diversification. In the mid-2010s, this interest was matched with a significant influx of Chinese money, as mining appeared to be on the verge of taking off—and potentially funding independence. A 2017 study by the Center for Naval Analyses estimates that, between 2012 and 2017, Chinese foreign direct investment in Greenland constituted 11.6% of the island's GDP.²⁴⁴

In part, the decline in Greenlandic interest in Chinese investment stems from China's failure to deliver tangible benefits. Despite their early promise, no Chinese mining or offshore project has moved forward to production. This failure can be assigned largely to falling or uncertain global resource prices, the cost of mining in Greenland, and persistent local resistance to mines in Greenland. The Chinese-owned Isua mine, for instance, was delayed by falling iron ore prices in 2014 and the decision by General Nice to wait for more favourable conditions before committing to a timetable. The project was eventually cancelled due to poor economics, worsened by disputes with reindeer hunters, who complained that the site would interrupt their traditional practices.²⁴⁵ The mining company's plans to bring in a large foreign (likely Chinese) workforce also sparked controversy, and local activists organized in opposition.

Many Chinese mining companies have also had trouble raising the necessary capital on the open market for their high-risk greenfield sites. Chinese companies have not normally tried to own mines in Greenland; rather, their pattern has been to partner with Greenlandic or international companies, or to sign offtake deals to ensure that minerals will be sent to China. As a result, Chinese companies have tended to influence and underwrite—but not directly control—these projects.

Despite clear interest in the island, Chinese companies have—as of January 2022—been shut out of all investments in Greenland. The development of the Kvanefjeld rare earths mine was halted in November 2021 when Greenland's new left-wing government, led by the Inuit Ataqatigiit party, banned uranium mining and exploration over concerns of radiation discharge. Since uranium would be a by-product of the mine, the project was stopped. The Ironbark zinc project has also dropped Chinese state financing after securing a \$657 million funding arrangement with EXIM Bank, under the US government lender's special 402A program that aims to help companies compete with China.

In December 2014, Denmark (together with Greenland) filed its claim for roughly 350,000 square miles of Arctic continental shelf with the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. This submission could take decades to review, and it will eventually have to be negotiated with Russia and Canada (which have overlapping submissions). An independent Greenland will clearly have significant seabed resources under its jurisdiction, which will require partners to develop.

Historically, Chinese Arctic expeditions have not focused on the Greenlandic shelf. However, the 2021 expedition of *Xue Long 2* included extensive mineral surveys on Gakkel Ridge on the Russian-claimed shelf. These surveys were very close to the Danish/Greenlandic claim. There has been no express interest by the Chinese in working in areas of Danish/Greenlandic maritime jurisdiction, but if its activities on Gakkel Ridge continue, they may well move into that jurisdiction. In the interim, it is safe to say that China is interested in the general outcome of any continental shelf legislation, given that it sees the Central Arctic as an emerging component of the Polar Silk Road and an area of future development.

The Faroe Islands

Much of China's real and potential leverage and influence in the Faroe Islands comes from its trading relationship. More than 93% of the Faroe Islands' exports are fish, and the Chinese market is increasingly important, with trade peaking in 2019 at 845 million DKK (\$128 million USD). While COVID-19 restrictions led to a 2020 drop off, the historical trend is one of steady expansion. China became an important trading partner after 2010, when Chinese human rights activist Liu Xiaobo's Peace Prize led to a Chinese boycott of Norwegian fish, which encouraged indirect access to Norwegian salmon through alternative outlets, including the Faroe Islands.²⁴⁶

More than the volume of trade alone, China's potential as a market is also crucial. With the world's largest population, China appears to offer the Faroese greater long-term potential than many Western markets. The opening of a trade office in Beijing in 2019 is certainly evidence of this thinking. The Faroese have only six such offices, and all are with their largest trading partners (save the US) and neighbouring Iceland.

This single-commodity economy has benefitted the Faroese in recent years. Growing Chinese purchases, along with above-market prices in the Russian market (the result of European sanctions), has led to significant GDP growth, from \$16,000 per person at the imposition of Russian sanctions to \$21,5328 in 2021.²⁴⁷ The danger in such a non-diversified economy is the extreme vulnerability to disruptions or price-drops in the one export commodity.

China has a well-known track record of using its trade relations to achieve political or economic objectives, and there is evidence of this occurring in the Faroe Islands: namely, securing access for Huawei. In November 2019, Danish media cited an audio recording made by a local broadcaster as they prepared to interview Faroese trade minister Helgi Abrahamsen. The hot mic recording picked up a private conversation between the minister and his aide, in which the aide allegedly explained to the minister how the Chinese ambassador threatened to pull a trade deal if the Faroese telecoms operator did not choose Huawei to build its 5G internet networks. According to the *New York Times*, the Chinese ambassador, Feng Tie, told the Faroese premier in the recording that "if Foroya Tele signed [an] agreement with Huawei, then all doors would be open for a free-trade agreement with China. If this doesn't happen, then there won't be a trade agreement."²⁴⁸ The Faroese broadcaster had planned to broadcast the audio, but a local court quickly issued an injunction at the request of the Faroese government, which claimed that it might damage relations between China and the Faroese government.²⁴⁹

In response, the Chinese embassy released a statement saying that "it is the duty of the Chinese Ambassador to ensure that Huawei gets a fair and indiscriminate treatment in Denmark. The Ambassador did not make any threat nor did he hear any such complaint from the Faroese side." That same statement included messaging that is common in Ambassador Feng's remarks, which highlights American aggression: "the US openly uses its state power to bully Huawei and blatantly threatens the Faroe Islands in Faroese and Danish newspapers."²⁵⁰ Another statement from the ambassador highlights this narrative: "I did not threaten any Faroese politician during my meeting with them. Threatening and exerting pressure is not our way of conducting diplomatic activities, it is America's way."²⁵¹

This rebuttal gained minor traction in Chinese state media, with the state-run paper *Global Times* citing Hua Chunying, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, as saying that the claims "are completely false and have

ulterior motives.”²⁵² A spokeswoman from China’s Foreign Ministry complemented this message in a press conference that December, stating:

Many party leaders and the public in Faroe Islands see the US ambassador’s open efforts against cooperation between Faroe Islands and Huawei as deeply inappropriate. Faroe Islands is small, but it won’t succumb to US pressure and let it swing its independent decision-making. Perhaps you still remember that lately, US ambassadors to Denmark and Germany made open threats on relevant countries’ cooperation with China, drawing strong protest in the two countries. China will never do that. We stand ready to work with Denmark to deepen political mutual trust, strengthen practical cooperation, and in the spirit of equality and mutual respect, promote our mutually-beneficial cooperation.²⁵³

China’s overarching message to the Faroe Islands is similar to its messaging in Greenland. Through this crisis, it sought to convey that it remains a partner for practical cooperation, working with smaller partners as equals for common gain, in alleged contrast to the US’s bullying and meddling in both Chinese and Faroese affairs. The Chinese messaging also seeks to lead the audience by intimating that the locals are too smart to believe American ‘lies’ or stories such as the hot mic, which Chinese outlets allege must have been inspired by American meddlers.

Strategic Objectives

Denmark

China’s strategic objectives in Greenland relate primarily to critical minerals and, more generally, support for China’s broader attempts to legitimize its position as an Arctic actor. Questions of strategic importance have a clear Danish nexus, given that Copenhagen has primary responsibility for defence. In recent years, several Chinese investments have been considered a strategic threat by Copenhagen and subsequently elicited a Danish response. What constitutes a ‘strategic’ threat has evolved and is tied to Denmark’s broader understanding of China’s interests and objectives. As Danish impressions of China have soured and questions of great power competition have come to define American and NATO interactions with China, Beijing has found itself facing much greater resistance in the Arctic.

The first clear example of this new dynamic came in December 2016 when the Danish government refused to sell the former naval base at Grønndal (in southern Greenland) to a Chinese business conglomerate, due in no small part to worries about a negative US reaction should the sale have been allowed to go forward. That company, General Nice Group, owned the iron ore project at Isua at that time and expressed an interest in buying the former naval facility. Because Denmark owned this base, the decision to sell it rested with Copenhagen. However, its location in Greenland created a political dynamic that is more complex than clear-cut constitutional divisions of responsibility would suggest. The official reason for the refusal to sell to the Chinese was that the base (which had previously been declared surplus to requirements) would still be of use in Denmark’s Arctic defence. Copenhagen informed the Greenlandic government that there had been a Chinese offer, but it was not presented as an important factor playing into the decision. Leaks in the Danish media, however, soon indicated that the decision was made primarily to prevent the Chinese from securing the base.²⁵⁴ This was allegedly at the personal behest of Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen.²⁵⁵ In a statement to Reuters, the Danish Defence Ministry said that the

base would be reopened as a strategic and logistical location for storing fuel and materiel and for training personnel. A source with direct knowledge of the matter stated that “the government does not want to sell the naval base to China, as we have a long, close partnership with the US and a defense agreement for Greenland with the US from April 1951 to think about.”²⁵⁶ At present, the Danes maintain a token force there.

Both the blocking of Chinese investment and the perceived misdirection created animosity and suspicion within the Greenlandic government. Greenlandic politician and former premier Aleqa Hammond specifically pointed to the handling of Grønnedal as a Danish effort to prevent China from getting a foothold in Greenland, in order to stall moves towards independence.²⁵⁷

The purchase of the base by Chinese state-owned General Nice was likely a strategic move, given that it made little economic sense. The facility is in poor condition and is 300 miles away from the company’s planned mine at Isua. No infrastructure connects the mine to the port, and roads could not realistically be built over the glacial ice that separates them, making Grønnedal a poor choice for a mining logistics hub.²⁵⁸ It is conceivable that this port was intended to be upgraded to play a broader role in China’s presence in the region, though there is no publicly available information to clarify what General Nice had intended for the facility.

Denmark has clearly identified the Chinese ownership of Greenlandic infrastructure as a strategic threat. This fear dates back a decade, with Chinese involvement in Greenlandic mining projects being vigorously debated in the Danish media and parliament as early as 2012.²⁵⁹ Danish politicians have become more vocal in recent years, reflecting a genuine concern about Chinese involvement, while recognizing the importance that the US places on strategic infrastructure. Danish intelligence reports have increasingly stressed, in more direct language, how large Chinese investments in Greenland could bring certain dependencies and vulnerabilities, giving state-owned entities leverage in small communities in a region with limited economic diversification. For instance, the 2017 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS) report warns that, “as a result of close connections between Chinese companies and China’s political system, there are certain risks related to large-scale Chinese investments in Greenland due to the effect that these investments would have on an economy of Greenland’s size.”²⁶⁰ This sentiment is echoed in the 2020 DDIS annual report.²⁶¹

Danish politicians in opposition now openly use growing Chinese interests in Greenland to criticize and put pressure on the government. For example, Søren Espersen, the foreign policy spokesperson for the influential Danish People’s Party (a far-right party that is vehemently opposed to Greenlandic sovereignty), recently called on the Danish government to stop Chinese involvement in Greenlandic airports now, “to avoid the humiliation, when the Americans demand it to be stopped.”²⁶²



Figure 1: Location of Isua mine and Grønnedal port

Transportation infrastructure has clearly been a Chinese priority in Greenland. In 2018, China Communications Construction Company—which is two-thirds state owned—was named to a short list of companies bidding to build and manage three airports on the island. Copenhagen intervened, forestalling Chinese participation by offering 700 million DKK (\$109 million USD) to purchase a 33% stake in Kalaallit Airports. The Danish decision was made in response to its own fears—as well as those of Washington—that this infrastructure was being purchased with ulterior motives. In Greenland, the pro-independence Partii Naleraq quit the governing coalition in opposition to the deal, which it saw as an imposition of Danish control over local affairs and a violation of the *Self-Government Act*.²⁶³

China's growing strategic interest in Greenland has altered the political dynamic between Copenhagen and Nuuk. While the Danish Constitution and the *Self-Government Act* make it clear that Copenhagen has total authority in areas relating to security, the political realities of the relationship demand a degree of cooperation and consensus. Copenhagen recognizes the need for nuance. As such, the February 2021 amendment to the 2018 *Danish Defence Agreement* adds 1.5 billion DKK to the country's Arctic spending, which is specifically being done in "close dialogue" with and with "political support from the Faroe Islands and Greenland."²⁶⁴

Given the importance of that cooperation to implementing Danish security projects, Greenland will seek a greater say in Danish foreign and defence policy decisions in the future. Indeed, following the April 2021 parliamentary election in Greenland, the newly formed Greenland government made it clear that the contents of Denmark's new Arctic defence spending package must undergo closer scrutiny before Greenland provides its approval. This desire for influence in the security arena can be traced at least as far back as the 2003 Itilleq Declaration, which affirmed Nuuk's right to participate in security and foreign policymaking. A recent policy brief from Greenlandic politician Sara Olsvig, titled "Greenland obviously has its own defence policy," emphasizes that point clearly and indicates the kind of increased cooperation that will be required in the future between Copenhagen and Nuuk in these areas of hybrid security threats emanating from China.²⁶⁵ For China, this is a positive development, since Greenland has been less concerned by the strategic implications of Chinese power projection and malign influence activities than the Danes.

Greenland

China has no clear military interests in Greenland or the North Atlantic. This is reflected in its strategic messaging to date. Yet, while Beijing focuses its messaging on economic and social partnerships, these objectives have indirect strategic implications.

The Danish and American governments have identified Chinese foreign investment in Greenland as a strategic threat. Recently, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service articulated its view that the inter-connection between Chinese companies and China's political system creates risks for an economy the size of Greenland's. In Greenland, a single large project can create a heavy dependency, with a Chinese state-owned entity providing an outsized share of Nuuk's tax base while employing a significant portion of the population. Even if Chinese investment is not intended primarily as an avenue towards strategic leverage, that would be its inevitable result. China's continued operations in a difficult investment climate reinforce this view. Despite the slow pace of resource development and the political friction that has slowed or stopped mining projects like Isua or Kvanefjeld (Kuannersuit), Beijing appears determined to continue pushing for a role in Greenlandic development. DDIS highlights the political value to Beijing of such a presence, which provides a channel to assert influence in Greenland more generally.²⁶⁶

Greenland is home to some of the world's most promising undeveloped deposits of strategic resources. The most obvious Chinese objective in recent years has been to secure influence over the island's rare earth element (REEs) sector. Both the EU and the US consider REEs to be a 'critical raw material,' given their role in most modern weapons and civilian technology. A 2021 report to the US Congress concluded that China's engagement with Greenland appears to be related in significant part to Greenland's deposits of rare earth elements.²⁶⁷

China dominates both the production and refining of REEs through companies partly or fully owned by the state. Access to producing (extracting and processing) REEs is regulated through a quota system to which only six selected companies have access.²⁶⁸ In the past, China has used REE exports as a political weapon, halting shipments to Western countries and, at times, threatening to use them for leverage in the Sino-American trade war. Attempts by the EU, the US, and other Western countries to diversify supply chains away from China have been unsuccessful, mainly due to environmental concerns and high start-up costs. Because Greenland has some of the world's largest undeveloped and most diverse REE deposits, their shipment to China under agreement with the Kvanefjeld mine owner, Greenland Minerals, would further cement China's dominance in this important sector.

The Kvanefjeld mine is one of the world's largest rare earth deposits and was certainly the most important Chinese-backed project in Greenland before it was put on hold in 2021. The licence owner, Australian-based Greenland Minerals, has signed agreements with China Nonferrous to develop the mine, and, in 2016, rare earths processor Shenghe Resources bought a share in Greenland Minerals and stated its interest in increasing its stake to a controlling one once the project enters production. Shenghe is ultimately controlled by the PRC's Ministry of Land and Resources.²⁶⁹ Shenghe's position in Greenland is aligned with China's broader strategic expansion. Beijing has called on the rare earth industry to build up its strategic reserves and is encouraging companies to "develop mining resources abroad." The Institute of Multipurpose Utilization of Mineral Resources at the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences has referred to the acquisition of the stake in Kvanefjeld as "implementing the vision on mining cooperation," and it cited the investment in the context of the China Geological Survey's implementation of the 13th Five-Year Plan.²⁷⁰

While the mine is currently in abeyance, Greenland Minerals is looking at alternatives to restart the project, such as separating the uranium and REE deposits outside of Greenland. There has been no discernable response in the Chinese media to the cancellation, and the comments from Shenghe Resources are vague and non-committal.²⁷¹ This quiet approach may be based on an assumption that the Greenlandic ban is shaky and temporary. Indeed, it enjoys mixed support, and critics of the Egede government have stressed that the policy was put into place without sufficient forethought.²⁷² A cautious waiting strategy may yet allow the Greenland Minerals to proceed after a change in government.

Another area with potential strategic implications is scientific cooperation. China has been advocating for a research station in Greenland since 2015, and Chinese polar program leaders highlighted plans for a permanent site as a priority in 2015 and again in 2016. In May 2016, the State Oceanic Administration signed an agreement with Greenland that included the construction of a research site. In 2017, two possible locations were hinted at: one near Kangaamiut or Maniitsoq in the island's southwest, and another near China Citronen Fjord zinc project. The latter could provide a unique observational vantage point, being situated even farther north than Denmark's Station Nord

and the Thule Air Force Base (now Pituffik Space Base).²⁷³ Scientific research falls under the devolved purview of the Greenlandic government, and Copenhagen's approval is not necessary in principle. In spite of this, the research station has yet to be constructed and is unlikely to proceed in the face of Danish opposition.

Do you think Greenland should follow the US's politics towards China?



Figure 4. Source: Maria Ackrén and Rasmus Leander Nielsen, *The First Foreign-and Security Policy Opinion Poll in Greenland*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the University of Greenland (2021)

China has, however, officially launched a project to set up a satellite ground station in Nuuk. This site was developed in cooperation between Beijing Normal University, the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources, and Tele Greenland, ostensibly to be used for climate change research. Despite its civilian purpose, it could also be used for the BeiDou navigational system—China's equivalent of GPS. The ceremony opening the site was led by Professor Xiao Cheng of Beijing Normal University, a leading polar scientist specializing in remote sensing, and featured Zhao Yaosheng, a BeiDou pioneer with a military background. They travelled to Greenland as part of a contingent of 100 'elite' tourists (including Rear Admiral Chen Yan, former political commissar of the South China Sea fleet) who were in the audience for the ceremony. Reports indicate that Greenland's public and elected representatives were not informed about the opening of the satellite ground station for months, presumably to avoid concerns about its likely dual-use capabilities. Only two Greenlandic representatives were present. While little was discussed in the Greenlandic media, reports were immediately available in Chinese.²⁷⁴

The presence of receiving stations in the Arctic is crucial to the development of the BeiDou system. Arctic stations track weather but also navigate commercial and military vessels. These sites could also be used to track missile launches in the northern hemisphere. Indeed, China's 2012-2013 annual report on polar policy highlighted the role of the region in C⁴ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance).²⁷⁵ Most recently, the Chinese icebreaker *Xue Long* has experimented with long-range autonomous underwater vehicles (the Haiyan glider) that rely on satellite communications to relay Arctic marine data to shore-based command stations in China.²⁷⁶

Other dual-use infrastructure that could offer strategic advantage includes key resource extraction facilities. In 2016, Chinese mining company General Nice Group attempted to buy the former military port at Grønnedal. This

attempted purchase was particularly curious given that the facility remains plagued by environmental issues and is 300 miles away from—and with no terrestrial connections to—the Isua iron ore mine, which General Nice then owned. Zhang Lin, an analyst at Lange Steel, believed that General Nice’s investment in Greenland was always more strategic, long term, and political than it was economic, though that remains conjectural.²⁷⁷ The Greenland Ministry of Mineral Resources’ cancellation of the Isua iron ore project licence in November 2021 has not elicited any clear Chinese messaging in either English- or Chinese-language sources.²⁷⁸

In a related move, in 2018, China Communications Construction Company generated concern in Copenhagen when it was named to a short list of companies bidding to build and manage three airports in Greenland. The Danish government intervened, forestalling Chinese participation by offering 700 million DKK (\$109 million USD) to purchase a 33% stake in Kalaallit Airports.

One of the most concerning strategic liabilities in Greenland relates to the island’s small population and the likely need for foreign workers to build and maintain large resource or infrastructure projects. In 2012, with the Isua mine under consideration, Nuuk passed the *Large-Scale Projects Act*, which created a framework facilitating the use of a foreign workforce for the construction of large-scale mining projects which was exempt from the country’s labour standards. This act also gives foreign workers rights in Greenland. The original estimate for the Isua mine anticipated that 3,000 to 5,000 Chinese workers would be needed, a labour force that would increase Greenland’s population by 5%, assuming the workers were able to remain in Greenland.²⁷⁹ In 2021, the mining project with Chinese involvement that was closest to production was the Citronen Fjord iron and zinc mine. While Ironbark is now no longer Chinese backed, its Australian owner had originally intended to work with the state-owned China Nonferrous Metal Mining Group to import Chinese labour, before gradually transitioning to local workers.²⁸⁰

How do you perceive the current security threat?

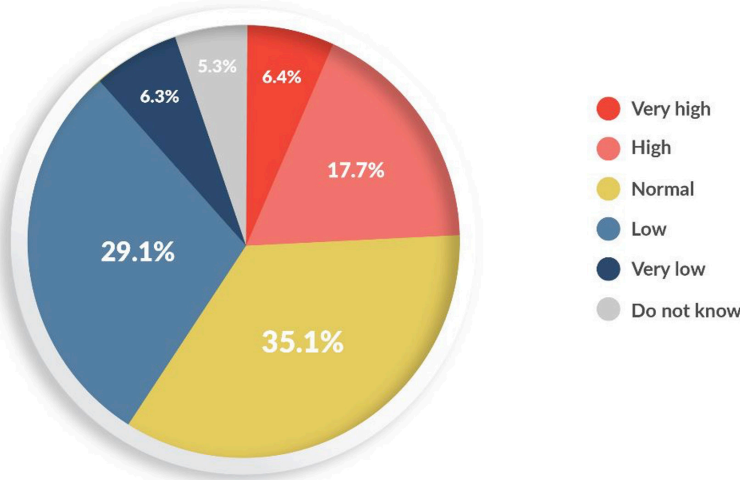


Figure 5. Source: Maria Ackrén and Rasmus Leander Nielsen, *The First Foreign-and Security Policy Opinion Poll in Greenland*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the University of Greenland (2021).

Chinese investment in mining and infrastructure projects has been consistently blocked by either the Danish government's security concerns, shifting Greenlandic politics, or the broader market. In spite of this track-record, Greenland has continued its political outreach to China—albeit with less enthusiasm than was the case a decade ago. The 2021 security poll by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the University of Greenland demonstrates a degree of mixed feelings: a majority (67.8%) of Greenlanders believe that “Greenland should protect its economy,” while only 32.2% state that “Greenland should welcome investments from China.”²⁸¹ However, most Greenlanders would still like to see good economic relations with China (53.6%).²⁸² In short, Greenlanders seem divided about current and future engagement with China.

While support for Chinese investment remains uncertain, it is clear that Greenlanders do not view the question of ‘security’ in the same manner as decision makers in Washington and Copenhagen. Indeed, polling from 2021 shows that only a quarter of the population considered the ‘security’ risks to be high or very high.²⁸³ Warnings over the strategic infiltration of Chinese influence or capital have gained comparatively little traction amongst Greenlanders or have even provoked a backlash within a Greenlandic political class averse to Copenhagen's interference. Former Greenlandic prime minister Kuupik Kleist put it bluntly: “are the Chinese worse than other capitalists? ... Once, the Europeans colonized the rest of the world. They have ruthlessly exploited everything. Now, the economic center is shifting to the East.”²⁸⁴

What has provoked genuine concern amongst Greenlanders are the local consequences of Chinese investment, rather than the broader geopolitical issues. A particular fear has been the potential influx of poorly paid Chinese workers undermining local unions and exacerbating housing issues while damaging Greenlandic gains from collective bargaining and Greenlandic national identity. In 2012, the leader of the main Greenlandic trade union, Jess Berthelsen, identified the Chinese threat to local labour, stating, “I strongly warn against the current government, in a reckless moment of enthusiasm, wrecking the Greenlandic labor market and bombing us all the way back to the Stone age.”²⁸⁵ In 2017, when China Communications Construction Company proposed to build airports in southern Greenland, the SIK union (Greenland's largest workers' union) once again warned against the impact of the tax exemptions of foreign labour on Greenlandic welfare. It was this labour issue, rather than Danish/American warnings of strategic infiltration, that most resonated with Greenlanders.²⁸⁶

The Faroe Islands

China has no clear military interests in the Faroe Islands, though its desire to integrate Huawei into the Islands' network is commonly defined as a strategic priority. While the Faroe Islands are strategically located in the GIUK Gap, this makes them an important component in NATO's posture vis-à-vis Russia, but not China. In relation to China, Danish intelligence assessments see few strategic issues arising.²⁸⁷

China's Messaging Strategy in the Kingdom

Denmark

Diplomatic Messaging

China has not prioritized the Arctic in its bilateral relationship with Denmark. During high-level diplomatic visits, the region is often mentioned as an area for cooperation. As early as 2012, President Hu Jintao's visit to Denmark (the first of its kind) included discussions on Greenland and Arctic concerns. In 2017, President Xi Jinping's meeting with Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen concluded with a statement that "both sides should reinforce coordination within the UN, the Arctic Council and other multilateral frameworks, and expand Arctic cooperation." While such references to the Arctic signal a mutual desire for cooperation, such statements have never resulted in substantive agreements.²⁸⁸

China's recent diplomatic approach to Denmark mirrors its *modus operandi* in many Western states around the world. Historically, Chinese influence activities in Denmark have consisted of diplomatic efforts to persuade the Danish side to accommodate Chinese interests by emphasizing economic opportunities, even encouraging a degree of self-censorship.²⁸⁹ More recently, Chinese diplomats have taken direction from Xi Jinping's newly aggressive and assertive global posturing to move beyond cooperative engagement into overt public denunciation of any criticism of China.

As has been the case elsewhere, this approach has been counterproductive to China's interests. In 2020, for instance, Alternativet (a Danish green political party), Amnesty International Denmark, and a group of politicians from the Inuit Ataqatigiit, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Enhedslisten, and Fremad parties supported the erection of a 'pillar of shame' (made by the Danish artist Jens Galschiøt) outside of the Danish Parliament in support of Hong Kong.²⁹⁰ Around the same time, a cartoon was published in *Jyllands-Posten* with coronavirus-like symbols in place of the five stars on the Chinese flag.²⁹¹ These incidents prompted the Chinese Embassy to launch a public relations offensive against the offenders on its webpage and social media.²⁹² Not only did the Danish government flatly reject the embassy's public outbursts (and demands for an apology, in the case of the cartoon), but the Chinese response also produced a backlash in the Danish media. Similar aggressive tactics in tweets and interviews have failed to quell criticisms of Chinese policy with regard to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Huawei, and COVID-19. As such, China's popular appeal in Denmark is dwindling, much to the frustration of current Chinese Ambassador to Denmark Feng Tie, who, at the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in Denmark in spring 2020, gave several public interviews in which he lamented the negative publicity that China receives in the Danish media.²⁹³

Cultural Engagement

China has an extensive history of relationship building in Denmark aiming to advance its narratives and improve its image. The Chinese embassy in Copenhagen calls this "fruitful cooperation" in "politics, economy, science, technology and innovation, education, etc[.]," and it points to a wide range of scientific and cultural partnerships over the past decade.²⁹⁴ The two governments also announced the establishment of the Joint Work Programme in 2017 (renewed in 2021) to further promote cooperation in investment, research, education, and culture. As mentioned earlier, none of these partnerships focus on the Arctic.

Denmark has long prioritized good relations with China. It was one of the first Western countries to establish a diplomatic relationship with the PRC, in 1950, and it was an early supporter of China's application for accredited Observer status on the Arctic Council. Yet, China's soft power influence in Denmark has been collapsing in recent years, a trend that is directly reflected in Denmark's harder line on Chinese infrastructural investment in Greenland.

In part, this collapse relates to the increasing Danish concern over China's behaviour in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and elsewhere, but it can also be traced to China's aggressive messaging in Denmark itself. The result has been a quantifiable decrease in Danish support for China and Chinese objectives.

The Chinese embassy and various Confucius and cultural institutes have spearheaded China's soft power promotion, with the outreach activities of the latter largely following a standardized formula based on China's traditional culture as well as language programs. However, the impact of these activities has been negligible, as demonstrated by the increasingly negative popular, media, and political perceptions of China in Denmark.²⁹⁵

The collapse in China's educational outreach demonstrates this shift in sentiment. China began establishing Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs) in Denmark in 2007, with a CI being founded that year at Copenhagen Business School, followed in 2009 by a CI at Aalborg University, and then in 2012 by the world's only Music Confucius Institute, located at the Royal Danish Academy of Music. Nearly all other Danish institutions of higher education have been offered a CC or CI but have declined. In recent years, all but one of the Chinese institutions have closed.²⁹⁶

Survey data collected by the Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey in autumn 2020 illustrates that general perceptions of China are worsening. The key drivers of negative sentiments about China amongst the Danish political elite centre on the domestic political situation in China, the Sino-American rivalry, and the revelation in the Danish media of China's covert influence operations. A more holistic 2021 study of Chinese influence in Denmark showed that support for China has reached such negative levels that no Chinese soft power strategy is likely to be effective in significantly influencing the Danish people.²⁹⁷

Unlike elsewhere in Europe, China does not have media partnerships in Denmark, limiting its mainstream messaging opportunities. Beyond cultural activities, the Chinese are also not active in promoting their own narrative or projecting a positive image of China in Denmark. There are no systematic or concerted efforts to offer 'a Chinese perspective' to the Danish public, such as the *China Watch* inserts that are found in several European newspapers.²⁹⁸

Coercive Forces

As elsewhere in the world, China is expanding its policies of extrajudicial message control and censorship in Denmark. In March 2021, the EU, Britain, the US, and Canada unveiled coordinated sanctions targeting Chinese officials accused of persecuting Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. In response, China announced entry bans on ten Europeans—including five members of the European Parliament—as well as two EU bodies and two think tanks. The list included the non-profit Alliance of Democracies, founded by former Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (2001-2009), who subsequently served as Secretary General of NATO (2009-2014). The *Global Times* celebrated this attempt to discourage criticism of China, announcing that "the EU should learn its lesson on

how to deal with China” and adding that “Beijing is not afraid of a sanction-wielding Washington, not to mention a much weaker Brussels.”²⁹⁹

This sanctioning of Europeans received considerable media attention and a response from Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod, who told a Chinese envoy that “when China sanctions free, critical European politicians, institutions and dissidents, merely for having been critical against China, it is a clear attack on citizens’ freedom of expression in Europe and Denmark.”³⁰⁰

Sanctions on politicians and organizations are important messaging tools but normally have a limited impact on the actions of those individuals. There is evidence, however, that China is attempting to coerce and influence society more broadly. For instance, Beijing has also collected information on dissidents in exile in Denmark; in one case, this led to the arrest and deportation of a Chinese agent, Dorjee Gyantsan, in 2018.³⁰¹ China has also demanded that private businesses apologize or self-censor. Most dramatic was the Chinese embassy’s response to the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*’s COVID-19 cartoon, discussed above.

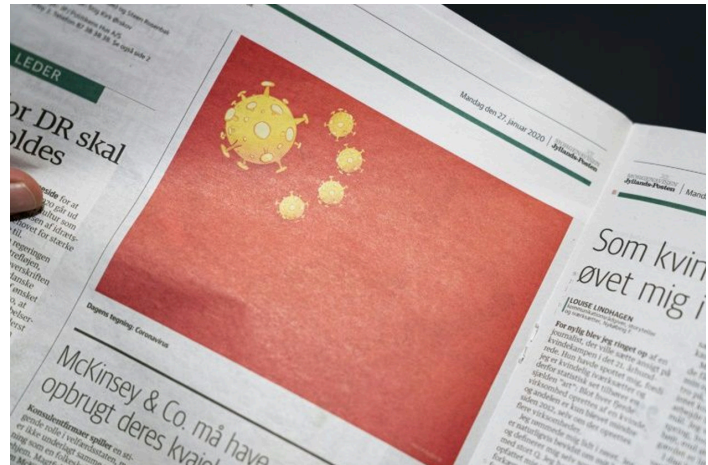


Figure 2: Jyllands-Posten cartoon

In a dramatic escalation of its extrajudicial coercion, China has also threatened to extradite three Danish youth politicians after they helped pro-democracy activist Ted Hui flee Hong Kong to Denmark. The Danish national daily *Politiken* revealed in early January 2021 that China was now investigating the possibility of prosecuting any foreign politician involved in Hui’s exodus, with the goal of potentially issuing arrest warrants and extraditing them to Hong Kong. An arrest warrant directed at a foreign politician would represent the first time that the national security law has been applied to a person outside China and Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, Secretary for Security John Lee Ka-chiu has been the driving force behind this effort, and, in a written statement to *Politiken*, he said that his department, together with the Department of Justice, was looking into the possibility of prosecuting the politicians under Hong Kong law. “Wherever any person (including Danish politicians) are under suspicion of having committed a crime by organising, planning or helping with absconding, the police will actively investigate and pursue its legal obligations within the framework of existing legislation,” Lee wrote.³⁰²

Greenland

Diplomatic Messaging

China’s diplomatic outreach to Greenland is significant for a jurisdiction of Greenland’s size. China’s consistent message to Greenland is to present itself as a partner, willing and able to provide practical assistance in the fields of science, resource development, tourism, and culture.

Greenlandic delegations paid official visits to China in 2005, 2011, and 2017. In 2011, the Greenlandic minister for industry and natural resources was received by Vice Premier Li Keqiang, a clear sign of the importance of the relationship. The meeting was reciprocated with a visit by a Chinese delegation, led by China's minister of land and resources, Xu Shaoshi, to Greenland in April 2012. Greenland has also sent delegations, led by the minister of finance and mineral resources, to participate in the China Mining Congress and Expo every year since 2011. In 2014, a Greenlandic delegation participated in the major mining conference Mining and Money in Hong Kong, an important platform for attracting mining investment.³⁰³ At the 2021 Arctic Circle meeting, Greenland's address highlighted its desire for a "new and potential stronger relationship" with China and other Asian states, to offer prospects for diversified investment.³⁰⁴ Greenland has also announced the establishment of a new permanent representation office in Beijing in the fall of 2021 (with the office opened in 2023).

While China's diplomatic messaging to Greenland is positive and supportive, its messaging *surrounding* Greenland has become increasingly aggressive. A sharp turn was evident in June 2019, when Feng Tie replaced Deng Ying as the ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark. While ambassador, Deng's message largely celebrated cooperation and partnership. Ambassador Feng's statements are more characteristic of a modern 'wolf warrior' diplomat, signalling a clear response to a perceived hardening of policies on Copenhagen's part.

