

The Polar Silk Road: China's Multilevel Arctic Strategy to Globalize the Far North

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Abstract

China has become an eminent Arctic actor in recent years due to its resource investments and bilateral diplomacies towards Russia and the Nordics. However, its arrival in the Arctic also aroused suspicion in foreign media and politics, which are distressed about China's goals in the Far North and the Belt and Road Initiative in general. This article assumes that the precondition for an effective and welcome Arctic diplomacy is how China manages and approaches the different levels and actors involved in Arctic governance. It argues that it is the small but wealthy European Arctic states that are indispensable for China to increase and accommodate its Arctic status and to complete the announced Polar Silk Road (PSR) in the years to come. Russia is mainly a conduit for China in connecting the PSR with Western Europe. However, Beijing's primary interests lie in robust and cooperative bilateral relations with the Arctic European states, enabling it to flexibly react to future external developments and opportunities, to promote the

globalisation of, and China's access to, the Arctic. Hence the Nordic societies should be aware that China's Arctic rise may also entail severe environmental costs in the fragile Arctic environment. The article concludes that China has adapted to the Arctic governance system peacefully so far, although this system needs to react flexibly to the new challenges that arise.

Keywords: *Barents, international political economy, foreign policy, multilevel governance, resources, Belt and Road Initiative*

1. Introduction

In January 2018, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (一带一路)¹ had finally reached the Far North when the People's Republic's State Council Information Office published the white paper titled 'China's Arctic Policy' (CAP) (中国的北极政策) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018). The white paper introduced the Polar Silk Road (PSR) (冰上丝绸之路), a northern maritime dimension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (21世纪海上丝绸之路). Like the BRI, the concurrent Maritime Silk Road was also proposed by the General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of China, Xi Jinping (习近平), namely during a speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013. China also made explicit commitments to global, regional, multilateral and bilateral mechanisms to build a well-organised 'Arctic Governance System' (北极治理体系) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018: 4), which should help to increase international confidence and trust in China's Arctic ambitions. However, to the contrary, China's Arctic enthrallment aroused suspicion in Western media and politics for years. *Newsweek* titled an article '[H]ow China's Arctic Empire Will Upset the Global Balance of Power' (14th

July 2017). *The New York Times* published an article 'Latest Arena for China's Growing Global Ambitions: The Arctic' (May 24, 2019). *CNBC* has highlighted how 'Russia and China vie to beat the U.S. in the trillion-dollar race to control the Arctic' (February 6, 2018). The British newspaper *The Independent* has perceived China as being in a 'race for Arctic dominance' (April 20, 2019). Furthermore, in May 2019, the United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, accused China of 'aggressive behaviour' and warned that the Arctic might become a 'New South China Sea' (*The Guardian*, 6th May 2019).

China's approach towards Arctic governance, and especially towards the Nordic states, is still underexplored. Most studies on China's Arctic policies explore China's Arctic interests or certain issue areas of engagement. In contrast, this article explores how China approaches and potentially shapes the emerging system of complex interdependence in the Far North and, in doing so, attempts to figure out China's primary Arctic goals. Oran Young's description of an Arctic Governance Mosaic (AGM) (Young, 2005) – emanated since the 1990s – inspired the research framework of this article, since this framework closely resembles China's proclamations about Arctic governance. A governance mosaic is non-hierarchical and displays a variety of connected issues. This dynamic and flexible, coordinated cooperative arrangement consists of global and regional rules, policies and fora, national governments, private actors and Arctic societies.

The next section introduces China's approach to this assumed AGM and presents an overview of the literature. Then, the empirical analysis explores China's Arctic policies and diplomacies towards Arctic governance at global, regional, bilateral and informal levels. It concludes that strong bilateral relations with the Nordics are indispensable to build the PSR and therefore are China's primary goal. Meanwhile, Russia acts as a significant Arctic hub and transit state for China's presence and the

commercialisation of the Arctic and its resources. China, in turn, is the primary driving force of the resulting globalisation of the Arctic, which could challenge the idea of an ‘Arctic distinctiveness’ compared to other regions and highlights the need for protection concerning the environment and its resources amidst rapid changes in the Arctic.

2. China and the Arctic Governance Mosaic

China committed itself to the global, regional, multilateral and bilateral mechanisms to build a well-organised ‘Arctic Governance System’ (北极治理体系) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018: 4). Tonami (2016: 19) has observed the ‘omnidirectional Arctic diplomacy’ of China, which also applies its primary foreign policy principles there: to avoid confrontation, build comprehensive national power and advance incrementally. Yang and Zhang (2016) have noted that Arctic governance consists not only of bilateral but also of multilevel, global and regional governance mechanisms. Yang (2015) has also stated that essential variables in China's Arctic approach include how the Arctic states and how non-Arctic states perceive it and how it sees itself. Hong (2014) and Peng and Wegge (2015) have affirmed that bilateral diplomacy is also an essential instrument for China in the Arctic. For many years, the Nordics were also regarded as more receptive and positive concerning China than the USA, Russia and Canada (Lunde *et al.*, 2016; Tonami, 2016).

The multilevel diplomacy approach comes close and is oriented towards what Young termed the Arctic Governance Mosaic (2005, 2016). A governance mosaic is related to a spatially geographic area and international and transnational issues that refer to that specific region. At its core is a differentiation of levels of analysis, as applied in the international relations methodology, and by China’s practical diplomacy

as well. Young (2016) has identified six elements of an AGM, which are as follows:

