

## **Climate Change and the Polar Silk Road in China's Foreign Policy**

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### **Abstract**

As an area rich in unexplored resources, the Arctic is assuming an increasingly important geoeconomic and geopolitical role among Arctic and non-Arctic states. The Arctic is the epicenter of the fight to preserve the planet from the effects of climate change. In the near future new trade routes will emerge in the region, which saves energy and time as a considerable security and geopolitical aspect. China has been working on building its regional ambitions for several years and released China's Arctic Policy in early 2018, according to which the country would like to integrate this region into the New Silk Road Project, too. As a responsible large power, China's commitment to the peaceful development of the Arctic through the Polar Silk Road is heartening.

**Keynotes:** *Arctic, China, climate change, Polar Silk Road, sustainability*

## 1. Introduction

China has become increasingly interested in how climate change in the Arctic affects not only the region itself but also China. Because of the direct relationship between climate change, rising sea levels, and potential threats to millions of Chinese living in coastal cities through massive flooding, China has long participated in Arctic research. China joined the international Arctic science committee in 1996 and since 1999 has organized scientific expeditions in the Arctic with the research vessel Xue Long (or Snow Dragon) as the platform. In 2004, China built its first Arctic research station, the Arctic Yellow River Station, in the Ny-Ålesund research village in the Spitsbergen Archipelago. China's White paper on the Arctic identifies several policies and positions on participating in Arctic affairs, including protecting the environment of the Arctic and addressing climate change. Through the White Paper, China acknowledges how Arctic climate change will impact its own environment and people, and hence commits itself to strengthening "publicity and education on addressing climate change to raise the public's awareness of the issue". China expresses its full commitment to protecting the Arctic environment via global environmental agreements, with particular emphasis on the marine environment. To achieve China's ambitions, it is essential to enjoy the support of at least one country in the region (Russia) and to establish a close relationship with it in terms of its Arctic objectives. As China has a much weaker power position in the region than America or Russia, it will need cooperation and economic investment with the Arctic countries to enforce its interests, that is, it must pursue a rather different foreign policy than in Southeast Asia in connection with the New Silk Road of the 21st century (Klemensits, 2019). This paper analyzes how China would like to become a responsible stakeholder in the Arctic through China's polar strategy and China's climate policies.

The main objective of my research is to identify China's commitment to protecting the Arctic environment via global environmental agreements and foreign political aspirations in the Arctic region. To this end, I have developed the following hypothesis: China wants to become a responsible stakeholder in the Arctic through China's polar strategy and China's climate policies. I will strive to support this throughout my research by analyse the role of the Arctic in China's foreign policy.

## **2. The Arctic and Climate Change**

It is not easy to determine the exact location of the Arctic, since the size of the Arctic ice is constantly changing, and thus its physical boundaries are also constantly moving. The northernmost part of the earth is covered by ocean (ACIA, 2004: 4), the most common definition of its locations is the Arctic Circle (International Chamber of Shipping (n.d.)). The Arctic Ocean, which covers the Arctic Circle, forms a link between Asia, Europe and North America, the continents between close to 90 per cent of international trade occurs. However, as a result of climate change, an increasing number of experts believe that new maritime routes can be opened up in the Arctic in the foreseeable future, but that, in order to ensure efficient trade on these newly opened routes, there will be a need for major improvements to the proper development of transport corridors, which will require large infrastructure investments (Gudjonsson and Nielsson, 2017). There are currently three routes in the Arctic: the Northwest Passage, which links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans along the northern coast of Canada, through the Arctic Ocean; the Northeast Passage, which runs along the coasts of Russia and contains the Northern Sea Route (Humpert and Ropotnik, 2012: 285); and finally the Transpolar Sea Route that opened last and passes through