Immediately upon assuming his post, Ambassador Feng published an open letter in the Danish daily newspaper *Berlingske* attacking US trade policy and American "bullying," while highlighting Chinese efforts to build partnerships and establish fair trading systems.³⁰⁵ This narrative was expanded to include Greenland and the Faroe Islands and has remained generally consistent. In December 2019, following the Chinese ambassador's 'hot mic' incident concerning the Faroe Islands' 5G network (see the following section on the Faroe Islands), Ambassador Feng responded in *Berlingske* by once again highlighting China's cooperative nature and emphasizing America's destructive bullying:

When China joins the world in addressing climate change, the United States withdraws from the Paris Agreement. When China and other countries work for peace, the United States walks away from the hard-won Iranian nuclear deal. When China helps developing countries to build roads and bridges, the United States erects walls and trade barriers. When China advocates a community of shared future for mankind, the United States declares "America First." No wonder many people say, "China builds, America bombs."³⁰⁶

In May 2020, following statements by US Ambassador to Denmark Carla Sands on the dangers of China's Arctic presence, Ambassador Feng returned to baseline narratives, emphasizing that "China participates in Arctic affairs in accordance with the principles of respect, cooperation, win-win results and sustainability. China respects the sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdictions of the Arctic states."³⁰⁷ In short, he again painted the US as an aggressive and bullying power that lies about China to "cover its own interests in Greenland."³⁰⁸

Expanding on this narrative thread, Feng pointed to the damage that Greenland has already suffered from America's interest. The US military presence has left the island with "extremely extensive" pollution, including "huge amounts of waste in Greenland"—including radioactive waste left from former secret bases. Feng also highlighted the

damage done by the crash of an American B-52 bomber in 1968 and alleged that local people still point to “animals with malformation.” He also pointed to the Americans’ dumping of diesel oil into lakes around Thule Air Force Base to kill mosquitoes, with deleterious effects on local food chains.³⁰⁹ This narrative shares many elements with a Chinese state media article on Greenland written in August 2019, indicating a reinforcing feedback loop.³¹⁰

While Chinese media and diplomatic messaging have highlighted the dangers of the American military presence in Greenland, Beijing approaches the subject differently than Russian messaging. Russia uses this theme ‘offensively,’ as a vehicle to attack American/NATO interests and to encourage Greenland to consider independence and begin a fundamental rethinking of its relationship with the US. China, by contrast, normally deploys this narrative defensively, in response to American criticisms of Chinese behaviour or involvement in the Arctic. This tactic is sometimes referred to as ‘whataboutism,’ which focuses on deflecting attention to make one’s own behaviour seem less objectionable.

Cultural Engagement

As outlined earlier, China is actively seeking to expand its scientific and educational partnerships with Greenland. Tianming Gao, Director of the Polar Development and Northeast Asian Economic Research Center at the Ministry of Education, told the Chinese media in 2018 that “misunderstandings” about China in Greenland (and along the Belt and Road) inhibit Chinese participation and influence. “Although top-level exchanges and cooperation are already in place,” Gao noted that “China will only be able to better participate in international cooperation if the people of the cooperating countries understand Chinese culture and build up trust in China.”³¹¹

Along these lines, there have been some limited attempts to incorporate China into the island’s education system. At present, Greenland does not have a Confucius Institute, which have been identified as key drivers of Chinese soft power elsewhere. An institute was planned for the Kujalleq campus in Qaqortoq (a centre for upper secondary and higher education) in 2018, following a cooperation agreement between the municipalities of Shanghai and Kujalleq. However, this program has yet to materialize.³¹²

The Faroe Islands

The Faroese have seen anti-American messaging being transmitted through Chinese diplomatic channels, aligning with common Chinese narratives being advanced elsewhere in the world. China’s message to the Faroese has been that it seeks “practical cooperation”³¹³ in trade and development, while the United States seeks to control or bully smaller partners into compliance. Within this ‘cooperative’ framework, China has sought to avoid exclusion from Faroese markets, particularly for its technology champions.

These narratives and objectives are also common to China’s engagement with most European states. The Faroese dispute surrounding Huawei is a global (rather than a narrowly Arctic) issue and has been repeated elsewhere. For instance, one month after the ‘hot mic’ incident, Chinese Ambassador to Berlin Wu Ken openly threatened trade retaliation were Huawei to be excluded from German networks.³¹⁴

Chinese narratives centred on trade and economic partnership will gain the most traction when targeting the Faroese fisheries sector, which is increasingly reliant on the Chinese market. The susceptibility of the Faroese to this messaging was certainly evident in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Crimea. The EU and Danish experience in seeking Faroese support for Russian sanctions showed how powerful the fisheries lobby is and the degree of influence it has in policymaking. In this context, the Russians had some success in highlighting the futility of sanctions, while pushing the notion that Danish control harms the Faroese economy and that a foreign and commercial policy separate from Denmark/NATO would be beneficial.

The Faroese did not join the Danish/EU sanctions in 2014, and the head of the Faroese government, Kaj Leo Holm Johannesen, even travelled to Moscow to highlight that fact.³¹⁵ Trade concerns have led to other breaks in Faroese-Danish approaches to Russia. Following the 2018 assassination attempt on Sergei Skripal in Great Britain, Denmark and other EU countries responded by expelling Russian diplomats. Shortly afterwards, Faroese Foreign Minister Poul Michelsen made it clear that the Islands did not support this line of action. Five months later, in August 2018, Michelsen signed a new memorandum of understanding with Russia to bolster more trade and cooperation. Only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did the Faroese government apply many of the sanctions requested by the EU.

Chinese Media and Expert Commentary on the Kingdom

Denmark

The Expert Community

Chinese expert communities are increasingly engaged on the Arctic; however, Denmark's Arctic role is rarely discussed. Instead, Chinese expert opinion on the Kingdom's Arctic presence is overwhelmingly related to Greenland. Much of this focus relates to potential resource development, an area where Greenland has a great deal of autonomy. The political relationship between Denmark and Greenland is one area in which Chinese diplomats show considerable circumspection on the question of Greenlandic independence. Chinese academics have more leeway to engage in these conversations, however, and there is an ongoing debate about what a Greenlandic break from Denmark might look like.

Chinese Media

Chinese media attention to the Arctic area within the context of the Kingdom of Denmark also focuses almost exclusively on Greenland. Here, Chinese interests and projects are viewed from a local perspective, rather than as part of China's broader relationship with Denmark. References to Denmark in an Arctic setting are limited and lacking in a clear pattern. Chinese messaging through state-controlled media aligns with the diplomatic narratives shared by its embassy in Copenhagen. The overarching message is that China represents a fair and cooperative partner that can support development in Greenland, while the United States is both aggressive and manipulative, seeking to use Greenland as a tool in its unfair attacks on China. In Chinese-language media, China is presented as a growing Arctic power with legitimate interests in Greenland.³¹⁶

Greenland

The Expert Community

Greenland is a focal point of Chinese academic and scientific research in the Arctic area. From a resource perspective, it is one of the most discussed Arctic locations in Chinese scientific work over the last decade.³¹⁷ Although Chinese officials are careful to avoid articulating China's specific foreign policy interests in Greenland, influential Chinese scholars have, since 2016, publicly discussed the issue of Greenlandic independence and its implications for the geopolitical balance of the Arctic. Guo Peiqing, a law professor at the Ocean University of China and one of China's most prominent polar social science researchers, discussed the topic in one of China's leading international relations journals, noting that Greenland is rapidly moving towards independence. He and co-author Wang Junjie believe that the international community has a "responsibility" to help an independent Greenland deal with its developmental problems.³¹⁸ Xiao Yang, the director of the Arctic Research Center at Beijing International Studies University, points to Greenland as being a critical component in China's Arctic policy and its future political and economic presence in the region. In Xiao's view, Greenland could serve as a "foothold" for China to "fully participate in Arctic affairs."³¹⁹ During the Global Ocean Governance Dialogue Series, Yitong Chen, a lecturer at the Institute of Polar Law and Politics at the Law School of the Ocean University of China, made a similar comment, suggesting that the joint Danish-Greenland strategy demonstrates Greenland's "strong autonomy and new jurisdictional status."³²⁰ This is an important consideration, as Greenland is the only major jurisdiction in the Arctic with its political future clearly in flux.

Recently, several Chinese Arctic scholars have also argued for prioritizing Greenland in China's Arctic diplomacy, with a view to securing a Chinese foothold in an independent Greenland that could facilitate broader regional access.³²¹ So far, there are few indications that Beijing has acted on these calls, particularly in light of the hardening attitudes in Denmark and the Covid-related import restrictions.

Chinese Media

Chinese messaging through state-controlled media aligns with the diplomatic narratives shared by its embassy in Copenhagen. The overarching message is that China represents a fair and cooperative partner for Greenland that can support its development, while the United States is both aggressive and manipulative, seeking to use Greenland as a tool in its unfair attacks on China. In Chinese-language media, China is presented as a growing Arctic power with legitimate interests in Greenland.³²²

According to the Chinese hypernationalist newspaper *Global Times*, "China's deepening cooperation with regional countries is not a threat to the Arctic region but rather a mutually beneficial combination of these countries' development need[s] and China's strength in production capacity."³²³ For its part, the US "groundlessly criticized China's cooperation projects ... [and] contradicts Arctic countries['] appeal for peace, stability and development."³²⁴ Framed as a malicious (but often bungling) villain, America's aggression is often shown as 'backfiring,' highlighting both its aggressive nature and its supposed victims' cleverness in avoiding the US's trick.

In Chinese-language media, the US is shown as malicious but also fearful of China's growing influence. The *Shanghai Observer* notes triumphantly that "China's rising influence on the island has correspondingly reduced Greenland's

dependence on Denmark,” and it points to a future independent Greenland as an avenue for China to add “weight to its side and gain additional support on Arctic issues.”³²⁵

Echoing Russian messaging about Greenland, Chinese sources have also begun highlighting the environmental dangers of a US military presence and the threats that Arctic militarization poses to Greenland. These themes appear in diplomatic communications from the Chinese embassy in Copenhagen and are mirrored in Chinese media. For instance, a relatively in-depth article by CGTN following the reopening of the US consulate in Nuuk in June 2020 discusses the US Army’s placement of “strategic missiles” in Greenland. The story also mentions Camp Century, which was “abandoned with all its nuclear waste” and “has become a ticking time bomb for the native population,” as well as the 1968 crash of a US B-52 carrying nuclear weapons. This latter event is held up as a serious breach of trust, which could have led to Greenland becoming “a nuclear wasteland.” CGTN also highlights conventional pollution in Greenland, including rusty metal and trash from American facilities.³²⁶

The notion of the US using Greenland solely as a military base also circulates in academic circles. Chen Yitong recently told a Chinese audience that the US “is only using Greenland as a military base and has no interest in promoting local livelihoods.”³²⁷ A *Global Times* article highlights this modern-day missile threat, suggesting that the American withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) may lead it to deploy new missiles in the Arctic.³²⁸

The US is also portrayed as acquisitive. The attempted purchase of Greenland by President Trump is a common theme in articles about Greenland in Chinese media (although this conforms to global coverage of Greenland by international media sources since 2019). Chinese messaging dismisses the purchase offer as “hilarious” and one that was met with “indignation,” playing into common anti-American themes that frame American policy as reactionary and outmoded.³²⁹ Having said this, it is essential to note that such assessments were also common in Western media. Tying this purchase into the broader “America-the-dominating-bully” narrative, CGTN notes that “it all sounds a bit silly, but the American interest in acquiring Greenland in pursuance of their own bid to maintain worldwide military supremacy is not a joke. American history is defined almost solely by territorial expansion for strategic ends. This illustrates as a whole just how far this administration is willing to go to reassert unilateral hegemony over the world.”³³⁰ Chinese media continues to frame US overtures to Greenland in similar terms. For example, the state-controlled Xinhua described the 2020 announcement of US financial support to Greenland as “a second grab for the Danish territory.”³³¹

Chinese media discussions of Greenland also pay particularly close attention to the question of rare earth elements, a natural fit given the potential importance of the Kvanefjeld mine. These narratives highlight the technological and environmental superiority of China’s REE processing system, conveying the idea that China is the ideal partner for rare earth mining.³³²

The Faroe Islands

There is very little discussion within China about the Faroe Islands. The ‘hot mic’ incident prompted a Chinese defence that received some limited attention;³³³ however, this appeared to be purely responsive and not tied into any larger narrative involving the Islands (for more on this see page 51). In Chinese English-language media, the dominant story of the past three years is the Faroese culling of dolphins in 2021—a fact-based story similar to those run by news agencies elsewhere.

Conclusions

In recent years, China has had limited success in promoting its narratives and burnishing its image in Denmark. Instead, Chinese soft power has eroded, and Danes are now hostile to China's broader political objectives and Arctic goals. Denmark's recent movement towards Taiwan demonstrates this trend. As with other parts of the Nordic region, relations with Taiwan are on the upswing, with Beijing being incensed by then-Danish Foreign Minister Kofod's meeting with Tsai Ing-wen at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit in May 2021.

This decline in the relationship can be tracked. According to a Eurobarometer survey from 2017, 59% of Danes held an overall negative view of China, while 32% expressed positive views.³³⁴ These numbers became even more unbalanced in 2020, as documented by a Pew opinion poll which showed unfavourable views of China amongst three quarters of the Danish population.³³⁵ In parallel, political perceptions of China have grown increasingly negative in Denmark, even if government officials are generally less vocal and more moderate in their criticism than members of the opposition parties.³³⁶ While the Danish government continues to court China and seek economic benefit, it is doing so with less self-censorship. Of note, when then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeppe Kofod announced the November 2021 renewal of the Joint Work Programme, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs made it clear that he had also expressed serious concern about the human rights situation in China, an element of the discussion that was omitted from the Chinese communiqués.³³⁷

China's messaging and engagement in Greenland have met with mixed success. Measured by the increasingly close 'direct relationship,' China has succeeded in promoting itself as a potential partner for Greenlandic economic development and scientific cooperation. Despite Greenland's diplomatic engagement with China and its growing trade relationship, Greenlandic attitudes towards Chinese investment have become more apprehensive, and voices critical of China have grown louder, amplified by fears of Chinese debt traps and an influx of Chinese labourers.³³⁸

Despite the initial enthusiasm in the mid-2010s, Chinese investment has not materialized, and there are presently no Chinese-owned or-backed mines operating in Greenland. Greenland's interest in inviting China to play a larger economic role appears to have declined, though not so much that any Greenlandic government would shun investment. Moreover, Copenhagen has exercised its powers pursuant to the 2009 *Self-Rule Act* to securitize various issues and to ensure that China is unable to acquire strategic assets in Greenland.

Greenland's new prime minister, Múte Egede, told *Time* magazine in May 2021 that "as China, Russia and the European Union scramble for Greenland's natural resources, the US might be spurred to invest more."³³⁹ According to Egede, Greenland is happy to host the American military, but it expects benefits in return. The previous Kielsen government also expressed this view.

China's objectives in the Faroe Islands have similarly met mixed success. Generally, the Faroese do not look upon China favourably. Surveys from 2019 indicate little support for China, with China's communist dictatorship and human rights violations dominating impressions of the state. While no recent polling is available, the trend in China's soft power across Europe has been sharply downwards. This drop in popularity is driven by Beijing's approach to COVID-19, its more aggressive diplomatic tone across the continent, and, specifically, its actions against India and Taiwan, as well as in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea. Extrapolating from the broader European

trend, and the established Faroese unease with the authoritarian elements of the Chinese government, it is a safe assumption that trust in China has fallen further.

The political dispute from 2019 over the status of Huawei in Faroese networks likely stemmed, in part, from that mistrust. That event saw the engagement of the American³⁴⁰ and Chinese ambassadors, presenting the Faroese with a binary decision. That the Faroese telecom chose to exclude Huawei and partner with Swedish company Ericsson for the Core and Radio Access Networks is an important measure of relative US and Chinese influence. Three months later, the United States and the Faroe Islands signed a Partnership Declaration that covers areas of mutual interest, including marine resource management, environmental protection, cultural cooperation, sustainable economic development, entrepreneurship, innovation, tourism, and trade. Faced with a stark choice, the Faroese chose to ignore the Chinese threats of retaliation and strengthen their engagement with the US (with Danish support).

The choice to engage more closely with the United States is a natural one given the long-standing cultural, security, and economic relationships between the US and the Kingdom of Denmark. However, this does not mean a complete rejection of China or Chinese influence. Because the Faroese tend to be both highly educated and satisfied with their lifestyles and political situation, disinformation campaigns are unlikely to be successful. Instead, Chinese influence will come in the form of practical accommodation based on economic considerations.

Despite some pushback against Chinese bullying, the role of China in the Faroese economy—and its future potential—is too great for the Islands to ignore. This was signalled by the opening of a new Faroese representation office in Beijing in August 2019—only its sixth such office and the first in Asia. The purpose of this office is to “promot[e] bilateral relations” and expand trade.³⁴¹ It is reasonable to assume that trade with China will continue to expand.

4 | Norway

Norway has had a turbulent relationship with China. From 2010-2016, Norway suffered from a political boycott, stemming from China's anger over the awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. After relations were re-established in 2016, Norway has walked a fine line between pushing back against Chinese human rights violations and avoiding a new break in relations.

Norwegian relations with China have declined in recent years as both Norwegian public opinion and political positions have hardened in the wake of China's increasingly aggressive behaviour. As a result, early optimism for trade with China in natural resources, fisheries, and green technology has been married with suspicion over Beijing's global and Arctic behaviour.

Norway's Arctic policy has also hardened in recent years, taking on a greater emphasis on defence and security. In large measure, this relates to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and persistent threats against NATO; however, Oslo has clearly adopted a more pessimistic position on China's role in the region as well. Norway's security services have identified China as a serious threat in the cyber domain and Chinese investment and economic partnerships as presenting potential security threats. For these reasons, Norway has joined many other Western states in moving away from Chinese telecoms and has halted attempts by Chinese nationals to purchase strategically important tracts of land.

Given China's economic heft and importance in a range of global issues, Norway continues to push for cooperation—including in the Arctic. As Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt made clear in May 2022, "the Arctic has no pause button."³⁴² This desire for cooperation on issues of trade and climate change, amongst others, has led to the Norwegian attempt to retain these important connections while managing the evolving security threats emanating from Beijing.

Political Objectives

China's political objectives in Norway are multifaceted. From an Arctic perspective, Norway's position along the Polar Silk Road makes it a logical target for Chinese infrastructure development, while Norwegian sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago has made Oslo a critical partner for China to conduct Arctic scientific work (and associated science diplomacy and prestige building) over the last two decades. More generally, China has evolving interests in creating and maintaining a political climate conducive to expanding Norwegian trade and forging new links with the Norwegian corporate sector, which has expertise in critical areas ranging from green technology to shipping and offshore drilling. Given the two states' fraught diplomatic history following the awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, China also has a special interest in maintaining positive bilateral relations with Oslo on terms set by Beijing.

The diplomatic boycott of 2010-2016 served as an early test of China's increasingly common and coercive 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy. Its success in Norway encouraged its employment elsewhere, and Oslo's accommodation of China's 'core interests' models what China considers to be an example of a small state paying proper deference

to a large one. Nevertheless, Norway is far from a supplicant, and Oslo has pushed back against China on several important issues. In 2019, Norway's majority state-owned telecommunications company Telenor selected Sweden's Ericsson as the technology provider for the country's 5G network, gradually removing China's Huawei after a decade of collaboration on 4G. Oslo has also offered veiled criticism of China's actions in Xinjiang. Norway's challenge has been to strike a balance between its economic and political interests, avoiding China's political 'red lines' while defending its trade relationship and avoiding the appearance of kowtowing to Beijing on all issues relating to China.

China's overarching political targets in Norway are summarized in the Norwegian Intelligence Service's environmental scans. Those scans conclude that China continues to target "a range of social sectors and uses a variety of open and covert methods and means" to influence and shape affairs in Norway. In comparison to Russian influence strategies, which rely heavily on cyber tools and disinformation networks, China has a more complex presence in Norway, angled towards securing acceptance in that country (and in the greater Nordic region) as a partner in Arctic development. China's influence operations are rooted in its multilayered scientific, educational, cultural, and business relationships. This comprehensive approach offers more avenues for influence and makes it difficult to distinguish illegal and unwanted activity from normal business, diplomatic, or cultural exchanges.³⁴³

The Norwegian Intelligence Service concludes that Beijing uses influence strategies to advance Chinese views on international cooperation and governance, cementing its foreign policy positions as alternatives to those of the US and the West, while avoiding political pressure or popular criticism of Chinese actions in Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, and elsewhere. Across Europe, China continues to pursue its policy of driving wedges between European states. It does this to prevent a united front of European voices critical of Beijing, while also undermining Europe's broader negotiating position on a range of issues. This approach was visible in Beijing's pressure on EU businesses to stop importing Lithuanian products following Taiwan's opening of a 'representative office' in Vilnius in November 2021. There are no plans to open a Taiwanese office in Oslo, which would be seen as overly provocative. Norway also confirmed early on that it would send both athletes and a diplomatic delegation to the 2022 Olympic Games in Beijing, thus breaking ranks with the US. Although talks have slowed, the Norwegian government has rebuffed domestic pressure to suspend its free trade negotiations with China.

Chinese messaging also promotes an image of China as a peaceful and friendly world power seeking 'win-win' economic cooperation.³⁴⁴ This narrative is common to Chinese messaging around the world. Its purpose is to blunt foreign criticism while facilitating investment, scientific collaboration, and the entrenchment of Chinese facilities and programs in foreign states. In the Arctic, this 'win-win' approach is designed to facilitate Belt and Road infrastructure projects, Chinese foreign direct investment, and (potentially) dual-purpose scientific research.

A Relationship on China's Terms

The diplomatic break that followed the Norwegian Nobel Committee's awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese writer imprisoned for authoring a pro-democracy manifesto, has defined China's relationship with Norway. While the Prize committee is a functionally independent entity, the Chinese government held the Norwegian government accountable for what Beijing saw as "wantonly interfering in China's internal affairs" and violating "Chinese sovereignty."³⁴⁵ Beijing has taken issue with Nobel Prizes on several occasions, describing them

as political tools and pointing to the Norwegian Parliament's close cooperation with the committee as evidence of this.³⁴⁶ Beijing considered the awarding of the Peace Prize to Liu to be particularly unacceptable given Norway's position as a small or middle power and China's status as a primary power.

This dispute led to a diplomatic downgrading between the two countries, in which official contacts were maintained but only under specific circumstances. This lasted until December 2016. Oslo could do little to address China's concerns without appearing to compromise the integrity of the Nobel Prize selection process. Bilateral meetings were suspended and free trade negotiations halted, but both sides continued to meet in multilateral and Track II (non-governmental) fora. The periodic stoppages of Norwegian salmon imports into China, imposed on the pretext of health concerns, had the most significant impact on Norway. This Chinese tactic served as a trial run for the more assertive and coercive diplomatic and trade policies that have defined Beijing's dealings with many countries, including Canada and Australia.³⁴⁷

China's unofficial trade boycott against Norway had limited consequences for the Nordic country. Overall, bilateral trade with China actually grew during this period, with the Norwegian fishing industry finding effective workarounds through third parties (including in the Faroe Islands, where Norwegian seafood concerns operate). Nevertheless, the downturn in relations created a chilling environment for investment, and Norwegian energy and shipping interests found it difficult to discuss new partnerships with prospective Chinese investors or partners.³⁴⁸ China's hypernationalistic *Global Times* newspaper captured Beijing's attitude and objectives in an editorial proclaiming that "they [Norway] must pay the price for their arrogance," signalling not only to Norway but to the world "how China can build its authority in the international arena."³⁴⁹

Beijing used diplomatic tension and trade to demonstrate the consequences of 'insulting' China's domestic institutions and 'interfering' in its internal legal system. With the restoration of Sino-Norwegian bilateral relations, Chinese narratives continue to deliberately frame and reinforce a message that Norway was mistaken in insulting China in the first place, and that Oslo has promised not to reoffend. A common line quoted in Chinese policy circles is the proverb "whoever tied the bell around the tiger's neck also needs to untie it."³⁵⁰

In other words, Norway is depicted as not only insulting the Chinese nation, but also bearing sole responsibility for remedying the situation. In December 2016, the two states normalized relations through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which represented a significant political victory for Beijing. The MoU clearly assigned blame for the break to Norway, which implicitly accepted responsibility in the document: "The Norwegian side is fully conscious of the position and concerns of the Chinese side and has worked actively to bring the bilateral relations back to the right track ... [and] will not support actions that undermine them, and will do its best to avoid any future damage to the bilateral relations."³⁵¹ This Norwegian *mea culpa* served as both an internal propaganda victory for China and a basis for future Sino-Norwegian relations. In his first message after becoming the Chinese ambassador to Norway in 2019, Yi Xianliang recalled the "stagnation" of that relationship "owing to the reason known to all."³⁵² In a tone reminiscent of a parent scolding a child, the ambassador emphasized the need for a "bilateral relationship built on the basis of mutual respect."³⁵³

Beijing holds up the (implicit) Norwegian apology as a source of pride, for its suggestion of China's international clout. Following the normalization of relations, *Global Times* stated that "Norway has deeply reflected upon the issue and learned its lesson.... Norway has a population of merely 4 million, but it tried to teach China, a country with 1.4 billion people, a lesson in 2010. It was a ridiculous story."³⁵⁴ This is a common theme presented to academics and experts visiting China.³⁵⁵

China's diplomatic messaging in Norway continues to highlight the break, both as a warning to Norway and as a reminder of the 'correct' path of diplomatic relations. In the process of normalizing relations, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed his satisfaction that "Norway has reflected profoundly on the reasons that damaged mutual trust," while the Chinese embassy in Oslo reported that then-Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende reassured China that "Norway will fully respect China's development path and social system, oppose any actions jeopardizing China's core interests and major concerns, as well as firmly uphold the one-China policy."³⁵⁶ 'Core interests' and 'major concerns' are common refrains, affirming China's sensitivity to any criticism of its political system or Beijing's policies. Of note, then-Prime Minister Solberg declined to meet with the Dalai Lama when he visited Norway in May 2014—a decision that was criticized as a sop to Beijing and evidence that Chinese economic pressure was pulling Norwegian policy towards core Chinese interests.

In Norway, the MoU and Oslo's relationship with Beijing remain sensitive issues. The perception that Norway surrendered to a bully remains strong, while the integrity of the Nobel Peace Prize remains a third rail in Norwegian politics. As such, Oslo's approach to China is a constant balancing act that it has executed pragmatically and with relative success. The Norwegian government has certainly tempered its political speech and actions to avoid antagonizing Beijing, and it has been hesitant to criticize China or to join international efforts to highlight human rights violations and failures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than a complete refusal to engage, however, Norway's response has been measured, attempting to skirt right up to China's red lines. For instance, Norwegian officials have echoed European concerns about Chinese actions in Xinjiang, signing the 2021 Joint Statement on Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang (from the 47th Session of the UN Human Rights Council) and ordering a review of any firms connected to Norway's Oil Fund that may have links with forced labour in the region. Nevertheless, Norway did not diplomatically boycott the 2022 Olympics and is unlikely to openly criticize China in the near future for fear of disproportionate political retaliation.

Polar Affairs

While Norway's status as an Arctic state is not central to China's diplomatic objectives in the country, it constitutes an important consideration. This can be seen in the 2016 MoU's reference to polar cooperation, which appears alongside other core priorities including trade, culture, science, and education.³⁵⁷ The inclusion of the Arctic in such a crucial document is telling.

Beijing's 2018 Arctic White Paper defines China as a 'Near-Arctic State.' Lacking a geographical connection to the Arctic, China legitimizes this status through extensive scientific research and economic development in the Arctic. China self-identifies as an important actor with a say in regional development and governance, as well as a responsible and reliable partner for Arctic states. For instance, Chinese media trumpeted a 2018 visit by

Nordic and Baltic speakers of Parliament as evidence of the Arctic states' appreciation of China and its scientific work. "Previously, foreign media reported that China's presence and activities in the Arctic were distorted and exaggerated," *Global Times* asserted. Instead, the visit of these Arctic dignitaries was a "refutation" of that (implicitly American) narrative, "proving that China is playing an active role in the Arctic."³⁵⁸

The political status of Norway's Svalbard archipelago presents a unique opportunity for China to secure access to the Arctic and to operate with a degree of independence that would be impossible elsewhere in the region.³⁵⁹ Sovereignty and jurisdiction over the islands are governed by the Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Treaty of 1920, which grants Norway "full and absolute sovereignty" over the archipelago, while providing all signatory states with equal access and entry "for any reason or object," subject to local laws and regulations. Article 7 of the Treaty also allows for equal status for property ownership. Being a contracting party of the Treaty since 1925 enables China to maintain a presence on the islands through its Arctic research station, Huanghe (Yellow River), which it founded at Ny-Ålesund in 2004.

The legal interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty remains a point of contention between the two countries. While certain activities on Svalbard are covered by the principle of equal treatment, research is not explicitly mentioned, nor did the Treaty negotiations indicate that all Treaty parties should have equal rights to conduct research. However, some states, including China, believe that research is covered by the equal-treatment requirement. China's Arctic White Paper explicitly states that it—like all non-Arctic states—has the right "to the exercise and practice of scientific research."³⁶⁰ Norway has tried to limit that research to natural science by tightening the codes of conduct for foreign researchers and insisting that all scientific facilities on Svalbard make their full research findings available in English. China is concerned that Norway is using security as a cover to tighten its own policy control in Svalbard, and, given China's failed attempt to set up an additional Arctic science facility in Greenland, Beijing seeks to preserve its status on Svalbard. China has therefore refused to accept any limits on its activities and made it a political objective to defend its broader and more permissive interpretation of the Treaty.³⁶¹

Economic Objectives

Norway's location at the western end of the Northeast Passage and Northern Sea Route makes it a potentially important target for Belt and Road investment, and Chinese companies and diplomats have paid special attention to building relationships in northern Norway as a result. At least 17 Norwegian companies have been wholly or partly acquired by Chinese companies since 2003. China has also established local affiliates in Norway, growing these companies from four in 2007 to 69 in 2018. Overall investment in Norway from 2000-2017 has been just over \$9 billion.³⁶² Much of this investment is focused on key segments of the Norwegian economy. Norwegian companies are also some of the world's leaders in offshore drilling and green energy technology, which has attracted Chinese investment and political interest. In spite of this growth, China's presence is still small. Only around 2% of foreign-owned workplaces in the country are Chinese, while 24% are Swedish and 14% American.³⁶³

Trade and Investment

Norway has been a destination for Chinese investment since the early 2000s. Initially, these investments were directed towards resource and energy projects, following a global pattern of Chinese interest in the oil and minerals

required to fuel its industrial growth. Some of these acquisitions in Norway were targeted at the offshore drilling technology that Chinese companies lacked. In 2003, for instance, the Chinese firm Sinochem acquired Atlantis Holding Norway AS and its patented deep-water drilling technology. In 2008, China Oilfield Services Ltd. acquired Awilco Offshore ASA, an oil service company specializing in drilling and housing rigs,³⁶⁴ and, in 2013, China Offshore Oil Engineering Co. opened an engineering joint venture with deep-water engineering firm Kvaerner COOEC Engineering & Technology in Qingdao.³⁶⁵

China's interest in offshore technology has remained strong. In a post-Paris Accord environment, it has expanded to include the design and construction of sea-based wind turbines. China is planning to install more than 50GW of offshore wind assets by 2030 and dominate the related offshore service industry as well.³⁶⁶ Realizing this objective requires foreign expertise and technologies that can be acquired through direct investment.

One of Norway's technological advantages is in offshore wind energy, based on technologies and systems developed over decades of operating oil and gas platforms in the North Sea. Since the normalization of relations in 2016, Equinor (formerly Statoil) and Aker—two of Norway's leading energy and offshore engineering companies—have invested time and energy building relations with Chinese counterparts. One important partner has been China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), which has pushed for closer cooperation with Norway with an eye towards technology transfers.³⁶⁷ In October 2018, CNOOC signed a deal with Equinor to have the Norwegian company apply its tight gas technology to Chinese oil and gas fields, specifically Changqing in northern China's Ordos Basin. Changqing is China's top gas field, accounting for nearly a quarter of the nation's total natural gas output, and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) aims to expand its commercial reserves.³⁶⁸

In 2021, the Norwegian outreach solidified into a strategic partnership between Norwegian state-owned energy company Equinor and Chinese shipbuilder CIMC Raffles to build wind farms in the Yellow Sea. The deal clearly had political backing, as it was signed on the same day that Norway's ambassador to China, Signe Brudeset, visited the CIMC Raffles facilities in Yantai.

The solar industry is the second leg of China's push to dominate green technology.³⁶⁹ Norway has seen strategic acquisitions in this field as well, with the China National Bluestar Group acquiring Elkem ASA, a leader in the global silicon materials industry, in 2011. Lastly, hydrogen has also attracted Chinese interest. In 2021, Norwegian renewable hydrogen plant manufacturer HydrogenPro launched a joint venture with China's Tianjin HQY Hydrogen Machinery Co. The joint venture will be based in Tianjin, China, and involve the sharing of intellectual property to jointly develop low-cost hydrogen production.³⁷⁰

American sanctions and the expansion of trade barriers are making foreign investments more difficult for China. Shifts in Norwegian domestic politics have added roadblocks as well. Beginning in 2016, Norway—like many other European nations—imposed new restrictions on state-owned foreign direct investment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign investments dropped even further. Facing resistance to direct investment, China is increasingly using foreign subsidiaries to make new acquisitions. With investments channelled through funds in third countries, Chinese connections are becoming increasingly opaque.³⁷¹ For example, the Chinese government is now one of the largest shareholders in Norwegian Airlines after a Chinese leasing company joined other creditors and lenders in

converting the airline's debt into equity. The Chinese connection comes through BOC Aviation, a company controlled by Sky Splendor Limited, which in turn is controlled by Bank of China Group Investment Ltd. and a series of other Chinese firms tied into China Investment Corporation, wholly owned by the Chinese government.³⁷²

To facilitate investment and expand trade, China and Norway have resumed negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA) that had originally been halted by the 2010 diplomatic freeze. Talks restarted in early 2017, and, in March 2021, the two states pledged to conclude the negotiations as soon as possible.³⁷³ China's stated objective for an FTA is to achieve a "fair, just and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese enterprises' investment and operation in Norway."³⁷⁴ This language mirrors Chinese statements elsewhere in Europe, rooted in concerns about investment reviews that have increasingly led to the banning of companies such as Huawei on security grounds.

