



FROM CATCHING MICE TO BREAKING ICE: UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S ARCTIC AMBITIONS

PART TWO IN A THREE-PART SERIES ON STRATEGIC
COMPETITION IN THE ARCTIC REGION

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China is not an Arctic state. It has no territory in the Arctic region, and its nearest point of land to the Arctic Circle is some 900 miles away. China's 2018 claim to being a "near-Arctic state" was met with a combination of bemusement and ridicule from the international community, and Beijing has subsequently dropped this phrase from their messaging.¹ Nonetheless, China's ambition to become an Arctic player is significant and enduring, and the eight actual Arctic states are taking it increasingly seriously.

¹ Michael R. Pompeo, "[Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus](#)," May 6, 2019

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From Beijing’s perspective, the Arctic represents a potential source of key resources, a new global maritime corridor, and a venue for strategic influence. China’s stated interests fall into two broad categories: 1) securing access to hydrocarbons, minerals, and fisheries that are migrating northward due to global climate change; and 2) developing shorter and potentially cheaper shipping routes between East Asia and Europe. China hopes to achieve these ends by positioning itself as a legitimate stakeholder in Arctic governance. As in other theaters, Beijing’s approach to achieving its Arctic interests is patient, multifaceted, and framed as cooperative even as its ambitions are undeniably strategic and self-serving.

SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITIONS AS A STRATEGIC WEDGE

China’s Arctic engagement began in the name of scientific research. Its first Arctic expedition occurred in 1999, when the research icebreaker *Xue Long* (“Snow Dragon”) first sailed to the region. Since then, Beijing has steadily increased the tempo of its

Arctic operations, conducting nearly annual expeditions. In 2012, the *Xue Long* transited the Northern Sea Route for the first time, gathering data not only on climate and ice conditions but also on hydrography and navigational feasibility. By 2019, China had launched a sister ship—the *Xue Long 2*—the first Chinese-built icebreaking research vessel capable of independent operations in dense sea ice. These ships have now conducted numerous surveys on ocean currents, seabed geology, and potential shipping corridors, all of which have obvious dual-use applications. While framed as “scientific,” Western analysts assess these expeditions are laying the groundwork for commercial exploitation and, eventually, military operations in the region.²

China has also invested in fixed research infrastructure. In 2004, China opened the “Yellow River Station” at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, under the auspices of the Spitsbergen Treaty. While nominally a hub for climate and atmospheric studies, the facility provides Beijing with a permanent foothold in the European Arctic and access to sensitive polar research networks, which is cause for growing concern in Norway and its Arctic allies.³

EUROPEAN PUSHBACK ON CHINESE RESEARCH PRESENCE

China’s ambitions in the European Arctic have met with increasing resistance from host governments concerned about the dual-use implications of Beijing’s scientific programs. In Sweden, for example, the Esrange Space Center in Kiruna has long hosted satellite and atmospheric research projects with international partners. However, Swedish authorities have moved to curtail Chinese involvement at Esrange, citing concerns over technology transfer, intellectual property, and potential military

² Edström, Anders, Guðbjörg Ríkey Th. Hauksdóttir and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Cutting Through Narratives on Chinese Arctic Investments.” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, June 23, 2025

³ Jane Tang, “Exclusive: How Chinese nationalism is sending jitters through the Arctic.” *Radio Free Asia*, November 7, 2024



applications of polar data.⁴ Similar efforts have been undertaken in Norway, where access to research stations at Svalbard and mainland facilities are increasingly scrutinized, and in Iceland, where planned Chinese research centers were delayed or canceled after diplomatic pressure from the United States and the European Union. While China continues to frame its presence in the European Arctic as scientific cooperation, the tightening controls China faces reflect growing recognition among European states that Beijing's Arctic presence is part of a long-term strategic agenda rather than straightforward academic research.

ENERGY INVESTMENTS AND THE POLAR SILK ROAD

Beijing has framed the Arctic as a critical component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), branding it the "Polar Silk Road." The concept was enshrined in China's 2018 Arctic policy white paper, which emphasized shipping routes and energy development. Nowhere is this clearer than in China's investment in Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects.

Chinese state-owned enterprises, including the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF), hold a combined 29.9 percent stake in the Yamal LNG project in northern Siberia. The China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China together provided \$12 billion in loans to the project, effectively underwriting Russia's Arctic energy ambitions. Initially, Chinese firms also invested in the Arctic LNG-2 project, taking a 20 percent share. However, Western sanctions imposed after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine forced Beijing to scale back its involvement, although Chinese contractors continue to provide technology and equipment to the project.

