

# China's Quest for Power in the Arctic:

## Protecting Navigational Freedom and Safeguarding Fishery Resources

By  
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### ABSTRACT

In the era of Great Power competition, China and the United States are vying for power across the globe. As the climate changes, China, a non-Arctic nation, demonstrates a consistent interest in the strategic Arctic region (Lackenbauer & Koch, 2021). This study explores the depth of China's Arctic strategy and its impact on the United States' maritime security. Using an exploratory case study analysis, evidence confirms China's actions are discreet and consistent with its aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. From China's status as a permanent observer on the Arctic Council to its numerous multi-national agreements with Arctic states, China uses economic and diplomatic instruments of power to project influence across the Arctic region (Lelyveld, 2019). The study concludes that China's Arctic strategy has resounding impacts on United States' maritime security and identifies two critical recommendations to improve America's ability to protect the region. First, China has a long-range fishing fleet and a need to expand its fishing operations worldwide. Simultaneously, the US should employ capable military assets to effectively fight illegal, unregulated, and underreported (IUU) fishing in the Arctic (USCG, 2020). Second, China is signing partnerships to control international Arctic maritime routes. The United States should prioritize the protection of oceanic freedom of navigation (FON) principles above the Arctic Circle (Riddle, 2014). To implement these recommendations, the study proposes a more robust freedom of navigation program in the Arctic and an increase of polar military assets, such as icebreakers and shoreside infrastructure.

### INTRODUCTION

The Arctic is known as Earth's last Great Frontier due to its vast, minimally explored territory and largely untouched natural resources (Alaska Coastline, 2024). As a rules-based world order takes shape, the Arctic Region is becoming an increasingly tactical hub for Great Power Competition. Although China is not an Arctic nation, the large country is aggressively projecting power into the evolving Arctic region (Doshi, Dale-Huang, & Zhang, 2021). China's efforts above the Arctic Circle include pursuing "natural resources, access to shipping routes, and the ability to influence Arctic and Antarctic bodies" (Clark & Sloman, 2017). In 2018, the Chinese government formally released its first Arctic Strategy (Biedermann, 2020). Meanwhile, the rapidly changing Arctic climate is increasing navigational accessibility to the region. According to one projection, by mid-century, ice-free Arctic transits are forecasted to decrease shipping time between major oceans by approximately four to ten days, reducing costs by a minimum of \$200K per maritime journey (Herrmann, 2019). As maritime access to the region becomes easier, the competition to claim fishery resources in Central Arctic Ocean will continue to grow. This study will compare China's regional actions to the large nation's corresponding Arctic strategy with a focus on the importance of protecting freedom of navigation principles and of safeguarding fishery resources above the Arctic Circle.

## **REGIONAL AND GLOBAL EXPANSION**

Since the 1970s, China has incrementally sought opportunities to gain power in the vital waterways of the South China Sea, home to critical maritime routes for commerce movement, and rich with reserves of natural gas, oil, and active fisheries. China's aggressive regional tactics in the South China Sea include Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) encroachments, attempts to exclude other nations' warships from operating in the free waters of the region, and hostile uncorroborated territorial claims. In 2015, China built artificial islands in international waters and subsequently militarized these islands. In a continued attempt to gain overt control of the South China Sea region, China continues to escalate its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) tactics as the nation overreaches international norms, aggressively projects power, and dismantles stability in the local region (Kuok, 2019).

The Chinese government intentionally makes it difficult for other nations to navigate unrestrictedly in the South China Sea. Ms. Lynn Kuok, a researcher at the University of Cambridge, contends, China's "actions in the South China Sea, where it has aggressively pursued its territorial and maritime claims, undermine the rules-based order" (2019). Ultimately, Ms. Kuok believes China's actions significantly weaken the long-standing international sea regulations (Kuok, 2019). China's policy and dominance in the region also provides it with maritime strategic dominance in the critical Indo-Pacific shipping region (Macaraig & Fenton, 2021). In his analysis of President Biden's 2021 National Security Strategic Guidance, retired Army Colonel, Dr. Hinck states, "if China controls the South China Sea, then China will be able to hold hostage more than 30 percent of the world trade" (2021). At the regional level, China's actions in the South China Sea demonstrate intentional disrespect for international order (Kuok, 2019). On the world stage, China's continued expansion around the world demonstrate the nation's desire to increase its stronghold on a global level.

