

CHINA IN THE ARCTIC INTERESTS, ACTIONS AND CHALLENGES

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Introduction

China is today experiencing extraordinary economic growth. Having sustained decades-long growth rates of around 7-12%, the new wealth has not only lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, it has also enhanced China's economic strength relative to other states, making China today the second largest economy in the world (Hu 2011: 1-18). While the new economic "powerhouse" in East Asia certainly has become more visible in issues pertaining to the global economy and international monetary policies, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) new strength is also paralleled by an expanded range of foreign policy interests abroad. One of these "new areas of interest" is China's new engagement in the Arctic, a region where it was recently acknowledged as a legitimate stakeholder by the Arctic Council's (AC) decision to accept it as an observer on 15 May 2013.

The aim of this article is to give an overview of China's interest in and approach to the Arctic as well as identifying and discussing some key topics of interest arising from this development. In the first part I will raise the following questions: 1 – Why is China getting involved in the Arctic? 2 – How is China's engagement in the Arctic playing out or materializing? After reviewing these questions I will discuss how China's actions in the Arctic should be interpreted as well as conclude with identifying some key issues that need to be solved in order for China to increase its relevance and importance as a political actor and partner in the Arctic.

I will apply a rationalist approach when seeking to answer the research questions guiding this investigation. I will hence primarily be guided by insight from the realist and liberal approaches. My decision to design the study on a rationalist approach does not necessarily stem from the belief that human actors are always rational, or that such an approach is without pitfalls. Rather, the presumption of rationality emerges from a belief that such a starting point is a productive one, and that the premise of rational behavior is a potent assumption when seeking to understand social interaction (Shelling 1960/1980: 4). However, as cultural factors such as identities or values certainly matter when seeking to explain social interaction, such elements will also be assessed, but to a lesser extent.

In order to answer these above-mentioned inquiries, I will start out by investigating some theoretical perspectives from the field of International Relations (IR) that are often employed in order to understand China's growth and, its new-found foreign policy interest abroad including China's enhanced influence in world politics more generally. These theoretical approaches are also relevant when investigating China's new interest in the Arctic as well when assessing how China's rise is perceived from the outside—within the international community more generally.

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Theoretical guidance

“China’s rise” is a key change with broad implications, playing out in the international system of today (Lanteigne 2013: 1). The term “rise” corresponds not only to the fact that China is becoming an “economic superpower”; it also refers to how the PRC is becoming more visible in global governance. The example from Arctic governance illustrates a general trend: China is joining a large number of international organizations at a steady pace, gradually becoming more engaged and integrated in the international community (Johnston 2003: 13). Moreover, the term “China’s rise” is also commonly used in describing how China has improved its position in the international hierarchy of states, evolving into a modern developed state with a larger middle class and acquiring various types of advanced technology and industrial capacities, including new military capabilities—enabling the government to project power far beyond its borders (Ikenberry 2008, Wang 2011, Larson and Shevchenko 2010).

China’s rise, its new stakes in far-away places, as well as its increased engagement in multilateral governance around the globe have been interpreted differently in different theoretical traditions. When applying the realist tradition as the point of departure, one important branch of study focuses on how the ongoing global “power-transition” unfolds. According to this theoretical approach the question of whether or not China is satisfied with the current political order—or its status within this order—is a key question, likely to say something about what the future holds with respect to the ongoing shifts in power structures (Chan 2008, Gilpin 1986: 34, Fravel 2010, Foot 2006: 90-93, Wohlforth 2009). In this respect one should expect a rising power to get more engaged globally in trying to shape international institutions, laws and norms to reflect the interests as well as social status of the rising power (Fravel 2010: 506).