the middle of the Arctic, and which is projected to be safe for navigation in 2020s, and in the summer months only (Wishnick, 2017: 8). In addition to saving energy and time, extractable energy sources and potential routes also represent an important security and geopolitical aspect as well as a logistical and investment opportunity for some countries including China. The Arctic is also very important due to raw materials, in addition to the new trade routes; this region is highly rich in natural resources, with more than 20 per cent of the world's reserves being located here, according to estimates. According to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the Arctic host the world's largest undetected oil and gas reserves. This is assumed to be 90 billion barrels of petroleum, 1669 thousand million cubic feet of natural gas, i.e., 44 billion barrels of liquefied natural gas. This represents 13 per cent of the world's unexplored oil resources, 30 per cent of natural gas and 20 per cent of liquefied natural gas. In addition, a significant amount of precious metals (gold, platinum, iron, uranium, lead and zinc) and rare earth metals are present in the Arctic. As a result of the melting of polar ice, there is an increasing likelihood that these energy sources and precious metals will be extractable in the near future, provided that there is an adequate infrastructure and technology base (Wishnick, 2017: 3).

The Arctic has a separate institution, the Arctic Council established in 1996 by the countries of the region, with the aim of creating a platform for dialogue between the Arctic countries. Currently, it has eight full members: Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the US. It focuses on the environment, science and economic cooperation as its main task, but it does not perform security tasks (*ibid.*: 15).

The thinning of the ice sheet and other recent environmental changes prove that an increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels is accompanied by an increase in global average temperature.

Concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have increased due to human activity, primarily the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas) and, secondly, deforestation. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations have risen by 35 per cent and global average temperatures by 0.6 degrees Celsius. As a result, there is an international consensus among researchers that the warming that has occurred over the past 50 years is due to human activity. If the current trend continues, some estimates suggest that there will be severe and irreversible changes in the global climate in this century. These include changes in atmospheric and ocean currents, soaring sea levels, and drastic changes in rainfall. Together, they will have a catastrophic impact on coastal settlements, animal and plant species, water supplies, and human health and well-being that are irreversible and will change our planet forever.

Global warming is a growing challenge for our world, and this is increasingly true of both poles of the earth (ACIA, 2004: 2). Global warming is causing accelerating physical changes in both the North and the South Poles (Dodds and Nuttall, 2016: 50). These changes are particularly intense in the Arctic, where average temperatures have risen twice as fast as in the rest of the world in the last two decades. Some of the effects of climate change are already visible in the form of melting glaciers and ice caps in the area, and some of their effects are still invisible (ACIA, 2004: 8). The size of the ice sheet reached its lowest level in 2012, but it approached the same level also in 2007, 2016 and 2019, which also attracted the attention of scientists and legislators. Many experts say there may be summers even as early as in 2030, when the ice in the Arctic will melt completely and so will the ice in some highly vulnerable ecosystems which are the habitat of several species that are native only there. This region is also of great importance for

water purification, flood control and the stability of coastal areas. Arctic ecosystems are important also for fisheries because of fish stocks and food supply. This fragile system has been threatened not only by the climate change, but also by the pollution and invasive species. Preserving biodiversity and the viability of the Arctic ecosystem is a major global challenge (European Commission, 2016: 5).

### **3. China's Strategy in the Region**

The primary and perhaps most important goal of China is to secure access to new commercial routes in the North. The Arctic's navigability would benefit China in many ways, not only for strategic reasons, but also in terms of time, cost and security, as there are no Somalian pirates there and the Malacca Strait dilemma is neither present – or at least not in the same way. While the journey takes 35 days from Asia to Europe through the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal, it takes only 22 days through the Arctic, saving time and cost. Since 2018, COSCO has made 14 trips in the North Sea with 10 vessels saving USD 10 million, 7,000 tons of fuel and 220 shipping days (Wishnick, 2017: 29). As China's economy is growing, so does its energy use. While China's GDP growth seems to be slowing down, its energy consumption increased by 18 per cent from 2017 to 2018. Such an increase and the lack of internal energy sources forces China to meet its raw material needs from imports. In 2018, 70 per cent of oil and 45 per cent of gas came from abroad. In 2019, China's oil imports rose by 10 per cent and the country imported 8 per cent more gas than in 2018 (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2020). From a security policy point of view, it is very important for China to be able to always provide the right supply, and to that end, it considers it necessary to diversify the supply chain (Albert, 2019). China's another quite important goal is to have a say in the rule-

making process, so that there is a geopolitical stage where it has the opportunity to try and define rules as a rule-making power and not merely to adapt to existing ones, as was the case in many areas of the world of international relations (*South China Morning Post*, 26th January 2018a). According to experts, Arctic regions, together with the oceans, and cyberspace and space are strategic areas in which China has great ambitions and wants to become a rulemaking, or even a leading player (Ling, 2020), (Pan and Huntington, 2015: 153-157).