## **CHINA'S ARCTIC STRATEGY**

In 2018, China proposed its first Arctic strategic guidance. In this strategy, the Chinese Government declared itself as "a near-Arctic State" with an essential stake in the Arctic region despite the nearest access point being nearly one thousand nautical miles from China (Biedermann, 2020). In this document, China highlights the importance of protecting the region environmentally while abiding by international law (Zoltai, 2021). Although seemingly unobtrusive, regional experts believe China's strategy is the foundation, and the first step, to China's

quest for power in the Arctic region. In the same strategy document, the Chinese government introduced the concept of the "Polar Silk Road," an element of the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Biedermann, 2020). The BRI is an expansion strategy and "widely acknowledged as a central diplomatic and economic policy of the Chinese government" (Jiang, 2022). The "Polar Silk Road" is forecasted to connect China and the Nordic States through Russian territorial seas using the Northern Sea Route (Lackenbauer & Koch, 2021).

China's jurisdictional rights in the Arctic region align with non-Arctic nations in the unique Arctic governing structure (Biedermann, 2020). In 2013, China, a non-Arctic nation, obtained a coveted permanent observer position on the Arctic Council alongside eight Arctic Nations and six observer states (Chang & Khan, 2021). This council of nations is the only governing body in the region, and the involved parties have worked together to maintain peace. The Chinese government's confirmation as a permanent observer on the Council was a significant achievement to enacting China's Arctic strategy. China recognizes the benefits of having access to the Arctic and seeks influence in this geographic region despite having no official legal nexus (Lackenbauer & Koch, 2021).

## **ARCTIC FISHERY ACCESS**

China's history of overfishing its EEZ and its current distant-water fishing fleet raises concern for fishing in the Arctic. Not only does China have a massive fishing fleet, but the nation is the consumer of over one-third of the world's fish (Urbina, 2020). Thus, "Chinese demand for fish has grown significantly with the rapid rise in income of many of the Chinese population, as well as the collapse of fish stock resources in its near-shores" (Chang & Khan, 2021). Due to decades of unregulated fishing in its waters, China's fishing supply is depleted (Chang & Khan, 2021). At the same time, the demand for more fish continues to rise with China's growing population. Therefore, it could be inferred that one of China's goals is to gain fishing rights in the High Seas waters of the Arctic Ocean (Zoltai, 2021). China has done so in the South China Sea, is operating fishing vessels across the globe, and may continue to expand fishing operations into the Arctic.

Simultaneously, as the climate warms, fish are migrating into the pristine waters of the Arctic Ocean, making it a prime location to fish (Pezard, et al., 2022). Fisheries experts claim the Bering and Barents Seas have the world's most plentiful fishing stock. Today, the Barents Sea is covered in ice most of the year, making it difficult to fish;

however, climate change is quickly affecting oceanic weather in this region. Both seas are inaccessible for Chinese fishing because they reside inside the Russian, Norwegian, and American EEZ (Biedermann, 2020). Although China does not have access to these regions, they have begun to seek avenues to gain rights to fisheries in the high seas region of the Arctic (Zoltai, 2021).

Arctic fisheries are enforced by the “Arctic Five” (the United States, Russia, the Kingdom of Denmark, Canada, and Norway). In 2018, ten nations with common interests in the Arctic region (including the “Arctic Five”) collaborated to sign the Central Arctic Ocean Fishing Agreement (CAOFA), which went into effect in 2021 (Biedermann, 2020). The CAOFA is scheduled to remain in effect until 2037 and “its purpose is to prevent any country from fishing in the high seas portion of the Central Arctic Ocean” (Pezard, et al., 2022). After the ocean is adequately assessed by scientific researchers for environmental sustainability and enforcement protocols are in place, the CAOFA fishing ban will be reassessed by the signatory nations for an extension or objections to the current agreement (Pezard, et al., 2022). China's involvement on the CAOFA signals interest from the Chinese government's to influence fisheries governance in the Arctic region.

As of 2022, China does not have known fishing vessels in the Arctic. However, based on the Chinese fleet's presence in the Antarctic, China may also be capable of fishing in the Arctic. Also important to note, China is heavily invested in commercial fishing industries in the Arctic from both a monetary and an industry perspective. China is an importer of Greenlandic fish and a processor for the Alaskan fishing industry (Pezard, et al., 2022). Diplomatically, China partnered with Iceland to create “a trans-shipment center for Chinese commodities and raw materials” (Biedermann, 2020). This center will provide China with direct access to natural resources and fishery stocks in the Icelandic EEZ of the Arctic (Biedermann, 2020). China's mounting involvement in the Arctic fisheries ranges from diplomatic agreements, environmental research policy and plans, and involvement in the commercial fishing industry. These items demonstrate intent from the Chinese government to stake a claim to the fishing grounds in the Arctic region.