Another realist informed approach to China’s rise, typically advocated by analysts in the USA, is found in the so called “China threat” theory (Shih and Yin 2013: 60, Lanteigne 2013: 4-5, 33, Ross 2005). According to this approach to China’s growth, the PRC is usually portrayed as representing a “danger” to the West with respect to the following dimensions: militarily, economically and politically/ideologically (Yang and Liu 2012: 697). In this perspective the PRC’s major diplomatic and economic gains in Africa and Latin America are viewed as coming at the cost of American influence. This view points out the potential for rivalry between the two large states, and Europe’s half millennium experience with great power rivalry is viewed as not unlikely to be repeated in Asia, with China as a future major “pole” intending to balance the USA (Kim 2004: 19). A tense competition for scarce commodities, stretching from the control of natural resources to struggles for political influence, is likely according to this theory (Lanteigne 2013: 102-103). In this perspective China’s increasing global engagement might be viewed in the context of rivalry with the USA, where analysts in Washington argue for the need for China to be watched and possibly contained, while their Chinese counterparts might display concerns about American attempts to contain Chinese power regionally as well as internationally (Carter and Perry 2007, Lanteigne 2013: 118).

From the perspective of liberal and institutionalist theory, states engage in international cooperation and regime formation in order to solve mutual challenges.

In the absence of a world government, formalized international cooperation through regimes and international organizations might therefore function to increase predictability, international stability and economic development (Young 1998, Kim 2004: 30). As China's economic rise has gradually made the country an interconnected stakeholder in most parts of the world, China's more active foreign policy could be interpreted as an expression of a desire to cooperate as well as a result of economic interdependence, rather than an attempt to marginalize other potential great-power competitors in regions of common interest (Lanteigne 2013: 4-6, 10-12).

The liberal approach also tends to focus on how the domestic level impacts foreign policy formation. Increased Chinese participation in multilateral cooperation is then at least partly explained by domestic developments. As the education level of the population in China has increased, a strong focus on cross-border challenges such as pollution and sustainable development has also elicited enormous attention in the Chinese media in recent years. This is a development that in accordance with liberal IR theory could be interpreted as having pushed the Chinese government to focus more on multilateral challenges that see no borders (Lanteigne 2013: 46, 55, PRC State Council 2011: II, H 2011: 70-77).¹

China is essentially experiencing its modern "rise" in an age of globalization, which implies a situation where borders and distances are decreasing in importance. Such developments are also followed by an increased sensitivity to several new threats, as well as an appreciation of the opportunities that follow from extended cross-border cooperation. With global challenges such as international terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, spreading epidemics such as AIDS or SARS, drug trafficking, cybercrime and global warming, a liberal approach to IR will often emphasize the importance of how such challenges have demonstrated certain limits of state control and sovereignty (Deng and Moore 2004). These are all tendencies likely to influence Beijing's view on the need for participation in international politics in the Arctic. Combining the functional, utility oriented dimension of foreign policy developments with the domestic sphere is hence vital when analyzing China's new interest in far-away places.

Finally, "post-positivist" approaches to international relations, with constructivism as the most applied version, offers a third major approach to explaining foreign policy outcomes as it tends to emphasize ideational, non-material factors--such as norms, culture and identity (Wendt 1992, 1999). By arguing that neither "state identities" or interests are fixed, nor necessarily derived from power struggles, or ambitions of maximizing utility, constructivism represents a different epistemological tradition, focusing on the construction of social reality (Wendt 1995, Katzenstein 1996, Checkel 1998).

To understand dominant "state actor identities" including evaluating subjective experiences such as "social status" hence becomes a key task to investigate in an analysis seeking to explain foreign policy development and actions (Katzenstein 1996). In this respect phenomena such as "collective memory" or the construction of threat perceptions become important when seeking to understand state behavior and

¹ Personal communication/ interviews, Shanghai 4-5 June 2013. Researchers on Chinese foreign policy and international relations.

the potential for conflict or cooperation in a given situation. The constructivist approach hence offers a powerful method in understanding a social reality that goes beyond “instrumental” utility calculations. Constructivism could therefore inform an analysis of Chinese foreign policy-making by questioning “social facts” and the construction of possible meanings of material resources.

Hence, if the analyst wants to uncover how cultural biases, where the existence of old, fixed, “mental frames” potentially might fuel influential discourses on how China’s new foreign policies should be interpreted, constructivism might be a superior approach to that of the rationalist approaches (Sun 2013, Kim 2004: 41). Nevertheless, while post-positivist and constructivist approaches indeed have the potential to uncover and explain important aspects of Chinese foreign policy-making, this epistemological approach will not be applied in any depth in this article due to the article format’s constraints and a limited research object.