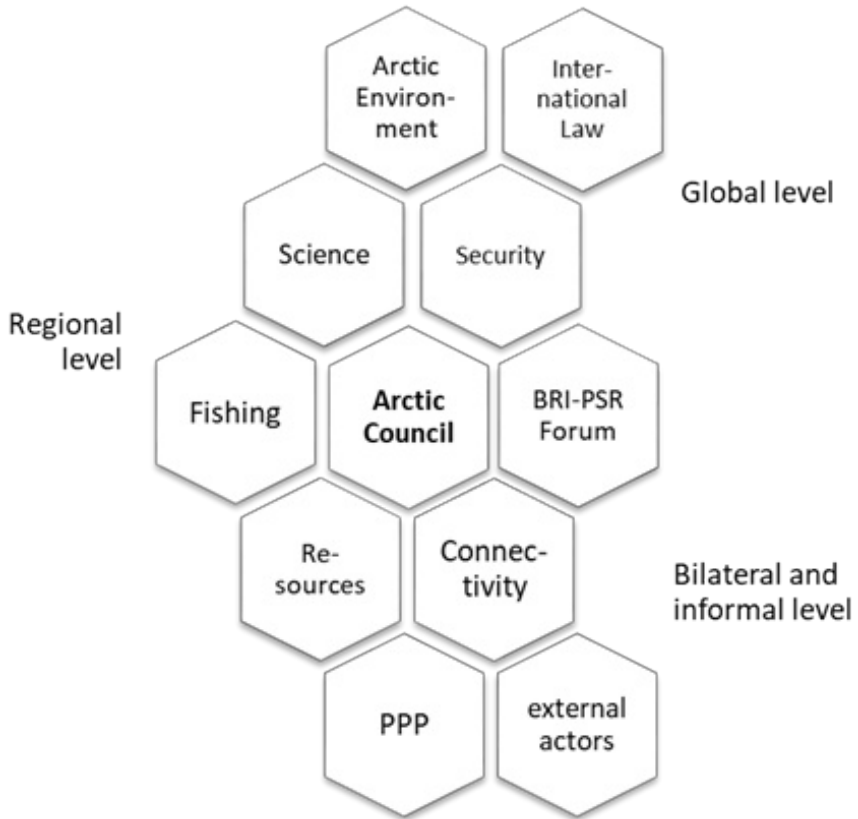
- global treaties and regimes developed by international organisations that also apply in the Arctic;
- the Arctic Council;
- locally based variable management systems;
- public-private partnerships;
- informal fora or meetings regarding Arctic matters of common concern; and
- ‘all-hands’ meetings.

The main criterion for successful Arctic governance is actors’ flexibility because the Arctic is changing fast. Some global issues additionally have a regional dimension, such as climate change and regional adaptation. When issues have an extraterritorial impact, such as sea pollution, it is the regional actors who must remind extraterritorial actors to take their responsibilities seriously. Therefore, the single governance mosaic blocs must be related to one another without a hierarchy and an overarching arrangement, such as an ‘Arctic treaty’, which would be too inflexible in a situation of rapid change, as Young (2005, 2016) has argued.

This paper modified these elements concerning China's participation and explores China's policies and emphases towards this governance mosaic. Young gave five recommendations regarding how rising China should engage with the Arctic (Young, 2016: 30-32). China should adopt a proactive attitude towards the Arctic but should not expect too much. China should encourage business activities but not regard them as a political strategy, and it should contribute to the construction of infrastructure needed to support responsible development in the Arctic

as a public good. China should treat the concerns of the Arctic's permanent residents in a sensitive manner, and finally, China should strengthen the science-policy interface to support the co-production of Arctic knowledge and policy.

Figure 1 China's Multilevel Arctic Governance



Source: Diagram by the author.

Figure 1 presents the relevant political and economic issues at the global, regional, bilateral and informal levels of analysis regarding China's approaches. These different levels are not separated in practical diplomacy because they blend. At the global level, international law such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) and environmental conventions apply in the Arctic Ocean, for instance, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), or conventions on shipping and pollution. Science and climate research are also part of the global level, blending into the regional level as well as into spheres of security.

At the regional level, the Arctic Council (A.C.) is the most relevant Arctic organisation, comprising all states that have Arctic territory within the Arctic Circle (see Figure 2). The A.C. was founded in 1996 and assumed an essential role in promoting action on topics like pollution, fishing, raw materials, tourism and science. These are Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the USA (via Alaska). Particularly, the Nordics view the A.C. as a whole policy-shaping body and believe that many of the Arctic's challenges require global as well as regional solutions (Khorrami, 2019; Prime Minister's Office, , Finland, 2013: 44). Non-Arctic states are not eligible for membership but have observer status only. Being an observer does not give them a special status. Also crucial for China at the regional international level are fishing negotiations and agreements, which are currently in the making. Moreover, China has engaged actively in cooperation with the Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. In sum, this article assumes that only when China manages the AGM well with its approaches from the global to the bilateral levels will China be able to build fruitful relations with those actors that are indispensable for the PSR and the globalisation of the Arctic.

Figure 2 Arctic Political Map (UNEP, 2006).



Source: Cartographer Hugo Ahlenius, <<https://www.grida.no/resources/7845>> (open source).

3. China's Governance Approach towards the Global Level

3.1. Commitment to Global Regimes

CAP states, '[t]he Arctic is gaining global significance for its rising strategic, economic values and those relating to scientific research,

environmental protection, sea passages, and natural resources. [...] It is an issue with global implications and international impacts' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018: 1). China's government perceives China as 'near-Arctic' (近北极国家), although the shortest distance between China and the Arctic Circle is 900 miles, similar to that of Poland. Also, scholars like Yang and Zhang (2016: 223) deem China a near-Arctic country, which is situated in the peripheral region near to yet outside of the Arctic Region.

Nevertheless, China's jurisdictional rights in the Arctic region are that of an Arctic outsider within the system of Arctic governance (Gayazova, 2013). Ecological changes in the Arctic region influence China's climate, environment and agricultural production, as well as its economic and social development. Chinese studies have claimed that climate change in the Arctic has contributed to exceptional snow and drought disasters in China. Therefore, Arctic issues have become global (Jiang, 2014).

Chen (2012) and Hong (2014) argued that China had adopted a low-profile tactic by avoiding confrontation from major littoral states. China's official engagement with the Arctic began with the signing of the Svalbard Treaty in 1925 (formerly called the Spitsbergen Treaty, in force since 1925) before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. That remains the only global-level governance arrangement for the Arctic region (Yang and Zhang, 2016). The treaty granted Norway sovereignty to the Svalbard archipelago but also afforded parties equal rights to undertake fishing, hunting, mining, trade and industrial activities in this area (Jakobson and Peng, 2012).

In 1996, China ratified the UNCLOS treaty system. UNCLOS was adopted and signed in 1982 and replaced the four Geneva Conventions from 1958, which respectively concerned the territorial sea, the contiguous zone, the continental shelf and the high seas fishing and

conservation of living resources on the high seas. The treaty gives Arctic nations an exclusive economic zone that extends 200 nautical miles (370 km) from land to marine resources. In the high seas, states outside the Arctic have rights in terms of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines as well as to resource exploitation in the area, under treaties such as UNCLOS and general international law. China has committed itself to UNCLOS and ‘plays a constructive part in the making, interpretation, application and development of international rules regarding the Arctic, and safeguards the common interests of all nations and the international community’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018: 9).