Its increasingly important objective is to be able to carry out regional research in the Arctic, particularly in terms of climate change. Citing existing research results, Chinese scientists believe that the melting of ice will have a major impact on China, where sea levels will rise and as a result, 20 million people will have to be displaced, not to mention the agricultural problems that this entails (Hong, 2018). In allusion to his Beijing wants to play a greater role in the region and act as a global power on climate change matters. China is often accused of using the environment as a pretext only to enforce its interests in the region. Even if this had been the case, China's own research in the Arctic has made the Beijing leadership realize that China will also be seriously impacted by climate change, which poses an even greater threat to the Arctic. The fishing potential of the Arctic Ocean is also one of the interests of the country. Fishing along China's coasts is becoming more and more stalled, as there is less fish, while demand is growing, including due to the increase in population. It is therefore one of China's ambitions to gain fishing rights in international waters, to which the Arctic region fits perfectly. According to a researcher of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, fishing in seas further away from the country is essential for China's long-term agro-development, and it is therefore inevitable that China will assert its fishing interests in the Arctic (Hong, 2018).

#### **4. The Arctic's Role in China's Foreign Policy**

China's foreign policy interests have expanded greatly over the past three decades, and the Beijing leadership has begun to place great emphasis on developing Chinese interests and representing them on the global stage, primarily in the Pacific. Under the leadership of former Chinese President Hu Jintao, and then of current Xi Jinping, Beijing's foreign policy is already far beyond the Pacific, and the Arctic is playing an increasingly important role (Koivurova *et al.*, 2019: 35). Since 1990s, Beijing was committed to developing bilateral relations, and now, after being admitted to the WTO, it focuses on free trade agreements. These agreements have already been able to move China's Arctic policy slightly forward, since China concluded a free trade agreement with Iceland in 2013 and conducted negotiations also with Norway in 2017. According to the official Chinese foreign policy position, also expressed by Chinese Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo in a 2010 statement, China considers the North Pole to be the property of all mankind and has not supported any state to have exclusive sovereignty over it (Chang, 2010).

According to Chinese ambitions, China started to build its policy related to the region several years ago. Some Chinese experts date the country's commitment to the Arctic all the way back to 1925, when the country signed the Svalbard Convention, which recognizes that Spitsbergen belongs to Norway (Wishnick, 2017: 30). China's polar engagement first began in the South Pole and later extended to the North Pole. The Chinese State Oceanic Administration (SOA) was established in 1964 to take part in future polar expeditions, and in 1985 it purchased its first ship from Finland capable of navigating in icy conditions to launch its Antarctic expedition, which it conducted from 1986 to 1994 when it was replaced by China's first icebreaker, the Xuelong (Chinese research vessel completes 8th Arctic expedition, 2017). China has



already had two ice breaker vessels since the autumn of 2018; Xuelong 1 bought from Ukraine in 1994 and Xuelong 2 built in 2018 and launched since then, which is now entirely Chinese-made (*South China Morning Post*, 26th January 2018b). Xuelong performed her first Arctic expedition (CHINARE) in 1999, of which she completed a total of nine by September 2018. In 2017, she made the route to the Northwest Passage; the 20,000-nautical-mile journey took 83 days, shortening the usual voyage from New York to Shanghai via the Panama Canal by seven days (*People's Daily Online*, 10th October 2017). It is the first Chinese ship to have traversed all three Arctic routes (*South China Morning Post*, 26th January 2018a). China's state-owned shipping company, COSCO, also plans to launch six cargo ships on the North Sea route for commercial transportation. There are dozens of Chinese scientists across the Arctic, with more than 30 Arctic expeditions carried out since 1984. China has its own research station in the territory, the Yellow River station built in 2004, which is the first Chinese Arctic research facility. COSCO, the largest commercial shipping company in China considers itself to be a leading shipping company on the Northern Sea Route (Gudjonsson and Nielsson, 2017). In 2015, COSCO's cargo ship Yong Sheng sailed from the port of Dalian to Rotterdam through the Northeast Passage, and back to the Chinese port of Tianjin in 55 days (Lelyveld, 2018).

The Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) was founded in Shanghai in 1989, and its establishment was a good indication of China's growing interest in the Arctic. In 1990, Chinese scientists entered the Arctic for the first time, and they also planted the Chinese flag. In 1966, the Chinese Antarctic Administration of the State Antarctic Research Committee was renamed as Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA) due to the growing importance of the Arctic. Also in 1996, China joined the International Arctic

Science Committee (IASC), a leading international non-governmental organization supporting Arctic scientific research and collaboration, and in 2005, the Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW) was held in the city of Kunming. In 2004, China built its first Arctic research station, named the Yellow River. China first attended the Arctic Council meeting in 2007 and has since sent delegates to the meetings of the Arctic Council Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) every year. The increasing participation in the scientific life of the Arctic provided a very good basis for China to build good bilateral relations with the Nordic countries. In 2013, it successfully became an observer state in the Arctic Council, which most Chinese officials saw as a recognition of the legitimate interest of the Chinese in the region (Koivurova *et al.*, 2019: 35). By gaining observer status, China was granted access to the waters and airspace of the Arctic and the opportunity to participate in the international governance of the region (Wishnick, 2017: 30). After an initial period of less active participation and less visibility, China has slowly begun to identify its areas of interest in the Arctic (Koivurova *et al.*, 2019: 35).

The almost 5 years that followed was about Beijing securing and consolidating its presence in the region. As a result, China has significantly expanded its scientific facilities in a short period of time, bringing its scientific potential to the northern region, and now, like several countries, has a research station in the Spitsbergen, is an active member of the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC), regularly conducts scientific expeditions with its icebreaker and increasingly participates in international scientific cooperation projects.

Xi Jinping, the current Chinese President was elected Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 and announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which set out a very new direction for China's external relations, compared to the previous low-activity Chinese foreign policy. With this initiative, the Chinese

President has openly begun to transform the existing world order, one of the main elements of which is this project, representing the beginning of a more assertive foreign policy direction. The main objective of BRI is to redefine the relationship between Europe, Asia and Africa. This can be best described as a network, which can be spatially expanded with great flexibility. Its significance is important to our global world because it questions the position of the US on the one hand and can pose a challenge to our current world order, on the other hand, as this new order is complemented by China's new regulatory ambitions (Eszterhai, 2019: 12-13). The Belt and Road initiative can be expanded flexibly. China makes use of this flexibility and, most recently, has extended the large-scale project with the Polar Silk Road (Zoltai, 2020).

For a long time, China has not had a public strategy for the Arctic; it issued the White Paper on the Arctic only in January 2018, which filled this gap (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2018). In this paper, an important role is assigned to the Belt and Road initiative, announced in 2013, as the Arctic is also intended to be included in the New Silk Road initiative, creating the Arctic Silk Road (Brady, 2017). On this section of the Belt and Road, the main role would be played by the new routes created by the melting ice, which would greatly benefit Chinese trade and Beijing's ambitions. China's presence in the Arctic is very important not only economically but also politically in the country's external relations strategy (Wishnick, 2017: 47-78, so achieving its goals will be of high geopolitical importance. As a basis for its region-related strategy, it has defined respect, cooperation, mutual benefits and sustainability (Chen, 2018). It has thus provided a great framework to its strategic objectives, institutionalized and subordinated them to the Belt and Road initiative, with the ultimate intention of legitimizing them at global level.

In its White Paper of January 2018, China formally declared itself a country "close to the Arctic", supported mainly by the fact that climate

change in the Arctic will have a major impact on China's society and economy (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2018). This was also confirmed by the fact that the country was admitted to the Arctic Council in 2013 as an observer state (Goodman and Freese, 2018).