China and the Arctic

- Why is China getting engaged in the High North?

China has in the last few years increased its interest in the Arctic—a region where it is repeatedly pointed out as one of the most prominent newcomers (Alexeeva and Lasserre 2012: 82-83, Keil 2013: 2). When seeking to point out why China is getting engaged in the Arctic several explanations seem valid. First China has a substantial interest in new potential shipping routes due to decreasing ice coverage in the Arctic. With the Arctic Ocean increasingly becoming navigable in the summer season, China has, as a major trade actor deeply integrated in the world economy, a direct economic stake in this development. Being deeply affected by processes of globalization and with most of its import and export being shipped by sea, China might potentially be the greatest future consumer or exporter of goods being shipped through the formerly closed shipping lanes in the north (Lee 2012).

As China’s economy keeps growing, Chinese manufacturers continue to demand an ever larger volume of the world’s natural resources and energy. With the Arctic region harboring both large quantities of oil and gas in addition to large organic and mineral resources, China is actively assessing the Arctic as a region to supply its growth. This is a development seen most profoundly in Greenland, but also in Iceland—both regions with concrete Chinese investments taking place today. Thus, one key aspect of China’s enhanced interest in the Arctic is China’s demand for natural resources and the potential supply of these commodities through the Northern Sea Route (NSR) (Blunden 2012: 125-126, Blank 2013). As shipping through the NSR can be expected to increase gradually, China has a direct interest in following this development closely as a major potential destination (Blunden 2012).

With China’s ever growing importance in the world economy, a new demand for influence in global as well as regional governance can also be observed as the PRC gradually is becoming more active within international organizations. The most prominent example is its more active role in the UN Security Council, where China—yet always along with Russia—has used its veto right five times since 2007 (UN 2013, Lanteigne 2013: 71). The Chinese use of the veto is a steep increase from previous decades (UN 2013). A more active Chinese role is also seen in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the ASEAN-plus-three organization

or the East Asian Summit (Lanteigne 2013: 8). Recently a similar tendency can be observed in the Arctic, where China, along with other Asian states has voiced an interest in taking part in governance of the region (Blank 2013, Jacobson and Lee 2013). The most recent manifestation of the Chinese desire to broaden its engagement in Arctic affairs, which is probably also the engagement with the highest public profile, is its new role as a permanent observer in the Arctic Council. As the AC usually is regarded as the preeminent circumpolar multilateral forum for political discussions and debate, obtaining observer status was of great symbolic value for China, just as it has been for other applicants like the EU. The Chinese role in the AC will therefore be specifically addressed in the next section. Finally, while the recently acquired observer status in the AC was important not least in the way it legitimated China as a stakeholder in the Arctic, one should also note that China's role in governing institutions pertaining to Arctic politics also include work in other forums, such as the International Maritime Organization's (IMO). In this respect one should note that representatives from the PRC have been involved in the process towards establishing a "polar code" for shipping in ice-covered waters in the IMO (Blank 2013, Lasserre 2010: 9).

While China's engagement in the Arctic can be ascribed to economic motives, where both mechanisms of interdependence as well as a power-dynamic of a geopolitical nature can be discerned, I will in the following specifically address the security dimension, as well as the issue of social status. These are all issues often mentioned when China's engagement in the Arctic is debated.

With respect to the security dimension it is interesting to note that discussions of Chinese military interests are (currently) almost entirely absent, even though references to China's interests in the Arctic stated by the Chinese military personnel might be discussed (Campbell 2012: 4, 8).² On the other side, while traditional notions of security are seldom addressed, environmental security and the need for scientific knowledge on climate change is often argued as a key interest explaining Chinese research activities in the High North (Pan and Zhou 2010, Lasserre 2010: 4). Concretely research on how the summer ice extent in the Arctic Ocean or weather patterns such as the Arctic Oscillation are linked to weather conditions in China is therefore a concern of great interest (Wu et. al. 2013, Drinkwater and Zhao 2013). If applying an extended security notion, environmental security concerns should hence be taken into account when seeking to explain China's engagement in the north.