However, the *Ilulissat Declaration* of May 28, 2008, affirmed that the five Arctic coastal states do not accept changes to the legal regime of the Arctic and that their sovereign rights have to be respected (*2008 Ilulissat Declaration*). Political representatives of these five countries met during the Arctic Ocean Conference in Ilulissat, Greenland to discuss the Arctic Ocean, climate change, the protection of the marine ecosystem, maritime safety and division of emergency responsibilities due to new shipping routes. Besides, one of the foremost intentions written into the Declaration was to block any ‘new comprehensive international legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean’. Also, by ‘virtue of their sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in large areas of the Arctic Ocean, the five coastal states are in a unique position to address these possibilities and challenges’.

In contrast, Brady (2017: 195) observed that Chinese state media often use the phrase ‘the North Pole belongs to all humanity’, intending to internationalise Arctic issues. Rainwater (2013) argued that the language of ‘common heritage of mankind’ shall expand China’s legal rights concerning shipping and resources in applying a sort of ‘*lawfare*’, which misuses the law as a replacement for military means to achieve an

operational goal to circumvent its weaker status as a non-Arctic state through asymmetrical means. Brady wrote that China wants to lobby the 'court of international public opinion' (2017: 195) with language such as Arctic resources as 'global resources' at a time when delimitation of territory in the Arctic is not yet adequately concluded. In 2015, China's foreign minister Wang Yi (王毅) expressed that 'China believes that the rights of non-Arctic countries under international law in the Arctic and the collective interests of the international community should be respected' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 17th October 2015). However, the renewal of the *Ilulissat Declaration* from 2018, in the year of China's issuance of its first Arctic strategy paper, confirmed the previous Declaration and again provided an explicit statement of the Arctic Five concerning sovereignty.

China is a party to the Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution (MARPOL) and the International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Cooperation. China is also party to the Minimata Convention on Mercury (2013), which applies mainly to mining and resource extraction. These conventions are all applicable to the Arctic region. China has also committed itself to relevant rules of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), including the International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code). The Polar Code, in force since 2017, is mandatory under both the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). It protects ships and the people aboard them (both seafarers and passengers) in the harsh conditions of the waters surrounding the two poles. The Code requires ships in the Arctic to apply for a Polar Ship Certificate, intended to cover the full range of shipping-related matters on navigation, including ship design, construction and equipment;

operational and training concerns; search and rescue; and the protection of the environment and ecosystems of the Polar Regions.

Given that 80% of transarctic shipping currently goes through Norwegian waters, potentially higher Arctic regional standards may affect shipping in the future: if crude engine oil were more strongly regulated or even prohibited, Arctic transport might become uneconomical. To date, no infrastructure can deal with contamination or accidents in Arctic waters. China is not a party to the Convention on Environment Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, signed in the Finnish Espoo in 1991, which entered into force in 1997 (Espoo Convention). China is also not a party to the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, Geneva (1979). All Arctic states have ratified these two conventions, while Iceland, Russia and the U.S. have only signed but not yet ratified the Espoo Convention. This lack of Chinese commitment to these environmental conventions only hints to speculate on China's future attitude concerning Arctic shipping. However, so far, one may rationalise that China rather supports global minimum rules instead of higher requirements in the Arctic, which would make shipping more expensive.

3.2. China and Arctic Security

Tonami (2016) wrote that China began to consider the geopolitical dimension of the Arctic when Russia sent a research expedition to plant a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed next to the North Pole in 2007 (see Figure 3). In 2015, Beijing passed a new security law emphasising that China must defend its national security interests, including its assets in the deep sea and the polar regions, and enhance safe access, scientific exploration, utilisation and development capabilities and international cooperation. Also, in 2015 and in line with this policy, five Chinese warships were sailing along the Alaskan coast, which led observers to

Figure 3 Claimed Territories in the Arctic Ocean



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arctic-claims.png>> (1st April 2009) (open source).

conclude that China protracted its naval scope into the Arctic (Brady, 2017). Recently in CAP, China portrays itself ‘as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, China shoulders the important mission of jointly promoting peace and security in the Arctic’ (Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018: 3). Nevertheless, how welcome is a security role of China in the Arctic region?

Under President Barack Obama, the White House described the Arctic region as peaceful and stable. The June 2018 report of the U.S. Navy aligns with the U.S. Pentagon that the ‘Arctic is at low risk for conflict’ (GAO 2018). A Defence Agreement has bound the USA and Iceland since 1951. Although Iceland is a non-military country, it is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member. Furthermore, Denmark, Norway and Canada are all NATO members. Since the Cold War, the USA has military facilities and satellite platforms to detect potential incoming missiles in Greenland. Sweden is a militarily non-aligned country but cooperates closely with NATO and in 1994 joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. NATO is currently stepping up cooperation with Sweden and Finland amidst the growing military presence of Russia in the Baltic Sea. In October 2018, the largest NATO manoeuvre since the end of the Cold War, ‘Trident Juncture 2018’, practised for a Russian invasion. All 29 NATO members, as well as Finland and Sweden, participated in the war games in Northern Norway, the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea.

U.S. President Donald Trump declared to work together with the Arctic Nations ‘to advance stability, freedom of navigation and respect for national sovereignty in the Arctic’, and that the region must be ‘free from external intrusion, interference, and coercion’ (*Newsweek*, 3rd October 2019). Trump regards China's rise as an Arctic actor with considerable suspicion, additionally owing to China's flouting of international law in the South China Sea. A Chinese security role, that is, military presence in the Arctic, is, therefore, less than welcome. Also, the United States Coast Guard has named China as a threat to American interests in the Arctic (Havnes and Seland, 2019). Besides, the European

Commission's in-house think tank suggested that the European Union should 'exercise caution' in its Arctic engagement with China, 'as China's long-term aspirations remain unknown' (EPSC, 2019: 13). Furthermore, numerous bilateral and regional security agreements in the Arctic limit a Chinese security role facilitated or supported by Arctic countries.

It is instead the global power shifts, insecurity about China's Arctic ambitions, cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, and China's aggressive claims in the South China Sea rather than real dynamics in China's security presence in the Arctic that create suspicions about China. Could China mitigate such concerns with a rather obscure concept like science diplomacy?

3.3. Science Diplomacy as a Threat Mitigation and Trust-building Measure?

Su and Mayer (2018) elaborated on the possibilities of trust-building in international relations created by science diplomacy. The four mechanisms that produce trust would be the sharing of resources and infrastructure, personal interactions, science-based institutions and spillover effects. Su and Mayer also find that the inherent potential of science diplomacy illustrates an opportunity for the rising power of China to integrate into regional politics while alleviating threat perceptions.