While an FTA has been a long-term Norwegian objective as well, China's recent use of economic coercion has demonstrated obvious perils. Australia has a free trade agreement with China, but its provisions were insufficient to prevent economic sanctions following Canberra's 2020 demands for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. As such, Norwegian political opposition to the deal has grown. Norwegians are also increasingly cautious of foreign investment, particularly Chinese investment. An updated version of the *National Security Act (Sikkerhetsloven)*³⁷⁵ came into force in 2018 to counter security threats posed by the foreign acquisition of private and public Norwegian companies that perform, either directly or through supply chains, a "basic national function." This facilitates prohibitions on national security grounds to broad sectors of the economy, not just those associated with national defence.³⁷⁶

Nordic public opinion about China also appears to be souring. In 2020, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) conducted a comprehensive public opinion survey among almost 5,000 people across Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Sweden. It found that citizens are likely to see screening mechanisms as a legitimate tool, at least when governments do not apply them excessively. There is also genuine concern about the potential negative security implications of foreign investment in some sectors, such as natural resources. In all Nordic countries, aside from Iceland, people view foreign investment from EU member states more positively than they do that from Russia and China.

Infrastructure and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

For China, shipping routes across the Eurasian Arctic factor heavily in the country's signature Belt and Road Initiative. Norway is a natural (potential) partner in this Polar Silk Road given that 80% of all maritime traffic in the Arctic passes through Norwegian waters.³⁷⁷ Chinese diplomatic statements to and communications with Norwegian industry repeatedly confirm this point. In a 2019 interview, Chinese Ambassador Yi Xianliang told Norwegian media that "the potential for mutually beneficial cooperation between the two sides is enormous."³⁷⁸ The Norwegian government signalled its support during Prime Minister Solberg's 2017 visit to Beijing.³⁷⁹

China's messaging surrounding the BRI is straightforward and echoes its narrative on trade more generally. Trade and investment are described as being mutually beneficial and disconnected from any security considerations. A short article published by Ambassador Wang in 2018 encapsulates this approach. In "Belt and Road: Win-Win Cooperation Rather than 'Debt Trap,'" Wang insists that the Western media is slandering China's BRI with

“groundless” and “bias” debt-trap accusations. Rather than listening to Western misinformation, the ambassador called for greater cooperation:

Norway has a geographic advantage and is a natural partner to China in realizing Eurasian connectivity, especially in building the ‘Polar Silk Road.’ China and Norway stand firmly together in defending and promoting free trade and the rules-based multilateral trading regime...We look forward to continuing to work with Norway for a bright future of win-win cooperation.³⁸⁰

In spite of this focus on the BRI, China has undertaken little infrastructure work in Norway. The \$300 million USD Hålogaland Bridge was built near the Norwegian Arctic town of Narvik with Chinese collaboration from 2013-2018, and Chinese shipbuilder CIMC Raffles was contracted to build the world’s largest salmon farming cage for Norway in 2020. These projects are not tied into any large-scale infrastructure networks, however, and Beijing’s mentions of the Hålogaland Bridge as part of the BRI constitutes an attempt to generate the *impression* of activity, rather than a strategic initiative.³⁸¹

China’s most ambitious BRI project in Scandinavia was envisioned for northern Norway, hinging on the development of the Kirkenes-Rovaniemi rail line (aka the ‘Arctic railway’). As the westernmost landmass on the Northeast Passage, Norway offered an ideal location to build a port to land Chinese goods from ice-strengthened tankers for transshipment to the rest of Europe. A recent report by Sør-Varanger Utvikling, a regional development agency located in Kirkenes, Norway, estimated that if as little as 4% of the Asia-Europe-contained trade travelled through the Arctic Ocean by 2040, an Arctic port could handle three times the level of traffic as the port of Oslo.³⁸² Attached to this port concept is the Rovaniemi-Kirkenes railway project, consisting of a link between Kirkenes on the Arctic Ocean and Rovaniemi in Finland, which would connect the Arctic coast to Helsinki and on to the rest of Europe. It would also hook up to the Siberian railway system, which could carry people and goods all the way to China. This concept gained more traction in March 2019, when Touchstone Capital Partners, a Chinese investor consortium tied into the BRI, announced €15 billion in funding for a rail tunnel linking Helsinki with the Estonian capital, Tallinn.³⁸³ It was also announced in June 2018 that an existing China-Finland rail link for cargo shipping would be extended to Narvik in northern Norway, a move that could further strengthen Arctic overland shipping. Several Norwegian businesses, including in the energy, seafood, and shipping sectors, hoped to leverage these investments to expand their partnerships with China as the BRI continues to develop in the Arctic.³⁸⁴ Although Oslo has shown little enthusiasm for the scheme, it appears attractive in theory, with sea transport costing 40% less than rail to carry goods between northern Europe and China.³⁸⁵ In spite of the geographical advantages, the project has come to nothing. The failure of the Arctic railway project through Finland and local opposition in Norway effectively stymied these efforts, and Norway has still not signed onto the BRI MoU.

Arctic Fisheries

While China has no commercial fisheries in the European Arctic, the rich fishing grounds off Norway are an area of interest—and potential future concern. China’s 13th Five-Year National Offshore Fisheries Development Plan (December 2017) pays minimal attention to the region but highlights the need to “pay attention to and actively participate in Arctic fishery affairs, and actively participate in the investigation and management of Arctic fishery resources.”³⁸⁶ Norway may be particularly susceptible to conflict over fisheries, given the ongoing disputes over

the interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty, the terms of which allow any of the treaty's signatories to have non-discriminatory access to the islands' fishing, hunting, and natural resources. Norway asserts that this relates only to the islands and the territorial sea, not the rich fisheries in the surrounding exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Despite Norway's claim that it is entitled to a full EEZ around Svalbard, it has chosen not to establish one and instead introduced a 200-nautical-mile fisheries protection zone (FPZ) in 1977. While Russia and several other European countries challenge the legitimacy of the FPZ, China has not declared its legal position.

Once Chinese distant-water fishing vessels reach the Arctic, Beijing will need to decide whether it wants to push for non-discriminatory fishing rights in waters outside of the territorial sea over which Oslo asserts jurisdiction and sovereign rights. At present, there is no pressing need to engage with that politically fraught issue, given the absence of Chinese fishing fleets. Still, Chinese academics have already begun to study the question.³⁸⁷ Qin Tianbao (Luoja Chair Professor of Law at Wuhan University) writes that, "as for Svalbard, 'territorial waters' should contain a fishery protection zone and the continental shelf. Because the Svalbard Treaty should be applicable to the fishery protection zone and the continental shelf around Svalbard, other contracting parties should be entitled to non-discrimination rights in resource exploitation in these two areas."³⁸⁸ Lu Fanghua, of the North China Institute of Science and Technology, sees China's fishing rights in the FPZ as being under-developed and echoes Qin's position.³⁸⁹ Lu suggests that China could begin by conducting fishery surveys and establishing exploratory fisheries in the FPZ; enhancing cooperation with countries with similar fishing interests, such as Denmark, Spain, and Russia; and eventually raising the prospect of establishing a fisheries management organization or arrangement for Svalbard's FPZ through a multilateral agreement.³⁹⁰ Moreover, Lu urges the Chinese government to articulate a clear position on the legal status of Svalbard's FPZ and continental shelf, reserving China's access to fishing rights in these areas sooner rather than later.³⁹¹

A Chinese fishing presence in the Norwegian EEZ would represent a significant shift in that country's regional presence and would introduce both security and ecological concerns. This is particularly relevant given the poor track record of China's distant-water fishing fleet in sustainable practices elsewhere in the world. China's intrusion would also overturn existing mechanisms for sustainable management. Norway administers fishing quotas in its FPZ, which it distributes to other countries based on those states' historic fishing activity in the area. This means that countries such as Russia and Iceland receive a fair share of the licences. Because of this, Russia has largely respected the regulations of the FPZ, while formally holding that Norway is violating the Svalbard Treaty.³⁹² Because China has no history of fishing in these waters, its rights under the FPZ system would be uncertain and require a more direct challenge.

Strategic Objectives

China has no clear military interests in Norway's Arctic, which is reflected in its strategic messaging to date. Beijing's external-facing discourse reveals a tendency to tread carefully in engaging the region, in particular by underscoring the country's potential as a partner in scientific, economic, and political developments in the circumpolar North. However, its increasingly pronounced enthusiasm for the region's economic potential, especially in the areas of shipping and resource extraction (energy, mining, and fishing), also intersect with potential future strategic military

interests.³⁹³ Nevertheless, China's calls for peaceful development and deeper cooperation with Arctic public- and private-sector partners are aligned with its strategic economic development goals.

To date, China has chosen not to display its military capacity in the circumpolar Arctic. Given that there is no indication that China seeks overt military competition or conflict in the region, there is little worry of kinetic military action by that country against Norway. Most Norwegian commentators now agree that the core geostrategic drivers affecting Arctic security do not relate to disputes over territory or resources, but that 'spillovers' and generally worsened East-West relations create additional challenges. In an increasingly open and trafficked Arctic Ocean, the risk of 'vertical escalation' around accidents or unintended events is perceived as heightened—with Russia, not China, identified as the most likely source.

While most open-source analysts suggest that the likelihood of a formal Sino-Russian Arctic security alliance remains remote, given that China and Russia have distinct regional interests (and their grand strategies are not naturally aligned), increased regional cooperation between the two countries is of interest to Norway and the other Arctic states and must be carefully monitored.³⁹⁴ Furthermore, China may express concern over the increasing presence of NATO exercises in the Arctic and Barents Sea area and may also join Russian media outlets in trying to deride Norway as being an appendage of NATO and the US.³⁹⁵ This would be done to embarrass Norway and divide public opinion, rather than indicating the likelihood of direct or indirect Chinese military action against the country or against NATO more generally.

Norway is well aware of strategic competition below the threshold of armed conflict (such as conflicts in the grey zone, political warfare, and hybrid threats) that threatens both the military and the whole of society. As Norwegian Major-General Henning-André Frantzen explained at the High-Level Military Doctrine Seminar held by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in February 2021, adversaries' tools encompass:

- Military—including large-scale exercises and force demonstrations without prior notice, posturing with nuclear and other high-end and long-range weapons, and direct action by intelligence agencies, special forces and proxies
- Diplomacy
- Influence through strategic use of information—some being conventional and legitimate, others not, like interference in other states' politics, encouragement of polarisation and extremism, or undermining Alliance coherence
- Economy, energy, and technology
- Cyber—a major concern, both as a means for intelligence, influence operations, and attacks on critical infrastructure
- Use of parts of the population in other countries for political influence and purposes

He noted that while "Norway has not developed formal doctrines for the management of these threats specifically," its security policy framework is designed to "protect all sectors of society, and second, to strike a balance between deterrence and reassurance.... As these types of influence activities, or attacks, aim across sectors, we work to improve our Total Defence Concept, which is our concept for mutual support between civilian and military sectors."³⁹⁶

The Norwegian Police Security Service's *National Threat Assessment 2021* identifies the country's "High North Strategies and processes related to Norway's High North policy" as amongst "the most sought-after intelligence targets in this country" by foreign states seeking "to strengthen their influence and secure their commercial interests in the region." Foreign intelligence-gathering activities seeking to collect information and influence Norwegian development processes are designed to secure for malicious actors "undue advantage in the exploitation of natural resources, access to technology and other commercial interests." Accordingly, the assessment notes that:

Intelligence activities in the High North have the potential to weaken Norway's freedom of action. Russian and Chinese intelligence services continue to pose the greatest threat...China and Chinese actors will continue to give priority to their long-term positioning in the region, especially in relation to the future exploitation of natural resources. We expect both states to try to buy or establish companies in strategically placed properties in the region.³⁹⁷

Security concerns related to the potential Chinese ownership of geographically strategic areas in the Norwegian Arctic are well documented. In 2014, Chinese real estate tycoon Huang Nubo attempted to buy a 218-square-kilometre parcel of land near Longyearbyen on Svalbard, ostensibly to build a resort for Chinese tourists so that they could experience "Arctic silence and the clean air." This was perceived in the Norwegian and international news media as an attempt by China to secure an Arctic foothold, particularly in light of Huang's previous attempt to purchase a strategically located property in Iceland.³⁹⁸ In 2016, the Norwegian government announced that it was purchasing the land to "provide the best possible management of Svalbard to the benefit of the public."³⁹⁹ Huang also attempted to purchase a large waterfront plot for about \$4 million near Tromsø, with his company, Beijing Zhongkun Investment Group, citing plans to build a luxury resort complex in Lyngen, a mountainous area also inside the Arctic Circle. This set off a heated debate about his—and, by extension, Beijing's—intentions.⁴⁰⁰

China has a strategic interest in maintaining a presence on Svalbard for surveillance and communications purposes. China's participation in the 1920 Svalbard Treaty and the operation of its Yellow River station are common refrains in Chinese messaging, both to legitimize China as a state with real interests in the Arctic and to promote its status as a contributing member of the Arctic community. The station itself is a useful platform for Arctic research on upper atmospheric physics, glaciology, marine biology, and environmental science.⁴⁰¹ China is also interested in testing ground- and satellite-based communications in the Arctic, which will be important to facilitate northern shipping routes and improve satellite communications (which serve both civilian and military purposes).

In 2018, China's Ministry of Transport dispatched a research vessel to Russia to measure and optimize communications capabilities along the Siberian coastline. The team assessed various technologies, including Very High Frequency (VHF) radio connectivity, medium-frequency navigational telex (NAVTEX) systems, and the digital selective calling (DSC) system component of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System. This team also evaluated coverage of China's BeiDou-2 (北斗-2) Navigation Satellite System along the route, with a view to optimizing future satellite orbits for the yet-to-be-fully-completed system. Chinese officials cite improved communications with its growing number of commercial vessels in the Arctic as its primary impetus for technology upgrades, but the country's efforts for improved satellite data in the Arctic can also have a military use.⁴⁰²

China established a BeiDou receiving and processing station at Ny-Ålesund in 2016.⁴⁰³ It previously used its Yellow River research station to optimize and increase the accuracy of the system. The Bureau of Surveying and Mapping rebuilt and upgraded the datum station's continuously operating reference system, which increased BeiDou's accuracy and reliability, as well as enabling real-time data transmission to China.⁴⁰⁴

Norway's *National Security Act (Sikkerhetsloven)* came into force in 2018 to counter security threats posed by the foreign acquisition of Norwegian companies, and the intelligence services reference investments from China and Russia in their public security briefs. The Norwegian Police Security Service (*Politiets sikkerhetstjeneste*, PST) assesses the Norwegian petroleum sector (which is of central importance to Norway's economy) as being at high risk for concerted espionage, identifying Russia and China as sources of direct concern. The risk is seen as both economic (a loss of competitive advantage) and security related, as some technology could have military applications.⁴⁰⁵ PST suggests that the renewable energy sector could also be the target of patient, longstanding, and heavily resourced espionage from those countries.

The Norwegian Intelligence Service also assesses that Russian and Chinese intelligence and security services are particularly active against Norway and its allies in the cyber domain. Both countries carry out network operations for intelligence purposes, and they likely have the ability to carry out destructive operations of sabotage and deterrence.⁴⁰⁶ Their operations often have overlapping messaging and are directed at political and military targets, as well as research institutions and companies with access to advanced technology.⁴⁰⁷ Chinese cyber operations also seek information on Norwegian policymaking relevant to Chinese interests, contact networks, and internal disagreements in Norwegian politics or in Norwegian companies that could be exploited.

The Chinese ambassador in Oslo insists that "China always respects the sovereignty and national security of Norway, and has never interfered with Norway's internal affairs. There is no conflict of interests between China and Norway. China poses no threat to Norway's security. It's very ridiculous for the intelligence service of a country to make security assessment[s] and attack China with pure hypothetical languages."⁴⁰⁸ However, growing evidence proves that Norway's concerns are well placed. In July 2021, then-Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide noted that the government had summoned China's ambassador in relation to China's alleged IT attack on the email systems of the Storting (Norwegian Parliament) earlier that month. "All cyberoperations leave different forms of traces and then it is among other things, our security services that make assessments of that and compile the information," Søreide's statement read. "On the basis of this information," she continued, "the government has made an assessment that the attack originated from China." The attack on Norway's democratic institutions prompted the foreign minister to urge Beijing to "take this issue seriously, and to ensure that such incidents are not repeated," with "such malicious cyber activities" contravening "the norms of responsible state behaviour endorsed by all UN Member States."⁴⁰⁹ Of note, the previous month, NATO had also called on Beijing to adhere to international commitments and obligations, asking that China "act responsibly in the international system, including cyberspace."⁴¹⁰

In the wake of the 2021 Norwegian election, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) undertook data analysis, examining select social media platforms and Norwegian websites (.no domains) for any coordinated and identifiable Chinese or Russian attempts to influence the election. Facebook and Twitter were chosen as the platforms to examine because they were (potentially) the most effective avenues for foreign influence and the

most prominent platforms for political debate in Norway. The scope of the project did not allow for an expansion of the search beyond these select platforms. The Norwegians detected no direct evidence of foreign influence aimed at the election specifically, but they did find several examples of inauthentic behaviour and the spread of disinformation from foreign actors aimed at a Norwegian audience. Attribution was not possible. This was a limited search, however, seeking clear evidence of attempts to lower voter turnout, reduce trust in the electoral process, or influence the election results. Detecting any longer-term shaping of public opinion was not an objective.⁴¹¹

China's Messaging Strategy in Norway

The North-South Divide

One of China's most effective influence strategies in Norway has been to bypass the central government and target local cities and municipalities—a practice that China honed during the period of the diplomatic freeze. Norway has a clear north-south domestic political divide, with the north boasting a less diversified economy, more limited government services, and less developed infrastructure than the south. The north has long expressed a sense of political disenfranchisement, a lack of consultation, and concern that Oslo has sidelined its priorities. Persistent unemployment has also led to a 'brain drain' of skilled workers to better prospects in the south. Likewise, the need for improved communication and transport infrastructure has been an enduring grievance of northern communities.

This political frustration, combined with a need for foreign direct investment to spur economic growth, has created an access point for Chinese influence in Norway. Support for Chinese investment is noticeably stronger in northern cities and municipalities, where citizens feel that they stand to lose if Oslo rejects Chinese infrastructure funds and future shipping lanes bypass their region.

Political frustration with Oslo has been particularly acute in the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, which sits on the Russian border. The economy of the town has suffered since the local iron mine closed in 2016 and Russian sanctions cut salmon exports soon thereafter.⁴¹² The closing of the Russian border during the pandemic also dealt a serious economic blow by disrupting local cross-border tourism and trade. Kenneth Stålsett, who manages the municipal company for transformation in Kirkenes, Sør-Varanger Development, succinctly encapsulated this feeling of economic dislocation from the south. In response to a report offering a critical assessment of the Arctic railroad project, Stålsett told news media that "Sør-Varanger only has small and tiny companies. We are struggling with an ageing population and have lost the generation between 20 and 40. If we are to turn this around, we must take action. The port and railway [via Chinese investment] can be tools to lift the region right to the top of the value chain."⁴¹³

Responding to northern Norway's need for foreign direct investment and new industries, Chinese diplomats and state-owned entities have taken to engaging with these northern partners directly, a pattern that began during the diplomatic freeze when contacts with Oslo were blocked. As the most likely site of the Arctic BRI port (which Oslo insists will not be cost effective and will adversely affect traditional Sámi lands), Kirkenes has received the most such attention. The town's former mayor even made the extraordinary claim that his small town of 3,500 is mentioned more often than Oslo on Chinese search engines and represents Norway's geopolitical centre for

China.⁴¹⁴ His assessment of Chinese search prioritization is not technically true, unless the term 'Arctic' is added to searches of Norway in Chinese engines.

High-ranking Chinese diplomats and business representatives have made several visits to the town. During his February 2020 visit to the Kirkenes Conference on northern development and politics, Ambassador Yi Xianliang reinforced the standard Chinese narrative of Beijing as a helpful partner in the face of American militarization in the North. "Some people," Yi said in clear reference to the United States, "would like to politicize Arctic affairs. Trust me, China will be a constructive player in Arctic affairs and also in any issues that will benefit Chinese people and the rest of the world," he promised, adding that his country's policy is "inclusive and cooperative. What we will do [in the Arctic], we will do for peace, for development[,] for common concern and commonalities of human beings." His speech also included a strong refutation of Norwegian intelligence reports from 2020 identifying China as an emerging security threat, insisting that "China does not pose any kind of threat to Norway or the Arctic."⁴¹⁵

This focused diplomatic attention dates back a decade. In 2014, two years before diplomatic relations were restored, the mayor of the northern town of Tromsø was questioned by Norway's secret services following repeated encounters with then-Ambassador Zhao Jun. This included being invited to a dinner and karaoke at the ambassador's official residence in Oslo. "The reason (for the meeting) may have been that they knew that I had close relations with the embassy of China," Mayor Jens Johan Hjort told the Associated Free Press. Hjort explained that he had received more than 80 ambassadors in Tromsø over the previous two years, but that Zhao had been there more times than any other.⁴¹⁶ Tromsø is in a unique and important position, given its role as a transit point for travel to Svalbard (and as a major tourism centre in its own right).

Chinese business executives have also travelled to northern Norway to curry favour and market their plans. Chen Feng, the general director of COSCO's Marketing and Sales Department, highlighted Kirkenes as one of his company's Arctic priorities during his presentation to the 2018 Arctic Circle Forum conference in Shanghai.⁴¹⁷ Chongqing International Logistics Hub Park held two events on May 21, 2021, including an online contract signing with the Narvik port authority in Norway. That agreement is intended to create new channels for regular cargo transportation, while exploring the construction of cargo distribution centres in Norway and Chongqing, to develop more effective import and export opportunities and better trade ties.⁴¹⁸

Many Norwegians clearly reciprocate this Chinese interest in the region, with Kirkenes being at the heart of this relationship-building effort. For years, the main actor has been the town's former mayor, Rune Rafaelsen, who dedicated considerable effort to attracting Chinese attention. Ambassador Yi began his 2020 speech at the Kirkenes Conference with a greeting to "Rune, my dear friend," before outlining China's plans for the Arctic.⁴¹⁹

In 2018, Rafaelsen succeeded in securing a cooperation agreement with the Chinese city of Harbin, intended to facilitate tourism, agriculture, trade, culture, and industrial projects. It was advertised as the start of a long-term collaboration that will draw in even more Chinese investment. According to a 2018 press release, the immediate goal of this partnership was to create a more attractive environment to begin the Arctic railway project, while also supporting a 10,500-kilometre-long Chinese-built fiber optic cable across the Arctic Circle.⁴²⁰ The cable project has fallen into abeyance, however, and Chinese participation is now in doubt. Instead, Finland appears to have taken the lead on this endeavour.

In the clearest attempt to curry favour, Kirkenes set up “the world’s northernmost Chinatown” as the theme of the annual Barents Spektakel in 2019. The town transformed its downtown with a China theme to celebrate “a golden age of China” and brought in Chinese artists, diplomats, and a delegation from Harbin. Addressing the event, Chinese Ambassador Wang Min said it highlighted the town’s friendship with China. Over five days, invited experts discussed the future of Kirkenes as a focal point for the BRI.⁴²¹

China’s own narratives highlight northern Norwegian resentment and the region’s desire for Chinese cooperation. In 2020, for instance, Chinese state media quoted Rafaelsen⁴²² calling for Norway to establish its own independent Arctic policy, separate from American interests: “what they [the US] said is out of fashion. I hope that the Americans can make changes as soon as possible. What they are doing now is destructive.” According to *Global Times*, Rafaelsen asserted that:

the current practice of the United States is in direct conflict with Norwegian national interests.... As for intelligence agencies claiming that China and Russia pose the greatest threat to Norway, I think this assessment is completely wrong.... I also don’t agree with the statement that China poses a threat to Norway. We should not allow military groups, whether Eastern or Western, to dominate our politics.⁴²³

This aversion to an American or NATO military presence in the region is far stronger in the northern regions of Norway than in the south. In part, this attitude stems from worries that an expanded NATO presence will make the North a legitimate military target, from the view that militarization impedes necessary cooperation with China and Russia, and from the proximity of these communities to and their trading relationships with Russia.⁴²⁴ Accordingly, the 2021 *Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement* between Oslo and Washington was met with particular concern in the north, especially since northern stakeholders were not extensively consulted. In practice, this sentiment has manifested in opposition to US nuclear submarines making use of civilian ports in Tromsø and the surrounding region. Critically, northern Norwegians see this NATO presence as potentially ending any hope of Polar Silk Road engagement. When the Virginia-class submarine USS *New Mexico* arrived in Tromsø in May 2020, the locals also complained that the US presence made the city a potential target and left it vulnerable to a radiation accident.⁴²⁵

Northern Norway’s position on Russia, which also extends to China, stems from a longstanding culture of pragmatic accommodation in managing relations with the Soviet Union. China is a new actor in the Arctic, and northern Norway’s more favourable view of Beijing is practical and transactional. The region seeks infrastructure investment to spur economic activity, and China appears to be the only potential source of large-scale funding. With few prospects of investment from local Norwegian sources, regional actors appear willing to work with China out of necessity. Rafaelsen suggested at one point that Chinese capital “may be what it takes to have Oslo wake up” to northern Norway’s needs.⁴²⁶

Industry

Deepening relations with Norwegian business interests represents another central pillar of Chinese influence operations in Norway. Prior to COVID-19-related trade disruptions, Norway exported \$4.5 billion USD annually to China, making China its seventh largest market.⁴²⁷ After the 2010 diplomatic break, Norwegian trade remained

relatively steady with China, apart from interruptions in the fisheries industry when China boycotted Norwegian salmon. Consequently, the Norwegian seafood industry lost significant market share in China, falling from 90% before 2010 to 30% in mid-2014. While much of this loss was made up for through creative labelling and moving Norwegian product through third countries, it left the industry with added costs and constrained opportunities.

The Sino-Norwegian diplomatic break also left Norway's energy and shipping interests incensed at the potential revenue loss, owing to the collapse of the free trade talks, which were cancelled after two years of negotiations and despite a near-complete draft text. There was also persistent unhappiness in the business sector with red tape, including delays in issuing business visas and the inability to schedule direct business meetings with Chinese counterparts. In shipping circles, there was a sense that a limited window of opportunity existed to take advantage of the Polar Silk Road and potential shipping partnerships. Accordingly, during the diplomatic break, business interests lobbied the Norwegian government heavily to re-establish relations. This lobbying, as much as any other factor, led Oslo to accept implicit culpability and sign what many in Norway saw as a humiliating surrender in its 2016 MoU with Beijing.⁴²⁸

Following the normalization of Sino-Norwegian diplomatic relations, industry groups and major Norwegian companies continue to be important elements drawing the two states closer together, while preventing the Norwegian government from taking positions that may offend Beijing. It is telling that the 2018 state visit to China by Norway's King Harald V included a delegation of about 340 businesspeople representing 140 Norwegian companies.⁴²⁹

The seafood industry remains one of the most powerful lobbies pushing for friendly political relations with China and for the completion of a free trade agreement. The steadily growing Chinese seafood market is already the world's largest by volume and value. In 2019, China was the largest growth market for Norwegian seafood, consuming 168,503 tons (a 13% increase over the previous year). During the pandemic, the Chinese market has become even more important as Europeans stopped hosting catered events, thus reducing their demand for salmon and driving more Norwegian exports to China. This influx led to a sharp price decline in the Chinese market but provided Norwegian exporters with an important outlet. Salmon from Norway enjoys an overwhelming price advantage in the Chinese market and an 80% market share.⁴³⁰

The Norwegian Seafood Council (which comes under the Ministry of Trade) has ambitious plans to increase its Chinese exports and expects the trade to be worth \$1.45 billion by 2025 (a roughly 250% increase over 2019 trade values).⁴³¹ The Council also unveiled plans in 2017 to target China as a new market for seafoods, after 140 Norwegian seafood industry representatives met their Chinese counterparts in Beijing—the Norwegian seafood industry's largest trade delegation to a foreign country.⁴³²

Norway's powerful shipping industry also has close ties with Chinese partners. In November 2019, Ambassador Yi Xianliang visited the Norwegian Shipowners' Association⁴³³ and exchanged views with CEO Harald Solberg on strengthening China-Norway maritime cooperation. Yi expressed his appreciation to the Association for its positive contribution to the deepening of China-Norway economics and trade, with Solberg reciprocating that the Norwegian Shipowners' Association attaches great importance to the Chinese market. Norwegian shipbuilders have long been a target for Chinese investment and business partnerships given their expertise in offshore drilling.⁴³⁴

Other fora connecting the Norwegian business community to China include the Nordic Innovation House in Hong Kong, the Nordic Business Forum Shanghai, the Norwegian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and the China section at Innovation Norway.

Diplomatic Messaging

China's diplomatic messaging in Norway echoes its broader Arctic narratives, which espouse a cooperative, friendly China looking to engage in 'win-win' partnerships. In 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi itemized these principles of Sino-Norwegian relations during a joint press conference with Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide:

1. Continue to respect each other, treat each other as equals, and take care of each other's core interests and major concerns.
 - This wording stems from the 2016 MoU and is shorthand for China's demand that Norway refrain from any criticism of China or its government.
2. Advance trade cooperation and complete a free trade agreement while expanding cooperation in the 'blue economy.'
 - This references China's interest in expanding cooperation and technology transfers in the offshore sector, while expanding trade in seafood.
3. Safeguard multilateralism and stand together in opposition to unilateralism and protectionism.
 - This is part of a global narrative advanced by China as it sought to establish itself as an alternative to the unilateral and protectionist Trump administration.⁴³⁵ This narrative has continued into the Biden administration.

The US's role in the Arctic is a secondary consideration to the 'win-win' narrative but represents an important corollary. While China is a productive partner, the US is presented as a dangerous and destabilizing force. Yi Xianliang, then China's Ambassador to Norway, encapsulated that narrative in a 2020 interview with *High North News*:

The question of whether the commercial cooperation between China and Norway, Russia and other Arctic countries constitutes a security-related issue should be answered by the countries themselves, not the US. We sincerely hope that the US will abandon its Cold War mindset and unilateralism approach and work with other countries, including China, to maintain permanent peace and sustainable development of the Arctic, and jointly promote world peace and development.⁴³⁶

The question of 'core interests and major concerns' is central to China's political messaging and is a common refrain. In the years since the renewal of diplomatic relations with Norway, China's diplomats return to this message repeatedly and—when they perceive a serious threat—act aggressively. The reaction of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to remarks made by Berit Reiss-Andersen, Chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee in 2018, are illustrative. In the wake of Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo's death, Reiss-Andersen released a statement expressing "relief and satisfaction" that Liu's wife was released from house arrest and departed China after her "inhuman ordeal."⁴³⁷ The Chinese embassy's response accused Reiss-Andersen of having "distorted the facts, viciously slandered and made provocations against the Chinese government." It stated that:

...as is known to all, the Nobel Committee's awarding of the 2010 Peace Prize seriously violated China's sovereignty and wantonly interfered in China's internal affairs, which had severely damaged the relations between China and Norway.... This is a hard-earned achievement. We hope that relevant parties in Norway will earnestly treasure the current positive picture of our bilateral cooperation, do more things conducive [*sic*] to the development of relations between our two countries rather than the other way around.... We urge relevant institutions to earnestly respect China's judicial sovereignty and stop interfering [in] China's internal affairs.⁴³⁸

Cultural Engagement

Since the normalization of Sino-Norwegian diplomatic relations, China has worked to expand cultural and social ties. These include enhanced ties between educational institutions, though success has been mixed in this area. In 2007, Norway opened its first Confucius Institute in Bergen, run by Bergen University College and Beijing Sport University, but it closed in 2021. Norway is now the second Nordic country, after Sweden, without a Confucius Institute. In an interview with Radio Free Asia, University of Oslo researcher Harald Bøckman attributes the closure to negative Norwegian sentiment after China's crackdown in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. However, the final catalyst was clearly the Chinese government's decision to replace Beijing Sport University with the China University of Political Science and Law—one of the main academic institutions for the ideological training of the Chinese elite, with close ties to the Chinese Communist Party—as the partner institution.⁴³⁹

Educational partnerships are an important arm of Chinese influence, and the description for the University of Bergen's Chinese-language program is particularly telling, casting doubt on what it implies are questionable Western judgements regarding China's governmental system:

We have been reading a lot about China in the Norwegian media in the last decade. The reports in question are often critical about the Chinese system, and focus on the country's lack of organisational freedom and freedom of speech. However, a few of the commentators have knowledge of China from the inside, in addition to being familiar with the Chinese language.⁴⁴⁰

The University of Bergen, Nord University, the University of Oslo, and the University of Tromsø are also participating in a new alliance between ocean- and fishing-focused universities in China and Norway. The China-Norway Marine University Consortium Alliance is comprised of a dozen Chinese universities, including the Ocean University of China, Dalian Ocean University, Sun Yat-sen (Zhongshan) University, and Shanghai Ocean University, home to a research team that advises the national government on distant-water fishing operations.⁴⁴¹

According to the Chinese embassy, the University of Oslo has partnerships with more than 20 Chinese universities. In 2019, Ambassador Yi Xianliang visited the school to express his appreciation for the university's "positive contribution in education cooperation with China." In 2021, the University of Oslo partnered with Fudan University in Shanghai to host the Fudan-European Centre for China Studies, run by a general manager paid by the Chinese university.⁴⁴²

Scientific Engagement

Because the Yellow River Station is China's only Arctic research facility, its scientific cooperation with Norway is more extensive than with most Arctic countries. During the diplomatic freeze, that cooperation was an important channel of communication, and scientific partnerships were allowed to continue. For example, the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) was opened in Shanghai in 2013.⁴⁴³ The Nansen-Zhu International Research Centre, founded in 2003 and tying in several Norwegian and Chinese institutions, is a prominent example of a longer-term collaboration.⁴⁴⁴ The annual Arctic Frontiers conference held in Tromsø also proved an important venue for dialogue during the diplomatic freeze. Beijing often sent high-level delegations to the event, which, along with the annual Arctic Circle conference in Iceland, serves as a means for China to advertise its Arctic credentials and engage in scientific diplomacy.⁴⁴⁵

Several Chinese institutions are now part of the UArctic (University of the Arctic) network, including Wuhan University, the National Marine Environmental Forecasting Center, Harbin Engineering University, the Harbin Institute of Technology, Fudan University, Dalian Maritime University, the Arctic Studies Center at Liaocheng University, and the Environmental Development Center, directly under China's Ministry of Environmental Protection. Their direct level of engagement with the 16 Norwegian members of UArctic⁴⁴⁶ requires more research.