The first White Paper on the Arctic in China, published in 2018 (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2018), also makes it clear that China's presence in the Arctic is fully in line with existing legal and political rules (Koivurova *et al.*, 2019: 12). In this White Paper, China describes itself as an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs and an inevitable part of the affairs of the region (Goodman and Freese, 2018). Beijing is therefore firmly committed to the international law and conventions in force in the Arctic (UNCLOS, Polar Code, new fishing agreement) and cooperates with the Arctic Council. In particular, Chinese foreign policy seeks to be present in the Arctic not as a follower of standards but now as a standard setter, the best example of which is the involvement of the Arctic in the BRI and the emergence of other segments of Chinese diplomacy in the region of the Arctic Ocean (investment, scientific research, tourism, etc.) (Koivurova *et al.*, 2019: 12). This is the result of a long process that Beijing has undertaken over the past decade to show its growing knowledge and commitment to the Arctic to be accepted as an actor in the area, although it possesses no territory in the Arctic.

China's energy supply has traditionally been dominated by coal, which is polluting, expensive, difficult to transport, and even low in efficiency. In light of this, there is great interest in alternative resources such as oil, natural gas, nuclear energy and green energy (water, wind, heat). China undoubtedly needs more diverse energy sources from different parts of the world in order to reduce its dependence on coal. This is where the Arctic, among others, comes into play which will be a potential source of oil and natural gas and other resources in the near

future. Another reason why the region has grown in importance to China is that it is perceived by the Arctic states as politically stable and generally predictable, which is not typical of other resource-rich regions (*ibid.*: 21-22).

## **5. China's Bilateral Relations in the Arctic**

To achieve China's ambitions, it is essential to enjoy the support of at least one country in the region and to establish a close relationship with it in terms of its Arctic objectives. This country is namely Russia, which is currently the only of the eight Arctic countries that is a partner of the Belt and Road initiative (Gudjonsson and Nielsson, 2017). The Arctic plays an important role in the relations between the two countries to begin with; Xi Jinping visited Russia before the G20 meeting in Berlin in 2017, where the two countries signed a joint declaration (*Oceanol.com*, 11th July 2017), in which the Arctic Silk Road and the Northern Sea Route were identified as the main location for their cooperation. As China envisions this section of the BRI along the Northern Sea Route, most of which passes along the coast of Russia, this could not be achieved without cooperation with Russia. Xi Jinping officially announced the concept of the Arctic Silk Road only in 2017 in Moscow (Liu, 2017), but the idea itself had been formulated by Russia in 2015, and then, after a foreign political consultation, an agreement was reached at the level of the leaders (Jiang, 2019). Mutual cooperation is mainly based on trade and raw materials. Russia hopes that Chinese investments can help improve its ports and boost trade on the Northern Sea Route. Traffic passing through this route reached and exceeded 7 million tons in 2016, an increase of 35 per cent compared to the previous year (Liu, 2017). Moscow also tries to relocate as much funds as possible to the area; one of Russia's major investments is the

development of this route: by 2030, they want to spend tens of billions of dollars on ships, shipbuilding, navigation and ports along the route (Johnson and Reid, 2018). As Western sanctions against the country have led to increasing dependence on China, it has also begun to implement developments in the Arctic, as it knows that this is of strategic importance to China and that without Russia it could not achieve its ambitions. Vladimir Putin has said that the region is an important part of Russia's national security in terms of military, politics, economy, technology, and environment (Wishnick, 2019: 51). Cooperation in this region is also very important for the two countries from a security policy perspective. China currently has a relatively weak position in the region, so it is highly dependent on Russia, which is an Arctic country, but this is true vice versa, because Russia wants to secure mainly economic and political advantage from the cooperation. Given that the best navigable shipping route in the Arctic is now along the Russian coast, China can only succeed and achieve its ambitions working together with Russia. China seeks to diversify its imports of raw materials, while Russia strives to diversify its exports of raw materials (Li, 2019). China is seeking to increase its presence in the region through raw material-oriented investments and the development of ports, as it is currently highly dependent on oil and gas imports from the Persian Gulf and Africa, which arrive in the country on routes controlled by the US Navy. Accordingly, it has started to diversify its energy dependency by investing in the Russian enterprise Yamal LNG and in Norwegian gas and oil fields. This could not only be an alternative for Beijing and reduce security policy risks, but it can also gain experience in the Arctic infrastructure and technology, which could make a major contribution to the controlling of commercial routes in the future. The first project called the Arctic Silk Road was an investment where the Silk Road Fund undertook a 9.9 per cent share in the Russian