Social status is a concept that has been identified to matter for states seeking to maximize their influence and standing in world governance (Holsti 1995: 84, 107-108, Wohlforth 2009, Welch et. al. 2010). As polar research generally demands specialized capabilities, and potentially has a high profile domestically as well as on the global stage, the status dimension should not be ignored when seeking to understand why China engages in Arctic research. Moreover, a debate on China's rise and its implications for its engagement in the Arctic could also include China's "status competition" with its centuries-long rival Japan, even though East Asian

² Exceptions exist, see for example: Jacobsen, L and Peng, J. "China's Arctic Aspirations" commenting on how the Icelandic Government were concerned about how the Chinese businessman Huang Nubo plans to purchase 300 km² of Icelandic property could be used strategically by the Chinese military (2012: 9).

cooperation in the Arctic might in fact be more practically important. The Arctic engagement of Japan and even other more remote great powers such as India should nevertheless at least be considered as one factor partly explaining the increased Chinese interest in the north (Tonami 2013).

- How is it materializing?

The Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration was founded in 1981. However China did not formally launch any Arctic research program until 1989 when the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) was established (Alexeeva and Lasserre 2012: 82). Since then the PRC has gradually increased its Arctic ambitions through various research programs, staff recruitment and development of infrastructure and logistical support devoted to the polar regions. While a priority consistently has been given to the Antarctic, the Arctic received gradually greater attention beginning in 1999 when China completed its first Arctic expedition.

At first glance, the high profile expeditions with the research ice-breaker, *Xue Long* (The Snow Dragon), stands out. The vessel was purchased in 1993 from the Ukraine and has an icebreaking capacity of 1.2 meters. With a length of 167 meters it is the world's largest non-nuclear icebreaker, and it has a great capacity to conduct research in the High North, e.g. through operating three smaller boats and a helicopter and housing seven laboratories (Alexeeva and Lasserre 2012: 82, Nielsson 2012). The icebreaker has been utilized for a number of Chinese Arctic expeditions in the last few years and has also been used as a platform for the international exchange of researchers. Moreover, while the *Xue Long* has enabled China to conduct several Polar Ocean research missions in the last few years, China is in 2014/2015 expecting its second (Finnish-designed and domestic-built) icebreaker, dramatically increasing its capacity to be "continuously" present in the Arctic seas and oceans.³

Besides the research expeditions conducted by *Xue Long*, China's most important scientific presence in the Arctic is the Yellow River research station in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard. At this station, established in 2004, Chinese researchers are conducting space-earth measurements, research on meteorology, glaciology, marine ecosystems and the Arctic environment (Kings Bay 2013, Humpert and Raspotnik 2012: 3). The station was also actively in use in conducting data for the International Polar Year from March 2007 to March 2009 (Yang 2012).

In addition to conducting scientific research in the High North, the Chinese are also engaged in several commercial activities. Through purchasing or investing in foreign mining and oil projects/companies, China has recently become a significant economic stakeholder in various locations in the Arctic (Han, 2013). Examples of such activities include: the government-owned China National Bluestar Group Co. Ltd's purchase of the Norwegian Elkem and its quartzite mine in Austertana, Finnmark (Reuters 2011); China's Sichuan Xinye Mining Investment Co.'s planned \$2.3 billion investments in the Isua iron-ore deposit in southwest Greenland, where about 3,000 Chinese workers would travel to Greenland in the establishment phase (Hickey 2013, Pedersen 2012, Erdal 2013: 12); and CNOOC's engagement in the

³ The Icebreakers is also a key resource for China's Antarctica engagement.

planned exploitation of Icelandic oil in the Dreki structure to the south of Jan Mayen (Financial Times 2013b).