In 2013, Oslo supported China's admission as an accredited Observer to the Arctic Council. This support stemmed from a Norwegian view that vetoing China's application would do more harm than good, given that China's Arctic interests meant that it would engage in regional affairs regardless and that, if forced to work entirely outside of the Council, China would be less inclined to work with the Nordic states. Nevertheless, some Norwegian policymakers believed (and still believe) that Norway should have blocked Chinese observership.⁴⁴⁷

Chinese Media and Norway

Chinese media narratives surrounding Norway centre on two main messages. The first is that Norway welcomes China into the Arctic as a helpful and constructive partner. The Chinese media takes every opportunity to quote Norwegian politicians and representatives who welcome Chinese involvement in the region. For instance, Xinhua cites Nalan Koc, the former director of the Research Department at the Norwegian Polar Institute, who told journalists that China "is an important contributor to the knowledge base of Arctic research," while "praising China's increased investment in polar research."⁴⁴⁸

Likewise, *Global Times* rebutted US State Department concerns over the Arctic presence of China and Russia by citing Norwegian Foreign Ministry State Secretary Audun Halvorsen, who "dismissed claims that China poses a threat to the Arctic region."⁴⁴⁹ *Global Times* has also used Norwegian voices to legitimize its growing Arctic interest and presence. For example, it cited Øystein Tunsjø, a professor at the Oslo-based Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS), as stating that "there is nothing wrong with the fact that Chinese activity in the Arctic is generally increasing, including investments and infrastructure projects."⁴⁵⁰

The second dominant narrative in Chinese media is Norway's continued adherence to the terms of the 2016 MoU re-establishing relations between the two states. Statements by Norwegian leaders promising to "consistently adhere to the One China policy" and "attach[ing] great importance to both China's core interests and major concern[s]" are commonly found in Chinese-language reporting on Norwegian political visits.⁴⁵¹

Conclusions

China has largely succeeded in moving the Norwegian government towards its desired positions on general political relations. Much of this, however, is attributable to Norwegian calculations of self-interest and its approach to small state diplomacy. China's most significant political victory in Norway was its securing of normalized diplomatic relations on its own terms in 2016. Despite initiating the diplomatic freeze six years earlier, China pressured Norway into implicitly accepting the blame. The framework for relations established by the 2016 MoU continues to govern much of Norway's interactions with China, most noticeably its reticence to criticize Beijing over human rights violations or the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁵²

The Norwegian government has also been under public pressure since before the COVID pandemic to break its silence on China's ongoing abuse of human rights and its threats against neighbouring Sweden, which followed Swedish criticism of China's incarceration of a Swedish-Chinese citizen in 2020 for publishing harsh assessments of China's behaviour in Hong Kong. Norway eventually supported Sweden's demand that Gui Minhai be freed, its first (albeit subtle) explicit criticism of China in several years.⁴⁵³

The careful Norwegian treatment of the Nobel Peace Prize is further evidence of Oslo's determination not to revisit the 2010 incident. The Norwegian government's frequent reaffirmation of its support for China's core interests suggests that it is highly unlikely to support the prize being awarded to any person or group critical of China. In 2019, Norwegian MP Guri Melby nominated the people of Hong Kong for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize for their fight for the freedom of speech and democracy. The move was aggressively attacked in Chinese media, with *China Daily* calling the nomination an insult to the "millions of peace-loving and law-abiding residents of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" who were impacted by the "rioters, including foreign nationals who joined the fights."⁴⁵⁴

During a meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and then-Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide, the former intimated severe consequences should the Peace Prize be awarded in such a way that countered Chinese sovereignty. According to a statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang told Søreide that China and Norway should "deal with sensitive issues appropriately, to avoid the hard-won warming ties being strained again." In his statements, Wang also made sure to mention that China "attaches high importance" to Norwegian seafood imports, which any audience would recognize as the main victim of that last Peace Prize crisis. The Norwegians were also told again that the two sides must "earnestly accommodate each others' core interests and major concerns."⁴⁵⁵ Ultimately, Melby's nomination garnered little support, and the Prize that year was awarded to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. While this does not indicate an official position on behalf of the Norwegian government, it does indicate a degree of self-censorship that will likely continue to shape decision making within the Prize Committee.

While the Norwegian government has been particularly sensitive to China's political sensibilities, Beijing's reputation in Norway has declined, notably since the beginning of the pandemic. China's behaviour in Hong Kong and Xinjiang has also generated a backlash against the free trade talks, especially amongst younger voters. The youth wings of several mainstream political parties (excluding the far-right Progress Party) have even called for the termination of the talks owing to the situation in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, the little Nordic press coverage that the BRI receives has

been largely negative, focusing on concerns about—and signs of—Chinese geopolitical ambitions and the potential of the BRI to erode common EU trade and investment rules and standards, as well as the EU’s political unity.⁴⁵⁶ A survey by YouGov in 2020 shows that China is number three among the ‘brands’ that most Norwegians have a bad impression of, beaten only by Saudi Arabia and Ryanair.⁴⁵⁷

In a sign of increasing popular anger with China, the four largest Nordic newspapers (including Norway’s *Aftenposten*) marked the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party’s founding with a joint front-page editorial denouncing Beijing’s attack on Hong Kong’s independent media. The editors-in-chief promised to “open our newspapers to an even more intensive coverage of the frightening developments in Hong Kong.”⁴⁵⁸

5 | Sweden

Sweden was one of the first democratic states to recognize the Communist government of China and has, historically, enjoyed good relations with Beijing. In the 2010s, as China expanded its investment and influence campaign in the Arctic, Stockholm was a close partner. Chinese companies were permitted to purchase major Swedish businesses, acquire significant intellectual property, and partner on strategically significant scientific work.

This relationship soured in the late 2010s. Since then, the Chinese embassy in Stockholm has mounted an intense campaign of public criticism and threats against parties the embassy has accused of being biased against China, including Swedish media outlets, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, politicians, and authorities. Swedish media reporting has also become more critical of China and the Chinese Communist Party, and Swedish public opinion of China has fallen significantly.

China's coercive diplomacy in Sweden has alienated the Swedish population and has led to high levels of distrust towards Beijing, including at local levels, where several cities and sub-national authorities have terminated cooperation agreements with Chinese counterparts, citing human rights concerns. This shift in attitude is clearly reflected in Sweden's 2020 Arctic Strategy, which warns that "China has already shown that it wants to have more influence on developments in the Arctic. This can risk leading to conflicts of interest. China expresses general support for international law, but acts selectively, especially concerning issues that China regards as its core interests."⁴⁵⁹

While Swedish official documents acknowledge that "the military dimension of China's actions in the area has so far been limited," Stockholm cautions that "China is gradually building up naval forces with global reach" and that "more attention needs to be given to the military cooperation between China and Russia, especially regarding possible military cooperation aimed at the Arctic." Accordingly, Sweden's Arctic Strategy encourages "like-minded countries and the EU to cooperate and act together regarding challenges and opportunities resulting from the increase in China's global influence."⁴⁶⁰

The 'wolf-warrior' diplomatic attacks endured by Sweden were far more aggressive than those suffered by its neighbours, despite other Scandinavian states offering similar criticisms of China. In part, this reflects the personal style of former ambassador Gui Congyou. These criticisms were dramatic and offensive, to the point where China sought to recalibrate its messaging and install a new ambassador in 2021. Despite this shift and attempt to adjust its approach, Sweden's relationship with China will likely remain strained for many years to come.

Political Objectives

China's objectives in Sweden, as in Scandinavia more generally, fit into two main lines of effort. First, Beijing uses influence strategies to advance Chinese positions on international cooperation and governance, cementing its foreign policy positions as legitimate alternatives to those of the US and the West, while avoiding political pressure or popular criticism of Chinese actions in Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, and elsewhere. Second, Chinese messaging promotes an image of China as a peaceful and friendly world power seeking 'win-win' economic cooperation.⁴⁶¹ This narrative is common to Chinese messaging around the world. Its purpose is to blunt foreign

criticism while facilitating investment, scientific collaboration, and the entrenchment of Chinese scientific and cultural facilities and programs in foreign states. In the Swedish Arctic, this ‘win-win’ approach is designed to support and legitimize Belt and Road infrastructure projects, Chinese foreign direct investment, and (potentially) dual-purpose scientific research.

These narrative approaches are geared towards achieving four key objectives in Sweden, outlined in a 2014 Swedish Defence Research Agency study (which remains relevant even in today’s fast-changing security environment). The first is the acquisition of technology and know-how, relevant to China for both civilian and military purposes. This includes dual-use technology (such as semiconductors) and green technology. The second is building influence and gaining access to European and international governance fora in which Sweden wields significant influence—including in the Arctic. The third is the defence of China’s ‘core interests,’ particularly in safeguarding its ‘territorial integrity’ and ‘national sovereignty’ by attempting to silence criticism of its human rights record, its foreign policy, and its policies towards Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Lastly, China seeks to promote a positive public opinion of itself, which is a prerequisite to long-term access to technology, investment opportunities, and influence.⁴⁶²

This approach to Sweden is a positive, cooperative one, well encapsulated by a 2019 article by Zhang Weipeng and Yu Xiaofeng of Zhejiang University, who note that the Nordic countries’ highly developed economies and technological innovations in strategic areas of energy conservation, environmental protection, and social security mean that “enhancing cooperation with the Nordic countries is indispensable for China to intensify its efforts to open up to the outside world.”⁴⁶³

This positive messaging—which is common across much of the Arctic—offers an interesting contrast to a more recent approach taken by China towards Sweden. Beginning in 2018, the Chinese embassy in Stockholm mounted an intense campaign of public criticism and threats against Swedish media outlets, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, politicians, and authorities accused by the embassy of bias against China. Consequently, Sino-Swedish relations have deteriorated dramatically.⁴⁶⁴ Swedish media reporting has also become more critical of China and the Chinese Communist Party, and Swedish public opinion of China has fallen significantly. Specific points of contention include China’s treatment of Gui Minhai (a Swedish citizen imprisoned in China) and the decision to exclude the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from Swedish 5G telecommunications networks. Although the Chinese ambassador in Stockholm declared in January 2021 that “Sweden is not important enough to threaten,” China’s actual behaviour suggests otherwise.⁴⁶⁵ As three commentators noted in *Politico* the following month, “Sweden’s travails are of wider interest to the EU because they touch on important questions which many countries in the bloc face, namely where to draw the line between often lucrative commercial deals with China and concerns over China’s human rights record and its history of spying on Western nations.”⁴⁶⁶ While Sweden is not unique in receiving this form of ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy, the quick shift from the ‘win-win’ narrative rebuts any thoughts of Arctic exceptionalism and shows how fast narrative approaches can change.

Polar Affairs

While Sweden’s status as an Arctic state is not central to China’s diplomatic objectives in the country, it constitutes an important consideration. China has tried to foster positive Arctic relations with Sweden, particularly to promote

investment, secure access to resources and technology, and establish a scientific footprint. Of particular relevance, China has operated the Remote Sensing Satellite North Polar Ground Station in Kiruna, north of the Arctic Circle, since 2016.⁴⁶⁷ Chinese media has also noted when Swedish defence officials have issued warnings with respect to the satellite station that “nominally civilian cooperation with China could ultimately be controlled by the military.”⁴⁶⁸

Economic Objectives

Sweden has attracted considerable Chinese investment for a country of its size. Between 2000 and 2019 (when COVID-19 skewed the trade flows), Chinese direct investment amounted to roughly \$8 billion, or 4.5% of all Chinese investment in the European Union. This accounted for 1.54% of Sweden’s GDP in 2019, a significant amount compared to the EU average.⁴⁶⁹ Roughly 25,000 Swedes work for Chinese-owned companies, with the vast majority (perhaps 20,000) being employed by Volvo and its Chinese owner, Geely.⁴⁷⁰

The Chinese embassy in Stockholm uses this trade and these investments to showcase the benefits of economic cooperation and promote the broader ‘win-win’ narrative mentioned earlier. In a 2018 interview, for instance, Ambassador Gui Congyou bragged that China had created 20,000 jobs in Sweden and that the Geely investment in Volvo had opened the Chinese market to the company.⁴⁷¹

Sweden is an attractive destination for Chinese companies because of the concentration and quality of its technology sector. A 2014 Google-funded report identified 22,000 technology companies in Stockholm alone, with 18% percent of the country’s workforce being employed in the tech sector.⁴⁷² China’s investment has focused largely on this technology and on intellectual property (IP) as part of its broader, global effort to leverage foreign expertise and IP in strategically important fields.

The Chinese state’s interest in acquiring technology is visible in its state-owned enterprises’ Swedish investments. However, roughly half of the Chinese money flowing into Sweden has been to non-strategic sectors, such as hospitality, pulp and paper, and consumer products.⁴⁷³ While Chinese companies often have strong state connections, they are also looking to improve their own capacities, build supply chains and markets, and acquire globally known and respected brands.⁴⁷⁴ Roughly 74% of China’s business acquisitions by volume came from private companies, while 27% came from state-owned enterprises (SOEs).⁴⁷⁵ The value of the transactions also skews heavily away from SOE participation, given that the largest acquisition by far was Zhejiang Geely’s purchase of Volvo. The motivations for and control over these transactions remain opaque, however, with large, private Chinese firms often being connected to state policy objectives in less obvious ways. In 2018, for instance, Geely chairman Li Shufu told Chinese state media that, in purchasing Volvo, “our aim is to support the growth of the Chinese auto industry through the growth of Geely to serve our national strategies.”⁴⁷⁶ While ostensibly an independent company, Geely clearly has ties and responsibilities to state interests.

The most concerning investments are those into companies that the Swedish Defence Research Agency (*Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut*, or FOI) has identified as being of strategic importance. In a 2019 survey, the FOI mapped out that investment landscape and identified 65 Chinese acquisitions. In that work, the agency found a clear correlation between Chinese purchases of Swedish companies and the industrial sectors that Beijing identified

as being the focus of its central plans for industrial development, elucidated in its ten-year plan, *Made in China 2025* (*MIC2025*).⁴⁷⁷ This strategic plan to develop the Chinese manufacturing industry focuses on ten technology fields, in which China aims to become more self-sufficient and, in some cases, a global leader. According to the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, the launch of *MIC2025* coincided with an increase in Chinese investment in Europe, and, for 30 of the 65 identified corporate acquisitions in Sweden, the FOI identified a connection with those ten technology fields highlighted in *MIC2025*.⁴⁷⁸

Based on the identified Chinese takeovers in Sweden, China's interest in technology transfer has clearly centred on the industrial, biotechnology, information and communications technology, electronics, and automotive industries.⁴⁷⁹ The largest transactions within these categories include Zhejiang Geely's acquisition of Volvo and the sales of electric car company NEVS to Evergrande, Spotify Technology to Tencent, and Breas Medical (a manufacturer of ventilators) to Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical.⁴⁸⁰

While technology transfer through acquisition is an important objective, the *Säkerhetspolisen* (the Swedish Security Service, which has counter-intelligence functions akin to the FBI) believes that China is also engaged in corporate intelligence gathering and theft. One former Swedish intelligence official stated that there is a pattern of Chinese intelligence agencies targeting the intellectual property of Swedish technology start-ups. One of the identified impacts has been technology being commercialized in China before those products can even be brought to market in Sweden.⁴⁸¹

There is also some evidence that China is seeking to acquire Swedish companies that are developing dual-use civilian/military technologies. For instance, NavTech, a Chinese company linked to the Communist Party, acquired Swedish micro-electromechanical systems manufacturer Silex Microsystems in 2015 using state-backed investment holding companies. The \$134 million purchase of Chematur in 2019 by the Chinese SOE Wanhua represents a foray into strategic defence territory. Chematur is a spin-off from Nobel, the Swedish munitions maker, and it remains, according to CSIS analyst Heather Conley, at "the center of Sweden's defense industrial base." Wanhua is one of the world's largest chemical manufacturers, and its complicated ownership structure includes the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) of the Yantai Municipal People's Government as the largest shareholder. Although the Silex acquisition led Swedish policymakers to reassess their investment safeguards related to China, it did not face scrutiny from the Swedish government at the time.⁴⁸²

Chinese infrastructure companies have also attempted major projects in Sweden. In Lysekil, on the west coast, Chinese companies sought to develop a large deep-water port, along with the necessary surrounding roads, railroads, and bridges. Hong Kong-based Sunbase International Holdings and China Communications Construction Company (a major project developer in global BRI projects) put forward plans for the container port in mid-2017, which would have been the largest in the Nordic countries. The plans were cancelled in early 2018 following a groundswell of popular opposition, centred on environmental and security concerns.⁴⁸³ The Chinese case was not helped by the fact that the front figure of one of the investing companies had ties to the People's Liberation Army.⁴⁸⁴

The short life of this project is illustrative of the rapid decline in Chinese soft power in the country, which has seen Swedish perceptions of Chinese economic involvement drop precipitously. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s,

Sweden was generally receptive of Chinese investment. Yet, the public debate has become significantly more critical in recent years. In a 2020 study, Nicola Nymalm (Swedish Defence University) and Viking Bohman (Swedish Institute of International Affairs) track this decline, pointing to 2018 and 2019 as having brought the shift in corporate China's reputation, as government authorities, political parties, the media, and civil society began to view these investments as potential security threats.⁴⁸⁵ The debate includes the same concerns that have been growing across the West, surrounding Beijing's ability to influence or control companies and investors to gain control over critical infrastructure and military technology.

That new dynamic is visible in Huawei's failure to develop its business in Sweden. That major Chinese telecommunications company has done business with Swedish telecommunications company Telia since 2009, even building the world's first commercial LTE network there. The partnership ended in 2019, however, and, in 2020, the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority banned any new use of Huawei products, while also stipulating that existing Huawei products be phased out by 2025.

Despite persistent and growing security and political concerns, China remains an important trading partner to Sweden. During the five years before Covid disrupted trade patterns, Swedish exports to China grew 31% to \$7.8 billion, making China the country's eighth largest customer.⁴⁸⁶ In 2000, China accounted for around 2% of Sweden's external trade in goods, while in 2019, this number increased to nearly 5%.⁴⁸⁷

Historically, Chinese investment in Sweden has not received government or media oversight, except in cases of very large transactions (like the sale of Volvo).⁴⁸⁸ Sweden's regulatory oversight of foreign investment has been—in Conley's words—"spotty."⁴⁸⁹ Many Swedish companies have also failed to report transactions, making it difficult for the government to measure acquisitions and risk or acquire actionable data. Moreover, Sweden has not had the intelligence resources to review Chinese companies in depth. Most oversight has been directed at defence exports (as defined by the Wassenaar Arrangement's control lists)⁴⁹⁰ and defence goods, controlled by the *Military Equipment Act* of 1992. The 2018 updated *Protective Security Act* requires local operators to notify Swedish security services of potentially sensitive transactions.⁴⁹¹

In August 2019, the Swedish government formed a special commission—the Direct Investment Investigation—to develop proposals for a Swedish system for reviewing foreign direct investment (FDI) in protected areas.⁴⁹² The result was the 2021 *Security Act*, which requires that any transaction involving a Swedish entity conducting security-sensitive activities or operating security-sensitive assets must receive approval from the Swedish Security Service or the Swedish Armed Forces before finalizing the transaction. Although this is not a general FDI screening mechanism, it enables the Swedish government to block investments that may pose a threat to national security.

The Act vaguely defines the concept of security-sensitive activities as activities that are of importance to Sweden's security or that are covered by an international protective security commitment that is binding for Sweden.⁴⁹³ Preparatory work for the legislation mentions sectors such as defence, law enforcement, energy and water supplies, vital infrastructure, telecommunications, and transport.⁴⁹⁴ The test is linked to a central question: what would the effects of a hostile action, such as an attack, espionage, or an interruption of the target's business, products, or

services, have on Sweden's national security?⁴⁹⁵ Companies are required to self-assess whether their operations are considered security sensitive, leaving room for strengthening in the future.

Increased legal scrutiny, coupled with the declining Swedish perceptions of Chinese investment, is likely to limit Chinese investment opportunities in the future, particularly in large, highly visible transactions.

Strategic Objectives

Chinese strategic messaging to date shows no clear military interests in Sweden's Arctic. Beijing's external-facing discourse tends to tread carefully in engaging the region, in particular by underscoring China's potential as a partner in scientific, economic, and political developments in the circumpolar North. Despite this, Beijing has an increasingly pronounced enthusiasm for the region's economic potential, especially in the areas of shipping and resource extraction (energy and mining), which also intersect with potential future strategic military interests.⁴⁹⁶ Nevertheless, China's calls for peaceful development and deeper cooperation with Arctic public- and private-sector partners are aligned with its strategic economic development goals.

To date, China has chosen not to display its military capacity in the circumpolar Arctic. Nevertheless, in 2017, a Hong Kong entrepreneur purchased a Swedish submarine base that the military had previously sold to civilians in 2004, though he promised to lease it back for free to the Swedish Navy, to not charge entry and exit fees, and to leave it otherwise untouched—an unusually generous offer but one clearly disadvantageous for Swedish security.⁴⁹⁷ The Swedish government eventually repurchased it, according to media reports.⁴⁹⁸

There is no indication that China seeks overt military competition or conflict in the region, and there is little worry of kinetic military action by that country against Sweden. Following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia is naturally held up as the most dangerous security threat in the Arctic, and growing connections between Moscow and Beijing are sometimes pointed to as a future strategic danger. While most open-source analysts suggest that the likelihood of a formal Sino-Russian Arctic security alliance remains remote, given that China and Russia have distinct regional interests (and their grand strategies are not naturally aligned), increased regional cooperation between the two countries is of interest to Sweden and the other Arctic states and must be carefully monitored.⁴⁹⁹ Furthermore, China has begun to join Russian media outlets in their hybrid warfare efforts, deriding Sweden as a crony of the US and NATO,⁵⁰⁰ rather than a 'neutral' or independent actor.⁵⁰¹

Chinese scientific work in Sweden has also been identified as presenting strategic risks. Beginning in 2011, the Swedish Space Corporation allowed Beijing to access its antennas in Sweden, Chile, and Australia. This decision was made despite the expression of strong US concerns to Swedish leaders.⁵⁰² In what proved to be a major success for China, Sweden was even the first state worldwide to offer China its first fully owned overseas satellite ground station, which was completed in 2016—a decision Chinese policymakers said could "prove just as politically significant to Beijing as the facility's technological benefits," because of its precedent-setting power.⁵⁰³

China's Messaging Strategy in Sweden

Viking Bohman has recently painted a sophisticated portrait of China's communication efforts in Sweden. These are built around five dominant frames:

- a) China is peaceful, benevolent, and successful;
- b) There are great opportunities if you cooperate with China;
- c) It is costly to not cooperate with China;
- d) Chinese policies are justified and good; and
- e) Swedish criticism of China is unjustified.

Through these lenses, the Chinese embassy in Stockholm has adopted a dual-messaging approach in which it, on the one hand, confronts and denounces Swedish voices that are critical of China, and on the other, "offers lucrative cooperation to those willing to refrain from such criticism and emphasises the importance of maintaining good relations." Bohman notes that, since 2018, "this dual approach has tilted heavily in favour of the first dimension as the campaign of frequent and forceful criticism of media outlets, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, politicians and authorities, has continued."⁵⁰⁴

Diplomatic Messaging

In recent years, China has channelled its political messaging in Sweden through its embassy and Foreign Ministry statements. This has added a highly personal touch to the relationship in recent years, as Ambassador Gui Congyou (2017-2021) was extremely active—and highly controversial—in his press releases, interviews, and editorials.

During Gui's time as ambassador, there was a clear rupture in Sino-Swedish relations as Beijing trialled a 'wolf-warrior' approach in the Arctic country. This began when Beijing sent its agents to kidnap a Swedish bookseller named Gui Minhai from Thailand, bringing him to mainland China and imprisoning him after a forced televised confession. After his arrest, China prohibited Swedish officials from meeting Gui or observing his trial.⁵⁰⁵ This arrest led to a backlash in the Swedish media, which, in turn, provoked a political counterattack, centred on the Chinese embassy. Chinese threats peaked when a non-governmental organization of writers, journalists, and others—Svenska PEN—awarded Gui its Tucholsky Prize, with Sweden's culture minister in attendance at the ceremony. In a November 30, 2019, interview with Swedish radio, the ambassador dramatically warned Swedish media 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].⁵⁰⁶ Accompanying this, there was a stream of aggressive political posturing aiming to reframe the relationship and push Sweden into a 'proper' position of respect for the larger China. The most notable embassy statements flowing from this new framing are worth quoting in full:

November 14, 2019: "Some people in Sweden insisted on lying and doing wrong deeds on this case, and they are already suffering from the consequences ... normal exchanges and cooperation will be seriously hindered. You are smart enough to know what I mean by 'consequences.'"⁵⁰⁷

November 14, 2019: "We oppose even more resolutely any Swedish government officials attending the awarding ceremony. It will bring serious negative impacts on our bilateral friendly cooperation and normal exchanges. We will surely take countermeasures."⁵⁰⁸

November 14, 2019: “If they ignore the strong oppositions from the Chinese side and go ahead anyway [with the event], we will have to take measures. Some people in Sweden shouldn’t expect to feel at ease after hurting the feelings of the Chinese people and the interests of the Chinese side ... We ask Svenska PEN to show some basic respect for China and the 1.4 billion Chinese people and stop the wrong actions before it’s too late. Let’s wait and see.”⁵⁰⁹

December 5, 2019: “No one can count on harming China’s interests on the one hand and making big profits in China on the other.”⁵¹⁰

December 5, 2019: “We will not only introduce restrictions in the field of culture, but will also limit exchanges and cooperation in economics and trade ... We will inform colleagues at your Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”⁵¹¹

December 19, 2020: “There is no doubt that the Swedish side has to take full responsibility and bear the consequences.”⁵¹²

January 17, 2020: “The frequent vicious attacks on [the Chinese Communist Party] and the Chinese Government by some Swedish media and journalists reminded me of a scenario where a 48kg weight boxer keeps challenging a[n] 86kg weight boxer to a fight. The 86kg boxer, out of good will to protect the light weight boxer, advises him to leave and mind his own business, but the latter refuses to listen, and even breaks into the home of the heavy weight boxer. What choice do you expect the heavy weight boxer to have?”⁵¹³

The Chinese embassy has paid particular focus on the Swedish media, accusing Sweden of being dominated by a so-called “media tyranny.” In the words of the embassy, “some Swedish media, when it comes to coverage on China, only allow themselves the right to do one-sided, biased and untruthful reporting on China, but deny China the right to speak about the reality and its positions. This is not only unfair distorted facts and against media ethics and professionalism, but also media tyranny.”⁵¹⁴ Gui Congyou’s fiery words were also accompanied by some limited actions. China banned Sweden’s culture minister from entering China and said that other officials from the ministry would no longer be welcome. It also moved to ban journalists critical of China. Furthermore, Beijing continued to publicly denounce specific Swedish journalists and the media. It also banned two Swedish films from screenings in China.⁵¹⁵

This is a striking example of ‘wolf warrior diplomacy,’ in which China attempts to “tell the China story” while reprimanding Sweden for what it considers to be biased media portrayals of China.⁵¹⁶ Thus, while China’s Arctic narratives seek to espouse a cooperative, friendly China looking to engage in ‘win-win’ partnerships, Swedish public opinion polls show very low levels of trust towards China,⁵¹⁷ and this carries over into the Arctic sphere. According to a 2019 Pew poll, Swedes had formed decidedly negative views of China: amongst the 34 countries surveyed, only Japan had a worse impression of the Chinese.⁵¹⁸

Recognizing the failure of this form of diplomacy (in Sweden and more broadly), China has sought to recalibrate. Gui was replaced in 2021 by Cui Aimin, who has adopted a more balanced and diplomatic approach and tone.

Despite this, relations will not be easy to replace, and the ‘win-win’ narrative that was so arduously pushed in Sweden may have been irreparably damaged, both in that country and in sympathetic Nordic neighbours. Indeed, the collapse of the ‘win-win’ narrative and the subsequent souring of Sweden’s perception of China have presented an insurmountable challenge for China’s soft power efforts in the country. Sweden has shut down Confucius Institutes, terminated sister city agreements, increased scrutiny of Chinese foreign investment, and effectively banned Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from participating in its 5G networks.

Cultural and Economic Engagement

According to a 2019 Pew poll, Swedes had the second most unfavourable views about China among the 34 surveyed countries, trailing only Japan.⁵¹⁹ This presents a challenge for China’s ‘United Front’ work in the Nordic country, which seeks to mobilize “harmonious diaspora associations” (和谐侨社, *hexie qiaoshe*) as civil society organizations to advance party goals.⁵²⁰

While Chinese English-language state propaganda emphasizes Sweden’s need for China (stressing that China is Sweden’s largest partner in Asia but that Sweden “accounts only for a small proportion of China’s foreign trade”), that supposed dependence is seriously exaggerated.⁵²¹ China is Sweden’s eighth or ninth largest trading partner, with Sweden conducting vastly more trade with the European Union and the United States. Moreover, Sweden’s EU membership offers it some market protection. After Gui Congyou’s threats, EU officials pledged “full solidarity” with Sweden, suggesting that for Arctic states, closer coordination with the United States, the EU, and NATO could complicate China’s efforts to coerce them—particularly if they make clear that the coercion of any one state will produce a response from all.⁵²²

Academic and Scientific Engagement

Chinese messaging in Sweden is multifaceted and extends well beyond the political. Zhang Weipeng and Yu Xiaofeng of Zhejiang University note that multilateral cooperation between China and the Nordic countries has taken many forms, including the Sino-Nordic Relations Forum, the Sino-Nordic Young Champions Forum, the Nordic-China Innovation Cooperation Summit, the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, the Sino-Nordic Think Tank Roundtable, the Sino-Nordic National Science Strategy Roundtable, the Nordic Environment Technology Cooperation Summit Forum, and the Sino-Nordic Trade and Economic Cooperation Forum (held during the first China International Import Expo). “Given the development levels of China’s different regions, China and the Nordic countries have also signed multilateral cooperation agreements and expanded their cooperation areas to provide Nordic enterprises with development opportunities in China,” they highlight. “In addition, through its active participation in activities such as the Arctic Circle and the Arctic Frontiers Conference, China has extensively communicated and built consensus with the Nordic countries on Arctic issues.”⁵²³ China’s actual engagement in and potential influence through these fora require additional research.

In 2018, an Australian study analyzing co-publications between the People’s Liberation Army and Western universities ranked Sweden as the sixth most common collaborating country, suggesting that China could be using such collaboration and academic exchanges to acquire military expertise and technology.⁵²⁴ Several Swedish universities

cooperate with Chinese institutions, and Sweden and China have signed an MoU in research and education which includes scholarship programs to promote student and teacher exchanges. Since June 2020, however, Sweden no longer hosts any Confucius Institutes, as the Swedish partner universities have terminated the cooperation agreements.⁵²⁵ More detailed research is needed into these networks to assess whether this is taking place and the extent to which Chinese intelligence gathering aimed at Swedish universities has an Arctic dimension.⁵²⁶

In response to the downturn in relations with the PRC, Sweden has adopted tougher measures with respect to scientific partnerships. For example, beginning in 2011, the Swedish Space Corporation signed contracts allowing Beijing to use its antennas in Sweden to transmit data. In early 2019, Sweden’s defence agency warned that this satellite station might be serving the Chinese military, given the militarized nature of the country’s space program.⁵²⁷ The Swedish Space Corporation eventually terminated the access that it had provided to China from Swedish antennas, noting that “the geopolitical situation has changed since these contracts were signed in the early 2000s.”⁵²⁸

Chinese Media and Finland

Chinese Media

Unlike the Chinese media’s portrayal of the other Nordic states, it depicts Sweden in overwhelmingly negative terms. Research conducted for the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) on the framing of the Nordic states in the Chinese media from 2016-2020 finds seven different Chinese narrative frames for Sweden, four of which are negative. The majority of articles relate to the Swedish ban on Huawei’s 5G technology and the ‘Kiruna satellite incident’ (when the Swedish Defence Research Agency warned that the Chinese military could access the Chinese-built satellite), leaving a strongly negative picture.⁵²⁹

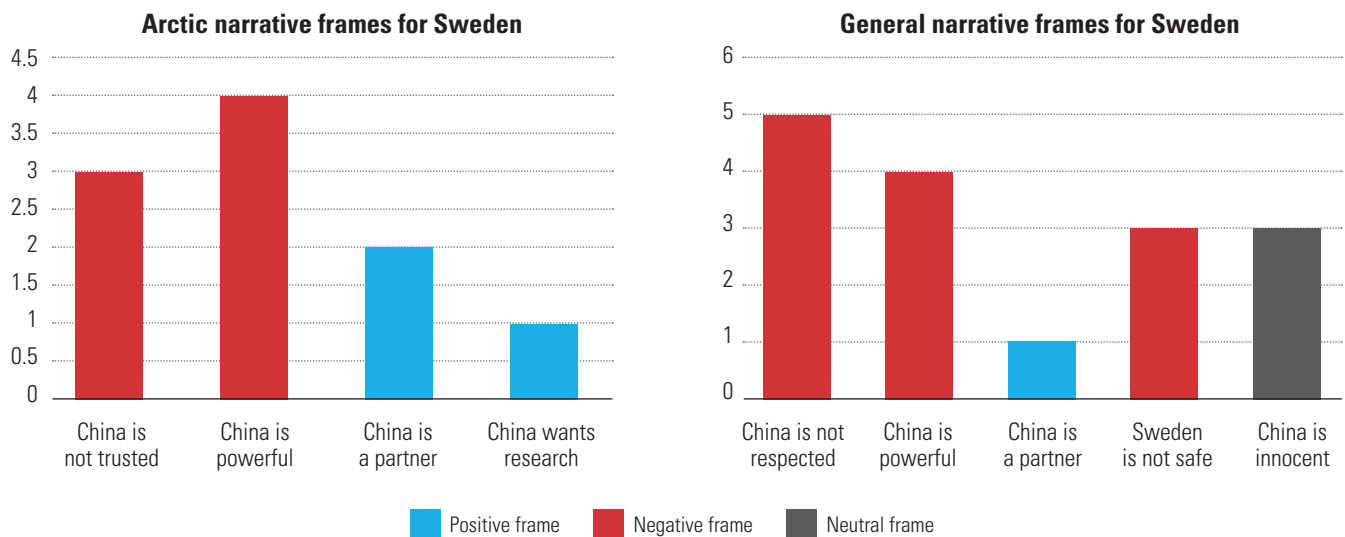


Figure 1/16: Narrative frames for Sweden.

Source: NATO StratCom COE, *Chinese Arctic Narratives: How Chinese Media Is Approaching the Nordic-Arctic States*.

Chinese media narratives surrounding Sweden seldom focus on Arctic issues. For example, less than 10% of the articles published by CGTN about Sweden and China included an Arctic dimension. The *South China Morning Post* adopted negative frames in 75% of the articles describing Chinese-Swedish relations in general, but it only adopted a negative frame in half of the articles discussing the Arctic.⁵³⁰ This may suggest that the Chinese media retains hope that the Arctic can be a space for comparatively more positive relations with Sweden.