Scholars have argued that China should aim to avoid sensitive issues such as resource exploration and focus instead on climate change considerations, 'which will allow China to constructively participate in global cooperation' (Jakobson and Peng, 2012: vi). Young (2016) recommended that China strengthen the science-policy interface to support the co-production of Arctic knowledge and policy. China's activities in polar science already began in the 1980s, while climate

research has been a priority of the Chinese government since the 1990s. China founded the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) (中国极地研究中心) in 1989. In 1994, the icebreaking research vessel Xuelong (雪龙) began its first Antarctic expedition.

Five years later, China sent its first official Arctic research expedition (Tonami, 2016). China established its first Arctic research station in Ny Alesund on Svalbard in December 2013, the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) (中国-北欧北极研究中心). Two Norwegian scientists were part of the team during a diplomatic crisis between the two nations. Major research institutions on Arctic matters from all the Nordics became partner organisations. The objective was to provide a common platform to research with researchers from the Nordics. Between 1999 and 2017, China made nine Arctic research expeditions, always with the participation of foreign researchers. Since 2017, China has planned to conduct a research expedition each year. Also, Chinese researchers regularly participate in foreign Arctic research programmes and expeditions. China has become a leader in Arctic research, supported by a multi-discipline observation system covering the sea, ice and snow, the atmosphere and the biological and geological system of the Arctic. China has created nautical maps for open use and takes part in international meteorological research to map Arctic ice levels and monitored the region from space in 2018. The icebreaker Xuelong conducted several Arctic missions under the Chinese National Arctic Research Expedition.

However, there are limitations. These investigations also serve to find resources and more manoeuvrable sea routes. Given that China might also use this Arctic experience for future submarine navigation in the Arctic, it will additionally have security implications for the Arctic and beyond. Besides, China's enhanced science activities are more and more eyed with suspicion by Western states. For instance, the Danish

Defence Intelligence Service expressed that China's military is increasingly using scientific research in the Arctic as a way into the region and has a 'dual-purpose', warning of intensifying geopolitical rivalry in the High North (Reuters, 29th November 2019). Scientific and technological endeavours, therefore, blend into the sphere of security. China's scientific expeditions are not regarded as apolitical by the Arctic environment anymore but viewed with increased suspicion.

4. The Regional Level: The A.C., Fisheries Agreements and BRI Cooperation

4.1. China, the Arctic Council and Fisheries

The A.C. is central to the AGM. Its goal is to coordinate joint action on all vital issues in the region. It has eight member states and six permanent participants, which represent the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Roughly ten per cent of the four million Arctic inhabitants are indigenous people. The Council focuses on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic. The A.C. demands, that observers recognise Arctic states' sovereignty, their sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic; recognise that an extensive legal framework applies to the Arctic Ocean including, notably, the Law of the Sea and that this framework provides a solid foundation for responsible management of this ocean; and respect the values, interests, culture and traditions of Arctic indigenous peoples and other Arctic inhabitants (Arctic Council – Observers, updated 31st July 2019). The Arctic Council members decided on three relevant legally binding agreements under the A.C. auspices. These are the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation (signed 2017), the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (signed 2013), and the Agreement on

Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (signed 2011) (Arctic Council – Agreements, updated 6th December 2018). Observers seek to contribute to environmental issues of global importance and develop the economic potential of the Arctic, although they are weak actors (Chater, 2016).

China initiated its official application for observer status at the A.C. in 2006 and was accepted not before 2013 by the Kiruna Ministerial meeting, together with India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. As of 2019, the A.C. has 13 national observers. The USA and Canada remained indecisive about or opposed China's presence (Lunde *et al.*, 2016). Russia, for years, obstructed Beijing's attempts to become an observer (Flake, 2013). The Nordics, however, supported Beijing's bid. Denmark has been the most consistent backer in China's quest to gain observer status. After acceptance in 2014, President Xi, for the first time, characterised China as a 'polar great power' (Sorensen, 2018: 3). China regarded this as a significant diplomatic success and an essential step towards becoming a maritime nation.

China took part in most working groups and every A.C. meeting possible. Havnes and Seland (2019) conclude that the A.C. provides the principal outlet for China's multilateral Arctic efforts. China proclaimed to respect the interests of the indigenous people when it writes that '[...] all stakeholders in this area should pursue mutual benefit and collective progress in all fields of activities' and that 'such cooperation should ensure that the benefits are shared by both Arctic and non-Arctic states as well as by non-state entities, and should accommodate the interests of residents including the indigenous peoples' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018: 3).

However, in May 2019 for the first time in A.C.'s history, the meeting ended without a final statement because the U.S. delegate rejected the concept of climate change. In an era of sharp geopolitical

shifts, including in the Arctic, this coordinated organisation may require institutional reform. Oran Young once described the Arctic region as fundamentally different from other regions like Western Europe or the Middle East (2005). However, in 2019 he not only questioned the effectiveness of the A.C. but also that the Arctic was still a 'low-tension region that fits the description of a zone of peace'. (Young, 2019: 5). Young suggested a profound rethinking of membership rules in the Arctic to find a more robust representation; otherwise, the A.C. will dwindle. For China, the most significant success indeed was to achieve observer status, which contributes to China's self-understanding as a maritime power. However, whether the A.C. also remains China's primary focus of Arctic orientation is questionable, since, on many vital issues, like fishing, it is the 'Arctic Five', not the A.C. that makes the rules. Fisheries is an excellent example of the limitations of the A.C.

Currently, no fishing takes place in the central Arctic region; commercial fishing occurs in the North Atlantic and within the exclusive economic zone of the Arctic coastal states. China has by far the world's largest fishing fleet and is naturally interested in tapping the Arctic maritime resources. The North Atlantic oceans, the Bering and the Barents Sea, belong to the planet's most fertile fishing grounds. Climate change will open new areas to fishing, necessitating further negotiations for binding agreements to prevent unregulated fisheries. In 2015, the 'Arctic Five' (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, USA) signed the Declaration Concerning the Prevention of Unregulated High Seas Fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean (CAOFA, see Figure 4). China is participating in the 'Arctic 5+5' process together with the E.U., Iceland, Japan and South Korea. That is the first agreement to take a legally binding, precautionary approach to protect an area from commercial fishing before it has begun. Only a small part of the agreement falls under the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC),

Figure 4 Agreement on Unregulated Fishing in the Arctic Ocean



Source: Government of Norway, Agreement on unregulated fishing in the Arctic Ocean, 1st December 2017, <<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/agreement-on-unregulated-fishing-in-the-arctic-ocean/id2580484/>>.

rendering CAOFA very substantial. China's general Arctic fishing rights are therefore limited to UNCLOS and the Svalbard Treaty. As a result of climate change in the coming decades, Atlantic cod will migrate towards

the coasts of Greenland and Labrador and into the Barents Sea off the coast of Norway and Russia, which will become the most abundant fishing ground in the Arctic region. The cod stock in the Barents Sea has already increased in recent years, as has salmon off the Alaskan coast. However, China has no access to them so far. The NEAFC almost wholly covers the Barents Sea. The E.U. currently leads the Head of the Commission and Presidency. Contracting parties are Denmark, the E.U., Iceland, Norway and the Russian Federation. There are currently six 'cooperating non-contracting' parties, but China is not among them. The stocks are fully regulated and allocated by the NEAFC as of 2019 and for the foreseeable future (NEAFC, 2003).