Yamal LNG project, which carries out transport, infrastructure and resource-related activities in the Eurasia part of the Arctic. As a result, Chinese companies have a total share of 29.9 per cent in the project, as the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation has 20 per cent in addition to the Russian Novatek (50.1 per cent) and French Total (20 per cent) companies. The financial part of the project is partly covered by a loan agreement of USD 12 billion, which is provided by the Chinese Eximbank and the Chinese Development Bank (Zoltai, 2020). Among other things, the development includes the establishment of a rail link with the port Sabetta, thereby connecting the area to the Eurasian rail network, an investment of approximately 3.22 billion (Gudjonsson and Nielsson, 2017). China, however, in exchange for Russia's diplomatic support and military cooperation, must accept some restrictions imposed by Moscow (in Central Asia and the Arctic) and agree with certain sensitive Russian actions (Ukraine) (Wishnick, 2017: 59). Russia is assuming the rotating presidency of the Arctic Council from May 2021. In this process, the country regards sustainable development as its priority, but tries to strike a balance between economic development and resource extraction goals (Wishnick, 2021). Russian presidency may bring new opportunities to China. Russia and China have common interests in the Arctic region: both parties are committed to the use of Arctic routes, cooperation in the construction of infrastructure, and environmental protection in the Arctic (Yang, 2021).

Although China's main partner in the Arctic is Russia, China's growing presence is a good opportunity to develop closer relations with the other Arctic countries, especially in Northern Europe (Wishnick, 2017: 62). While Canada and Russia are looking at China's ambitions in the region with scepticism, North European countries gladly welcome the Asian country's growing interest in the region. China's strategy with these countries is based mainly on multilateralism and investments under

the BRI, alongside bilateral relations. In 2013, when China gained observer status, four Chinese academic institutions which support China's Arctic policy (Shanghai Institute for International Studies, Polar Research Institute of China, Tongji University's Center for Polar and Oceanic Studies and Ocean University of China's Research Institute of Polar Law and Politics), together with institutions of the Nordic countries, established the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, which, in addition to joint research, also created information sharing and began to organise meetings. In October 2015, the Navy of the Chinese People's Liberation Army visited Finland, Sweden and Denmark for the first time (*ibid.*: 51). China's most important North European partners include Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, which mainly hope for financial support through China's Arctic ambitions. Finland received the fifth largest Chinese foreign direct investment worth USD 8.43 billion between 2000-2016, which amounted to USD 7 billion in Norway over the same period (Feng and Sagatom, 2018) Iceland and Greenland have now become the main North European locations for Chinese foreign capital investments (Goodman and Freese, 2018). The Polar Research Institute of China estimates that by 2020, 5-15 per cent of the country's trade will go through the Arctic, and that ratio will only increase if China is to develop partnerships with more Arctic countries (*ibid.*). It is interesting that none of the five North European countries (Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland and Sweden) participate in the Belt and Road project, but all five are founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is linked to the new Chinese initiative. However, China has long started to develop its Arctic strategy from a diplomatic point of view, thanks to which, the relations with these countries have normalized and even become and are still becoming deeper. The question is whether or not these five countries will be willing to join the Belt and Road initiative and participate in



infrastructure investments within its framework (Gudjonsson and Nielsson, 2017).

## **6. China's Commitment to Protecting the Arctic Environment**

Many accuse China of using environmental protection only as an excuse to pursue its interests in the region. However, their own research in the Arctic made the Beijing leadership realize that climate change will also have a severe impact on China, putting the Arctic at increased risk. China's measures to prevent these are still very rudimentary, but a sense of responsibility is already beginning to emerge, in the hope that, as a responsible superpower, it will be able to realize its ambitions in the region in line with environmental protection (China plays critical role in leading global actions to tackle climate change, 2018).