Conclusions

China's coercive diplomacy in Sweden has alienated the Swedish population and has led to high levels of distrust towards Beijing (including at local levels, where several cities and sub-national authorities have terminated cooperation agreements with Chinese counterparts, citing human rights concerns). Despite these developments, NATO StratCom COE research reveals several areas in which China seeks to assert influence, especially when China's frames converge with existing Swedish local attitudes and perceptions of the economic benefits of and opportunities from cooperation with China. Chinese official statements also warn Swedes about the costly repercussions of opposing China.⁵³¹

Sweden, however, is highly attentive to these overtures and has set up effective measures to counter them. Sweden's 2017 annual national security strategy, published by the Prime Minister's Office, emphasizes the need to identify and neutralize propaganda campaigns.⁵³² One of the leading organizations in this push is the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), the national civil defence agency under the Ministry of Defence. Amongst its primary civil defence measures, the MSB has a subdivision called the National Board of Psychological Defence (SPF), tasked with educating the public about being more critical towards news, among other things. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven also announced the creation of a new government agency tasked with creating a "psychological defence." This agency identifies and counters influence operations, ensures a robust societal defence against psychological operations, and offers a source of factual information in a potential crisis situation.⁵³³

There is a low risk of Chinese messaging successfully gaining traction in Sweden at this time or influencing Swedish public opinion to support heightened engagement with China in the Arctic. Nevertheless, a NATO StratCom COE report astutely notes that "the potential of China's influence may not lie in China's active communication efforts, but rather in exaggerations of ideas regarding China's importance in bilateral relations and the consequences of opposing the country. This can foster self-censorship and abstention by decision-makers when considering policy decisions regarding relations with China."⁵³⁴ This observation applies to the Arctic, where China's aspirations to become a 'polar great power' frame its appeals to legitimacy and importance in the region.

6 | Finland

Since beginning its concerted diplomatic and economic push into the Arctic in the early 2010s, China has found a welcome reception in Finland. For its part, Helsinki has seen significant opportunity in Chinese trade and investment, and it has pushed to have China included as an Observer on the Arctic Council and incorporated into Arctic governance fora. Amongst the Nordic states, Finland has also been—at least in principle—the most welcoming of the Polar Silk Road, a component of the broader Belt and Road Initiative.

In recent years, Finland's position on China has soured, a trend that can be traced through successive Finnish foreign and security policy documents, which have become more suspicious of Chinese economic and scientific engagements. No longer viewed as a benign source of investment, Beijing has come to be considered a global and regional threat. As a result, Chinese investments are coming under increasing scrutiny in Finland, producing, for example, restrictive telecommunications laws that have limited Chinese companies' access to the Finnish market.

China has prioritized its relationship with Finland given the latter's significant stock of technology companies and intellectual property that can support Chinese development. Beijing has also seen great potential in developing its Polar Silk Road through Finland to connect China and Europe. Accordingly, China has displayed restraint in its strategic messaging, avoiding the 'wolf warrior' tactics that it has used in Sweden and Denmark, instead preserving the space for deeper collaboration. Despite that forbearance, Finns have been strongly influenced by Chinese behaviour and messaging towards their neighbours. Indeed, the diplomatic fireworks in Sweden and—to a lesser extent—Denmark have accelerated the deterioration in Sino-Finnish relations and created a far less permissive environment for trade, investment, and scientific and cultural engagement.

Political Objectives

China's objectives in Finland, as in Scandinavia more generally, fall into two main categories.⁵³⁵ First, Beijing uses influence strategies to advance Chinese positions on international cooperation and governance, cementing its foreign policy positions as legitimate alternatives to those of the US and the West, while avoiding political pressure or popular criticism of Chinese actions in Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, and elsewhere. Across Europe, China continues to pursue its policy of driving wedges between European states. It does this to prevent a united front of European voices critical of Beijing, while also undermining Europe's broader negotiating position on a range of political and economic issues.

Second, Chinese messaging promotes an image of China as a peaceful and friendly world power seeking 'win-win' economic cooperation. This narrative is common to Chinese messaging around the world. Its purpose is to blunt foreign criticism while facilitating investment, scientific collaboration, and the entrenchment of Chinese scientific and cultural facilities and programs in foreign states. In the Arctic, this 'win-win' approach is designed to support and legitimize Belt and Road infrastructure projects, Chinese foreign direct investment, and (potentially) dual-purpose scientific research.

In 2018, Zhu Hailun, the president of the Finland Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China, described relations between Finland and China as an exemplary “model of friendly relations between China and Europe.”⁵³⁶ For most of the post-Cold War period, Sino-Finnish relations have reflected what Julian Tucker and Johannes Nordin describe as “a shared pragmatic positivity,” with Finland benefitting from Chinese trade while avoiding any needless disruptions to cooperation that promotes development.⁵³⁷ The high point appears to have been President Xi Jinping’s visit to Helsinki on the occasion of Finland’s 100th year of independence in 2017. Xi lauded the “enduring friendship” between Finland and China, which he said set an “example for peaceful co-existence and friendly exchanges between two countries.” The visit culminated in the establishment of “a future-oriented new-type cooperative partnership” between the two states and was promptly followed by the delivery of two pandas to the Ähtäri Zoo.⁵³⁸

While China’s interests and objectives in Finland mirror its intentions for the Nordic region more broadly, it is noteworthy that its warm relationship with Helsinki has survived the regional wave of ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy that has soured ties with Denmark and Sweden. Political scientist Matti Puranen made this observation in February 2020, quoting a study by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) that could not find “any examples of pressure being exerted by China [on Finland].” For example, it is striking that a February 2021 tweet by Prime Minister Sanna Marin condemning human rights abuses against Uyghurs in Xinjiang⁵³⁹ drew no reaction from the Chinese embassy in Finland, while similar statements in Sweden and other countries have elicited strong rebukes and threats from Chinese ambassadors. This indicates that China is comparatively reserved in its treatment of Finland, presumably to preserve the idea that it enjoys an “exemplary model relationship” with that country.⁵⁴⁰

The ETNC report, however, wrongly conflates the lack of Chinese pressure on Finland with a lack of political influence. Along these lines, Puranen and Jukka Auki note that “the pragmatic status quo has allowed economic relations to flourish, making Finland, more than many other European states, economically integrated with China.” Rather than ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy, the Chinese embassy in Helsinki prefers to invite Finnish political and business elites to networking events co-organized with Finnish parliamentarians. Nevertheless, Chinese influence activities have intensified in Finland. Since the spring of 2020, Finnish news media have reported various Chinese intelligence and influence activities not in line with “friendly exchanges and peaceful co-existence.” These range from typical ‘United Front’-style operations to careful information operations and the harassment of refugees.⁵⁴¹ Another notable case was when a Finnish member of Parliament, who was connected to a Chinese state-funded company, arranged an invitation for a Chinese People’s Liberation Army general to the Finnish Parliament without disclosing the Chinese officer’s affiliation.⁵⁴² Furthermore, the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (FSIS) also attributed a large-scale cyberattack that attempted to infiltrate the Finnish Parliament’s IT systems to China.⁵⁴³ These revelations have led to a discernible shift in Finnish discourse on China, with Chinese engagement coming under increasing scrutiny by the Finnish media and government.

Polar Affairs

Finland is an important part of China’s broader push to establish itself in the Arctic. The country sits at the European end of the Polar Silk Road and offers a gateway to European markets. The now-defunct Arctic railway was an important part of that project, while Finnish expertise in icebreaking and polar engineering are of great interest to

China. In particular, Finland is a world leader in Arctic ship technology and ship operations. This expertise includes ship design, ship construction, materials and construction technology, icebreaking and ice management technology, motor and control technology, ship electrification and automation, navigation, and shipping company operations. Finnish education and research are also developing solutions to enable autonomic sea transport and low-carbon fuels.⁵⁴⁴ This connects with Chinese priorities. China's 2018 White Paper indicates that China will strive "for the upgrade of equipment in the fields of deep-sea exploration, ice zone prospecting, and atmosphere and biology observation, and promotes technology innovation in Arctic oil and gas drilling and exploitation, renewable energy development, navigation and monitoring in ice zones, and construction of new-type icebreakers."

Accordingly, Finnish academic experts observe that "currently the most prospective area of business is the design and construction of polar class vessels and components." Examples of such projects include Aker Arctic's role in designing China's second polar icebreaker (*Xue Long Two*) and the construction of engines capable of operation in polar conditions by Wärtsilä and its China-based joint ventures. Potential future projects include Finnish clean technology. Experts also note that "while in some areas the 'Arctic' labelling of Finnish products and expertise is of marketing advantage, that is not necessarily the case for all sectors."⁵⁴⁵

China has also expressed interest in partnering with Finland to establish a joint research centre for Arctic space observation and data-sharing services, based on an agreement signed in April 2018.⁵⁴⁶ Finland is a partner in the EU space program and other European space infrastructure for the Arctic, with a particular interest in telecommunications, climate change and environmental monitoring, and Arctic transport. The agreement highlights remote sensing and satellite navigation as existing capabilities, while pointing to satellite communication as a significant gap. It also highlights the need for better weather forecasting systems to strengthen Finland's situational awareness in the Arctic.⁵⁴⁷ The Finnish Meteorological Institute's Arctic Space Centre in Sodankylä, which is used for satellite data reception and processing and in connection with service production, is an example of Finnish scientific infrastructure and expertise that is of national and international significance.⁵⁴⁸

Economic Objectives

Finland has been an important destination for China's Arctic-focused foreign direct investment, and, as has been the case in the other Nordic countries, Beijing's interest has centred on strategically important intellectual property and technology. Finland's large stock of technology start-ups and its history as a global centre of telecommunications technology make it a natural partner for Chinese companies contributing to China's ten-year strategic plan, *Made in China 2025*, to develop the Chinese manufacturing industry in critical fields.

These investments include strategic purchases to support the domestic semiconductor industry, which has been one of China's most important technological-industrial goals.⁵⁴⁹ In 2016, China's National Silicon Industry Group—the country's largest semiconductor material provider—acquired Finnish Okmetic, one of the world's leading specialty silicon wafer producers and suppliers, which provides products used in the manufacture of sensors, semiconductors, and analog circuits. In 2018, the Chinese state firm SRI International also acquired the Finnish company Beneq, a supplier of the atomic layer deposition (ALD) equipment used in advanced chip fabrication.

Investments in the automotive sector have also been a Chinese priority in the Nordic countries. In neighbouring Sweden, Chinese company Geely purchased Volvo in 2010, as well as the Swedish electric car company NEVS in 2019. In 2016, the Finnish automotive interface software company Rightware was sold to Chinese ThunderSoft, while the Chinese battery company Contemporary Amperex Technology took a minority stake in Finnish contract car manufacturer Valmet Automotive in 2017. In 2021, Zoomwe Hong Kong New Energy Technology, a wholly owned subsidiary of CNGR Advanced Material, announced a partnership with Finnish Battery Chemicals to establish a lithium nickel-cobalt-manganese oxide in Finland to support China's growing electric vehicle (EV) market.

Finland is also a world leader in forestry and biofuels. In 2016, Sunshine Kaidi New Energy Group invested \$1.13 billion in a new wood-based biodiesel plant in Finland. This is China's most significant investment in northern Finland, intended to launch a larger industry partnership. Two additional biofuel projects were planned; however, these were ultimately suspended after reportedly encountering problems with the European Union's regulatory frameworks.⁵⁵⁰

The most recent major Chinese acquisition in Finland was the 2021 purchase by Shenzhen Mindray Bio-Medical Electronics of diagnostic test material supplier HyTest. HyTest supplies raw materials used in diagnostics tests, including those for COVID-19. Its product portfolio also consists of cutting-edge technologies surrounding monoclonal antibodies, antigens, and polyclonal antibodies—many of which have proven their use during the pandemic.

These investments have contributed to China's broader attempts to develop self-sufficiency in key areas and have been advertised as 'win-win' arrangements.⁵⁵¹ This focused approach to investment is likely to continue. In July 2021, for instance, the Chinese foreign minister emphasized the need to continue to expand cooperation, highlighting "innovation and clean technology" as well as "green and digital industries" in particular.⁵⁵²

In pursuit of these objectives, China's business leaders have been important national actors in Finland. Interviews conducted for a January 2022 study by the Center for Naval Analyses characterized Chinese executives as "relentless in their information acquisition" and perennially acquiring information with no apparent deadlines.⁵⁵³ As is the case elsewhere in the Nordic countries, these business people are described by local actors as "highly visible" and pushing a "bottom up" engagement with Finnish business and society, advancing the narrative that Chinese investment is benign.⁵⁵⁴ Chinese diplomats in Finland also actively support these activities, with the Chinese government subsidizing travel, lodging, and food costs for business junkets and providing officials as 'advisors' in business meetings.⁵⁵⁵

China's business messaging and deep investment pockets have provided its 'win-win' narrative with some credibility. Finland has been welcoming of this investment, with Chinese investors generally being treated on par with other European counterparts.⁵⁵⁶ The height of political and popular support for Sino-Finnish economic cooperation was likely in 2017. That April, President Xi Jinping visited Helsinki to participate in the signing of a number of business and cooperation agreements, including a Joint Declaration encouraging increased investment, sustainable Arctic resource use, harmonized regulations, and other cooperation.⁵⁵⁷ In a show of friendship and business partnership, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö declared that "relations between our countries are excellent and deep. They extend to all sectors of society."⁵⁵⁸ These meetings also saw the conclusion of an agreement on

the protection of pandas, enabling the arrival of pandas in Finland's Ähtäri Zoo. These animals—part of China's long-standing 'panda diplomacy'—are important tools of public diplomacy, representing symbols of friendship bestowed by the Chinese government on only highly trusted partners.

Infrastructure and the Belt and Road Initiative

Amongst the Nordic states, Finland has been—at least in principle—the most welcoming of the Polar Silk Road, a component of the broader Belt and Road Initiative. In 2017, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö welcomed the project during a state visit by President Xi Jinping, declaring that the BRI “would deepen relations between Asia and Europe.”⁵⁵⁹ Aleksi Härkönen, Finland's Ambassador for Arctic Affairs, repeated that same message in an interview with Chinese state media outlet Xinhua that same year.⁵⁶⁰ This political support did not translate into action, however, and Finland has not officially signed onto the BRI through any formal MoU, nor are there any Chinese-funded infrastructure projects likely to advance in the near term.

The failure of China's BRI push in Finland is illustrated by the death of the Arctic Railway project. This was a proposed rail link between the Arctic Ocean (most likely through the Norwegian port of Kirkenes) and southern Finland through the town of Rovaniemi and onwards through existing rail networks. The intent behind the rail link was to link Chinese shipping through the Northern Sea Route to Europe more effectively by shortening travel times. Connected to this rail link would be a planned tunnel from Helsinki across the Gulf of Finland to Tallinn, connecting Chinese shipping through the NSR directly to the European rail network. That tunnel project is spearheaded by Finnish entrepreneur Peter Vesterbacka (through his company FinEst Bay Area Development) and backed by Chinese investors. Those backers included China's Touchstone Capital Partners, which, in its expressed interest in investing \$17 million, would have possess a minority stake in the tunnel. Construction was also slated to include several major Chinese construction companies with extensive histories of BRI work around the world, including the China Railway Engineering Corporation, China Railway International Group, and China Communications Construction Company.⁵⁶¹

By 2019, momentum on the railway element of this project slowed. The previous year, the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications appointed a joint working group between Finland and Norway to examine the railway's economic viability, looking at key issues such as routing, environmental impact, permitting, and funding. Ultimately, it was determined that the line was not financially viable.⁵⁶² Adding to the project's difficulties was widespread popular resistance amongst the Indigenous Sámi peoples of northern Finland. A rail line would have negative impacts on reindeer migration, and reindeer herders in both Norway and Finland resisted these plans aggressively, pointing to Section 17 of the Finnish constitution, which confirms the Sámi's right to maintain and



Figure 2: The Arctic Rail Line route

develop their own culture.⁵⁶³ In 2021, the Regional Council of Lapland voted to redraft provincial development plans for the area of northern Lapland to remove any mention of the rail line.⁵⁶⁴

As has been the case elsewhere in the Arctic, local voices were crucial in halting Chinese development.⁵⁶⁵ Other concerns, surrounding the security implications of Chinese investment, also triggered a broader discussion within Finland about China's Polar Silk Road and the objectives of its state-owned entities in Finland.

The tunnel component of the Arctic Railway project remains an ongoing proposition. However, its proponents have clearly identified Chinese involvement as a vulnerability. Discussing his company's plans, Vesterbacka emphasized that Chinese investors would not hold a majority ownership, which has been a political requirement for both Finland and Estonia. He was also explicit that "this is not some kind of belt and road project."⁵⁶⁶

Strategic Objectives

Chinese strategic messaging to date shows no clear military interests in Finland's Arctic. Beijing's external-facing discourse tends to tread carefully in engaging the region, in particular by underscoring China's potential as a partner in scientific, economic, and political developments in the circumpolar North. Nevertheless, it has an increasingly pronounced enthusiasm for the region's economic potential, especially in the areas of shipping and resource extraction (energy and mining), which also intersect with potential future strategic military interests.⁵⁶⁷ Nevertheless, China's calls for peaceful development and deeper cooperation with Arctic public- and private-sector partners are aligned with its strategic economic development goals.

To date, China has chosen not to display its military capacity in the circumpolar Arctic as part of its international deterrence posture. Given that there is no indication that China seeks overt military competition or conflict in the region, there is little worry of kinetic military action by that country against Finland. Most Finnish commentators highlight that the core geostrategic drivers affecting Arctic security do not relate to disputes over territory or resources, but that 'spillovers' and generally worsened East-West relations create additional challenges. In particular, the risk of 'vertical escalation' around accidents or unintended events is perceived as heightened—with Russia, not China, identified as the most likely source.

While most open-source analysts suggest that the likelihood of a formal Sino-Russian Arctic security alliance remains remote, given that China and Russia have distinct regional interests (and their grand strategies are not naturally aligned), increased regional cooperation between the two countries is of interest to Sweden and the other Arctic states and must be carefully monitored.⁵⁶⁸ Furthermore, China has started to echo Russian media outlets in trying to deride Finland as a crony of the US and NATO, rather than a neutral or independent actor. China's reaction to Finland's NATO membership has been negative but still generally muted.

Given China's equivocating position on the Russo-Ukrainian War and Finland's increasingly close ties to NATO, China's desire to strengthen its military ties with Finland is unlikely to bear fruit. A July 2021 statement by the Chinese Embassy in Helsinki celebrating the 94th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army of China sought to promote Xi's depiction of the PLA as "a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development and an upholder of the international order." Citing how "China and Finland have established a future-oriented new-

type cooperative partnership, and pragmatic cooperation in various fields has continued to deepen, ushering in new development opportunities for the relationship between the two militaries,” the statement also “highly expect[ed] that the two militaries continue to strengthen exchanges and cooperation, and jointly write a new chapter on safeguarding world peace and stability, and building a community with a shared future for mankind!”⁵⁶⁹ Such messaging is unlikely to resonate with Finnish audiences. It is telling that the Finnish 2021 Defence Report does not mention China in its list of key bilateral defence partners.⁵⁷⁰

China’s Messaging Strategy in Finland

Diplomatic Messaging

China communicates its views to Finns primarily through embassy and Foreign Ministry statements. Official messaging tends to be positive, highlighting closer exchanges, good communications, economic cooperation, mutual support, and deepening friendship. For example, an October 2020 embassy communiqué on how “China-Finland Ties Show Strong Resilience Even in Hard Times” emphasized how, “as the country continues to open up to the outside world, China will provide opportunities for Finland to recover from the pandemic,” while “Finland’s advantages in areas such as the digital economy, green growth and research and innovation are also what China needs to pursue high-quality economic development. Strengthening cooperation is a win-win choice as the two sides meet each other’s needs and complement each other’s advantages.”⁵⁷¹

Another clear example of the dominant narratives came from Li Zhanshu, the former chairman of the National People’s Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, during a virtual meeting with Speaker of the Finnish Parliament Anu Vehviläinen in December 2021. “Li said that mature and stable China-Finland relations meet the common interests and expectations of the peoples of both countries,” the official Chinese embassy readout summarized. “He said it is hoped that the two sides will continue to strengthen political mutual trust, consolidate the political foundations for the healthy development of bilateral relations, and always adhere to the principles of mutual respect, equality, seeking common ground while shelving differences, and pursuing win-win cooperation.” In terms of specific priorities, Li encouraged Chinese and Finnish partners “to steadily advance connectivity, promote the construction of the Belt and Road, and expand pragmatic cooperation in fields such as trade and investment, information and communication, energy conservation and environmental protection, and anti-pandemic work.” In turn, Vehviläinen stated that the Finnish Parliament “stands ready to work with the NPC to cement cooperation between the two countries” in economic development, free trade, pandemic response, green transformation, and climate change.⁵⁷²

Sanna Kopra and Matti Puranen noted in March 2021 that “China seems to treat Finland with kid gloves compared to many neighboring countries.” In contrast to the ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy of the Chinese embassy in Stockholm, “China’s embassy in Helsinki,” they note, “almost never comments openly on Finland’s domestic developments in any way.”⁵⁷³ For example, it is striking that a February 2021 tweet by Prime Minister Sanna Marin condemning human rights abuses against Uyghurs in Xinjiang⁵⁷⁴ drew no reaction from the Chinese embassy in Finland. Similar statements in Sweden and other countries have elicited strong rebukes and threats from Chinese ambassadors, thus indicating that China is comparatively reserved in its treatment of Finland, presumably to preserve the idea that it enjoys an “exemplary model relationship” with that country.⁵⁷⁵

Cultural and Economic Engagement

In December 2021, Li Zhanshu, the chairman of the Chinese National People's Congress Standing Committee, encouraged China and Finland to "deepen cultural and people-to-people exchanges and consolidate the friendship between the two peoples." To do so, he called for maintaining high-level exchanges and deepening the "communication among special committees and friendship groups." He also emphasized that "democracy is a common value shared by all people and there is no one-size-fits-all model of democracy," adding that China would "adhere to and improve its people's congress system, and keep developing whole-process people's democracy."⁵⁷⁶

China's 'United Front' work seeks to mobilize "harmonious diaspora associations" (和谐侨社, *hexie qiaoshe*) as civil society organizations to advance party goals.⁵⁷⁷ According to Anne-Marie Brady, the United Front establishes foreign Chinese organizations and infiltrates organizations and associations that have already been established, which it then uses to monitor the Chinese diaspora (particularly students and researchers) and establish contacts with foreign Chinese in key positions.⁵⁷⁸ Its activities in Finland are subtle and include working through the Finland Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China (FAPPRC) (中国国和平统一促进会), which seeks to "unite the Chinese living in Finland, promote the one-China principle and firmly oppose Taiwan's independence and other similar measures to share Chinese land." The FAPPRC claims to have had 235 members in its 'WeChat Working Group' in 2020, but it no longer promotes such information in a public-facing manner.⁵⁷⁹ Matti Puranen notes that members of the association (including its former chairman, Zhu Hailun) are in regular contact with the Chinese embassy in Finland and with the sister associations in China. Indeed, Zhu boasts that the Finnish branch has "extensive influence among the overseas Chinese in Finland" and that the organization is actively promoting Chinese "participation in local politics,"⁵⁸⁰ with FAPPRC Vice-Chair Jenni Chen holding a seat on the Vantaa city council. Puranen assesses that cases of Chinese influence in Finland "fit the larger picture of China's influence activities well, although the scale in Finland is smaller and the methods used are more careful than in many other countries."⁵⁸¹

Academic and Scientific Engagement

China's 2018 White Paper declares that "to explore and understand the Arctic serves as the priority and focus for China in its Arctic activities." This strategy also emphasizes the need for China to "improve the capacity and capability in scientific research on the Arctic" through pragmatic cooperation. Zhang Weipeng and Yu Xiaofeng of Zhejiang University highlight that multilateral cooperation between China and the Nordic countries has taken many forms, including the Sino-Nordic Relations Forum, the Sino-Nordic Young Champions Forum, the Nordic-China Innovation Cooperation Summit, the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, the Sino-Nordic Think Tank Roundtable, the Sino-Nordic National Science Strategy Roundtable, the Nordic Environment Technology Cooperation Summit Forum, and the Sino-Nordic Trade and Economic Cooperation Forum (held during the first China International Import Expo). "Given the development levels of China's different regions, China and the Nordic countries have also signed multilateral cooperation agreements and expanded their cooperation areas to provide Nordic enterprises with development opportunities in China," they highlight. "In addition, through its active participation in activities such as the Arctic Circle and the Arctic Frontiers Conference, China has extensively communicated and built consensus with the Nordic countries on Arctic issues."⁵⁸² China's actual engagement in and potential influence through these fora require additional research.

Chinese scientists are encouraged to conduct international academic exchanges while China promotes involvement with the University of the Arctic among Chinese higher education and research institutions. In December 2013, the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) was established in Shanghai by four Chinese and six Nordic institutions dedicated to Arctic research. The Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland is a Finnish member of the network. Before COVID-19, CNARC convened annual China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposia that rotated between the Chinese and Nordic members of the network. The Arctic Centre (University of Lapland) and the Polar Research Institute of China organized a symposium in Rovaniemi in June 2016 on “The Sustainable Arctic—Opportunities and Challenges of Globalization.” As per previous events, the CNARC symposium consisted of an academic conference and a business roundtable, with invitations extended to relevant partners from China and the Nordic countries. The theme of the business roundtable in Rovaniemi was “Sustainable Arctic Tourism,” and it focused on prospects for Finnish Lapland.⁵⁸³

The Academy of Finland (now the Research Council of Finland) has signed collaboration agreements with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the National Natural Science Foundation of China, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院, Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan, covering humanities, culture, law, economics, and social sciences in general). A new series of bilateral agreements were signed during President Xi’s visit to Finland in April 2017, including an MoU between Universities Finland (UNIFI) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Collaborative projects include the construction of the Station for Measuring Ecosystem-Atmosphere Relations (by the University of Helsinki, in cooperation with the Beijing University of Chemical Technology, 北京化工大学, Beijing Huagong Daxue), as well as the Sino-Finnish Medical AI Research Centre in Chengdu (established in January 2018). The Finnish Meteorological Institute’s Arctic Space Centre in Sodankylä also cooperates with Chinese partners dealing with meteorological data.⁵⁸⁴

China has furthermore sought to use efforts to strengthen research capabilities as a way to secure an infrastructure footprint in Finland. For example, Finnish public broadcaster Yle reported that, in January 2018, the state-funded Polar Research Institute of China extended an offer to buy or lease the airport at Kemijärvi in Lapland, which is adjacent to the Finnish Army’s Rovajärvi firing range, for use as a base for climate and environmental research flights over the polar region. The proposal was made to the city by a delegation of Chinese research institutes led by Xia Zhang, Director of the Polar Research Institute of China, and Xu Shije, Director of the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration. The delegation also included Major Lie Ji, an assistant to the military attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Finland. The proposal was to extend the runway at Kemijärvi Airport from 1,400 to 3,000 metres so that it could handle jet traffic (estimated to cost at least €40 million), in addition to building new airport buildings and a research laboratory. According to Kemijärvi’s mayor, Atte Rantanen, the funding was to have come from the Chinese research institutes. The Finnish Ministry of Defence quashed the prospective deal on security grounds, however, given that the airport is adjacent to a military firing range.⁵⁸⁵

Chinese Media and Finland

The Chinese media tends to depict Finland in overwhelmingly positive terms. Recent research conducted for the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence on the framing of the Nordic states in the Chinese media

from 2016-2020 found that the only example of a negative frame is the “China is powerful” narrative, given that it could also be read as a warning (“China is a threat if you do not do what we want because we have the upper hand and demand respect”). The figure below shows the prevalence of the “China is a partner” narrative frame. The “China is a friend” narrative also appears more often with respect to Finland than any other Nordic country. There is a clear, deliberate effort by China to avoid ‘rivalry’ language and instead to highlight themes of partnership, collaboration, and mutual benefit.⁵⁸⁶

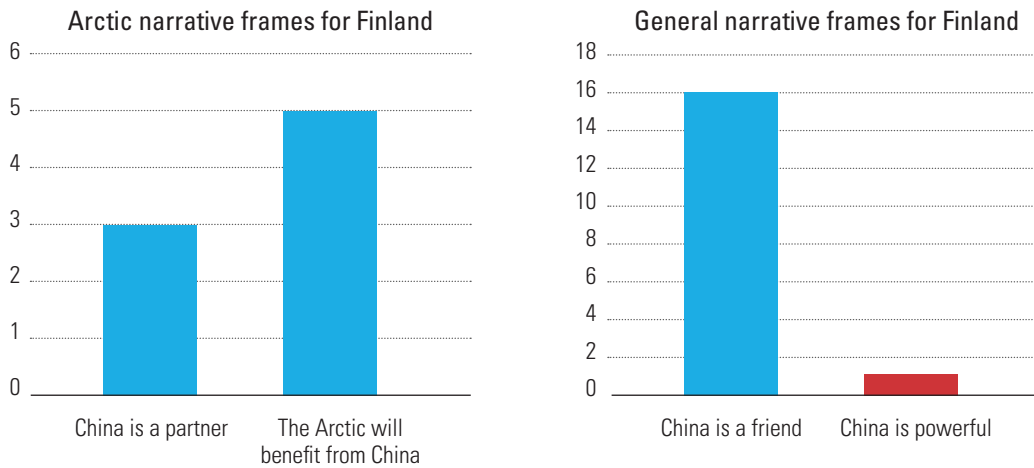


Figure 2/18: Narrative frames for Sweden.

Source: NATO StratCom COE, Chinese Arctic Narratives: How Chinese Media Is Approaching the Nordic-Arctic States.

Chinese media narratives surrounding Finland seldom focus on Arctic issues, but when they do, they emphasize ‘partnership’ rather than ‘friendship.’ The strategic message that the Arctic will benefit from Chinese investment and development is not surprising, given Finland’s potential role as the European terminus of the Polar Silk Road.⁵⁸⁷ Recent worries about China being ‘frozen out’ of Arctic cooperation and collaborative research if it is seen taking sides with Russia over the war in Ukraine⁵⁸⁸ also may encourage a heightened focus in China’s messaging on its partnership with Finland.

Conclusions

Since 2020, the Finnish discourse on China has taken a harder turn. “Almost all aspects of Chinese engagement have come under increasing scrutiny by the Finnish media,” Matti Puranen and Jukka Aukia note, “but a subtler change is developing also within official circles. This can be observed in the tone of recent government reports on Finnish foreign and security policy.”⁵⁸⁹ While a 2016 government report on foreign and security policy envisaged Finland tightening its ties with China and promoting “increased Sino-EU cooperation in the EU,”⁵⁹⁰ a 2020 report emphasized situational awareness and recognized China as being an “economic competitor and a systemic rival” (language that is aligned with that of the European Commission⁵⁹¹). Along similar lines, a 2021 Finnish action plan on China begins with a description of cordial relations but then develops a more skeptical frame that highlights the risk of bilateral relations, ranging from strategic dependencies to systematic intelligence and influence activities.⁵⁹² “Instead of a partner offering boundless opportunities,” Puranen and Aukia note, “China is now rather seen as a self-interested actor exploiting vulnerabilities in democratic market economies.”⁵⁹³

Publications by Finnish state security organizations also reveal a more critical stance on China. The 2021 Government Defence Report notes a growing concern about “the potential effects of China’s influencing methods on the security of the target countries,” indicating the Ministry of Defence’s increasing apprehensiveness about China as well. Finland places a high priority on information defence, explaining that “the harmful use of information is an everyday part of broad-spectrum influencing” and that the Finnish Defence Forces have developed capabilities “to monitor the information environment, protect against information influencing, and created prerequisites for operations in the information domain. Information defence has become a part of the normal activity of the Defence Forces.”⁵⁹⁴

In 2018, the Finnish security and intelligence service (SUPO) identified China as a major intelligence actor in Finland.⁵⁹⁵ Since that time, security officials have consistently described China as “dominating ... espionage while jeopardizing Finland’s national security.”⁵⁹⁶ SUPO actively monitors Chinese activities in Finland, has repeatedly warned Finnish companies about security concerns associated with partnering with Chinese companies,⁵⁹⁷ and cautions academic institutions about Chinese espionage activities.⁵⁹⁸

Puranen and Aukia observe that:

Although the changes in wording may appear subtle, they highlight a clear turn away from the earlier, pre-2017 discourse of optimism, limitless cooperation and pragmatic reciprocal goodwill. Changes have not remained solely on the level of rhetoric, as Finland has joined EU-wide and transatlantic coalitions in condemning and sanctioning China’s violations of human rights and international law. Finland also suspended its extradition agreement with Hong Kong in 2020, in line with other European governments, evoking a rare warning from the Chinese embassy for Finland to not interfere in China’s internal affairs.⁵⁹⁹

Although China warned Finland about interfering with its internal affairs,⁶⁰⁰ it did not stop delivering statements desiring enhanced bilateral collaboration. In 2021, the foreign ministers of China and Finland made reciprocal statements that both parties intended to deepen their cooperation,⁶⁰¹ indicating that both countries are adopting a long-term view that takes a pragmatic and measured approach to strategic messaging that avoids escalating disagreements into narratives of tension or conflict.

Finland’s narratives with respect to China are reserved but clear and reassuring to Western partners who are concerned about Chinese influence operations. Accordingly, based on our analysis, we assess a low risk of Chinese messaging successfully influencing Finnish public opinion to support heightened engagement with China in the Arctic against the national interests of Finland or its Western partners.

7 | The United States

Over the last 20 years, the American perception of China has changed dramatically. During the early 2000s, the language used in the *US National Defense Strategy* (2005) and *National Security Strategy* (2000, 2002, and 2006) emphasized the importance of constructive relationships with China, recognizing the country as a rising power and welcoming its entrance into the world system.⁶⁰² This optimistic framing focused on integrating China into established international economic and political systems through regional fora, trade, and joint efforts to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula, fight terrorism, manage the non-proliferation regime, and counter environmental threats.

In the mid-2010s, the American understanding of China as a threat began to change under then-President Barack Obama's 'pivot to Asia.'⁶⁰³ This re-evaluation of the relationship framed China as a pragmatic and effective competitor to be watched, yet one that shared an interest in cooperation on macroeconomic issues, climate change, and global security. In essence, China was seen as a rising power with a very different system of governance and world view, but one that would follow a path of peaceful development, which pointed towards cooperation rather than conflict.

More recent US policies—under both the Trump and Biden administrations—have reframed the relationship following Beijing's clear shift in foreign policy philosophies from Hu Jintao's 'peaceful rise' to Xi Jinping's aggressive use of military and paramilitary forces in its near-abroad and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy globally. By the late 2010s, China had become a strategic competitor and the US military's 'pacing threat.'⁶⁰⁴

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continued Chinese economic and diplomatic support for Russia's war have damaged the Sino-American relationship further. Public disapproval of China has risen in the US from 35% in 2005 to 83% in 2023.⁶⁰⁵ Meanwhile, 75% of Chinese polled now have a negative view of the US.⁶⁰⁶ In America, this disapproval has made bipartisan hostility to China a near certainty, while Beijing's state-backed propaganda media has ensured continued hostility at home. It is through this hostile dynamic and whole-of-society competition that the two states view the Arctic.