When it comes to shipping interests in the Arctic, China is certainly demonstrating an interest through its procurement of a second icebreaker, at the same time as Chinese shipping firms are reported to be interested in working with Nordic firms on building ships equipped with ice-breaking capacities (Aker Arctic Technology 2012: 3-4). Nevertheless, the PRC is so far much less engaged in Arctic shipping than its Korean and Japanese neighbors. At the time of writing only very few Chinese-owned commercial transport ships have actually passed through the Northern Sea Route (NSR), but more Chinese ships have obtained a permit for the NSR for the 2013 season than ever before, and in the future a considerable percentage of both the commodities transported through the Arctic ship lane, as well as ship ownership should be expected to be Chinese (Barents Observer 2013, Financial Times 2013, Lee 2012).⁴ The expectation of increased Chinese shipping activities is particularly based on the fact that the western end of the route – the area around the Norwegian Sea, The Barents Sea and the North East Atlantic region – harbors several commodities crucial for continued Chinese growth such as LNG, iron ore and other minerals likely to be shipped to Asia in the years to come. China has also increasingly developed an interdependent economy where its economic development increasingly depends on imported raw materials shipped by sea (Blunden 2012: 124-127).

With respect to Arctic governance, the last few years have certainly changed the dynamics by which non-Arctic states have become more interested as well as engaged in the governance of the northern region. With the AC's May 15, 2013 decision opening up the door for not only China, but also Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India, Italy and the EU to be permanent observers (the decision yet to be implemented on behalf of the EU), the AC is truly becoming a more globalized high-level forum for the governance of the Arctic (Arctic Council 2013).

Increasing political interest in the Arctic comes along with increasing politization of the Council. The enhanced political role of the AC made it more difficult for China and the EU to enter the high-level forum not least due to their size. Because of both China and the EU's roles as political and economic heavyweights, it was feared that particularly these two newcomers would "fill the room" at the cost of both the Arctic states and the permanent participants.⁵ As representatives from both applicants have given statements challenging the current political order in the North, the acceptance of China and the EU has indeed been controversial within the AC (Wright 2011: 28, Sun 2013, Jakobsen and Peng 2012: 15, Wegge 2012, 2013, Solli et. al. 2013). Nevertheless, in accepting the "Nuuk Criteria" for observer-membership, China, as well as the other observer applicants' ultimate acknowledgement of the Arctic states' special role in the governance of the Arctic made it easier for the Arctic states to accept the newcomers bids for observer-membership (Solli 2013: 8-13, Jakobsen and Peng 2012).⁶

⁴ Personal communication, researcher at the Polar Research Institute of China, August 27, 2013.

⁵ Interviews with several diplomats from Arctic states 2011-2013.

⁶ The AC ministerial meeting in Nuuk 11 May 2011 adopted "the recommendations of the Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) on the role and criteria for observers to the Arctic Council as set out in

Finally, China's Arctic interest has also materialized through several new bilateral ties and dialogues with Arctic states as well as through contact with the indigenous peoples' organizations represented in the AC.⁷ While China has held dialogues and exchanges with all Arctic states, the Chinese relationship to Norway stands out as particularly difficult as well as interesting. In the early years of Chinese interest in joining the Arctic Council as an observer, Norway was among the most interesting states for the PRC to initiate bilateral cooperation with, and this was reflected in early bilateral dialogues and broad contact from the bureaucratic to the political level.⁸ This was partly because of Norway's favorable geographic location at the entrance/end of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), its less "complicated" role as a rather small country compared to, e.g. the USA or Russia, and also because of its technological competence in areas such as deep water drilling and its possession of untapped energy reservoirs, as well as its inclusiveness in accommodating Chinese research activities at Svalbard (Jacobsen 2010: 11,13). However, with the Norwegian Nobel Committee's awarding the Peace Prize to the Chinese dissident Lui Xiaobo in 2010, the Chinese government decided to freeze all bilateral cooperation with the Norwegian government. This freezing of the ties instantly affected all political contact including putting an almost finalized bilateral free trade agreement on ice. The Chinese MFA also ended their contact with the Norwegian diplomats in Beijing, and researchers and other Norwegian representatives experienced severe problems in obtaining visas for business travel to China.