## **CHINA'S ARCTIC ASSETS**

China has two polar-class, open-ocean icebreakers and a third heavy icebreaker in construction, which is scheduled for commissioning in 2025 (Pezard, et al., 2022). In comparison, the United States also has a total of two polar-class, heavy icebreakers (Riddle, 2014). That said, the Fiscal Year 2024 Homeland Security Appropriations Act secured \$125 million to procure a commercial icebreaker, a process which is currently ongoing (Blenkey, 2024). Despite having no Arctic coastline, China's fleet of large icebreakers is equivalent in size to that of the US. China also touts a fleet of small-scale icebreakers (Riddle, 2014). According to US Coast Guard CDR Riddle, “with a 7,000-mile range, these icebreakers would require refueling but could also be used in the Arctic or near-Arctic in collaboration with a refueling ship” (2014). Finally, behind Russia, China will become the world's second country to commission a nuclear-powered icebreaker (Biedermann, 2020). As a nation without an Arctic nexus, China has a robust fleet of icebreaking vessels that can access to the remote region.

Additionally, the Arctic Ocean is a strategic hub between Great Power nations, Russia and the United States. Military strategists believe “nuclear deterrence, sea-denial, commerce defense, and political leverage” are strategic objectives of great power competitors in the Arctic. Along with a fleet of icebreakers, China has two classes of submarines capable of operating above the Arctic Circle, the 09 Jin-Class and the Yuan-Class S20 attack submarine. Submarines can be hidden by ice coverage in the Arctic, which results in adversarial nations' inability to detect them from the air, surface, and space domain (Pezard, et al., 2022). China's robust ice-breaking fleet and ice-capable military assets suggest China is progressively constructing a powerful force that is capable of advanced Arctic operations.

## **COUNTER ARGUMENT – BENEFITS TO CHINA'S STRATEGY IN THE ARCTIC**

As a nation, China projects its involvement in the Arctic frontier as overwhelmingly positive, respectful of international law, and critical to preserving the environment (Doshi, Dale-Huang, & Zhang, 2021). For instance, Dr. Zoltai, a professor at the Graduate Institute of Strategic Studies, states that “as a responsible large power, China's commitment to the peaceful development of the Arctic through the Polar Silk Road” may have positive implications in the Arctic Region (2021). China's 2018 Arctic strategy claimed that China's role is to protect the environment and that the nation is “firmly committed to international law and conventions in force in the Arctic” (2021). Outwardly, China's involvement aligns with international norms (Zoltai, 2021).

More specifically, as a Great Power, China provides financial and economic resources to Arctic states through economic agreements to increase infrastructure in the region. China's financial support promotes the development of the BRI and progress towards operating year-round passages through the Northern Sea Route as the climate changes (Biedermann, 2020). For example, “Finland received the fifth largest Chinese foreign direct investment

worth \$8.4 billion between 2000-2016” (Zoltai, 2021). Norway and Iceland are also the recipients of substantial Chinese capital investments (Biedermann, 2020). Similarly, China is investing millions of dollars to support Russia's increase in its seagoing assets and critical infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route. These routes would be financially untenable without the support of China, which is clearly invested in Russia's development in the Arctic (Zoltai, 2021). From the economic standpoint of less wealthy states, China's involvement in the Arctic is financially beneficial to the wealth of Arctic nations.

Next, China's 2018 Arctic policy highlights that its robust involvement in the Arctic is to peacefully and diligently protect the environment (Zoltai, 2021). The Chinese government has a wealth of resources and economic assets to fund climate research in the Arctic (Biedermann, 2020). China announced that global climate changes would cause a devastating front-line impact on the Chinese shores if not addressed. The paper continued that it may result in the displacement of tens of millions of people and an inability to produce commerce to sustain the Chinese population. Thus, it can be inferred that China's involvement in the Arctic and its stance on actively protecting the environment would benefit the well-being of other nations if China's stated intentions are honest. China frames its strategy to increase prosperity for other nations, safely increase shipping access to the region, and safeguard the environment (Zoltai, 2021).

## **NATIONAL SECURITY ANALYSIS**

While research confirms China's robust and far-reaching involvement in Arctic operations, the United States is also taking measures to protect Arctic Maritime Security. Nearly a decade ago, the 2013 United States National Security Strategy for the Arctic Region set forth guidance to use military vessels and aircraft to achieve a stronger presence in the Arctic. It also discussed the importance of funding Arctic infrastructure and icebreaking ships to protect American resources (The White House, 2013). This strategy highlighted the relevance of the Arctic region and "of preserving all of the rights, freedoms, and uses of the sea and airspace recognized under international law" (The White House, 2013). In 2021 DHS Strategic Approach for Arctic Homeland Security recognizes "China's ... attempts to undermine our alliances and partnerships, and their aggressive military modernization efforts [that] pose an undeniable threat to global security and prosperity" (DHS, 2021).