Political Objectives

In the Arctic, US national policy did not begin acknowledging China until 2016.⁶⁰⁷ In two policy documents that year, the Department of Defense's *Arctic Strategy* and a report of the International Security Advisory Board (ISAB) on Arctic policy, China was mentioned as a non-Arctic state with an interest in influencing the region. That trend changed between 2019 and 2021, when a host of Arctic military strategies were released, all addressing Chinese interests. The 2019 Coast Guard's *Arctic Strategic Outlook*, for example, labelled China a "nearest-peer power," suggesting that its (and Russia's) "persistent challenges to the rules-based international order around the globe cause concern of similar infringement to the continued peaceful stability of the Arctic."⁶⁰⁸ The *Outlook* goes on to describe China's behaviour in the region as attempting to expand its influence globally, as it has done in the Indo-Pacific and the East and South China Seas without regard for international law, warning that China could "impede US access and freedom of navigation in the Arctic."⁶⁰⁹

In 2019, the Department of Defense also published its *Report to Congress on its Arctic Strategy*. In it, China plays a similar role. The report names China and Russia as "principal challenges to long-term US security."⁶¹⁰ In the Arctic,

the report pays attention to China's icebreaking vessels and civilian research, and, although it affirms that China has no military presence in the region, it notes that "China also continues to seek opportunities to invest in dual-use infrastructure in the Arctic."⁶¹¹ It also obliquely names China as a challenge to the US homeland, and the Arctic as a potential corridor for competition.⁶¹² The 2020 Air Force *Arctic Strategy* mentions China the least, with the state only appearing three times in the whole document. Nevertheless, the strategy is clear that "China is not an Arctic nation" but that Beijing is attempting to "normalize Chinese presence in the region, enhance polar operating capabilities, and gain a regional governance role," pointing to examples such as the Belt and Road Initiative.⁶¹³

By 2021, China was becoming more mainstream in US Arctic policy. Using similar rhetoric to the Department of Defense and the Coast Guard, the US Navy's Blue Arctic policy claims that the primary regional challenge to the US in the Arctic is "increased military activity by China [and Russia]."⁶¹⁴ The Navy also anticipates the threat posed by "China's growing economic, scientific, and military reach, along with its demonstrated intent to gain access and influence over Arctic states, control key maritime ports, and remake the international rules-based order."⁶¹⁵ The US Army published its Arctic strategy in 2021, identifying China as a problem for the region and drawing attention to China's ambitions to "gain access to Arctic resources and sea routes to secure and bolster its military, economic, and scientific rise."⁶¹⁶ This is also the first US Arctic document mentioning the potential for Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, drawing a link to Russia's ostracization from the international system and China as a willing buyer of its Arctic resources.

In the Department of Homeland Security's 2021 *Strategic Approach for Arctic Homeland Security*, China again is framed as a threat which, if left unchallenged, could damage American interests in the region, noting the possibility that China may "outpace US icebreaker capacity and polar access by 2024."⁶¹⁷ This document makes the first mention of the dangers associated with Chinese "investment in Alaska." By this point, the US recognizes the possibility that legitimate investments in the state could be used for malign economic purposes.⁶¹⁸

These national documents and policies on China's activity in the Arctic, with very few exceptions, do not highlight any Chinese threat to the American Arctic (namely Alaska). Instead, China is presented as a global and regional disrupter rather than a specific danger to the US itself.

This US assessment of Chinese interest in Alaska is solid. Politically, China has spent little effort to influence the US as an Arctic state or to expand its presence in Alaska. RAND and Swedish Defence Research Agency researchers concluded in their late 2022 study on *China's Strategy and Activities in the Arctic* that there is "not a ton going on" in terms of Chinese "nefarious activities" in the North American Arctic. It is telling that they do not mention 'Alaska' even once in their detailed report, instead emphasizing that, "in the Arctic, as in the rest of the world, the United States sees China as a potentially destabilizing force, with the economic and military power to try to bend the established order to its liking." Accordingly, RAND analyst Stephanie Pezard cautions that the Chinese "threat should not be inflated," while noting that, "at the same time, they have a clear intent to not be excluded from Arctic developments as the region becomes more accessible. The real questions are, How much of a role do they want, and what does that mean for an Arctic nation like the United States?"⁶¹⁹

Economic Objectives

China's economic interests in Alaska focus on seafood and energy. Over the past decade, Alaska has exported roughly \$1 billion worth of seafood, with China being the primary foreign recipient.⁶²⁰ In total, Chinese imports from the state have been worth over \$1 billion per year.

Alaskan Exports to China in USD

| 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1,354 | 1,236 | 1,467 | 1,203 | 1,184 | 1,322 | 1,018 | 855 | 1,194 | 1,381 | 1,088 |

Source: US Census Bureau (numbers in million)

This trading relationship was damaged by the Trump administration's tariffs, which led to a 36% drop in seafood sales. The Biden administration's policy has not shifted this dynamic. For example, wild Alaska pollock now faces a 35-37% tariff when entering China (up from 7% from before the Trump-era trade disputes). For comparison, Russian pollock only faces a 5-7% tariff. In March 2020, China's Tariff Commission opened a tariff exclusion process in which importers can apply for exclusions from Chinese retaliatory tariffs; many Chinese importers continue to shun Alaskan products simply to avoid "the general uncertainty of the situation."⁶²¹ COVID-19-related inspections and regulations also imposed hurdles that limited the sale of seafood. A 2021 Chinese disinformation campaign accusing Maine lobsters of being the secret catalyst for the pandemic starting in Wuhan did not help this trade.⁶²²

Beyond fisheries, China has also had an interest in Alaskan energy. The state's proposed liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline is intended to run from the North Slope to Nikiski on the Gulf of Alaska. With an estimated price tag of \$43 billion, then-Alaskan Governor Bill Walker sought international partners to support the Alaska Gasline Development Corporation (AGDC). In 2017, a joint development agreement was signed in front of President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping. China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec), CIC Capital Corporation (CIC Capital), and the Bank of China (BOC)⁶²³ agreed to finance the work and purchase up to 75% of the LNG.⁶²⁴

The late 2010s also saw efforts to build a broader economic relationship. The World Trade Center Anchorage (WTC-ANC) led trade missions to China and established the Alaska-China Business Conference, where participants discussed energy, minerals, fishing, and tourism cooperation. The last of these events was in 2018.⁶²⁵ Governor Walker also led a ten-day trade mission to China in May 2018 dubbed "Opportunity Alaska," which included meetings in four Chinese cities, all in an effort to boost the Alaskan-Chinese economic relationship.⁶²⁶ Similarly, in 2018, WTC-ANC and its partner in China signed a memorandum of understanding for expanding agricultural trade.⁶²⁷

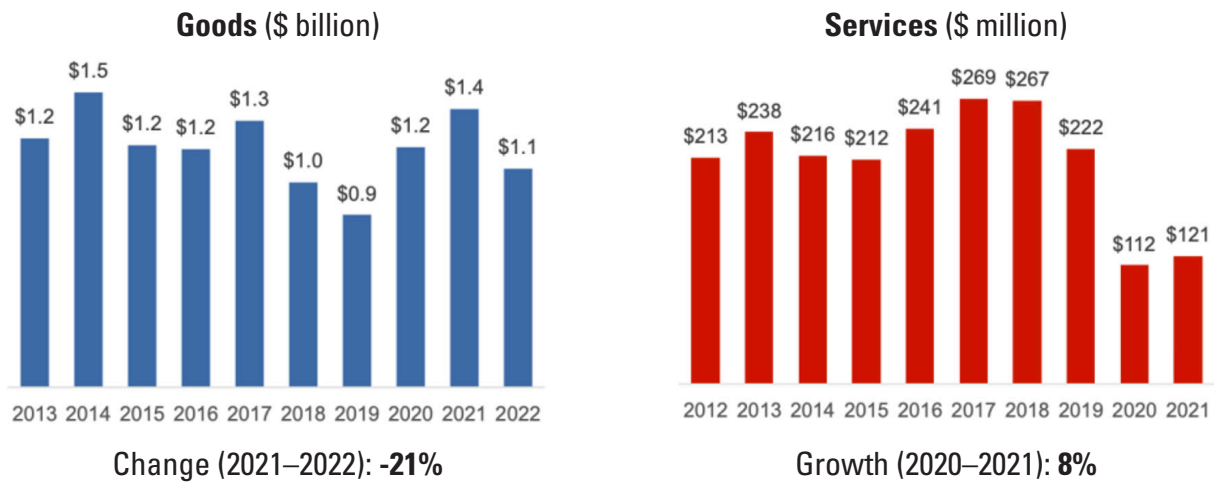
Many of these economic efforts have suffered from the growing trade and political disputes between the two countries. The non-binding LNG arrangement was scrapped in 2019 by the new Republican governor, Mike Dunleavy, who was not "comfortable with the risks that the state would have to take on to complete the project."⁶²⁸ In part, this move had to do with uncertainty over global LNG prices; however, national security concerns, which were less prevalent in 2017 than in 2019, may have played a role in the cancellation.⁶²⁹

China has few institutional supporters in Alaska. One of note is the Alaska International Business Center (formerly WTC-ANC), which has been fostering relationships with Chinese businesses for several decades. It hosts annual Alaska-China Business Conferences, comprised of meetings between business and government officials from Alaska and China. The Center also hosts business visits from China with diplomatic support, with previous guests including the Chinese ambassador to the United States.

Overall, Alaskan-Chinese business has remained largely flat over the past decade, and any improvement will be tied to broader US-China trade negotiations and the resolution of the current trade disputes, which have led to tariff barriers and restrictions. Diplomatic support for direct business with Alaska has also not been a Chinese priority.

Alaska's Exports to China

Alaska's goods and services exports to China supported 6,840 American jobs in 2021.



Source: https://www.uschina.org/sites/default/files/alaska-us_exports_to_china_2023_state_and_district_data.pdf

Strategic Objectives⁶³⁰

China's militarization of the South China Sea, aggressive behaviour towards Japan and Taiwan, and general naval expansion into the blue water have led many commentators to assume that the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) strategic objectives and long-term goals include the deployment of military assets into the Arctic. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo voiced such concerns at the 2019 Arctic Council meeting in Rovaniemi, decrying China's "pattern of aggressive behavior" around the world and suggesting that Beijing may seek a military presence in the Arctic, highlighting the particular danger of PLAN submarines operating under the ice cap.⁶³¹ Geography dictates that any Chinese Arctic presence would have to deploy through—or very close to—the American territorial waters off Alaska.

China's recent deployment into Alaskan waters, in the company of Russian partners, has exacerbated these concerns. The August 2023 Sino-Russian naval exercises around the Aleutian Islands provoked outrage from some American quarters. In reality, the voyage was more about responding to US and allied freedom of navigation voyages (FONOPs) through Chinese-claimed waters than about the Arctic,⁶³² yet it still provoked more calls for an augmented US military presence in the region.⁶³³

The prospect of Chinese submarine operations in the Arctic has also emerged as a perceived strategic threat in some North American defence circles. Secretary Pompeo highlighted this concern during his 2019 speech to the Arctic Council,⁶³⁴ as did the Department of Defense's May 2019 Report to Congress on the PRC's military and the US Navy's 2021 Arctic strategy.⁶³⁵ The strategic risks of Chinese warships—and submarines in particular—passing through American Arctic waters and into the Arctic Ocean remain uncertain. There is no Chinese policy suggesting that such a move is imminent, while the technical issues involved in deploying ships to the North remain daunting.⁶³⁶ More importantly, the practical benefits to any such deployment appear limited.

Some Western authors have highlighted sea denial and interdiction in the Arctic as a potential risk.⁶³⁷ The US Navy's 2019 *Strategic Outlook for the Arctic* mentions the need to evaluate the "rapid movement of personnel, materiel, and forces to and from or within the Arctic by sea," while the US Coast Guard's Arctic policy, published that same year, warns of potential Chinese efforts to "impede" American "freedom of navigation in the Arctic."⁶³⁸ As the Arctic warms, the possibility of moving elements of the US joint force through the region to conflict zones in Asia will grow. Deploying warships from Norfolk to the Sea of Japan is a roughly 14,000-kilometre journey via the Northwest Passage, 19,000 kilometres by Panama, or 30,000 kilometres if rounding Cape Horn.

Distance matters, but the unique realities of moving through the Arctic make this proposition less straightforward than it might appear. At present, the Northwest Passage does not lend itself to military sealifts, offering ships both unpredictable ice conditions and an extremely short shipping season. Even in an ice-free (or reduced) future, the region will remain inaccessible to non-ice-strengthened ships during the winter, with hazardous sailing conditions persisting in the shoulder seasons as the remaining first-year ice breaks up and the narrow channels fill with multi-year ice broken off from the polar cap. While a future sealift through the Northwest Passage to reinforce an Asian theatre may make sense in some circumstances, it will remain a niche alternative, confined to the summer and—depending on variable ice conditions—perhaps not even then.

Interdicting convoys moving through the Arctic would overextend PLAN submarine resources. Sealifts would still need to pass through the deep waters of the Bering Sea, a region that is far more accessible to Chinese nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) and that represents better hunting grounds than the narrow waters of the Northwest Passage or Beaufort Sea, where a submarine would have to work in the littorals with little room to manoeuvre and where water depth is normally less than 60 metres. Sea-denial operations under these conditions are certainly possible, but they would be far from a safe or optimal use of Chinese assets.

Canadian Arctic waters would also make poor transit routes for Chinese SSNs seeking access to the Atlantic Ocean. The southern passages through the Arctic Archipelago are too shallow for a nuclear submarine and have various choke points. For example, the deepest route through Victoria Strait is 66 feet in some places, and finding even this depth requires careful manoeuvring through much shallower waters. The deeper-draft northern routes would support a transit, but choke points, hazardous top-cover ice conditions, and poor hydrographic charting limit their attractiveness.⁶³⁹ Historically, United States Navy (USN) *Skate*- and *Sturgeon*-class SSNs (4,300 tons) have made transits of the Northwest Passage, and these small and highly manoeuvrable boats were far better suited to operating in shallow, icy waters than the current *Shang*-class SSN (7,000 tons) or *Jin*-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs).⁶⁴⁰ Military deployments to the Arctic remain a possibility, but they are not a near-term risk.

Marine Scientific Research and Dual-Purpose Activities

More likely than Chinese PLAN deployments to American Arctic waters is the continued presence of Chinese state-owned scientific vessels with dual-purpose research missions. Over the past 20 years, China has undertaken extensive marine scientific research in the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas. Chinese narratives surrounding this research program centre on questions of environmental research, geophysics, and other purely scientific pursuits. Despite this, AIS tracking of the Chinese icebreakers *Xue Long* and *Xue Long 2* demonstrate a deep interest in resource mapping and deep-seabed mining. Historically, most of this work has been undertaken on the American continental shelf north of Alaska. Indeed, every Chinese Arctic Expedition (save for the fifth) has focused on the continental shelf north of Alaska. In particular, the emphasis has been on the Chukchi Plateau and Northwind Ridge. In 2019, Chinese investigations included “the formation mechanism of polymetallic nodules,” which primarily consist of iron oxyhydroxides and manganese oxides, onto which strategic metals such as nickel, cobalt, copper, titanium, and rare earth elements attach. In 2020, *Xue Long* conducted core sampling in Northwind Basin at a depth of 1,870 metres.⁶⁴¹ This work took place on the US continental shelf; however, it was not in violation of existing US regulations concerning maritime scientific research at the time. It did, however, cause sufficient concern that the Trump administration changed US policy to require US permission for future core sampling.⁶⁴² Under US law, marine scientific research only includes “those activities undertaken in the ocean to expand knowledge of the marine environment and its processes.” Hydrographic surveys—including those for military purposes—and resource exploration, which China’s research fleet is known for, are instead considered “marine data collection,” and thus they are not affected under the updated policy.⁶⁴³



While marine scientific research (MSR) is governed by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the definition of ‘research’ is ambiguous, as is the precise nature of the coastal states’ rights to permit or deny access to their EEZs. This is important considering that Chinese scientific work across the Arctic has been accused of having ‘dual-use’ military-civilian intent. While China’s research is civilian in nature and is clearly geared towards the natural sciences, there is also a long history of those civilian endeavours connecting to the state security apparatus. In the Arctic, China has spent a decade testing its sensing and detection systems, including unmanned ice stations, anchored submersibles, autonomous gliders, and helicopter-dropped sea ice drift buoys.⁶⁴⁴ Likewise, its Arctic operations have supported the development of the BeiDou global positioning system, high-latitude communications technologies, and data-transmission systems. All these systems are ostensibly civilian, though with clear military utility.⁶⁴⁵

China's Messaging Strategy in the Arctic United States

Diplomatic Messaging: Mutual Respect, Peaceful Coexistence, and 'Win-Win' Cooperation for 'the shared interests of mankind'

The United States remains the primary focus of China's foreign policy. President Xi has recently adopted a more confrontational stance against the US,⁶⁴⁶ with Chinese government officials publicly castigating Washington and consistently rejecting US proposals to establish a direct military crisis communications hotline between Washington and Beijing.⁶⁴⁷ In contrast to China's advocacy of "true multilateralism, a development-first approach, mutually beneficial cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, integrated development, and pursuit of common development in harmony," the Chinese Foreign Ministry accuses the US of "a relapse into the Cold War mentality and exclusive clubs, and attempts to draw lines based on values, politicize economic issues, divide the region into different security blocs, and stoke division and confrontation."⁶⁴⁸ Concurrently, the PRC's great power narrative during the Xi era promotes "playing the long game in the trade war to defend [China's] national self-esteem," while mobilizing the term 'great power' to refer only to China and the US (and thus making "a new type of great power relations between China and the US ... a necessary requirement to realize the Chinese Dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation").⁶⁴⁹

The China-US High Level Strategic Dialogue held in Anchorage in March 2021 highlighted deep divisions between the two countries. Chinese media reported that Yang Jiechi (a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPC and director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs), Wang Yi (State Councillor and Minister of Foreign Affairs), US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan "conducted candid, in-depth, long-time and constructive communication on their respective domestic and foreign policies, China-U.S. relations and major international and regional issues of common concern." Claiming that the Americans' "irrational suppression of China's legitimate rights and interests" had produced "unprecedented difficulties" in bilateral relations, the Chinese delegation stated that it was ready to work with the United States "to enhance strategic communication, advance mutually beneficial cooperation, properly manage differences, and push forward bilateral relations on the track of sound and stable development, so as to create benefits for the people in both countries and promote long-lasting peace and prosperity of the world."⁶⁵⁰ Chinese official briefings also chastised the US side when it "seriously overran the agreed time" in its opening remarks "and provocatively launched groundless attacks and accusations against China's domestic and foreign policies," breaching "diplomatic protocol" and forcing the Chinese side to respond "solemnly."⁶⁵¹ In the Chinese media, Yang Jiechi rebuffed American arrogance by asserting that "the United States is not qualified to talk to China in a condescending manner, threats and intimidation will never work on China."⁶⁵² All told, the exchange reinforced that China expects "mutual respect" and purportedly seeks "mutual benefit rather than a zero-sum game." For the US's part, Blinken told the media that America's relationship with China will be "competitive where it should be, collaborative where it can be, [and] adversarial where it must be," while Sullivan said that the US did not desire "conflict" but welcomes "stiff competition."⁶⁵³

The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Washington has not focused on Arctic or polar issues to date. However, statements and presentations to American audiences by Minister Xu Xueyuan, who has been responsible for subnational affairs, congressional affairs, and overseas Chinese relations since 2018, are revealing about more general narratives that also apply to Arctic affairs.⁶⁵⁴

First and foremost, Chinese official messaging emphasizes the importance of “mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation” rather than a “new Cold War, confrontation, or conflict.”⁶⁵⁵ The idea that “China is firmly committed to a defense policy that is defensive in nature”⁶⁵⁶ undergirds this narrative. “Peaceful coexistence is a basic norm for international relations, and more importantly, a bottom-line that China and the U.S. should hold on to as two major countries,” Minister Xu noted in November 2023:

Anyone familiar with the Chinese tradition can understand that peace, amity and harmony are values embedded in the Chinese civilization. Throughout the 70 years and more since the founding of the People’s Republic, China has not provoked a conflict or war. What the Chinese people oppose is war and conflict, what they want is peace and stability, and what they hope for is prosperity and development. A major conflict between China and the U.S. would be an unbearable burden for both sides. China does not bet against the U.S. and has no interest in replacing it. Likewise, the U.S. should not bet against China, and need[s] to think twice whether it must outcompete China. The relationship does not have to be a zero-sum game. Instead, it should be characterized by treating each other as equals and living together in peace.⁶⁵⁷

Embassy narratives around closer bilateral communication and cooperation helping to bring greater stability and certainty to the world⁶⁵⁸ are often linked to trade and economic development. While there is no specific mention of the Arctic, the language frames how Chinese commentators justify their interests in Arctic development. Official Chinese statements insist that “the economic structure of China and that of the United States are highly complementary, and the economic and trade cooperation between the two countries is mutually beneficial.” Accordingly, Beijing continues to promote economic and trade cooperation, and it encourages the US to “provide a fair, just and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese companies to invest with greater confidence.”⁶⁵⁹ Chinese narratives are also critical of the US change of heart from being a former “champion of globalization” to “quite upset and resent[ful], to the extent of regretting having led China into globalization and being determined to hold back its further development,” Xu suggested in March 2023. This posture “is not in the fundamental interests of the two peoples, nor does it meet the expectation of the international community. We hope that the U.S. side will return to a rational and pragmatic policy toward China.”⁶⁶⁰

Embassy narratives also echo the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s language in emphasizing the importance of stable Sino-American relations to produce “a shared future for mankind.” “No country in the world want[s] to choose sides between our two countries,” Minister Xu noted in April 2022. “To form any cliques that exclude or encircle China, to create two markets or two systems, and to stoke Cold-War mentality and bloc confrontation will only make the world suffer, and this is unacceptable to the people of the whole world.”⁶⁶¹ This logic applies to climate change, which requires collective action by all of the major global players. “I know that many of you are worried about climate change, the melting of glaciers in the polar regions, raging wildfire[s], disappearing species and frequent extreme weathers,” Xu told an audience at the University of Virginia on November 28, 2023. “Many of you take climate response as your own mission. Indeed, issues concerning the future of our planet and humanity must be addressed by us together. The international community, therefore, expects nothing less from China and the U.S. on climate change.”⁶⁶²

Chinese embassy narratives also promote Sino-American ‘people-to-people exchanges’ in the fields of education, science, and culture, with a particular focus on university students and other youth.⁶⁶³ Although we have found no evidence of embassy advocacy for Arctic- or polar-specific exchanges, youth-directed narratives promoting cooperation, mutual understanding, and trust between the two countries look to the next generation of leaders to foster a more cooperative spirit.⁶⁶⁴ “You are welcome to study, work and travel in the various parts of China, try the eight major cuisines of China, visit the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, learn about the different localities and customs, experience the ancient and modern China, and listen to what the Chinese people want for their lives,” the Chinese embassy’s chargé d’affaires told Duke University students in March 2023.⁶⁶⁵ That same month, speaking at the first Fudan-Harvard China-U.S. Young Leaders Dialogue, she suggested that “the misperception of some U.S. politicians about China and the policies thus adopted are outrageous. This has, unfortunately, made some Chinese public opinion and narratives about the U.S. more sensational and simplistic. To bring this relationship back to normal, we first need to bring mutual perception back to normal.”⁶⁶⁶ This desire to change perceptions, coupled with the idea that “people at the sub-national level are an important driving force for the development of China-US relations,”⁶⁶⁷ portends how Alaskan youth could become an important target audience.

Cultural and Economic Engagement

A few cultural connections do exist between Alaska and China. Alaska has a sister-state relationship with Heilongjiang Province and Anchorage has a sister city relationship with Harbin. Alaska Pacific University signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Heilongjiang Province to work together on training for the 2022 Olympic Winter Games in China. Similarly, East West Marketing and Explore Fairbanks signed agreements to promote tourism in both Fairbanks and China.⁶⁶⁸ The International Arctic Research Center (IARC) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks also recently signed an MoU with the Chinese Academy of Sciences.⁶⁶⁹ Until recently, the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) also hosted a Confucius Institute, which was originally set up with the aid of the World Trade Center Anchorage in 2008. In April 2021, the UAA’s Confucius Institute closed, ostensibly due to budget pressures.⁶⁷⁰

Another example of the many avenues that exist between Alaska and China is the US-China Arctic Social Science Forum, which was initiated in 2015.⁶⁷¹ In May 2021, the fifth iteration of this conference, held at the South China Business College of the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, included more than 100 Chinese and American experts from government agencies, universities, and other research institutions. These included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Polar Research Institute of China, the Polar Research Institute of Hong Kong, the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Tongji University, Shanghai Ocean University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Nankai University, the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Hainan University, Dalian Maritime University, and the University of Macau, as well as American experts from the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, the Woodrow Wilson Center, and the Institute of the North in Anchorage.⁶⁷² The sixth China-US Arctic Social Science Conference, held in China in June 2023, included discussions on governance in the Arctic, the development of shipping routes, the export of natural resources from Alaska to China, and cultural, tourism, and educational cooperation.⁶⁷³

Academic and Scientific Engagement

There has been limited academic engagement between Alaskan and Chinese partners, with existing partnerships winding down. Beginning in 2008, the University of Alaska Anchorage hosted a Confucius Institute, a Chinese-government-sponsored program meant to advance the teaching of Chinese language and culture, though it closed in January 2020 due to budgetary concerns.⁶⁷⁴ A memorandum of understanding also exists between the International Arctic Research Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, meant to increase research collaboration between the two institutions.

China participates in the International Arctic Science Committee and the University of the Arctic alongside the United States. Likewise, the 2019 MOSAiC (Multidisciplinary drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate) expedition, which studied climate change in the High Arctic, was supported by 18 Chinese scientists and the icebreaker *Xue Long*, in collaboration with many US universities and research organizations, including the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Chinese Media and the Arctic United States⁶⁷⁵

In English-language Chinese media, the US appears frequently in discussions of the Arctic, second only to Russia. In recent years, Chinese media messaging vis-à-vis the US has centred on the themes of militarization and the anti-Chinese ‘threat theory.’ These two themes are linked, as China consistently seeks to portray America as militarizing the Arctic while hypocritically—and irrationally—accusing China of threatening the region.

The most common triggers for Chinese reporting on the US have been American military exercises and the release of US Arctic policies and strategies (particularly those by the military services). Little context is provided in Chinese reporting, and never are US strategies presented as being reactive, defensive, or part of a broader whole-of-government approach to the Arctic. Rather, American policy is oversimplified and creatively interpreted to fit a militarizing narrative.

Within the militarization theme, the US is commonly portrayed as seeking hegemony or simply ‘playing games.’ The implication is naturally that the US is not only aggressive but irresponsible and even childish in its mindset and approach. In response to the US Army’s Arctic strategy, for example, Xinhua ran the headline “New U.S. Army Arctic Strategy Revealed: Aiming for Arctic Dominance.”⁶⁷⁶ The fact that the Army’s strategy employed the word ‘dominance’ supported the broader Chinese narrative, but Chinese media extended this theme of ‘domination’ to any American policy that advocated expanding the US’s capacity to work in the Arctic. The assertion that the US government ‘plays games’ in the Arctic is a common phrase and explanation for how the US seeks to dominate the region. These games are undertaken at others’ expense, with the US seeking advantage by containing Russia and using the European states as puppets to achieve hegemony.⁶⁷⁷

China’s English-language media consistently explains to readers that this militarization damages the region and overturns existing, peaceful governance dynamics. In 2019, the *People’s Liberation Army Daily* summarized that the “intensified U.S. foray into the Arctic has intensified military competition in the region, which runs counter to the general trend of peace and cooperation in the Arctic and has aroused widespread concern from the international community.”⁶⁷⁸

This aggressive behaviour is frequently contrasted with China's peaceful attempts to integrate itself into Arctic governance, economic, and scientific structures. Ironically, the aggressive United States also seeks to stigmatize peaceful China in what Chinese media calls the 'China threat theory.' In 2020, Xinhua used the release of the US Air Force *Arctic Strategy* as a hook to mock how "the U.S. military, on the one hand, stigmatizes Russia and other countries for "undermining" peace and stability in the Arctic region, and on the other hand, emphasizes the formation of an integrated joint warfare capability in the Arctic."⁶⁷⁹

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has solidified these narratives, as Chinese state media reporting about the US has become increasingly hostile and focused on the economic and military threat supposedly posed by the US. Following Sweden's and Finland's applications to join NATO, Chinese media has increasingly tied NATO and the US to that broader Arctic militarization narrative to show that the US (and NATO, which it controls) has absorbed these new states, while forcing the rest of Europe into a dangerous trend of aggressive military posturing—which is contrary to European interests.

One of the most consistent trends in Chinese political narratives regarding the war in Ukraine has been to blame the conflict on NATO expansion—allegedly caused, of course, by American pressure and meddling. This theme is widespread in Chinese-language media, with language that closely mirrors Chinese government statements on the subject. For its part, the Chinese government has closely hewn to Russia's established position, which holds that NATO's expansion upset the balance of power in Europe and forced a Russian response.

This overarching narrative approach to the war has governed Chinese government statements and has been consistently echoed by Chinese media. Chinese-language reporting is generally explicit and unnuanced in its assessment. The *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, wrote (falsely) that "international public opinion generally believes that the root cause of the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is the continuous expansion of NATO led by the United States after the end of the Cold War, ignoring Russia's legitimate concerns on security issues, long-term siege and squeeze Russia's security space, repeatedly challenging Russia's strategic "red line."⁶⁸⁰ Xinhua, the official state press agency of the People's Republic of China, offers a similar assessment, declaring that "[it] is the unrestricted eastward expansion of NATO led by the United States that is pushing the Russia-Ukraine conflict to the crater step by step."⁶⁸¹ China Central Television (CCTV), a Chinese state-owned broadcaster controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, offers an identical assessment: "many analysts believe that the root cause of the Ukraine crisis lies in the continuous expansion of NATO led by the United States and its continuous approach to Russia's border, which ultimately affects Russia's fundamental security interests."⁶⁸² These statements are representative of China's broader domestic messaging, which sees little variation and adheres to the party line.

China's English-language media is less aggressive in its anti-NATO pronouncements and typically presents more fact-based stories, which are often shorter pieces with minimal analysis. These stories are more subtle than their Chinese-language counterparts, but they consistently present NATO in a negative light. Here, NATO is not commonly accused of starting the war, as it is in Chinese-language media, but it is never described as a defensive alliance or one that is reacting to Russian aggression. Chinese English-language media also places clear emphasis on NATO

disunity, often focusing on Turkey’s threats to veto Swedish and (initially) Finnish membership in the alliance. This response encapsulates all the key NATO themes, applied to Sweden and Finland. Their inclusion, these narratives suggest, is part of a global effort by the US to expand its influence, which will force Russia (and others) to respond, thus bringing destruction to Europe and America’s other supposed partners.

Chinese Expert Opinion

Chinese academic and expert work on the Arctic tends to focus on the US as part of broader, regional analyses, rather than focusing on any specific US Arctic issues. Of 125 Arctic-themed Chinese academic publications (from 2018-2021), the United States appears as the subject in 33 (or 26%). The focus of this work is typically US defence policy and its implications for the region, environmental issues, US-Russian competition, and the US’s position on the Polar Silk Road. Naturally, there was also a brief surge of interest in US-Greenlandic/Danish relations in 2019 when President Trump offered to purchase Greenland.

The tone of this research is generally quite negative. Chinese scholars view the United States as a major competitor that is obstructing China’s participation in Arctic affairs and blocking its economic engagement and infrastructure plans. The security theme has also become more prevalent in recent years, tracking the decline in Sino-American relations.

Conclusions

Chinese influence in the American Arctic has never taken hold. There are few Alaskan public opinion polls offering data to quantify that relationship; however, in 2013, one poll indicated that 66% of Alaskans identified China as the country they were least comfortable dealing with on Arctic issues.⁶⁸³ During the 2015 *Rethinking the Top of the World* public opinion poll, Americans more generally also identified China as their least preferred Arctic partner.⁶⁸⁴

American public opinion towards China has also been falling over the last decade. When asked if they consider China as a partner, competitor, or enemy, only 6% of Americans surveyed in a 2023 Pew poll reported seeing China as a potential partner (compared to 20% in 2013) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Do you think of China as a partner, competitor, or enemy of your country?
(Answers in percentages of respondents)

| | Partner | Competitor | Enemy | Unsure |
|--------------|---------|------------|-------|--------|
| Spring 2023 | 6 | 52 | 38 | 3 |
| Spring 2022 | 10 | 62 | 25 | 2 |
| January 2022 | 9 | 54 | 35 | 2 |
| Spring 2021 | 9 | 55 | 34 | 2 |
| Spring 2020 | 16 | 57 | 26 | 2 |
| Spring 2013 | 20 | 58 | 18 | 4 |

Source: Pew Global Attitudes [only US answers shown]

In short, Chinese messaging towards and engagements with Americans about the United States' involvement in Arctic affairs have been met with skepticism. Congressional Research Service documents have long viewed Chinese activity in the Arctic with concern, and government policy documents contain themes of suspicion and concern.⁶⁸⁵ The aggressive reactions of Alaskan senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan to China's 2023 naval deployment off Alaska illustrate that suspicion clearly.⁶⁸⁶ Accordingly, we anticipate that China's soft power in Alaska will remain minimal for the foreseeable future. The state government's 2020 decision to end its LNG partnership with Chinese SOEs and the closure of the University of Alaska Anchorage's Confucius Institute are indicative of a broader trend, and we expect that future economic or cultural partnerships will face overwhelming headwinds—despite Chinese desires to advance narratives of 'win-win' cooperation.

8 | Russia

Unnatural allies with a history of conflict and suspicion, Russia and China have been drawn together over the past decade by a shared hostility to the United States and the liberal rules-based international order. This process of accommodation and cooperation accelerated in 2014 following Russia's limited invasion of Ukraine and the resulting Western economic and political sanctions. Since that time, Russia has made concerted efforts to shift its energy exports to the East and diversify its investment base. New agreements in trade, energy, finance, technology, and aerospace have been matched with symbolic Sino-Russian military cooperation.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine dramatically expanded this partnership, as Western businesses cut ties with Russia and expanded sanctions limited Russian imports of key goods. China is now Russia's most valuable trading partner and political supporter. While China has not provided Russia with the desired fulsome backing of its war in Ukraine, Beijing's tacit support has allowed Moscow to counter Western attempts to isolate it. Indeed, China has generally echoed Russia's own media frames and political narratives since 2022. Chinese state media and Foreign ministry representatives have consistently amplified Russian propaganda, often citing Kremlin officials and Russian-controlled media as their news sources or sharing those stories through state or state-controlled social media outlets. This is clear in Chinese treatments of Russian human rights violations, discussion of the war's origins, and the spread of Russian disinformation concerning the presence in Ukraine of Nazis and American bioweapons labs.⁶⁸⁷

While China's mirroring of those messages is obvious and well documented, its interests go beyond support for Russia or local concerns in Ukraine. China's narratives primarily relate to its broader security concerns and balance-of-power calculations.⁶⁸⁸ With respect to NATO, China's interests happen to coincide with Russia's. This has resulted in messaging designed to delegitimize and denigrate the alliance by supporting the Russian assertion that the West is both responsible for the war and seeking to spread violence and instability to Asia. Through its support for Russian messaging, China also seeks to delegitimize the use of sanctions and multilateral responses outside of the UN framework—where it enjoys influence and a veto. At the heart of these efforts is a focus on its own vulnerabilities and the potential threats to China's own economy.