On the Norwegian side of the discord, the government became trapped between following their principles of an open democracy – allowing an independent entity like the Nobel Committee to express their views without the government being responsible for their decisions and actions, while on the other hand perhaps losing out on important business opportunities with an important and rising global power. With respect to the potential AC observer-membership there was also discussion about using the Chinese desire to join the Arctic Club as "leverage" on Beijing to end the Chinese boycott (Economist 2012).⁹ However in the end Norway decided to support the Chinese bid, giving priority to enhancing the Arctic as a region of cooperation, rather than using it in bilateral horse-trading. As of the beginning of 2014, the bilateral ties remain frozen between Oslo and Beijing even though diplomatic exchange has been revived on a low technical level in Beijing.¹⁰

Because of the Chinese-Norwegian bilateral frozen ties, the other Nordic states have emerged as China's preferred partners in the Arctic. In June 2013 the Polar Research Institute of China formally established a China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, under the supervision of the State Oceanic Administration (China Daily

Annexes to the SAO Report, and decide to apply these criteria to evaluate pending applicants for observer status". The criteria emphasized the special sovereign rights of the Arctic states and underscored the UNCLOS as a sufficient and solid legal framework for the region. The criteria are available at: <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/observers>

⁷ China did for example arrange the 5th World Reindeer Herders' Congress in July 2013 in Gehne, in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, the homeland of the Aolugya tribe, where Arctic indigenous people also participated.

⁸ Interview, Norwegian senior diplomat. Oslo, May 24, 2012.

⁹ Interview, Norwegian senior diplomat. Oslo 24 May 2012.

¹⁰ Interview with Norwegian diplomat Beijing 3 June 2013.

2013). Today it also appears as if Iceland has developed into one of the most important Chinese partners in the region, e.g. illustrated by China building the largest embassy building in Reykjavik (Li and Bertelsen 2013: 62, Makki 2012, Wright 2011: 34). The newly established close ties to Iceland have also been expressed in the last few years through official Chinese visits to Iceland, through substantial cooperation on the Icelandic continental shelf by the Chinese oil company Cnooc, as well as through the newly accomplished free trade agreement between the two countries—in fact the first bilateral free trade agreement between China and a European country (Icelandic MFA 2013, Nielsson 2013).

Assessing China as an actor in the Arctic

- How should China's actions be interpreted?

As a world power China has a natural role to play in the Arctic, as this northern region is being increasingly interwoven into the global economy and politics. However, the increased interest of China in the North has caused enthusiasm as well as suspicion and uneasiness among several of the traditional Arctic states (Solli et. al. 2013: 261, Stokke 2013). On the Greenlandic and Icelandic side, the expressed Chinese willingness to invest and develop infrastructure has been warmly welcomed. The strengthened political ties with China have given these two actors valuable access to a key state in international politics (Nielsson 2013). Nevertheless, China's reputation for large scale economic investments and huge appetite for mineral and energy resources has also led to questions concerning China's long term political intentions in the Arctic, given the PRC's status as a rising great power (Chen 2012: 361, Solli et. al 2013, Dodds 2013: 32).

On the one side realist inclined analysts have been concerned about whether China would seek revisionist policies, e.g. trying to re-shape the rules governing the Arctic. In this perspective China's growth and enhanced political clout might be viewed in the context of rivalry with the USA, and in its most pointed version, as a threat to a liberal Western-dominated global order (Chan 2008, Blunden 2012: 127, Lasserre 2010). Based on my investigation of China's move towards the Arctic, this perspective does not find much evidence supporting its warning of potential great-power rivalry in the north. Nevertheless, through the strengthened Chinese position in the Arctic, including the new development of strong economic and political ties with important Arctic actors such as Greenland and Iceland, the PRC certainly demonstrates a stronger influence in the region, likely to come at the cost of others.