4.2. The Belt and Road Forum and the Nordics

Another significant example, in which the A.C. lacks meaning for China, is in investments in infrastructure. Therefore, China uses other venues to discuss such issues and claims a leading position. The Arctic Investment Protocol provides guidelines for responsible and sustainable development, published by a broad range of stakeholders. The white papers indicate that 'China, [...] is ready to participate in the governance of the Arctic, and advance Arctic-related cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 26th January 2018: 6). The year 2017 saw the 'Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative' issued by China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), while the State Ocean Administration (SOA) aimed to 'synchronise development plans and promote joint actions among countries along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' (Gudjonsson and Nielsson, 2017a) with three planned Arctic routes. Accordingly, the China-Nordic Research Center (CNARC) held its fifth annual China-Nordic Cooperation Symposium in Dalian, with the BRI the critical topic. CNARC also organises economic roundtables on topics

such as Arctic shipping and port cities and has contributed to a joint Nordic dimension of China's Arctic policy (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2016).

President Xi announced the upgrading of the China-Finland partnership to a future-oriented form of cooperative partnership and enhanced economic cooperation in the fields of investment, innovation, environment and urbanisation in 2013. In 2017, Xi and Finland's Prime Minister Juha Sipilä again exchanged visits in Helsinki and Beijing, where the latter declared an expansion of their joint Arctic affairs and cooperation under the BRI framework, as well as calling for the active cooperation of Northern European countries with China. China has a large 'Arctic Corridor' railway project in mind to link the PSR and connect the Arctic with the Baltic Sea and continental Europe. This project would connect Kirkenes, Norway's northernmost town, with Helsinki in the south of Finland, and – via a multi-billion US\$ project underneath the Baltic Sea – with Tallinn, the capital of Estonia and the end station of the PSR. A Finnish entrepreneur heads this €15 billion project, up to 70% of which shall be funded by unknown Chinese investors (*China Daily*, 2nd March 2018).

In addition, negotiations of a 10,500 km cable through the Arctic have taken place in Finland to provide a faster data connection between Europe and China from as early as 2020.

China invited the five to the International BRI Forum in Beijing in 2017 and 2019, with weak representation from European nations. No representatives of a Nordic country participated, except for the Minister of Transport and Communications of Finland in 2017. At the second BRI Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in 2019 within the Maritime Silk Road Port Cooperation Mechanism, 13 countries participated, among them only one Nordic country – Denmark. However, the only BRI-related issue was the signing by the Chinese government of tax treaties and protocols with Sweden, Kenya, and

Chile. In sum, the E.U., but also Nordics, have taken a reluctant attitude towards the BRI, especially concerning the involvement of China's vertically integrated state-owned enterprises.

5. Bilateral Level: Cooperation 'Under' the BRI

5.1. Connectivity Cooperation with Russia

China's interests in shipping and Russian resources place Chinese-Russian negotiations at the centre of contemporary Arctic connectivity. Tillmann, Jian and Nielsson (2018) have provided a rich account of China's cooperative implementation of the PSR with the Nordics, but especially with Russia. In 2017, President Xi and Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev agreed to jointly develop the PSR and expand the use of the NSR. Central concerns are energy, shipping and infrastructure projects, mostly financed by Chinese investors in Russia. China's interests and considerable investments in Russian carbon results in the refurbishment of harbours and security and emergency facilities, while facilitating further investment in Arctic research, shipping and vessel construction. An essential step in this endeavour was the joint project on refurbishing and expanding the Russian port of Zarubino, from a capacity of 1.2 million tons per year to 60 million tons per year. Zarubino is close to Rason in North Korea at the Sino-Russian border. These investments additionally increase Russia's (necessary) amenability to regular Arctic trans-shipping to Europe. Energy may also be exported by Chinese ships to Europe in the future, rendering the PSR more economically viable to the latter. Russia is, therefore, a hub and transit state for the PSR.

In 2013, during his first state visit to Russia, Xi agreed with the Russian government that the state-owned Rosneft would borrow US\$2 billion from the China Development Bank and in return guarantee 25

years of oil supplies to China, a total of up to 620,000 barrels of oil per day. Rosneft offered China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) access to three offshore Arctic areas for oil exploration. The most significant BRI-related Arctic investment to date was the China-Russia Yamal liquid natural gas (LNG) project between China National Petroleum Corporation, Russia's Novatek and French Total. The expected annual output will be 16.5 million tons by 2019. For Russia, Chinese investments are helping to revive the Russian Arctic and may double its share in the global LNG market. This Russian majority-owned US\$27 billion project outshines the China-European Arctic projects so far.

Nevertheless, this project has brought China closer to the European Arctic states, where the majority of smaller as well as significant investments may take place in the coming years. This project is a precondition and steps towards further globalising the Arctic, with China's policies moving Siberia to the central European Arctic. Lastly, all Nordic states became members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the primary finance tool China has established since 2015 for BRI projects.

5.2. China's Leading Role in Arctic Shipping

Beijing can only achieve its Arctic goals with the cooperation of a variety of state and non-state actors. Given that 90% of international trade takes place among countries in the Northern Hemisphere, shipping across the Arctic Sea would prove much quicker and cheaper, at least during summer. There are three possible major sea routes through the Arctic for the PSR. The Northwest Passage traverses the internal waters of Canada (due to Canada's numerous islands off its northern coastline). The other passage, the Northeast Passage, goes along the Russian coast. The transarctic route through the middle is mostly ice-covered, but