China's support for Russia in the information environment is one part of those two states' growing partnership. Beijing has identified its own core interests as being at stake in Russia's war and has reinforced Russian lies, primarily with an eye towards its own near-abroad, rather than Eastern Europe. For China, the great danger in this war comes from the further legitimization of sanctions as a weapon against aggressor states—and even against great powers. China also fears the strengthening and expansion of NATO in Europe and, potentially, into Asia. Other regional US alliances that may mimic NATO are equally to be feared. Likewise, global responses to state aggression outside of the UN framework (which Beijing can veto) are to be resisted. China's support for Russia's fantasy version of the war's causes will continue so long as they align with Beijing's own interests and perceptions of the threats to itself and its own neighbourhood. Understanding China's objectives and tactics is therefore more essential than ever and is now an integral element in countering this messaging.

Political Objectives

China's overarching approach to the Russian Arctic is framed by its 2018 Arctic White Paper, a document that harmonizes years of political statements into a coherent, if 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.

In recent years, Russia has been the only Arctic state in which China has managed to consistently advance its interests in these four priority areas. In particular, the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine was a clear pivot point in the relationship. Prior to 2014, Russia's position towards China's Arctic presence was marked by a track record of suspicion and sometimes outwards hostility. This attitude dominated during the 2000s and was frequently at odds with China's desire for a greater role in the Arctic. In 2003, for instance, Russia rejected a Chinese request to send a research vessel through the Russian EEZ as part of China's second Arctic Expedition. Although the Russian government ultimately revised its decision and granted permission, the decision was made only after the Chinese expedition was completed.⁶⁸⁹ The roots of that suspicion can be seen in a rare public warning to China by the commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, who said that "[w]e are observing the penetration of a host of states which ... are advancing their interests very intensively, in every possible way, [and] in particular China." He stressed that Russia would increase its military presence in the Arctic to defend Russia's interests.⁶⁹⁰ In 2012, Russia prohibited Chinese research vessels from operating along the Northern Sea Route, forcing China to suspend its research activities for the season. In 2013, China's application for Observer status on the Arctic Council faced stiff Russian opposition as Moscow led a campaign against its inclusion. While China was ultimately admitted as an Observer, Moscow made it very clear that China was not a *de facto* member of the Council.⁶⁹¹ That same year, Russian security agencies rejected China's proposal to send researchers to work with the Russian Far East Maritime Research Institute on Arctic research, part of a continuing pattern of mistrust.⁶⁹² Even as late as February 2015, hostility was still visible in the military, as Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu expressed irritation at how some non-Arctic states (China) "obstinately strive for the Arctic." Moreover, Shoigu continued, "Russia does not prioritize participating with high-level delegations in the Arctic Circle meetings"—which was then China's favoured international forum for trialling Arctic positions.⁶⁹³ This hostility stemmed from Russia's position as a status quo Arctic power that was (and remains) hostile to the notion of ceding any control or influence in the region. This position was never far from the surface and was, according to Yun Sun, the director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, "well-documented and well-understood by the Chinese side."⁶⁹⁴

Russia's perceived jurisdictional expansions in the Arctic in the 2000s were also a cause for concern in China. In 2007, influential Chinese scholar Guo Peiqing expressed his discomfort over Russia's seabed flag planting at the North Pole. Russia "has been clamoring for the establishment of an 'Eight-State Polar Region Alliance,'" and its actions, said Guo, are "directed at the blind spots of international law... From a legal point of view, Russia's flag planting has no meaning."⁶⁹⁵ This symbolic action, combined with Russia's broader aversion to Chinese participation on the Arctic Council, represented exactly what China feared in the North: exclusion by the coastal states. This exclusion was sometimes colloquially referred to as the 'melon scenario,' whereby the eight Arctic states carved up the Arctic

Ocean amongst themselves. Chinese academic papers from the time also fretted about the potential for a Monroe Doctrine emerging amongst the Arctic powers which would effectively exclude any Chinese activity or influence.

Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine changed its position towards China, with clear implications for the Arctic. Following the imposition of Western economic sanctions, Russia was compelled to seek Chinese development partners and financing to replace the departing Western oil and gas companies. This shift was not entirely driven by Western sanctions: it was also part of Russia's broader 'Pivot to Asia' strategy, initially voiced by Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov in the late 1990s and later reiterated by President Vladimir Putin in 2012. While a continuation of a broader trend, this shift was certainly accelerated by the political and economic impacts of the West's response to Russia's 2014 invasion, and the shift in Arctic rhetoric was noticeable. In February 2021, Nikolay Korchunov, Ambassador at Large of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Russia's Senior Arctic Official (SAO), defended China in an interview with the RIA Novosti news agency in a statement representative of this shift. "Recently, China has been heavily criticized for taking a greater interest in the Arctic, due to alleged threats from Beijing," Korchunov said. "At the same time, it should be noted that this non-Arctic country refrains from military activities in the Arctic region, thereby helping keep low tension and a constructive atmosphere for interaction." No longer an unwelcome guest in the Arctic, Korchunov painted China as "an important investor for the Arctic states" and praised Chinese companies for investing tens of billions in Russian LNG projects.⁶⁹⁶

This statement, and other Russian pronouncements like it, represented a shift, from cautious suspicion of an interloper to echoing China's main narratives for the Arctic. This was reflected in Russian state media as well. In general, Russia is accepting of the notion that China is a 'near-Arctic state.' In a turn noticed and highlighted by the Chinese, Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* pointed out that the 'Near-Arctic State' is actually a very clever concept—a striking departure from a decade earlier.⁶⁹⁷ In Russia's official portrayal, China was now peaceful and cooperative, as well as a valued partner for investment and development whose presence in the North was being falsely maligned (principally by the US).

In the month leading up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government attempted to further solidify this partnership. In a meeting prior to the Olympics, Xi and Putin declared that the "friendship between the two States has no limits, [and] there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation." As part of this declaration, they announced an agreement "to continue consistently intensifying practical cooperation for the sustainable development of the Arctic," including the use of Arctic sea routes.⁶⁹⁸

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine did not noticeably damage this official partnership. On March 30, 2022, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks in Tunxi, Anhui, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who was in China to attend the Third Foreign Ministers' Meeting Among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan. Wang celebrated the fact that Sino-Russian relations "have withstood the new test of the changing international situation, maintained the correct direction of progress, and demonstrated a tenacious development momentum." The two sides, Wang said,

... have a firmer willingness to develop bilateral relations and a firmer confidence in advancing cooperation in various fields. China is willing to work with Russia, guided by the important consensus

reached by the two heads of state, to push China-Russia relations to a higher level in the new era ... At the same time, on the international and multilateral arena, actively promote the process of multi-polarization, oppose hegemonism and power politics, and uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.⁶⁹⁹

Today, there is a broad policy consensus in Russia about the desirability of keeping Sino-Russian relations on a positive trajectory in political and economic terms.⁷⁰⁰ Chinese statements—and tacit acceptance of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—suggest that Beijing also sees strategic value in continuing to strengthen that relationship.

China’s Position on the Russo-Ukrainian War

In the wake of Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, China has adopted a broadly supportive approach to Russia’s aggression. While China is officially neutral in the conflict, its messaging has been decidedly pro-Russian. Its officials and state media are broadly critical of NATO actions and Western sanctions, suggesting also that Moscow has valid historical and strategic grievances justifying action against Ukraine. In February 2022, a Chinese propaganda directive instructed national media to avoid information “disadvantageous to Russia or sympathetic to the West.” The same directive instructed them to use only official news releases from the state-run *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television. Content-sharing deals struck between these official state media sources and their Russian counterparts mean that Russian narratives also shape those official news releases.⁷⁰¹

The result has been that the Chinese state media and Foreign Ministry representatives consistently amplify Russian propaganda surrounding NATO’s role in the crisis and Moscow’s ‘legitimate’ security concerns. These stories often cite Kremlin officials and Russian-controlled media as their news sources. Russian state-media stories are also shared directly through Chinese state or state-controlled social media outlets. This is clear in Chinese treatments of Russian human rights violations, discussion of the war’s origins, and the spread of Russian disinformation concerning the presence in Ukraine of Nazis and American bioweapons labs.⁷⁰² The notion that the United States is operating bioweapons laboratories has received particular attention from Chinese media, which spent considerable effort blaming American defence laboratories for secretly developing and deploying COVID-19. In messaging about Ukraine, China Global Television Network has been actively promoting this anti-American misinformation with stories like “Russia reveals evidence of U.S.-funded bio-program in Ukraine”⁷⁰³ and “China urges U.S. to disclose more details about biolabs in Ukraine.”⁷⁰⁴ In a similar vein, the Communist Party’s *Global Times* newspaper published a story with the headline “US tries to refute ‘rumors’ about its biolabs in Ukraine, but can we believe it?”⁷⁰⁵ While there have been many individual Chinese influencers and experts questioning this implied support for Russia, the political and media narratives remain consistent in their essentials and continue to parallel Russia’s own media frames and political narratives.

The impact of the war on China’s Arctic interests is not a particular focus of the Chinese government, media, or expert community. When the region is discussed, the main northern theme is naturally the (then potential) NATO membership of Sweden and Finland, which is typically discussed as part of China’s broader messaging on the dangers of NATO expansion. The Chinese government has been largely silent on the subject, its position best represented by hypernationalist Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who told Chinese media that Finland’s application to join NATO will “naturally add new factors to the bilateral relations” and encouraged the country to “follow the principle of security indivisibility.”⁷⁰⁶

Chinese media messaging, picking up on Beijing's broader anti-NATO themes, consistently states (or implies) that the Swedish/Finnish NATO applications will "contribute to the further militarization of the Arctic region," a fact that will prove detrimental for not only the Nordics but for Russia and China as well.⁷⁰⁷ Citing Russian Foreign Ministry Ambassador at Large for Arctic Cooperation Nikolay Korchunov, *China Daily* conveyed the message that "the internationalization of the alliance's military activities in high latitudes, in which non-Arctic NATO states are involved, can't fail to cause concern ... [I]f Sweden and Finland joined NATO it would jeopardize security and trust in the Arctic region."⁷⁰⁸ Sanctions in particular will impact Chinese cooperation in Russian resource projects, causing what think tank researcher Wang Chenguang describes as "setbacks in Russia's Arctic economic development."⁷⁰⁹ Since the invasion, such setbacks have become clear. In May 2022, for instance, a Chinese shipyard stopped work on a module for Russia's major LNG 2 project, delaying what the Russians consider to be one of their most important resource projects.⁷¹⁰ These LNG projects are heavily dependent on Western technology, from companies such as Linde, Siemens, and Baker Hughes.⁷¹¹

Arctic shipping is another area that the Chinese identify as being vulnerable to destabilization due to the war. The viability of Russia's Northern Sea Route already faces considerable uncertainty as global shipping and insurance companies withdraw from Russian partnerships and global shipbuilding firms cancel contracts. In a sign of things to come, South Korea's Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering (now Hanwha Ocean) cancelled a \$872 million contract for six ice-strengthened LNG tankers. Russia was also hoping to build an additional 15 such vessels with Samsung Heavy Industries in a deal that similarly appears to have been derailed.⁷¹² Of note, Russian-built ice-strengthened LNG carriers rely extensively on many sanctioned foreign components, endangering even domestic production.⁷¹³ It is possible that Chinese shipbuilders will step in to supply the vessels, but there are practical difficulties there. Chinese shipbuilders not only rely on key Western components, but their yards are also presently full. Chinese builders, led by state-backed Shanghai Hudong-Zhonghuhave, have capacity for up to eight LNG carriers per year, and those slots are filled with orders for years to come. China has also never built the largest tankers, which is what Russia is looking to acquire. This failure to build shipping may ultimately impact Russia's major LNG projects on the Yamal Peninsula, of which China owns a significant stake. One small indication of a potential shipping crisis was Russia's dispatch of a non-ice-strengthened tanker—*Leonid Loza*—to China along the Northern Sea Route in September 2023.

Chinese concerns over Arctic shipping have not been officially expressed. A search of the websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Transport, and Ministry of Natural Resources, as well as of the WeChat account of the spokesperson of the MFA, reveals no official position on these threats or fears of what may happen to China's stakes in northern resource projects. However, a March 2022 workshop on the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, held by three of China's leading Arctic research centres⁷¹⁴ with close contacts and regular exchanges with the government, is informative. The workshop summary indicated that China's Arctic experts expect the impacts of the war to be far reaching and create a host of new risks for Chinese companies.⁷¹⁵

These concerns over shipping, security, and investment are representative of the limited discussions surrounding the impact of the war on the North and NATO's expansion in the Arctic. Generally, China is concerned for the stability of the region's trading system and its sea lanes. Both the Polar Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt are based on the concept of open borders. A renewed iron curtain in both the Arctic and the Eurasian regions will exacerbate

serious supply chain problems, which China is already experiencing. China has therefore proven cautious when it comes to expanding investment into northern Russian resource projects that have been vacated by Western firms, and it is officially non-committal on the matter of Sweden and Finland joining NATO.

Economic Objectives

Chinese investment and equity partnerships in Russian Arctic projects have expanded considerably since 2014 and are broadly presented by the Chinese as examples of 'win-win' cooperation. In a 2018 meeting with Chinese and Russian media, Chinese Ambassador to Russia Li Hui presented his country's growing role as an unqualified success: "it can be said that Sino-Russian economic and trade cooperation has not only benefited the two countries and peoples, but has also become a model for advocating equality, mutual benefit, win-win cooperation and common development in the world today." Li continued to state that the "high-level political relations," which were clearly growing, were turning into "more practical cooperation results."⁷¹⁶ Political friendship and cooperation brought wealth and advantage, and China was pleased to demonstrate this in the Arctic. The Arctic is also an ideal place for China to demonstrate that 'win-win' approach. Northern Russia is rich in undeveloped natural resources, though Russian firms lack the capital to develop them. China provides that capital, leading to a symbiotic relationship.

Resource Development

Resource development and investment opportunities are at the heart of China's interests in northern Russia. In particular, the Russian Arctic is a major source of natural gas and oil. Following the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014, Russia began to actively seek out Chinese partnerships to backfill its loss of Western funds, and since then, Chinese state-owned enterprises and banks have emerged as major investors, shareholders, and development partners.

The most significant Chinese investment is the Yamal LNG project, described by Liu Jin as the "first large-scale overseas project implemented after the proposal of the 'Belt and Road' initiative and the core project on the 'Polar Silk Road.'"⁷¹⁷ Russian company Novatek, through its subsidiary Yamal LNG, owns 51% of this project, while French oil and gas multinational Total holds 20%, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) 20%, and the Silk Road Fund 9.9%.⁷¹⁸ In addition to these equity stakes, the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank also lent Yamal LNG \$12 billion.⁷¹⁹ The neighbouring LNG 2 project also has significant Chinese ownership, with CNPC holding 10% of the shares and China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) holding 10%.

China has been an important investment partner for these projects, but it is also seen by Russia as an increasingly vital market. This shift in oil and gas exports to China began in earnest following the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014 and has certainly been accelerated by the EU's more recent moves to ban Russian hydrocarbons. In January 2022, Russia's energy giant Novatek and China's Zhejiang Energy Gas Group concluded a long-term deal, with the Russian side committed to supplying 1.6 million tons of LNG per year from the Arctic LNG 2 project.⁷²⁰ Moreover, according to Gazprom officials, Novatek and CNPC have reached their own long-term agreement on gas supplies, the importance of which is indicated by the agreement being formalized during the February 2022 meeting between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. This agreement will see the overall volume of natural gas sent to China increase by

10 billion cubic metres (bcm), eventually reaching 48 bcm.⁷²¹ Also in February 2022, Russian oil company Rosneft signed a long-term contract with CNPC, which reportedly commits Russia to exporting 100 million tons of oil (via Kazakhstan) over the next ten years.⁷²² Other future oil exports to China are expected to come from the developing Vostok Oil project; however, that project's seaborne trade will face challenges as Western insurance companies refuse to cover vessels carrying Russian oil.

The timing of these major contract signatures is likely not coincidental, coming as they did in the immediate run-up to Russia's full invasion of Ukraine. While expanding its markets in China has been an eight-year endeavour, Russia was likely also looking to lock in buyers for its hydrocarbons before the expected Western trade sanctions bit further into its export options—or increased China's negotiating power. While exports to Europe have fallen, Russia's natural gas supplies to China, via the Power of Siberia pipeline, increased by almost 60% between January and April 2022.⁷²³ Chinese oil processing facilities have also increased their overall volume, taking advantage of a price discount that has hit \$35 per barrel.

On the surface, the future of this business relationship looks promising, with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce openly stating that China will not support oil-related sanctions or jeopardize Chinese businesses.⁷²⁴ Behind such statements and implied support, however, this relationship faces growing challenges. Chinese multinational oil companies are loath to run afoul of Western sanctions, and China's embrace of Russia has not stopped Chinese energy firms from discreetly pulling back from new projects. In spite of its official position in opposition to sanctions, the Chinese government seems to recognize the difficulties that such sanctions can cause for multinational companies. In March 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly summoned officials from the three major energy companies (Sinopec, CNPC, and CNOOC) to review their business ties with Russia and "urged them not to make any rash moves buying Russian assets."⁷²⁵

As such, the corporate response has been one of caution. In March 2022, Sinopec Group suspended its talks with Russia's Sibur for a \$500 million USD petrochemical investment and a gas marketing venture. The reported reason for the cancellation was Chinese concerns over secondary sanctions that might impact Sinopec's global operations. According to the Russian side, this caution was primarily motivated by Chinese producers' fear of potential EU sanctions.⁷²⁶ Sinopec also suspended talks over a gas marketing venture with Novatek over concerns that Sberbank (one of Novatek's shareholders) is on the latest US sanctions list.⁷²⁷ The construction of the Arctic LNG 2 project was similarly delayed by the decision of Chinese yards to cease production on critical modules. As a result of this and other sanctions-related work stoppages, Novatek temporarily halted construction on two of the three unfinished trains on the project. The production of LNG was originally due to start in 2023, but that schedule is now in flux.⁷²⁸

Relying on Chinese companies for Arctic development presents other problems for Russia. While Chinese companies are still engaged in many of these projects, those SOEs 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 project as being the most affected by the loss of Western engineering and technological support. Professor Natalia Zubarevich of Moscow State University makes it clear that Russia should not count on China providing these critical technologies.⁷²⁹ Partly, these issues could be solved through a 'parallel import' strategy,⁷³⁰ which Russia declared to be a response to

international economic sanctions. However, many countries—including Kazakhstan, the traditional conduit nation—have already stated that they will not participate in this scheme. Despite these difficulties, Russia is likely to increase its dependence on China for its Arctic development, if simply because China is Russia's sole remaining partner with significant financial resources and market demand. On April 13, 2022, Putin gestured in this direction in a speech at a meeting on the development of the Arctic zone. There, he alluded to granting non-Arctic actors a greater role in regional development as a means of breaking the international isolation imposed by “unfriendly countries.”⁷³¹

Anticipating these longer-term trends, Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Gabuev believes that it is too early to make any determinations about China's willingness to continue or expand its major investments in Russia. At this juncture, Beijing has not made a decision about which Russian partners it will continue to work with. Moreover, the stagnation of the Russian economy will only strengthen Beijing's negotiating position by making the Russians more pliant partners. The “once cocky [Russian] oligarchs, and state corporations are getting more and more docile,” Gabuev writes.⁷³²

Shipping and the Polar Silk Road

One of China's principal interests in the Russian Arctic remains the region's potential as a shipping route. As a major exporting economy dependent upon global shipping, shorter routes bypassing global chokepoints are clearly attractive to China, and, over the past decade, the prospect of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) serving as a major thoroughfare to Europe has attracted a great deal of attention. This attention and interest are evident from surveys of Chinese Arctic experts and media. In both categories, the issue of shipping dominates discussions of the Russian Arctic, often with a focus on oil and gas development along the route.⁷³³

Most of the official narratives surrounding the NSR from China have been exceedingly bullish, with the attendant challenges associated with Arctic shipping being scarcely mentioned.⁷³⁴ Chinese academic and media boosterism of the route is common, and exaggerated predictions tend to dominate much of the literature. Huigen Yang, the director-general of the Polar Research Institute of China, for instance, proclaimed at a conference in Oslo in March 2013 that a full 15% of the country's international trade could travel through the Arctic by 2020.⁷³⁵ Estimates by the Polar Research Institute of China that same year assumed that 5-15% of China's international trade would travel through the NSR by 2020. Clearly, this has not come to pass. Data from 2022 shows that only seven Chinese-flagged (Hong Kong) vessels made the transit, a miniscule fraction of the country's overseas commerce.⁷³⁶

Chinese investment in the NSR received a symbolic boost in 2017 when the route was incorporated into China's broader Belt and Road Initiative as the ‘Polar Silk Road.’ Yun Sun tracks this initiative's origins to two official statements from the Chinese government. The first was the June 2017 “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” jointly released by the National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration, which proposes building three ‘blue’ (maritime) economic passages, including one “leading up to Europe via the Arctic Ocean.” The second is the 2018 Arctic Policy, which solidified official support for the concept by committing China to a “Polar Silk Road” that would “facilitate connectivity and sustainable economic and social development of the Arctic.” Participation in the development of Arctic sea routes is listed in that policy as the foremost priority for the utilization of Arctic resources.⁷³⁷

The rationale for Chinese involvement in the NSR is clear. The distances between China’s major ports and Europe are significantly lower via the NSR, theoretically saving both time and fuel (see Figure 1). While in many instances the Canadian Northwest Passage offers a shorter route, that passage’s harsh ice conditions, complicated geography, and limited infrastructure render it uneconomical under most circumstances.

There are also strategic and political reasons for China to expand its shipping routes north. A major consideration has been that Arctic shipping and investment cement China as an Arctic stakeholder and participant in future dialogues over regional governance. That assertion of interest and rights in the Arctic underpins much of what China has sought to achieve in the region over the past ten years.

From a strategic perspective, these northern passages could also offer important alternatives and/or redundancies in the event that other traditional routes were obstructed. In particular, Chinese officials have cited the security of their country’s oil supply as a particular concern. With much of the country’s oil coming from the Middle East, and the vast majority of that moving through the Strait of Malacca, a blockade or closure of that route during a conflict could prove both economically and strategically disastrous.

| Origin-Destination | Panama | Northwest Passage | Northeast Passage | Suez and Malacca |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Rotterdam-Shanghai | 25,588 | 16,100 | 15,793 | 19,550 |
| Bordeaux-Shanghai | 24,980 | 16,100 | 16,750 | 19,030 |
| Marseilles-Shanghai | 26,038 | 19,160 | 19,718 | 16,460 |
| Gioia Tauro (Italy)-Hong Kong | 25,934 | 20,230 | 20,950 | 14,093 |
| Barcelona-Hong Kong | 25,044 | 18,950 | 20,090 | 14,693 |
| New York-Shanghai | 20,880 | 17,030 | 19,893 | 22,930 |
| New York-Hong Kong | 21,260 | 18,140 | 20,985 | 21,570 |
| Rotterdam-Los Angeles | 14,490 | 15,120 | 15,552 | 29,750 |
| Lisbon-Los Angeles | 14,165 | 14,940 | 16,150 | 27,225 |

Figure 1: Distances between major ports. Dark grey indicates the shortest routes, light grey a close second.

Source: Whitney Lackenbauer et al., *China’s Arctic Ambitions*, 2018

Chinese officials and the media have dubbed this danger the ‘Malacca dilemma.’ These risks were brought into stark relief following China’s August 2020 skirmishes with India—which sits astride those vital routes. This is not a new concern. In 2010, for instance, Guo Peiqing, a professor of polar politics and law at the Ocean University of China, told an interviewer that he foresaw the Arctic becoming “a new energy corridor that would be safer than the Indian Ocean where piracy has been an issue for the world’s shippers, including China.”⁷³⁸ Li Zhenfu, a professor at Dalian Maritime University, together with a team of specialists, has been looking closely at the benefits that polar shipping might provide. Referring both to the shortened shipping routes between East Asia and Europe or North America and to the abundant Arctic oil, gas, mineral, and fishery resources, Li concludes that “whoever has control over the Arctic route will control the new passage of world economics and international strategies.”⁷³⁹

For Russia, developing the NSR is a high priority. In 2018, Putin set a target of quadrupling the annual cargo volume on the route. This development is intended to strengthen the Russian economy and improve access to resource-rich regions in Siberia and the Far East.⁷⁴⁰ In April 2022—in the face of expanding Western sanctions impacting Russian shipping and insurance—Putin again pushed this priority, claiming that Moscow needs to come up with a renewed plan for the NSR.⁷⁴¹

Despite the high priority assigned to the route, Russia lacks the resources to develop it on its own. Moscow recognizes that it needs partners, and China has both the investment dollars for infrastructure and the commercial fleet that offers the most obvious customer base for NSR operations. Russia's position is therefore welcoming, with senior Russian officials, including Nikolay Korchunov, the former head of the Russian representation on the Arctic Council, calling for the integration of the NSR into the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the Russian side, such a partnership, built on pre-existing Chinese investment in Russia's Arctic energy projects,⁷⁴² could result in a "deepening of cooperation between Russia and China aimed at sustainable development of the Arctic region."⁷⁴³

Developing the route has secured high-level (if ambiguous) support from both states. In a joint statement signed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in December 2015, the two states formally agreed to cooperate in developing the NSR into a "competitive commercial sea route"—though without specifics on how that success could be measured.⁷⁴⁴ Subsequently, cooperation in the Arctic was included in joint statements from 2017, 2018, and 2019, where the two states agreed to support agencies and companies involved in the development of the NSR and its adjacent infrastructure. The 2019 Joint Statement noted that cooperation would be "based on rights and interests of the coastal state."⁷⁴⁵ This was a significant concession from China, in comparison with its earlier declarations about freedom of navigation.⁷⁴⁶

Problems with the NSR

In spite of the hype, the prospect of significant Chinese shipping along the NSR remains highly speculative. The first Chinese commercial voyage along the route took place in 2013, when the COSCO vessel *Yong Sheng* transited from Taicang, China, to Rotterdam. The vessel continued to make the trip in the years that followed and was often hailed as a harbinger of things to come. In spite of that optimism, the voyages revealed serious vulnerabilities in the NSR as a reliable route. In an article published by the Chinese journal *Marine Technology*, *Yong Sheng's* captain, Wu Weibing, described real "challenges and inconveniences" along the route, ranging from a lack of detailed navigational information and the language barrier in working with Russian officials to hydrographic charts that were sometimes off by ten metres. Ice reporting was, likewise, sparse and inconsistent, while the high latitude limited communications.

Despite that, Wu noted that the route holds great potential value. At 3,500 nautical miles (and 11 days) shorter than the Suez route, the ship likely saved \$210,000 in charter and fuel savings.⁷⁴⁷ Even these savings can be overstated, however. Russian services add significantly to shipping costs. Icebreaker fees are mandatory, even when their services are not required. For instance, during *Lian Hua Song's* 2017 voyage through the NSR, those services cost the vessel \$140,000.⁷⁴⁸

The route's infrastructure is also outdated and inefficient, with only four of the 20 Arctic ports being connected to Russia's national transportation system and 40% lacking basic functionality or the ability to host ships.⁷⁴⁹ The passage is shorter than competing routes, but it remains icy and unpredictable. For commercial shippers, timing is critical, and a ship trapped in ice would create chaos amid precise schedules. Despite Russia's large icebreaker fleet, this is a distinct possibility, a risk demonstrated by the early freeze-up of the NSR in November 2021, which trapped 20 cargo vessels.

Chinese companies see little return on investment from enhancing this infrastructure, and the few investments that have been announced came to nothing. China's state-owned Poly Group, for instance, signed an initial agreement with Russia on the construction of the Arkhangelsk deep-sea port, intended to handle 30 million tons of cargo per year. This was supposed to be a breakthrough, and the region's governor praised the deal as one that "will change greatly the transport infrastructure of the Russian Arctic zone."⁷⁵⁰ Likewise, during the March 2017 Arctic Forum in Arkhangelsk, Poly Group reportedly proposed railway and port investments, and Russian media widely reported a visit to Murmansk by the deputy general manager of Poly during the same trip.⁷⁵¹ The project has yet to begin and appears to have never moved past the exploratory stages. Even the Russian-Chinese working group, assembled in 2013 with the participation of the Ministry of Transport, the China Development Bank, and other influential organizations from the two countries, has produced nothing of note.⁷⁵²

This failure reflects, in part, the manner in which NSR development and Sino-Russian cooperation are presented. As Yun Sun points out, the Arkhangelsk port was enthusiastically publicized by Russian officials, not the Chinese. This represents a pattern, in which the Russian side appears much more eager to publicize this cooperation, even though most 'activity' is merely potential Chinese interest, rather than confirmed investment.⁷⁵³ Yun's broader analysis shows that these expressions of interest from the Chinese government are frequently blown out of proportion. This stems from divergent interests, conflicting calculations, and vastly different cost-benefit analyses. From the Chinese perspective, the joint development of the NSR is a Russian proposal to which China has reacted primarily out of strategic and political considerations, rather than practical economic ones.⁷⁵⁴ From this perspective, China has not staked its credibility on polar development but rather retains the investors' freedom to pick and choose profitable opportunities. This is a feature of the broader Sino-Russian partnership, where the impression of Chinese investment often outstrips the actual results.

Such profitable opportunities have been sparse, and real Chinese investment has been low. According to Feng Shuai, who led the Polar Research Institute of China's joint research projects on NSR development in 2015, Putin's public relations campaign to paint a glorious picture of a cost-effective and thriving Northern Sea Route is far from sufficient to stimulate the much-needed, front-loaded investment.⁷⁵⁵ Overall, the Chinese policy community appears to assume great potential for the NSR, but those benefits are long-term possibilities. According to Gao Tianming, a leading expert on Sino-Russian cooperation on the Polar Silk Road from Harbin Engineering University, "even if the Northern Sea Route eventually transpires in the future, it will still be a supplement to the current traditional shipping route rather than its replacement or an alternative."⁷⁵⁶

Strategic Objectives

China has not deployed military assets to the Arctic and has no clear plans to do so in the immediate future. It does, however, have important strategic interests in the region. China's civilian activities in the circumpolar North are commonly assessed as having a dual purpose, with potential military implications. These concerns exist within Russia, though they are rarely expressed through official channels. In 2016, Liu Huirong, Dean and Professor of the Law and Politics School at the Ocean University of China, wrote about those Russian fears, which he noticed emerging around the Chinese use of dual-use technology, specifically hydroacoustic research in Russian waters.⁷⁵⁷ The mapping of the Arctic seafloor, the studying of ocean salinity and thermal layers, and the analysis of regional ice dynamics are all activities of China's civilian research program and prerequisites to a naval presence—particularly when considering potential submarine operations.

For Russia, this is a persistent fear that was dramatically brought to the fore in June 2020 when Russian authorities arrested Valery Mitko, a professor at the St. Petersburg Arctic Social Sciences Academy. Mitko was charged with high treason for providing Chinese intelligence with classified materials relating to hydroacoustics and submarine detection methods. While the details of his activities are not public, Chinese interest in co-opting an Arctic submarine expert must have provoked new concerns over Beijing's long-term objectives.

China's scientific work in the Arctic has helped it to develop its Arctic maritime technology. Some of this equipment has dual-use strategic relevance, while some may pose jurisdictional issues as Chinese research programs expand. For instance, China has used its Arctic voyages to test and refine its unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs). In 2008, China began using what it called "underwater robots" to predict sea ice changes in the Arctic Ocean.⁷⁵⁸ These tools have become more sophisticated, and, in 2019, the icebreaker *Xue Long* deployed a 'Haiyan' glider. This is an autonomous vehicle used "to monitor the deep-sea environment in vast areas" with temperature, salt, depth, and dissolved oxygen sensors.⁷⁵⁹ China's Arctic tests in the Bering Sea showed that it could self-sustain for at least 22 days over 1,111 kilometres.⁷⁶⁰ In 2020, three of these devices were deployed simultaneously. Although China (and various Arctic states) have used these for scientific work, the military applications are also obvious. Because this glider has no propulsion system (maintaining momentum by relying on small changes in buoyancy), the acoustic signature is extremely low, making it ideally suited to undersea tracking.⁷⁶¹

China has also spent a decade testing other Arctic sensing and deployment systems, including unmanned ice stations, anchored submersibles, and helicopter-dropped sea ice drift buoys. These systems can record temperature, sea ice dynamics, water salinity, current speed, and flow over an extended period.⁷⁶² All of this work is framed in English- and Chinese-language discussions as legitimate civilian environmental research, designed to better understand the Arctic region and a changing global climate. While this justification is realistic, it does not negate the dual application of this research, given that all of this environmental data would be useful for under-ice submarine navigation and/or detection.

Russian security concerns over Chinese activities have, however, been subordinated to its broader need to partner with China as a counter to Western sanctions and political isolation. This has even led to open displays of security cooperation in the Arctic. In September 2015 and again in August 2023, for instance, ships from the People's Liberation Army Navy operated near Alaska during joint military exercises with Russia. Russian military exercises in

the Far East, some with Arctic components, have also incorporated China. In 2018, the Vostok war games brought in 3,200 military personnel, as well as 30 aircraft and 900 tanks and armoured vehicles, from the People's Liberation Army. This is a stark contrast to past Russian exercises—such as Vostok 2012 and Vostok 2014—in which China served as the enemy in the scenario.⁷⁶³

Public Chinese assessments of Russia's Arctic military presence and expansion have also shifted to a friendlier light and now range from neutral to positive. Several Chinese scholars have pointed to a stronger and upgraded Russian military presence as a guarantor of Arctic stability, as well as a useful provider of search and rescue services.⁷⁶⁴

China's Messaging Strategy in Russia

Diplomatic Messaging

China's diplomatic messaging regarding the Russian Arctic has been defined by the same themes that characterize its approach across the circumpolar North. This message is the 'win-win' narrative that is codified in the 2018 Chinese Arctic Policy, with specific attention to the value of Chinese investment and cooperation in Arctic shipping and resource development.