In 2020, the Department of the Navy published a Tri-Maritime Strategy document, *Advantage at Sea*, to create a unified and powerful Naval service consisting of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, to maintain dominance in the maritime warfighting domain. This document aligns with DHS's strategy and highlights a growing concern with the protection of the Arctic region. The Tri-Maritime Strategy *Advantage at Sea* also labeled China as a high-priority concern due to the nation's upwardly trending economic and military competence and aggressive regional power projection (DOD, 2020). For over a decade, United States strategy documents represent an urgent need to protect the Arctic.

Studying China's involvement in the Arctic and correlating it to US national strategy region exposed two topics that impact maritime security in the Arctic operating environment. First, the United States should focus more resources on the protection of the fishery stock in the increasingly accessible Arctic region. Second, the United States must prioritize the use of military assets to preserve freedom of navigation principles above the Arctic Circle per international maritime law.

## **ILLEGAL, UNREPORTED, AND UNREGULATED FISHING ENFORCEMENT**

The 2020 United States Coast Guard Strategic Outlook for Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing highlights IUU fishing as a leading threat to global maritime security (USCG, 2020). For decades China mismanaged the fishing stock in its EEZ. This negligence resulted in depleted fish availability and China's need to seek other options while expanding their nets to a global scale (Chang & Khan, 2021). Within the last two decades, China encroached on the EEZs of nations in the Indo-Pacific region staking claims in other nations' fishing grounds. China and Taiwan make up over 60% of the world's long-range fishing fleets, and China has demonstrated little regard for international norms (USCG, 2020).

Former Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Karl Schultz stated, "if IUU fishing continues unchecked, we can expect deterioration of fragile coastal states and increased tension among foreign-fishing nations, threatening geopolitical stability around the world" (USCG, 2020). Every nation is responsible for holding their fishing fleets accountable for IUU fishing (USCG, 2020). In China's case, there is a documented history of their disregarding international norms and promoting invasive and unsafe fishery operations throughout the South China Sea and the Western Pacific (Felton, 2022). As fish stocks migrate above the Arctic Circle, The United States must be prepared to enforce fishing regulations throughout the region.

As the climate continues to change, China is becoming more involved in the Arctic fishing industry. “Changing ice conditions are enabling expanded economic activity, including commercial fisheries, in areas where they had not previously been possible” (Pezard, et al., 2022). Scientists predict that fish stocks will shift north; without adequate enforcement resources, this shift will make it challenging to enforce Arctic fishing and ensure fishing in prohibited waters is protected (Pezard, et al., 2022). As a non-Arctic state with a reputation for negligent fishing, China’s fisheries behavior and growing access to resources in the Arctic pose a concern for maritime security.

## **PROTECTING FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION**

The United States upholds freedom of navigation as a maritime security priority (Riddle, 2014). Due to China’s aggressive policy, the South China Sea is a major disputed region in the world regarding freedom of navigation principles (The Graduate School of Global Affairs, Tufts University, 2017). As it becomes more involved in the Arctic, strategists anticipate that China will begin to implement similar A2/AD tactics in the Arctic, which could lead to attempts to restrict access to Arctic sea routes (Doshi, et al., 2021). Notably, the large nation is quickly introducing a robust fleet of Arctic-capable vessels while signing partnerships with Arctic nations (Chaisse, 2022).

One reoccurring example of China’s deep connection with Arctic states is its relationship with Iceland. “Iceland, which is in a key strategic location at the entrance to the Arctic sea-lanes from the North Atlantic Ocean, is home to an unusually large Chinese embassy” (Riddle, 2014). The China-Iceland partnership provides China with access to navigational routes at the boundary between the Arctic and the Atlantic Ocean (Riddle, 2014). In the future, as China and Iceland continue to expand this partnership, China could gain enough access to control, and even deny, other nations’ freedom of navigation through Arctic sea lanes.

In the absence of other available data, China’s history is the best predictor of their future intentions in the Arctic region. China’s historical actions demonstrate non-compliance with international law if the law does not align with its own nation’s interests. China’s far-reaching contributions to the Arctic as a non-Arctic state aligns with the powerful nation’s A2/AD tactics and regional policy in the South China Sea (Kuok, 2019). Key examples of China’s robust participation in the Arctic include economic and diplomatic collaboration with Arctic States, a rulemaking position on the only Arctic governing body, and signatory authority on the CAOFA. Dr. Zoltai confirmed the importance of the Arctic region and stated, “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” (2021).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The case study identified two areas to improve the current defense of maritime security in the Arctic region: the ability to enforce fishery violations and the protection of freedom of navigation in alignment with international law. Establishing a sustainable presence in the Arctic region is something for the United States to consider to close these gaps. This presence could include a robust freedom of navigation program above the Arctic circle, military vessels capable of transiting the region, the infrastructure to support and solid partnerships with other Arctic nations (GAO, 2012).