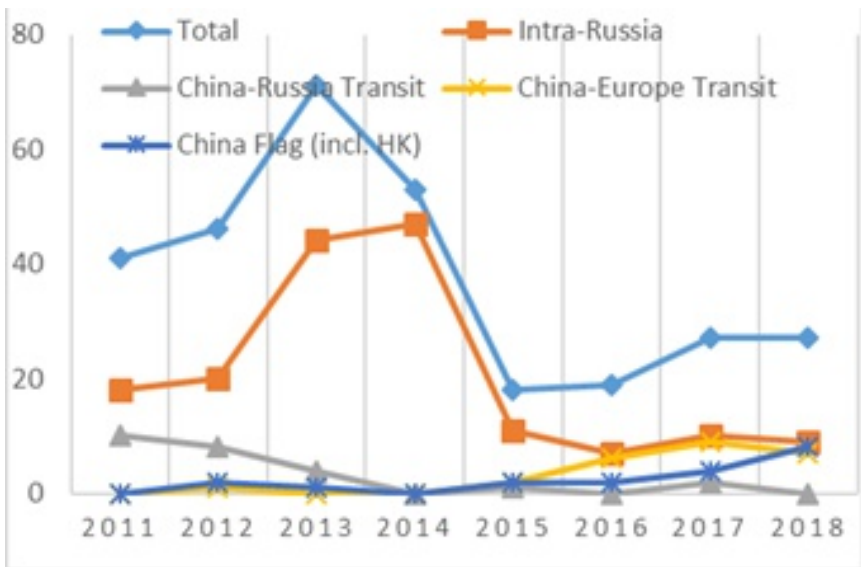
China has also been testing it in recent years. In June 2017, China put forward plans for three ocean-based ‘blue economic passages’ to connect Asia with Africa, Oceania and Europe to advance maritime cooperation under the BRI. The ‘blue economic passages’ are central to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

In 2017, China became the only country to send ships across all three routes. The Northern Sea Route (NSR, see Figure 5) is the most substantial trade route between the North Pacific and North Atlantic and the shortest route available; at 4,000 miles it is approximately 40% shorter than the Suez Canal. In September 2013, the MV Yong Sheng became the first commercial vessel to reach Rotterdam using the NSR. COSCO has accumulated more experience in sailing the NSR route than any other company. In 2015, COSCO announced the launch of regular shipping to Europe through the Arctic Ocean. Tonami (2016) argues that COSCO has implicitly helped China to become a great polar power. COSCO Shipping has already established itself as a leading Arctic shipping company in the NSR. In 2017, at least six Chinese-flagged commercial vessels made use of the shortcut to Europe. COSCO alone has announced 14 transit voyages along the NSR in 2019, nearly twice the number of 2018 (Humpert, 2019). However, the overall number of ships traversing the NSR is stagnating. In 2018, there were 27 transit voyages and 27, again, in 2019. The record was in 2013 when 71 trips via the NSR carried 1.3 mln tons of cargo (CHNL Information Office, 31st December 2019).

In contrast, the Danish Maersk is not convinced about the economic viability of the route. Russia represents a steppingstone to the PSR via the Nordics. That is also signified by the statistics of the NSR in recent years, as China-Russia transit has reduced, while China-Europe transit is increasing. The announced building of a nuclear icebreaker will further enhance China’s ability to navigate the Arctic Ocean even during the

winter (Gupta, 2018). China will become only the second country to operate a nuclear icebreaker, after Russia (Humpert, 2019). This icebreaker will prove essential to opening shipping lanes and reducing China's transit dependence on Russia, as it will be able to integrate the Transpolar Sea Route (through the central Arctic Ocean) into the Polar Silk Road. However, Moe and Stokke (2019) claimed that Japan, South Korea, but most recently also China exhibited less diplomatic activity concerning Arctic shipping than indicated by earlier studies, which leads to growing concerns about the future economic feasibility of Arctic shipping (see also Figure 5).

Figure 5 China and the Northern Sea Route



Source: NSR transit statistics, modelled after figures from Nord University information office <<https://arctic-lio.com/>> data by the author.

5.3. Bilateral Relations with the Nordics: China's Central Arctic Gateways?

According to Hellström (2014), the Nordics – Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Sweden – are easy to deal with from China's perspective. Numerous high-level state visits in recent years have demonstrated keen Chinese interest in the Nordics. China tried to develop dense relations, especially with Iceland, Denmark and most recently with Norway, which was ignored by China in most years of the last decade.

In 2002, China's President Jiang Zemin (江泽民) made the first visit by a head of state to Iceland, which became the entry point to reaching the Nordics (Tonami, 2016). In 2007, both countries commenced negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA), which was signed in 2013, the first between China and a European country, covering shipbuilding, fishing, geothermal power and tourism. China today has the most significant foreign embassy in Reykjavik. Arctic narratives have both reinforced Iceland's Western foreign policy identity and non-Western possibilities, such as increased ties with China (Ingimundarson, 2015). The Arctic region has become a core component of Iceland's foreign policy, in which China plays a vital role. Iceland was the first country in Western Europe to recognise China's market economy status. The Chinese ambassador to Iceland, Zhang Weidong (张卫东), has expressed that 'China and Iceland have broad space for more cooperation in the Belt and Road framework' (Embassy of PRC in Iceland, 1st June 2017).

For China, Iceland appears to be a natural partner by which Asia and Europe can connect and cooperate (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 8th June 2018). Both the Icelandic and Chinese governments encourage joint efforts with other Arctic states to build the ocean-based

'blue economic passage' linking China and Europe. Iceland may become a trans-shipment centre for Chinese commodities and raw materials. Chinese tourism to Iceland in the Pre-COVID-19 era had sharply increased. Both sides also plan to expand existing cooperation projects regarding geothermal exploration and clean energy, joint research and technical cooperation in glaciers, volcanoes, earthquakes and other geological areas. In 2016, Sinopec and Iceland signed the cooperation agreement of the China-Iceland Geothermal Research and Development Center (Economic and Commercial Office, Embassy of PRC in Iceland, 31st May 2019). China has the 'Northern Lights research station' (北极光观测站) in Iceland. Moreover, the Chinese fishing fleet will be allowed to catch fish from Iceland and sell it as Icelandic.

Since 2008, Denmark has become a key European player for China through the 'China-Denmark comprehensive strategic partnership', celebrated in 2018. President Hu Jintao's (胡锦涛) visit to Denmark in June 2012 was the first in 62 years of history of bilateral diplomatic relations, accompanied by critical media speculation: 'Greenland's huge mineral wealth may have been the elephant in the room', and the explanation for President Hu's visit (Reuters, 12th June 2012). To expand the scope of its cooperation, China emphasises strategic partnership in the fields of innovation and entrepreneurship, green economy, high-end manufacturing, education and elderly care services and anti-corruption. That may also enable China to debate BRI issues in Greenland. Forsby and Jiang (2016) claim that Denmark's BRI participation will remain limited to Copenhagen's membership in the AIIB. Although Greenland enjoys resource autonomy (in contrast to foreign and security policy, which Copenhagen determines), an understanding with Denmark is indispensable, because large infrastructure projects like airports also have a security component. Kluth and Lynggaard (2018) opine that Denmark may also have the

normative goal to enmesh China into a liberal Arctic order to legitimise its advance into the Arctic.