Beyond Russia, China has eyed resource extraction opportunities in Greenland and Iceland. Proposals have included investing in Greenlandic rare earth mines, building new airports, and developing port infrastructure at Nuuk and Qaqortoq. Several of these projects were halted in response to Danish and U.S. pressure, reflecting growing Western sensitivity to Chinese economic inroads in the Arctic. In Iceland, Beijing established a short-lived research center in 2013 under the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center initiative, which remains a vehicle for academic exchange and diplomatic influence.

CHINA'S "ARCTIC EXPRESS" SHIPPING INITIATIVE

Parallel to its scientific and investment activities, China is actively developing Arctic shipping as part of its Polar Silk Road strategy. In 2023, Chinese shipping firms began testing a regular container service, dubbed the "Arctic Express," connecting ports in northern China to ports in northern Europe via the Northern Sea Route. The initiative is designed to complement traditional Suez Canal routes, offering shorter transit times in

⁴ Jonathan Barrett and Johan Ahlander, "Exclusive: Swedish space company halts new business helping China operate satellites." Reuters, September 21, 2020.



favorable ice conditions while demonstrating China's ability to project commercial influence along Arctic sea lanes.

The Arctic Express also has strategic dimensions beyond commerce. By routinely operating in the region, Chinese vessels collect valuable navigational and environmental data, and the logistics network required to support these transits enables China to cultivate closer ties with Russian Arctic ports and maritime authorities. Of course, these fledgling commercial routes could eventually support dual-use operations, including the rapid movement of cargo, personnel, or equipment, if China's strategic interests in the Arctic were to expand. While the service is currently limited by ice conditions and seasonal constraints, Beijing's investments in ice-class vessels and satellite navigation systems indicate a long-term commitment to establishing a sustained Arctic maritime presence – an ambition that will be aided over time by warming Arctic waters.

DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

China joined the Arctic Council as an accredited observer in 2013, and it has since sought to expand its influence in Arctic governance forums. It has leveraged its observer role to position itself as an advocate for the principle that the Arctic is a “global commons,” a not particularly subtle attempt to undermine the sovereignty-based approach of the Arctic littoral states. Chinese official pronouncements, as well as party propaganda outlets, regularly argue that issues such as shipping, resource development, and climate change transcend national borders and thus require inclusive governance. This framing advances China's interests in expanding its presence in the Arctic while building solidarity with other non-Arctic states and diminishing the claims of actual Arctic states.

China has also cultivated bilateral relationships with key European Arctic states. Chinese relations with Norway were frosty for years after the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to dissident Liu Xiaobo, but the two sides normalized relations in 2016, creating possibilities for greater Arctic cooperation. In Finland, China has invested in telecommunications infrastructure and Arctic shipping feasibility studies. Sweden has likewise hosted Chinese polar researchers at its Abisko Scientific Research Station, although Stockholm has become increasingly wary of Chinese influence. In all these cases, Beijing leverages scientific cooperation and investment as tools to enhance its long-term political influence in the region.

SECURITY DIMENSIONS

Xi Jinping has declared that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will become a “world-class military” by 2049, capable of operating in all environments, including the polar regions. To date, the PLA Navy (PLAN) has conducted only limited Arctic operations, but Chinese military publications openly discuss the potential for Arctic sea routes to reshape global maritime strategy and create weak points in the northern approaches to North America.



Western defense officials increasingly warn that Chinese “scientific” activities could serve as a cover for mapping and surveillance that would aid future military operations. In 2022, NATO identified China as a “systemic challenge” in part because of its polar ambitions, noting that Beijing’s dual-use research programs mirror similar Chinese behavior in its ongoing campaign to assert control over the South China Sea.

CONCLUSION: NEED FOR COORDINATED RISK MANAGEMENT

Unlike Russia, China does not have an Arctic coastline, a history of polar settlement, or major military assets in the region. But Beijing is nonetheless pursuing a steady, deliberate strategy to embed itself in the region by funding expeditions, building research stations, investing in critical infrastructure, developing shipping routes, and aligning itself with Moscow to secure access to energy and maritime shipping opportunities. The more isolated Moscow becomes from the West, the more leverage Beijing gains to shape Russia’s Arctic projects in line with its own interests.

For the United States and its allies, China’s Arctic ambitions present a growing dilemma. While Beijing continues to frame its Arctic activities as cooperative and scientific, its sizeable investments, Arctic Express operations, and Arctic research presence suggest a long-term design to normalize Chinese influence in a region where it has no natural claim.

The Arctic may remain peripheral to Chinese strategy today, but over the coming decades, it is poised to become a theater where great-power competition between China, Russia, and the West will increasingly play out. Contesting China’s efforts to normalize its presence in the Arctic will require coordinated pushback from European and North American Arctic states at a moment of increased tension in transatlantic relations. However, failure to do so will almost certainly lead to growing Chinese exploitation of the Arctic region, and strategic regret on both sides of the Atlantic.

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