Apart from the Chinese researchers and research stations outside, there is only a theoretical determination in this regard: in his speech at the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping mentioned the environment not less than 89 times, while the Chinese economy only 70 times (Xinhua, 18th October 2017). Also, in the Arctic White Paper published in 2018, the importance of environmental protection is included, however, if we look at this document, the section on the environment is one of the shortest of all. In this section, China states that it follows international law in protecting the natural environment and ecosystem of the Arctic as well as conserving biological resources and is actively involved in addressing environmental and climate change challenges in the Arctic (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2018). China is also fully committed to the Paris Climate Agreement. However, China's presence in the Arctic has so far shown almost only signs of self-interest of the country through investment and development in new transportation routes and access to energy resources. However, this is also starting to show a

positive trend, with China pledging to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions by 40-45 per cent by 2020, which is reported to have been three years ahead of schedule, according to the latest report from the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment. In 2017, it decreased by 46 percent compared to the 2005 levels, thanks by the way to the increasing green energy investments in China (Xinhua, 4th December 2018). Although these initial steps have been taken mainly within China, they also have an indirect impact on the situation in the Arctic.

China's White paper on the Arctic identifies several policies and positions on participating in Arctic affairs, including protecting the environment of the Arctic and addressing climate change. China expresses its full commitment to protecting the Arctic environment via global environmental agreements, with particular emphasis on the marine environment (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2018). China also commits itself to respecting the "environmental protection laws and regulations of the Arctic States" (*ibid.*), and even calls for stronger environmental management and co-operation from the Arctic States (Koivurova *et al.*, 2019: 30). The country also commits itself to raising the environmental responsibility awareness of its citizens and enterprises. In 2018, COSCO has made 14 voyages in the North Sea using 10 vessels, saving USD 10 million, 7,000 tons of fuel and 220 shipping days (Manta, 2019).

China has taken part in a variety of international negotiations and partnerships on climate change, and it is a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol as well as the Paris Agreement. 2007 was the year when China published its first national climate change program, which highlighted the historic responsibility of developed countries to reduce emissions as well as to aid developing countries to handle the adverse effects of climate change. In 2009 China was harshly criticised role in the UN

Climate conference in Copenhagen in 2009, the state now plays a rather constructive behavior in international climate politics. Between 2013 and 2016, China and the United States deepened their cooperation on climate change (Koivurova *et al.*, 2019: 35).

Furthermore, China is the world's biggest investor in carbon dioxide capture and storage technology, and it has a large research programme on geoengineering. The development of green technologies plays an important role in China's efforts towards the so called "greenisation" of its society as well as developing the country as a "knowledge power". When it comes to Arctic energy projects, China's participation in Arctic LNG (like Yamal LNG) projects supports these goals by increasing (technical) knowhow as well as the government's efforts to replace coal and oil by natural gas, a less environmentally harmful fossil fuel (*ibid.*: 40).

With the sudden and rapid development of the Chinese economy, pollution is becoming an increasing concern for the Beijing leadership. However, there is no tradition of environmental protection in China as in the Western world, so they have yet to learn as a developing country. However, in the case of China, the situation has arisen that it must do so not only within the country, but also outside the country because of its great power ambitions.

## **7. Conclusion**

Following a short overview of China's foreign policy in the Arctic, China acts as an external actor in the Arctic, follows the rule-based regional order as an observer member of the Arctic Council, taking into account the UNCLOS, and strengthening multilateralism by Belt and Road initiative, while also strengthening bilateral relations with the countries of the region. In the light of this, the hypothesis set up at the

beginning of the study was confirmed.

There is no doubt that China is an increasingly important player in the Arctic's life, and its growing presence is more and more likely to open up a new scene in the geopolitics of the major powers.

In terms of climate change, China expresses its strong commitment to the Paris agreement but also to studying the impacts of climate change in the Arctic and promoting international co-operation in “addressing climate change in the Arctic”. Of importance is that through the White Paper, China acknowledges how Arctic climate change will impact its own environment and people, and hence commits itself to strengthening “publicity and education on addressing climate change to raise the public's awareness of the issue”. China is committed to protecting the Arctic environment via global environmental agreements and foreign political aspirations in the Arctic region.

## Note

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