Liberal interpretations of the development, focusing on Chinese economic interests and China's relevance as a key actor in the environmental challenges facing the region, probably fits the empirical development best. Political observers should also showi caution when interpreting marginal Chinese statements apparently challenging the Arctic states' traditional view on their rights in the Arctic. In this respect Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo's statements from 2010; "The Arctic belongs to no one" and "the Arctic belongs to all humankind and not to any one country or group of countries", certainly have become the statements making the biggest headlines (Sun 2013, Jakobsen and Peng 2012:15, Solli et.al. 2013, Blunden 2012: 126). As Chinese leaders experienced that such "offensive" statements were striking back, e.g. with respect to the difficulties in acquiring a seat as a permanent observer to the AC,

the Chinese government from around 2011 on started displaying much more conciliatory and accommodating behavior, where economic and scientific cooperation with the Arctic states were emphasized. The Chinese support for the sovereign rights of the Arctic states was also stressed, as was the view that the UNCLOS served as a sufficient legal framework for the Arctic Ocean (Jakobsen and Peng 2012, Sun 2013, Blank 2013). In moving its focus away from issues of Chinese rights and toning down its role in Arctic governance, instead focusing more on softer dimensions such as cooperating in scientific research and environmental monitoring, China has improved its image in the face of some of the more skeptic Arctic states (Blunden 2012: 126). China's pragmatic acceptance of the Nuuk criteria also demonstrated a rather liberal and cooperative behavior, contrary to what one would expect from a "revisionist state". This indicates also a shift in the Western mindset regarding China's role in the Arctic; China is now seen as less of a competitor and threat to Western values such as democracy, human rights and individual freedoms, and more of a partner and value added in terms of Arctic science and governance.

Concluding remarks and future issues to be solved

China has in the last few years increasingly been accepted as a legitimate stakeholder in the Arctic. With important economic stakes related to shipping, investments in resource utilization as well as in the consumption of the same resources, China is an increasingly important economic actor in the Arctic. Moreover, as it has become clear that climate change in the Arctic is directly related to environmental and climatic conditions in China, the PRC is also perceived as an even more relevant scientific partner in the region. With new infrastructure, such as icebreakers and the Yellow River Station at Svalbard, China has also invested in capabilities making it able to contribute to scientific research in the north.

Nevertheless, important issues concerning China's role in the Arctic remain to be solved. First, China's future role in the High North might depend on global geopolitical developments. This includes the PRC's relationship to other great powers--primarily the USA, Russia and Japan--but also developments in global trade patterns, price development on raw materials, as well as growth in world and domestic markets. With higher prices on raw materials in the world market, Arctic resources are more likely to be utilized, hence increasing the stakes and importance of controlling and utilizing these resources. With conflicts escalating in the East and South China Sea a strained cooperation climate in the Pacific region might spill over to affect the governance and cooperation climate in the Arctic. Second, China's role in the Arctic will also depend on developments within multilateral institutions such as the Arctic Council. As no one knows with certainty how the role of the AC observers might develop in the future, institutional development of this high level multilateral forum might indeed influence China's as well as other newcomers' role to participate in the governance of the region. In this respect it is also worth noting how Chinese representatives have made their viewpoints heard with respect to demanding a greater influence on matters also concerning non-Arctic states--issues such as shipping, environmental issues or trading of resources extracted from the Arctic (Jacobson and Lee 2013: 13). And finally, powerful and influential states like China can also to a certain degree decide for themselves the direction and intensity of

their Arctic engagement and their future role in the region. Domestic developments might in this respect be able to influence some of this decision even though the ruling party certainly should be expected to have the final say in this development. To this latter point a future Chinese Arctic policy should be expected, carving out the role China wishes to play.

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Summary:

This article gives an overview of China's interest in and approach to the Arctic region. The following questions are raised: 1. Why is China getting involved in the Arctic, 2. How is China's engagement in the Arctic playing out? 3. What are the most important issues that need to be solved in order for China to increase its relevance and importance as a political actor and partner in the Arctic. In applying a rationalist approach when answering the research questions, I identify how China in the last few years increasingly has been accepted as a legitimate stakeholder in the Arctic, with important stakes and activities in areas such as shipping, resource utilization and environmental science. The article concludes with pointing out some issues that remain to be solved including China's role in issues of global politics, the role of observers in the Arctic Council as well as pointing out how China itself needs to decide important aspects of their future role in the region.

Keywords: China, Arctic, interests, international relations.