Although Arctic ice is rapidly melting, the need for icebreakers continues to increase. Mr. Kee, a senior advisor at the Ted Stevens Arctic Security Center, stated, “the Arctic is a maritime region, and icebreaking provides you year-round access to be able to go in the region” (as cited in Lopez, 2022). He continued to stress that icebreakers provide a consistent presence which no other asset can provide to the strategic Arctic Region. If the United States is unable to operate unrestrictedly in the Arctic, the government will be unable to provide enforcement to IUU fisheries or be able to conduct Freedom of Navigation patrols throughout the region. As of 2022, “six polar icebreakers capable of operating the Arctic are authorized for bolstering the Coast Guard’s icebreaking fleet” (as cited in Lopez, 2022). It may take up to a decade to commission these vessels (Lopez, 2022). In the interim, the United States only has two icebreakers to protect the entire region. Both of these assets have exceeded their service life and need frequent maintenance (Kime, 2022). In 2024, United States Congress secured funding to purchase a commercial icebreaker to sustain near-term operations above the Arctic Circle (Blenkey, 2024). As China continues to bolster its Arctic-capable fleet for immediate access, a commercial icebreaker will be a critical bridging asset to establish a consistent American presence in the region until the new icebreakers are commissioned (Kime, 2022). These assets could conduct scientific research and ensure the up-and-coming fleet is adequately prepared to assume regional operations.

At the same time, support from a commercial icebreaker would give the Coast Guard’s current polar icebreakers more availability to conduct freedom of navigation transits. Freedom of navigation transits “reinforce internationally recognized rights and freedoms by challenging excessive maritime claims” (Coffey & Menosky, 2020). As China

continues to sign agreements with Arctic Nations through the Belt and Road Initiative, maintaining freedom of navigation is of the highest importance. In 2020, a US Naval ship transited the Barents Sea, near Russia, to reinforce freedom of navigation operations in the ice-free waters of the Arctic region. This transit was the first US Navy Arctic patrol since the 1980s, during the Cold War (Coffey & Menosky, 2020). Integrating US Navy FON transits with Coast Guard icebreakers would reaffirm the United States' firm stance on FON operations above the Arctic Circle and signal America's stance in the region to other great powers. Using icebreakers would allow the FON patrols to proceed deeper into the harsh, polar environmental conditions, further enforcing United States' power and ability to sustain operations in the region.

A Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report to Congressional Committees in 2012 stated the state of the Arctic basing infrastructure was sufficient through 2020. As the United States builds a more modern and powerful Arctic fleet, it is recommended to bolster shoreside maritime military infrastructure and presence in the Arctic region to sustain maritime security operations above the Arctic Circle. These assets could also be a hub to conduct Arctic Search and Rescue and to collect intelligence. During an interview with Coast Guard CDR Cody Dunagan, an IUU fishery expert, he stated, "the enforcement of IUU fisheries in the Arctic is becoming more important as the climate changes. Today, we do not have the adequate shoreside infrastructure required to enforce sustained operations in the region" (Dunagan, personal communication, 2022). Approving funding and preparing Western Alaska and the Arctic for increased shoreside military assets is a critical step toward protecting maritime security.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article highlighted the history of China's A2/AD tactics in the South China Sea and correlated these aggressive actions with China's intent to control and influence the Arctic Region. In 2016, as a permanent observer on the Arctic Council, China began influencing regional governance (Chang & Khan, 2021). Since the early 2000s, using economic and diplomatic instruments of power, China has continued to gain access and control of the region using multi-lateral agreements with Arctic nations (Biedermann, 2020). Incrementally, China may begin applying similar A2/AD tactics to the Arctic that it used to pursue control of the South China Sea (Doshi, et al., 2021). Ultimately, the more access China secures in the Arctic region using these tactics, the higher the likelihood it will seek to procure ownership of the resources that inhabit the region.

As the great powers continue to gravitate towards the Arctic region, increasing the American military presence through maritime military assets, commercial icebreakers, and critical shoreside infrastructure is essential to enforce IUU fishing and reaffirm America's firm stance on the right to freedom of navigation under the Law of the Sea convention.

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