The relations between Norway and China had the most substantial potential of improvement: '[I]n 2013, China and Norway had no high-level official exchanges, and cooperation in all areas further decreased' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2013). Improvements happened when Chinese bilateral relations with other Arctic states also broadened. Norway – China cooperation focuses on hydroelectricity, offshore oil and gas development and the investment and liberalisation of global trade. Norway is authorised to seek licences awarded by the Icelandic government as part of a 1981 treaty between the two countries and to seek outside partners. The China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) with local firm Eykon Energy received two licences in 2017.

Norway also possesses unique cold climate technology. Norway joined the AIIB to lure future Chinese investments to the Norwegian Arctic. Beijing has claimed that Norway will 'actively' respond to BRI and plans to make Kirkenes a focal point of the PSR. Kirkenes is located 400 km north of the Arctic Circle and is very close to the Russian border. It became a friendly town with the northeastern Chinese city of Harbin and was dubbed the 'World's Northernmost Chinatown' at a multicultural event in the winter of 2019. That 'Barents Spektakel', a five-day event, also highlighted a 'golden age of China' (Xinhua, 14th February 2019).

The Barents region is vital for connectivity and the PSR also because it has a comparatively high population density. Like Iceland, Norway opportunistically recognised China's market economy status. China suggested the launch of negotiations of an FTA and to cooperate in fields including agriculture, fishery, the ocean, shipping, environmental protection, finance, taxation, social security, investment, people-to-people and cultural cooperation. Since 2018, China has sought

to learn from Norway's proficiency in winter sports, being the worldwide leader in Olympic gold medals.

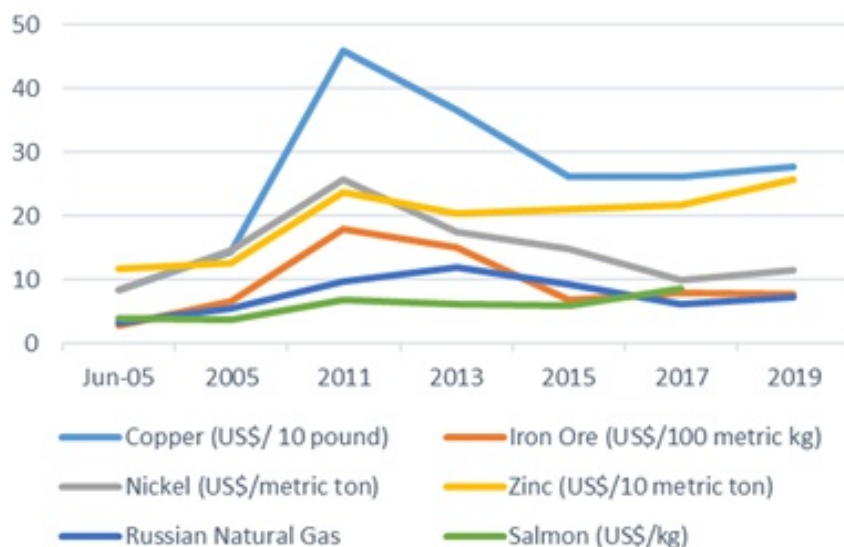
These broadened negotiations with the Nordics may increase the Nordics' trust and confidence in China's Arctic policies. Additionally, strong bilateral relations may offer Chinese actors access to public-private partnerships in the economic field and political exchanges at the sub-state level. However, there are also limitations in China-Nordics bilateral relations. The Nordic countries pusillanimity in China is shown by Norway's, Sweden's, Finland's and Denmark's decision from the end of 2019 to exclude Huawei from the construction of the 5G networks for security and other reasons and prefer Ericsson and Nokia instead, two homegrown Nordic companies. That this is pushback for China was also signified by media reports that China would threaten to step back from a trade agreement with the Faroe if Huawei were excluded.

6. The Informal Level: Raw Materials and East Asian Coordination

6.1. Raw Materials Projects

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2014) estimates that around \$1 trillion in minerals such as gold, zinc, nickel and platinum lie in the region. It also holds an estimated 13% of the Earth's oil and as much as 30% of its natural gas (Gautier, 2009) as well as plenty of other desirable raw materials like rare earth elements. Scholars generally view China's raw material interests as its dominant concern (see Alexeeva and Lasserre, 2012; Humpert and Raspotnik, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2014; Jakobson, 2010; Jakobson and Peng, 2012; Rainwater, 2012). However, all these studies were conducted under conditions of high raw material prices and before China revealed its PSR plans. A more recent study conducted in a period of lower global commodity prices has interpreted China's mineral interests as being

Figure 6 Selected Raw Materials' Global Prices



Source: Modeled after data from <www.indexmundi.com> by the author.

rather moderate (Weidacher Hsiung, 2016). Based on the eleventh Five-Year Plan from 2006, the Ministry of Land and Resources identified copper, zinc, aluminum and nickel as resources of which China is short in supply, and it hence seeks to promote the exploration of mines domestically and abroad. The Twelfth Five-Year Plan of 2011 (中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十二个五年规划纲要) included a ‘Go Out’ (走出去) with a particular financing scheme from China’s Development Bank for resource development projects abroad. These plans coincided with high global raw material prices and China’s broadened Arctic policies in the early 2010s. When global raw material prices fell in 2012, Arctic mining projects were deemed uneconomical by private actors, and media attention regarding Chinese interests in

Greenland's resource riches calmed down. Greenland is rich in rare earth minerals, copper and zinc, and has moderate levels of nickel and tungsten, materials that China needs for its economic security. In Greenland, five projects with Chinese participation in raw materials and infrastructure were under development (Yang, 2018), all initiated by the Greenlandic government or Western companies. Greenland proactively searches for Chinese investments at trade fairs, China's government or companies in mining, construction, harbour engineering and hydropower. Chinese companies have accordingly purchased licences or invested in the original company or construction for the project. These projects came without the intervention of the Chinese government. However, Chinese companies always try to align with governmental policies, as Yang (2018) explains. Investments are seldom purely private, as they require political, societal and financial backing by governments. Private companies also seek governmental financial support. Of the five projects, private Chinese companies (Jiangxi Zhongrun) own the Isua Iron Ore and the Wegener Halvo Copper projects, while the Kvanjefeld rare earth project is co-funded by the local Chinese state-owned company Shenghe, which acquired 12.55 of Greenland Minerals and Energy in 2016 (Yang, 2018). In contrast, the Chinese state-owned company CCCC has withdrawn its bid to build airports in Nuuk and Ilulissat, after Greenland chose Denmark over Beijing to finance the projects. Several Chinese state-operated enterprises have signed agreements with Iceland, among them Sinopec.