China and Russia have very different long-term views of the Arctic, with the Russian vision of a closed region subject to the governance and control of the coastal states being in stark contrast to the Chinese idea of a more international Arctic in which China itself plays an important role. While China continues to register this position, and has integrated it into its formal Arctic Policy, it refrains from pressing the issue or forcing Russia to agree to principles that Moscow would find philosophically and politically difficult to accept. For instance, the legal status of the NSR and China's right to transit passage through Russian straits are never formally raised, nor is China's right to conduct marine scientific research in Russia's EEZ.

Chinese messaging consistently highlights its investments in the Arctic and its expanding scientific work as evidence of a 'Near-Arctic State' status, which grants China an undefined but always assumed degree of authority and say in regional governance. Russia considers this activity on a more pragmatic and transactional basis, without broader significance. Beijing's diplomatic and political tactics have therefore consisted of gradually advancing its interests, avoiding conflicts, and accumulating capacity to operate in the region.⁷⁶⁵ Russia has accepted this because it provides the two states with the ability to side-step awkward questions of governance and access, while facilitating the cooperation that Russia relies upon to carry its projects forward.

Media Cooperation

A significant component of China's messaging strategy in Russia is its media cooperation with Russian outlets. While China has not been able to build any formal media partnerships of note with Western Arctic states, its close political ties to the Putin government have facilitated a deep and growing cooperative framework for delivering Chinese messages to a Russian audience (and vice versa).

During Xi Jinping's first trip to Moscow in March 2013, he and President Putin presided over the signing of a cooperation agreement for news sharing between Voice of Russia and the *People's Daily Online*, the news media arm of the Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper. In 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev attended the signing of a cooperation agreement between Russia Today (RT) and the *People's Daily*. According to the RT agreement, the two sides "agreed to cooperate in mutual sharing of online news resources." Three months later, in January 2015, China's official Xinhua News Agency signed a cooperation agreement with RT to "strengthen the exchange and mutual use of news products between the two sides." Commenting on the cooperation, RT's chief said that "Russia and China are allies in the construction of a multipolar and pluralistic world."⁷⁶⁶ For its part, the Chinese embassy in Moscow praised the agreement as a means of "more effectively promot[ing] the non-governmental exchanges and trust between the two countries."⁷⁶⁷

Shortly after this agreement, Xi and Putin jointly declared the following years (2016 and 2017) to be the "China-Russia Media Exchange Years," which would lift "media cooperation between the two countries to a national level."⁷⁶⁸ Highlighting their continued importance, Premier Li Keqiang and Prime Minister Medvedev attended the opening and closing ceremonies for these exchange years.⁷⁶⁹ This political initiative led to significant cooperation at the operational level. In 2017, the two countries established a Russian-language (and Chinese-subtitled) channel produced by Russia's state-owned Channel One and CCTV, and broadcast via satellite in China.⁷⁷⁰ Since then, major outlets such as the *People's Daily*, Xinhua, the *Global Times*, and the China Media Corporation have partnered with RT, Russia's Channel One, TASS, RIA Novosti, and Sputnik—amongst others.⁷⁷¹

Gaining a foothold in Russian media is important for China. While Chinese news networks have Russian-language websites, securing the participation of Russian media provides access to more trusted sources. Xu Tingting, writing in the *People's Daily*, notes that overseas audiences generally rely on domestic media to obtain their news. Chinese surveys show that Russians gain most of their understanding of China through Russian media, with only a small percentage being informed directly by Chinese Russian-language media. Partnering with Russian media to deliver China's message therefore delivers "twice the result with half the effort." In Xu's words, China has chosen to "borrow a boat to go to sea."⁷⁷²

These media exchanges have become an important force in Sino-Russian public diplomacy. In a report on the partnership, the *People's Daily* celebrated its role in deepening mutual understanding, clarifying facts, and reporting on each other more comprehensively, objectively, and accurately.⁷⁷³ Put succinctly, it is an attempt to "tell each other's stories well."⁷⁷⁴ Naturally, the objective is not factual accuracy in storytelling but the ability to match the partner's messaging. Mayya Solonina and Katja Drinhausen note that this collaboration takes many forms. Local reporters draft stories for the partner country, while media organizations pool their resources by exchanging or drafting content together, or jointly developing apps and platforms. Joint training and exchanges between key personnel are also meant to align narratives and the presentation of current events and viewpoints by both traditional and social media.⁷⁷⁵

The result has been a general harmonization of messaging between Russia and China and direct avenues for influencing people in the partner state. Sometimes, that harmonization has been aggressive. In response to an article critical of the Chinese economy from the liberal Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, the Moscow

embassy's press secretary reportedly emailed the paper to demand its retraction, telling the outlet "categorically that you need to delete this article immediately from your newspaper's website; otherwise you will be blacklisted and you will never be allowed to enter China!"⁷⁷⁶

These media partnerships have been used to advance China's key 'win-win' investment messaging, which is central to its Arctic narrative. One such case comes from Russia's treatment of the Belt and Road Initiative, where China has been allowed to write its own script. On this issue, Carolijn van Noort and Precious Chatterje-Doody track an illustrative example of a partnership between RT and China Radio International (CRI) to explain the BRI to a Russian audience. CRI created and funded a collaborative media forum to produce this 2017 project, which sent Russian journalists to travel the route of the new Silk Road. The result was more than 200 articles, essays, and news stories—and even a documentary series.⁷⁷⁷ From this, a five-episode TV series was released, dedicated to BRI infrastructure and China's powerful economy. While ostensibly a partnership, van Noort and Chatterje-Doody point to clear asymmetries that reveal the 'borrowing a boat to go out to the ocean' strategy in action. The products have the trappings of an RT production; however, several of the featured journalists—including the main presenter, Russian journalist Anna Allabert—work for CRI, and the title sequences for each video in the Silk Road series prominently display the 'Hello China' logo. Tellingly, the copyright for the series rests solely with CRI.⁷⁷⁸ RT was used as a vehicle and cover for a Chinese-commissioned propaganda film to trumpet its infrastructure investments.

China's ability to present itself in the best possible light has played an important role in buttressing its reputation as a valuable partner for Russia. A 2020 poll by the Central European Studies Institute shows that 61% of Russian respondents have a positive view of China, with only 16% holding a negative view, a sunny outlook that prevails across age demographics and political preferences.⁷⁷⁹ A separate survey from 2021 undertaken by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows 74% of Russians to have favourable opinions of China.⁷⁸⁰ A 2022 Levada Center poll puts China's favourability at 84%.⁷⁸¹ This is a stark contrast to the increasingly negative views on China developing across the rest of the circumpolar world and will continue to facilitate Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic and across Russia.

Cultural Engagement

China has made an effort in recent years to expand its cultural and educational partnerships with Russia. These cultural ties are magnified by deep media cooperation and the expanding footprint of Chinese cultural institutions in Russia. In an effort to build these social connections, China has established four cultural centres and 23 Confucius Institutes across Russia. These organizations provide a variety of services designed to promote China in Russia and support positive cross-border relations. While these centres exist (or have existed) in other Arctic states, Russia is the only Arctic country with a large and expanding official Chinese cultural presence.⁷⁸²

In Russia, these centres have seen solid growth in tandem with the increasing Russian demand for Chinese language instruction. The Confucius Institutes support these programs by providing direct training, Chinese teachers, teaching resources, exams, and exchange programs. In 2020, there were 85,000 Russians and Chinese studying in each others' countries, including more than 35,000 Chinese in Russia. Chinese language education in Russia has expanded dramatically, from 5,000 students in 1997 to 17,000 in 2007 and 56,000 in 2017.⁷⁸³ These Chinese language courses offer China's Confucius Institutes the opportunity to insert themselves into the Russian

curriculum. Some cooperate with local Russian teachers to arrange joint Chinese language classes and to encourage Russian teachers to lobby educational authorities for the creation of Chinese textbooks, while also providing them with human and material support.⁷⁸⁴

This growing soft power magnifies Russia's deepening economic and strategic ties to China and has played a part in dramatically improving Russian perceptions of the Chinese. In March 2022, positive impressions of China represented a "historical maximum" according to the Levada Center, an independent Russian polling organization, outstripping any rating since the centre began recording Russian attitudes towards China in March 1995. Direct correlations between Chinese cultural diplomacy and Russian sentiment are impossible to demonstrate, and the recent spike in support for China can be clearly traced to Beijing's tacit support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Despite this, China has clearly identified continued cultural interactions in media and education as a long-term route to building support for national collaboration.

Academic and Scientific Engagement

Scientific research is a cornerstone of China's Arctic policy and its approach to the region. That priority is formalized in China's Arctic policy and described as part of its desire to "understand the Arctic" and "create favorable conditions for mankind to better protect, develop, and govern the Arctic."⁷⁸⁵ This interest in natural sciences is genuine; however, China's research efforts are also important elements in legitimizing the country's role as a regional stakeholder by providing justification for the notion of China as a 'Near-Arctic State.'⁷⁸⁶ For instance, its participation in Arctic research was an argument China made when seeking Observer status on the Arctic Council in 2012. In fact, the term 'Near-Arctic State' seems to have originated within the scientific community, being deployed for the first time at the Sino-Russian Arctic Cooperation Forum held in Qingdao in September 2012.⁷⁸⁷

Within the Russian context, this research is also heavily focused on more practical objectives surrounding shipping and resource development. Commonly, China-related studies performed by Russian scholars focus on the involvement of Chinese companies in the exploration of natural resources in Yamal and other parts of the Russian Arctic, as well as on the development of maritime routes in the Arctic Ocean.⁷⁸⁸ Both China and Russia specifically encourage studies on the development of polar equipment in the fields of deep-sea exploration, ice zone prospecting, the exploitation of natural resources, renewable energy development, navigation and monitoring in ice zones, and the construction of icebreakers.⁷⁸⁹ In September 2016, for instance, the Russian-Chinese Polar Engineering and Research Centre was established as a cooperative venture between the Russian Far Eastern Federal University and Harbin Polytechnic University. The Centre was designed for joint research promoting the industrial development of the Arctic, including the development of ice-resistant platforms and frost-resistant concrete for use in polar regions, as well as the study of the effects of ice loads on ships and the reliability of various engineering structures on ice.⁷⁹⁰

One of the most prominent joint research projects focuses on Arctic drilling, carried out by CIMC Offshore Engineering Research Institute and the Krylov State Research Center.⁷⁹¹ Another example of this focus is the China-Russia Arctic Research Center (CRARC), established between the Pilot National Laboratory for Marine Science and Technology (Qingdao) and the Shirshov Institute of Oceanology (Moscow), which examines environmental, geological, and biogeochemical processes in the Arctic. Ultimately, the objective of the Institute is to improve ocean and climate

monitoring and the forecasting of ice conditions for safer navigation in the NSR and exploration of the mineral and biological resources of the Arctic Ocean.⁷⁹² Likewise, Harbin Engineering University (Harbin) and Northern (Arctic) Federal University (Arkhangelsk) initiated the Russia-China Arctic Research Consortium. Started in 2019 with the involvement of several technical universities and research institutes from China and Russia, the consortium studies the economics and organization of the NSR, as well as innovations in shipbuilding and engineering.⁷⁹³

This focus on shipping and resource development makes sense given China's economic interests in northern Russia. These initiatives are fairly limited, however. Only a small number of Chinese research centres and universities focus on Russia in their Arctic studies.⁷⁹⁴ Most Chinese scholars and technical researchers have linked their joint research projects with Northern Europe, Iceland, Greenland, and Canada.⁷⁹⁵ In part, this can be attributed to a language barrier, with Russian research being undertaken in Russian, as opposed to the more common second language—English. Russian scholars also tend to make fewer overtures, as they see little to learn from Chinese colleagues. China is a newcomer to Arctic studies, while Russia has one of the most impressive track records on Arctic research of the circumpolar states. As such, Russian literature pays little attention to collaboration with China. Most Russian scholars have not considered engagement with Chinese research centres, and few regard that engagement as being essential for future Russian scientific studies of the Arctic.⁷⁹⁶ Even in a geopolitical environment where research ties to Western partners are being cut off, few publications in Russia emphasize the need for scientific cooperation with China.⁷⁹⁷

Russia also remains suspicious of sharing some of its core Arctic research. While cooperation is formally endorsed at the highest level, many spheres of knowledge relating to the Russian Arctic remain closed to foreign specialists for security reasons.⁷⁹⁸ Russia also has a history of hostility and suspicion towards foreign actors in the Arctic, and concerns remain that China's scientific activities constitute a Trojan Horse of sorts. In the words of one Russian analyst, the Chinese strategy is “an attempt to lead the process of strengthening the role of out-of-[the]-region players in the Arctic, a successfully camouflaged wish to play one of the leading roles among them in formulating the Arctic agenda.”⁷⁹⁹ In turn, Chinese experts often discuss the reliability of Russia as a partner in the Arctic, noting this suspicion and the general desirability of working with European partners instead.⁸⁰⁰

A core element feeding Russian distrust of Chinese research is China's focus on its own freedom of action in the Arctic. China's Arctic policy takes pains to repeatedly highlight its rights of access to the region under UNCLOS. Russian policy emphasizes Moscow's control over the region, with scientific research being done through and with Russia, rather than separate from it. The Chinese exploration of Russia's continental shelf is a good example of this dynamic. In 2020, China announced the inaugural research program for its *Xue Long 2* icebreaker, which centred on a survey of Gakkel Ridge north of the Russian exclusive economic zone. Suspected of containing massive sulfides, rich in copper, zinc, and other minerals, the ridge was in a section of ocean dubbed “the Area” by UNCLOS, outside of Russian jurisdiction and where access to resources is subject to governance by the International Seabed Authority (ISA).⁸⁰¹ Russian authorities reacted quickly, and before *Xue Long 2* departed, Moscow updated its submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to include the area being surveyed by China. A Canadian government representative working on the continental shelf file highlighted this shift as a clear reaction to China's activities, representing concern over a Chinese presence there.⁸⁰² Despite this new Russian assertion of jurisdiction, China followed through with its survey, collecting seafloor samples and geological studies that would facilitate later development.

Chinese Media and Expert Commentary on Russia

Chinese-language media prioritizes Russia in its coverage of the circumpolar Arctic. This is not surprising, given the scale of Chinese investment and shipping activity in Russia.⁸⁰³ That coverage tends to focus on the resource potential of the Russian North, as well as the shipping opportunities of the NSR. The tone of Chinese reporting is typically positive, with Russia being seen as a valuable partner and Arctic development a promising activity. That partnership is presented as a natural marriage of states with supporting strengths. China has the financial resources and shipping capacity, while Russia has the reserves and promising sea routes. Guo Peiqing, a professor at the School of International Affairs and Public Administration of the Ocean University of China, typifies that message in the *People's Daily*, noting that the two states are “cooperating closely in the Arctic region because they have mutual needs and can achieve complementary advantages.”⁸⁰⁴

As with China's media, its Arctic academic community devotes more attention to Russia than any other region of the Arctic. In a survey of 125 Chinese academic papers written between 2018 and 2021 on the Arctic, 72 focus on Russia. The topics most commonly discussed are the Polar Silk Road and the development of the region, including potential investment in key ports along the NSR. Commonly tied to the topic of shipping is a sub-focus on oil and gas development. The individual project receiving the most attention is the Yamal LNG project—an understandable focus given its size and China's significant investment. Other frequently discussed topics include Arctic security, the Russian military build-up in the Arctic, Russia's territorial and maritime claims in the region, and polar science. Overall, China's expert community considers Russia a partner. Most of this research suggests cautiously optimistic support for more investment and Arctic cooperation with Russia, especially in the field of energy and in the development of sea routes.

The impact of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on Chinese Arctic analysis is still evolving in Chinese expert circles. However, the initial response seems to be concern that the war will destabilize economic relationships. Wang Chenguang, a researcher with Grandview Institution (one of the leading independent think tanks in China), sees the Arctic as entering a “fully formed confrontation pattern with Russia on one side and the United States, Canada, and the five Nordic countries on the other.” This shift will, according to Wang, shake the foundation of international cooperation in the region and derail Arctic scientific and business cooperation with international political and economic sanctions.⁸⁰⁵

These concerns for the stability of the Arctic have led some Chinese experts to push for more regional cooperation. “The Arctic countries cannot allow the regional security situation to go to an irrational conclusion of the ultimate confrontation between Russia and NATO,” writes Chen Zinan, Associate Researcher at the Institute of Marine Strategy, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). “In this critical moment, the Arctic countries outside the region also need to play a more active role, to help promote the Arctic governance back to the right track of dialogue and cooperation, and jointly maintain and promote peace, stability, and sustainable development of the Arctic.”⁸⁰⁶

While this economic dislocation has created serious problems for Chinese investors in the region, some scholars also see opportunities to expand China's investment and shipping operations by taking advantage of the fact that Russia is being left with few willing partners.

Conclusions

China has been very successful in securing its objectives in the Russian Arctic. Chinese ships have access to the Northern Sea Route, and Chinese businesses have secured favourable arrangements investing in Russian resource projects. Russia's general reliance on China in the wake of its deteriorating relations with the West has also brought about a wholesale switch from Moscow's pre-2014 opposition to China's northern scientific work and participation in Arctic governance fora. Russia's ability to continue to expand this cooperation in the face of Western sanctions is in doubt, however, as Chinese companies have increasingly (if quietly) cut or suspended ties with some Russian projects. However, from a Russian perspective, continuing to expand these relationships is clearly a priority.

The Russian popular perception of China is very favourable, with China held in higher regard than any other country in Europe.⁸⁰⁷ That perception stems from years of political messaging and media cooperation, much of which focused on building a positive image of the other state. However, as Katja Drinhausen and Mayya Solonina of the Mercator Institute for China Studies note, the main theme in this partnership narrative remains one of opposition and resistance to joint threats. To garner public support for the Sino-Russian strategic relationship and each state's actions on the global stage, the citizens of China and Russia do not have to love each other—they just have to be united against common enemies.⁸⁰⁸ For both countries, this means opposition to the West and the rules-based international order where it does not serve their national interests.

While cooperation with China is seen as essential, this relationship is largely one of necessity. Prior to the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, Arctic resource development was meant to be done in partnership with Western countries. International oil majors like BP, Shell, Statoil, and Exxon played central roles, bringing not only money but world-leading technology to develop the region's offshore and unconventional oil reserves. These corporations' exit forced Russia to rely on China, whose businesses typically bring less advanced technology and often can command a better price based on the absence of viable alternatives for Russian exports or financing. This reliance has led to growing concerns in Moscow that Russia is moving towards becoming China's junior partner.⁸⁰⁹

In the Arctic, the old fears of Chinese activity have not disappeared; they have simply been removed from government and state-controlled discourse. From time to time, these concerns are made apparent. Zhao Long, an associate researcher at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, warns that "the so-called China threat and China expansionism rhetoric is still prevalent among some Russian media, scholars, and social elites ... Some people think that Russia will pay the price in energy, employment or even land for China-Russia cooperation."⁸¹⁰

On the Russian side, Dmitri Trenin, a member of Russia's Foreign and Defence Policy Council, writes that China's global ambitions are driving its attempts to be present in the Arctic, where, as one of the strongest global powers, it will be one of the key norm-setters and guarantors of order. Russian authorities are both aware and somewhat wary of this objective. Russia is a status quo power, while China is seeking to open up the region for the world and capitalize on that. The two countries' legal positions reflect that, and suspicions remain.⁸¹¹

In spite of these concerns, Russia has no choice but to continue its cooperation with China. Western sanctions have removed nearly every avenue for cooperation in the Arctic, leaving China as the only major investment partner and market for Russian hydrocarbons. This arrangement will provide China with considerable leverage in its future cooperative ventures, and those arrangements will increasingly be on Beijing's terms.

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, but that support is not overwhelming. This lukewarm support indicates that China’s money and markets are seen as a necessity but also as a risk. As (or if) Chinese investment increases in the 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 over-reliance on China. Much will depend on the conditions of China’s future investment and whether Russians perceive themselves as being taken advantage of.

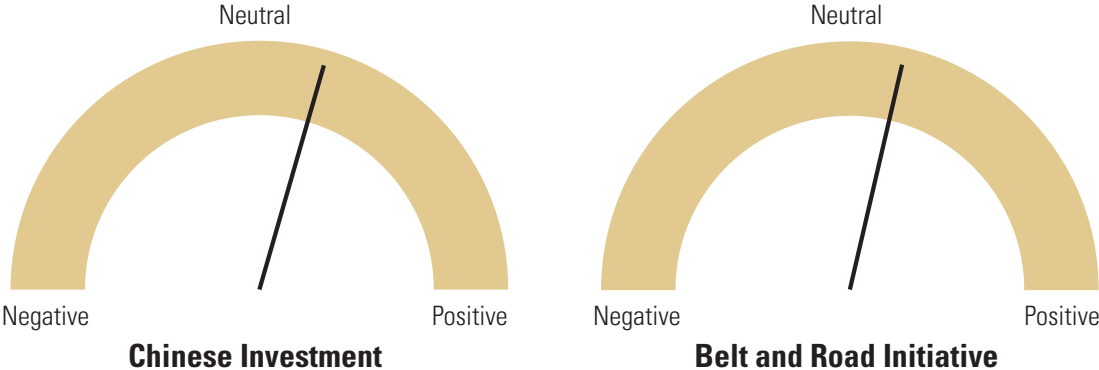


Figure 4. Source: Sergei Ivanov, “Russian public opinion on China in the age of COVID”

Conclusions

Official statements and the state-run media of the People's Republic of China assert 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*), with rights and interests in the region that the West cannot ignore.⁸¹² This focus on a region long perceived to be the sole domain of the Arctic Eight has evoked concern that China's aggressive behaviour towards its closest neighbours may be extending to the polar north.⁸¹³ As this report has demonstrated, the Chinese threat is neither as clear nor as immediate as Secretary Pompeo and others have made out. Beijing has, historically, sought a cooperative regional dynamic, focusing on what it calls 'win-win' relationships with Arctic states. Beijing's 2018 Arctic Policy lays out this approach clearly, downplaying defence and security considerations to focus on science, shipping, resource development, and regional governance. Indeed, this policy is framed to complement the policy priorities of most Arctic states. Its phrasing is tailored to allay Arctic state concerns about China's alleged revisionist designs by emphasizing respect for Arctic state sovereignty and sovereign rights over resources. Rather than the zero-sum conflictual approach chosen by China in the South and East China Seas, in the Arctic it deploys a message of peace, stability, and sustainable development. That cooperative approach stems from the reality that China's 'near-Arctic' status is more rhetoric than reality. Lacking an Arctic coastline, continental shelf, or physical connection to the region, China's Arctic endeavours are largely dependent upon collaboration with Arctic states.

In spite of that dependence and its resulting collaborative approach, Chinese messaging has also emphasized the international nature of the Arctic. Rather than a pie to be divided between the Arctic powers, the region is a global commons where non-Arctic states have a role to play.⁸¹⁴ In an illustrative article for the *Guangming Daily* in April 2021, Dong Yongzai 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."⁸¹⁵ In so doing, it advances the "community of human destiny"⁸¹⁶ in the polar regions. As Danish analyst Patrik Andersson observes, "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.⁸¹⁷ China has therefore sought to play within the existing international system rather than overturn it. Yet, it also emphasizes the elements of that system that it considers to give it the access and status that it craves.

Over the last decade, the rise of Chinese 'wolf warrior'⁸¹⁸ and hostage diplomacy⁸¹⁹ reinforces China's willingness to play by international rules—but only until those rules no longer serve its interests. Beijing's diplomatic practices in the Arctic states now cover a spectrum of behaviour from positive reinforcement to coercive tactics, with differing levels of aggression being dependent upon the overall tenor of the bilateral relationships and the diplomatic personalities involved, rather than Arctic-specific dynamics or drivers.

Chinese state messaging has not been static, becoming more aggressive or conciliatory to meet perceived changes in global dynamics. Despite these shifts, a few core messages have remained central to all Chinese narratives. The state's communication plan, advanced through official government channels and state-owned media, can be broken down into these major themes:

- a) China is a benevolent partner with much to offer.
- b) It is costly to not cooperate with China.
- c) Chinese interests are legitimate and its activities beneficial.
- d) Criticism of China's presence is unjustified and racist.⁸²⁰

In recent years, and in particular following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a fifth message has become increasingly common:

- e) America (and its puppet NATO) is militarizing the Arctic and bringing chaos with its Cold War approach to international relations.

These narratives are not unique to the Arctic, as similar messages are common in China's drive to integrate itself into governance fora and economic systems globally. They are intended to blunt foreign criticism while facilitating investment, scientific collaboration, and the entrenchment of Chinese scientific and cultural facilities and programs despite the US government's anxiousness to block that access. Always present in its messaging, either implicitly or explicitly, is China's emphasis on respect. China respects Arctic state sovereignty, but it demands reciprocal respect for its own sovereignty—a concept that transcends traditional Westphalian definitions to encapsulate any internal behaviour of the Communist Party. In the words of Wang Yi, Ambassador to Iceland, this means giving “priority to each other's national interests and common interests in handling bilateral relations without being influenced by any third party.”⁸²¹ The issue of ‘national interests’ is an important one. It means non-interference in sensitive political issues, most notably surrounding Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. References to ‘third parties’ are also common and track China's growing desire to avoid being excluded from the Arctic by American pressure.

Unlike Russian narratives in the Arctic, which consist primarily of disruptive and corrosive messages intended to destabilize Arctic societies,⁸²² Chinese narratives have traditionally not sought to disrupt local societies or create fissures. Major-General Li Quan's message to his Danish hosts in 2019, that China pursues a “one-Denmark” policy with respect to Greenland, is illustrative.⁸²³ While Russian disinformation efforts have consistently focused on breaking Greenland away from Denmark, Chinese messaging has sought instead to integrate Chinese activity into the existing dynamic to highlight the cooperative and constructive nature of its presence. Likewise, China has not followed Russia's footsteps in deploying disinformation and disruptive messaging towards immigration, gender politics, Indigenous relations, and other contentious topics that provide an adversary with clear opportunities to create friction within most Arctic states. The simple reason for this approach is that China has sought to integrate itself within the existing Arctic governance and economic systems and benefit from them, rather than simply generate chaos—as is Moscow's primary goal.

In recent years, however, Chinese messaging has shifted in tone and emphasis. While the cooperative ‘win-win’ messages have remained central, they are increasingly paired with more aggressive assertions of Chinese rights and hawkish warnings of American militarism, a ‘Cold War mentality,’ and ‘bloc confrontation.’ The US is now commonly referred to as an aggressive and bullying power that lies about China to “cover its own interests.”⁸²⁴ This shift stems from the general deterioration of China’s relationship with the US, Washington’s increasingly aggressive pushback against China’s Arctic role, and the expansion of NATO to include Finland and Sweden. As a result, Chinese narratives have gained a sharper edge, with the state media now commonly pointing to the damage being done to the Arctic by American militarism and the threats to regional state sovereignty from US hegemonic control.

Part of that shift in narrative also stems from Chinese frustration with the Arctic states’ hesitation to fully embrace the ‘win-win’ narrative. While Arctic states were initially receptive to Chinese engagement and investment, that trend has reversed as Chinese behaviour towards Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang—as well as on matters such as the South China Sea and COVID-19—have generated suspicion and eroded popular and political support for engagement across the democratic Arctic. From this has stemmed a more aggressive ‘wolf-warrior’ approach to diplomacy. Most visible in Sweden—but also clear in Denmark, Norway, and Canada—this approach has seen ambassadors and other messengers aggressively push back against any perceived slight or transgression of China’s core interests. In 2019, then-Ambassador to Sweden Gui Congyou famously declared that “[f]or 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].⁸²⁵ This more aggressive approach to Arctic relationships failed to achieve much success and was recalibrated (with new ambassadors being appointed in some cases). However, Chinese messaging has retained a more defensive edge, a trend that is continually exacerbated by deteriorating relationships with Washington and with Western states more generally.

While ambassadors like Gui have made headlines in Arctic countries as Beijing’s highly visible messengers, China has developed a multilayered and complex network of interconnected systems for advancing its narratives. This web includes political, scientific, educational, cultural, and business relationships aimed at different levels of Arctic society. This comprehensive approach offers multiple avenues for influence and sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish illegal and unwanted activity from normal business, diplomatic, or cultural exchanges.⁸²⁶ Business partnerships frequently involve political strings, with trade deals and investments being tied implicitly to an Arctic state’s willingness to avoid criticisms of Chinese Communist Party behaviour, Chinese foreign policy, or local human rights abuses. Academic and cultural partnerships are, likewise, employed to reinforce state narratives and push back against criticism or deviation from prescribed narratives. While there is certainly variation in the tone and emphasis of the messages being delivered by different actors, the core narratives remain consistent.

The success of China’s messaging in the Arctic has been mixed and certainly varies by country. On the whole, however, China’s Arctic strategy has suffered significant setbacks since 2017. As its broader relationships with the Western Arctic countries have deteriorated, those states have become increasingly suspicious of engaging with China on Arctic issues or blindly accepting Chinese investment in the region. Pushback against ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy has also damaged China’s core narrative of ‘win-win’ cooperation. Rather than shaming or coercing Arctic states into bowing to Beijing’s whims, that aggression has undermined years of messaging and cast China as a bully rather than a partner.

Partly as a result of this failure, China has not been as successful in integrating itself into the region and influencing Arctic governance as it had intended. In particular, China's economic push into the region has suffered significant pushback, largely as a result of local opposition and increasing hesitation on the part of regional governments. Arctic commentators have written a great deal on China's Arctic economic aspirations, though these have not matched actual investments in the region. Sober analysis reveals that the Arctic states have not blindly or naively accepted Chinese investments, and recent trends suggest a strong sentiment against attempts by Chinese actors to build major projects or acquire land or strategic infrastructure in the Arctic.⁸²⁷ A telling example is the Chinese state-owned company General Nice Group's attempt to purchase a former naval base in Greenland, which 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 among Arctic states of growing caution and increasing recognition of the security risks posed by Chinese investment in resource development projects and infrastructure. Across the Arctic, new foreign direct investment laws are blocking Chinese acquisitions of strategic resources and companies, free trade negotiations are being cancelled or placed in limbo, and resource projects are being halted. In Greenland, a territory once identified as an Arctic jurisdiction most at risk of malign Chinese influence, every Chinese resource project has either failed, been cancelled, been placed on hold, or switched ownership. In Scandinavia, major infrastructure projects designed to link Europe to the Polar Silk Road have, likewise, been stopped and Chinese investments in ports and airports blocked. Displeased with these outcomes, China has not been able to force its way in, nor convince Arctic states to separate its Arctic engagement from broader global tensions.

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 China's self-described Arctic role, particularly its desired place in regional governance structures.⁸²⁸ 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 its vital Arctic resource projects. Moscow has had some success, most clearly the Yamal LNG project, which is partially owned by China National Petroleum Corporation (20%) and the Silk Road Fund (9.9%). Russia has also highlighted its 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, that growth 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 its official position in opposition to sanctions, the Chinese government seems to recognize the difficulties they can cause for its multinational companies. In March 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reportedly summoned officials from the three major energy companies (Sinopec, CNPC, and CNOOC) to review their business ties with Russia and "urged them not to make any rash moves buying Russian assets."⁸²⁹ Since then, investment in Russian resource projects has continued but at a glacial pace.⁸³⁰

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 project as being the most affected by the loss of Western engineering and technological support.⁸³¹ After some delay, Chinese industry is again providing the machinery needed to expand the production of this project; however, both CNOOC and CNPC declared *force majeure* on the project, blaming US sanctions.⁸³²

Russia and China's cooperative approach to Arctic investment and development has been driven by a transactional need to avoid conflict and advance resource projects (for Russia) and shipping (for China). 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 US and the West more broadly. Nevertheless, deep differences remain, and they are likely to become harder to disguise as Chinese activity in the region increasingly intrudes into 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.⁸³³ 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 it becomes increasingly tied to, and dependent upon, China. Russia will tolerate China as a partner in Arctic development, but not as a peer. The latter would erode Russia's strident attempts to legitimize its perceived position as the primary Arctic power.⁸³⁴ Russia has adopted a cooperative position, given its need for Chinese investment in the region, but it refuses to consider China a 'peer.'

For these reasons, the danger of a Sino-Russian military alliance in the Arctic is unlikely to materialize. A growing number of commentators have held out this danger as an imminent threat,⁸³⁵ but Chinese messaging and activities in the region do not indicate a significant military interest. Rarely do Chinese commentators focus their attention on military matters or on China's rights to operate military forces in the region. Indeed, China's capacity for such missions is severely lacking. China began commissioning a series of ice-capable patrol boats in 2016, though these were not designed for polar ice conditions. It also has two icebreakers that can work through up to 1.5 metres of ice. These, however, are unarmed.⁸³⁶ 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 a threat. China has few aircraft that could reach the Arctic, and its nuclear submarine fleet is small and ill-equipped for under-ice operations.⁸³⁷

Western narratives tend to conflate the more hypothetical risk that China poses as an international actor in the Arctic with the real risk that it already presents as a regional actor in the Pacific. The danger is that overinflated 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 defence resources from elsewhere.⁸³⁸ 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 its capabilities and interests actually warrant such status.

China's efforts to demonstrate its 'Near-Arctic' character and integrate itself into the region's economies and governance systems have had decidedly mixed results. Russian desperation has created a clear opening for investment and collaboration, limited mainly by China's own economic interests and willingness to circumvent Western sanctions. Across the democratic Arctic, its narratives have been less warmly received. This pushback stems not from apprehension over Chinese activity in the Arctic *per se*, but rather a broader European and North American rejection of China's violation of human rights at home and its increasingly aggressive approach in its own neighbourhood. This is not to say that Arctic states have rejected China's role in the region outright, or Chinese investment and trade more generally. However, the enthusiastic welcome that China received from many quarters in the early to mid-2010s and the general acceptance of the 'win-win' narrative have been replaced by a healthier dose of caution and even suspicion.

China's messaging strategy in the Arctic is continuing to evolve and recalibrate. Wolf-warrior communication has been scaled back after its clear failure to coerce the desired behaviour from Arctic states. Despite that general shift, Chinese messaging has retained that sharper edge with a greater focus on anti-American narratives and the dangers of excluding China from regional economies and governance fora. This is not uniformly applied, however, with different messaging strategies being deployed in different Arctic countries. Often, this flows from a sensible appreciation of what would or would not work in that target audience, though much of this can also be attributed to different ambassadors applying their own styles and approaches. China's messaging strategy in the Arctic remains a work in progress as it continues to calibrate its approach, trying to awkwardly harmonize a recognized need for collaboration with its underlying insecurity over any perceived slight and implicitly assumed superiority over smaller Arctic states.⁸³⁹ How this strategy evolves in the future will depend heavily on China's broader relationship with the West and its behaviour globally. Success in the Arctic will continue to depend on China's ability to sell its 'win-win' narrative, a task that is becoming more difficult as its broader relationship with the West sours and its ties with Russia grow.

Endnotes

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