In 2015, Nonferrous Metal Corporation (NFC) signed an agreement with Klappir Development to conduct a feasibility study of Klappir's aluminium smelter project in Hafursstaðir in northern Iceland. The Chinese privately held carmaker Geely Group signed an agreement for investment in Carbon Recycling International of Iceland, a private company that has developed a process to convert CO₂ from industrial

sources into liquid fuel. A Chinese firm obtained a licence to carry out oil and gas exploration in the Dreki region, located between Iceland and Jan Mayen Island. In sum, much fewer Chinese investments went into Euro-Arctic resource extraction projects compared to Chinese-Russian cooperation. China's rush or race to the Arctic resources, as portrayed in some media outlets, has still not fully materialised.

6.2. Coordination with Extra-Asian States

China, Japan and South Korea are involved in Arctic development through resource interests, scientific research and international shipping. Beijing has initiated a multilateral forum with its East Asian neighbours. China wants to coordinate its Arctic interests and policies with South Korea and Japan and increase Asia's standing in Arctic governance. Both South Korea and Japan were accepted as observers in the A.C. at the Kiruna meeting in 2013, and geographically they are as near-Arctic as China (Gong, 2016). Like China, they are also party to UNCLOS, the UNFCCC and the various agreements developed by the International Maritime Organisation. China is more strongly coordinating on Arctic issues with South Korea than with Japan. In 2008, the two countries signed the 'Memorandum of Understanding on Polar Science and Technology Cooperation'. All three jointly initiated the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences, which is the only regional scientific cooperative organisation in Asia. Asian stakes are in the fields of management and use of natural resources, Arctic shipping and shipbuilding (especially South Korea) and environmental protection (Stokke, 2014). All three also have a keen interest in LNG imports from Russia. In 2015, the three nations officially acknowledged the global importance of Arctic issues in a joint declaration. They launched a 'trilateral high-level dialogue' to share Arctic policies, explore collaborative projects and search for ways to deepen cooperation over the Arctic (Bennett, 2017).

The Third Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic took place in Shanghai in June 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 8th June 2018). The joint Declaration reiterated the intention to contribute to promoting peace, stability and sustainable development in the Arctic, and stressed the importance of policy dialogue and facilitating their cooperation in the Arctic. The common denominator on Arctic affairs is research, which may contribute to mutual trust-building. Together with other Asian nations, China may embed and increase its Arctic influence and rationalise concerns against China's rising impact. Furthermore, even if coordination proves merely superficial, Beijing may attempt to eschew notions that China was only interested in resources. In 2012, the Japanese newspaper *Sankei Shimbun* (産経新聞) published an article titled 'Greedy eyes of China never left the wealth of Arctic'. China's Xinhua News Agency immediately refuted this statement (*People's Daily*, 3rd February 2012).

Also, within the BRICS state group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) plans for cooperation on polar issues and the Arctic were discussed on several occasions (Lagutina and Leksyutina, 2019). However, these five states have different statuses regarding Arctic governance and are at very different stages in their engagement with the Arctic region, while South Africa is not engaged in Arctic affairs. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether BRICS can add to the China-Russia bilateral relations in the Arctic.

7. Conclusion

China's primary goal to build the PSR is contingent on several factors and conditions that it is seeking to influence and manage at different levels of Arctic governance. A precondition for the success of China's Arctic diplomacy is how it institutionalises its policies towards the

Arctic in a multilevel approach. At the global level, China must accept international law, the territorial sovereignty of the Arctic nations and a limitation of its role in Arctic security if it wants to make progress with its PSR since suspicions are also growing. Probably, China will be defensive on significant higher environmental standards in the Arctic and favour global minimum standards over (higher) regional standards. Higher standards on shipping compared to other regions may make the PSR uneconomical. For that goal, strong bilateral relations with the Nordics and Russia and investment prospects are helpful.

China indeed adopted a proactive attitude towards the Arctic but did not expect too much from the A.C., which may lose its central position in Arctic governance for China. Hence, China also looks for alternatives to promote its goals. While China encourages business activities more than any other actor, activities that have potentially geopolitical content, like airbases or shipping ports, are regarded with suspicion, especially from the U.S., but more and more also from the Nordics. Concerning its science diplomacy, China uses it implicitly as a way of trust-building, not only towards the Arctic but also with its East Asian peers, Japan and South Korea, which have similar Arctic interests. However, China's intensive Arctic science has met suspicion in the Arctic.

Russia is currently an ideal partner for China's strong political will since China has the funds and the means to negotiate significant investments in infrastructure. Investments in ports and energy supplies also make trade shipping and sea routes more viable and cost-efficient, while increasing China's energy security, thereby laying the economic foundation for comparative advantages in future exploration and investment in the Arctic. However, it is the small but wealthy European Arctic states that are indispensable to China's goal to globalise the Arctic region and to complete the PSR in the coming years and decade(s). Russia is a conduit to connecting the PSR with Western

Europe. Beijing's main interests lie in robust and cooperative bilateral relations with the Arctic European states, enabling it to flexibly react to future external developments and opportunities, which even it can scarcely influence directly.

China has broadened its diplomatic interactions with these small states so that from a negotiation theory perspective, collective value creation supersedes mere value distribution. That also adds to trust-building. A broadening of policies reduces suspicions that China is only interested in resources, while, nevertheless, the Nordics have become more reluctant concerning China's Arctic policies. At the informal level, public-private partnerships and fora, such as with the East Asian developed economies, may contribute to China's socialisation with and the economic development of the Arctic region. Amidst rapid ecological changes in the Arctic, the Nordic societies nevertheless should be aware that China's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of globalising the Arctic are not identical with the Nordics strong interests of environmental protection and sustainable development ('Arctic distinctiveness'). In sum, however, China has adapted to the Arctic governance system peacefully so far, although this system needs to react flexibly to the new challenges arising.

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Notes

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1. President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in Astana, Kazakhstan in 2013, where a route of the old Silk Road connected China and Europe 2000 years ago. Xi described the BRI as the new silk road and the 'Project of the Century'. The BRI comprises a massive collection of development and investment initiatives that stretches from East Asia to Europe and other continents. Since 2013, more than 130 countries and 30 international organizations have signed BRI cooperation agreements and received ca. US\$100 billion in Chinese Foreign Direct Investment. However, there has been continuous international critical

academic and political debate about the essence of the BRI, its strategic purposes and the sustainability of the initiative.

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