

*China's Growing Interest in the Arctic*¹

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China started being actively interested in Arctic affairs in 2007,² and since that time its interest has become manifestly obvious to the international community. Even if 'The Arctic is not destined to become a priority of China's foreign policy,'³ China seems firmly convinced that in the future, and perhaps the not-too-distant future, the Arctic will become the economic crossroads and geopolitical pivot of the globe, the central point of contact and communication between the three regions that run the world and the world's economy; these are, not in any particular order, East Asia, North America, and Western Europe. It will remain much more concerned about this than about climate change, although China does note the effect of climate change on China. As I have written elsewhere, 'China seems to see the overall effect of Arctic climate change as more of a beckoning economic opportunity than a looming environmental crisis.'⁴

¹ Editor's Note: The footnotes in this article and in the others in this issue of the *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* have been left in the European format in which they were received, except that they have been placed at the bottom of the page to ease readability. We apologize for any confusion this may cause our North American readers.

² Guo Peiqing, personal conversation, early October 2012. Cited here with Guo's knowledge and permission.

³ Jakobson and Peng, 2012: 23.

⁴ Wright, 2011: 1.

China clearly wants in on the future action in the Arctic, but China is not an Arctic state. So what does China want in the Arctic, and is it reasonable or practical? The most fundamental answer to this question is that China would want, ideally, to have an Arctic shoreline or at least territory within the Arctic Circle. China has what I will call 'Arctic envy.' But since China knows that a territorial position within the Arctic is impossible, it wants to have the next best thing: the absolute maximum amount of influence over Arctic affairs that any non-Arctic state could possibly have. In my view, if such would be quite exceptional for a non-Arctic state, that would be fine with China, because China seems to view itself as quite an exceptional power.

What then is the purpose of this maximum influence? What, specifically, does China hope to gain from it? The most direct and succinct answers given both within China and outward to the West and the world come from Professor Guo Peiqing of the Ocean University of China in Qingdao, Shandong province. According to Guo, China is interested in the Arctic for four main reasons (and these are not in any particular order): Genuine interest in, and concern over, the global climate change that is directly affecting China and has been in recent extreme weather there; scientific study in many directions, including the causes that drive and cause climate change; newly opening navigation routes and waterways through the Arctic; and energy and natural resources.⁵

Within China Guo offers his country four methods for pursuing these interests, and these methods are ranked in their order of importance: First, strengthening research efforts, building research teams, and promoting exchanges with Arctic state research organisations; second, strengthening exchanges with the governments of Arctic states, cooperating with European Arctic states that are interested in China, and presenting China's ideas and concepts to them; third, strengthening coordination and harmonisation with important non-Arctic states, finding common interests with them,

⁵ Jakobson and Peng 2012, 1 give three key Chinese interests in the Arctic as follows: '...first, to strengthen its capacity to respond appropriately to the effects that climate change in the Arctic will have on food production and extreme weather in China; second, to secure access, at reasonable cost, to Arctic shipping routes; and third, to strengthen China's ability as a non-Arctic state to access Arctic resources and fishing waters.'

and promoting the internationalisation of Arctic issues; and fourth, formulating a Chinese Arctic strategy and integrating it within global strategies.⁶

China's official arctic policy or strategy, or lack thereof

What is China's strategy for achieving this maximum influence? We do not yet know, at least in full; the world now sees China's Arctic policy through a glass, darkly. Indeed, 'China's Arctic policies are still in a nascent stage of formulation. The government has not published an Arctic strategy, and it is not expected to do so in the near-to-medium term.'⁷ There have, however, been a few official hints. In 2009, Hu Zhengyue, China's assistant minister of foreign affairs, offered a few general comments about China's intention to respect international norms in the Arctic while at the same time expressing his views (and likely the Chinese government's as well) that the Arctic beyond the 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone of the A5 states belongs to all humankind. This is still all we have, even though policy directions might have emerged with a little more clarity over the last two years. But in the absence of a clearly and officially articulated Arctic policy, China's intentions in the Arctic must at present still be inferred or guessed at, and it could always be this way because China may never clarify its Arctic policy. (It could be diplomatically and politically quite difficult to do so.) In a well-ordered world, clear policy would precede actions. But in the real world, there is often ad hocery in foreign policy formulation, in China as elsewhere. China could be discovering its Arctic policy while acting and this formulated-on-the-fly foreign policy would in such a case be affected and influenced by what China has done thus far.

Possible emerging clarity about China's arctic intentions

But even in the absence of a clear Arctic policy, over the past two years it has become possible to perceive some emerging broad contours of China's objectives in the

⁶ <http://military.people.com.cn/BIG5/42969/58519/9926219.html> Accessed 7 October 2012. See also http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2009-08/26/content_11945066_4.htm Accessed 7 October 2012.

⁷ Jakobson and Peng, 2012: 2.

Arctic, if not its overall policy (if indeed there is one). If 'The task of Chinese research institutions and academics is to help policymakers understand polar issues from their specialised perspectives and to provide policy recommendations,'⁸ and if in 2009 and 2010 China's approach to the Arctic seems to have been largely shaped by academics and scholars who offered a smorgasbord of recommendations (some of them contradictory) for Arctic policy and strategy, then by 2011, 2012, and 2013, more concrete diplomatic and political considerations have apparently guided the Chinese government's engagement in Arctic affairs.

Over the last two years it has become increasingly apparent that at least for now, China sees partnerships with small Arctic states as important means for enhancing its geopolitical standing and influence in the Arctic.⁹ This pattern of some emerging clarity about China's intentions in the Arctic seems to be reflected in the current state of scholarly publishing on Arctic issues in China. In a word, over the past two years the volume of publication of scholarly articles on the Arctic has gone down significantly since its heyday in 2009 and 2010. Among the most important and prolific journals publishing scholarly articles on Chinese Arctic policy during these two heyday years were the prestigious *Journal of [the] University of International Relations (Guoji guanxi xueyuan xuebao)* and especially the *Zhongguo Haiyang Daxue xuebao*¹⁰ of the Ocean University of China in Qingdao (Tsingtao), Shandong province. A total of 37 articles have been published in JOUC between 2009.3 and the present (October 2012). In 2010 each of the six issues of the journal had several articles on the Arctic, and virtually all of these were the lead articles in each issue's standard repertoire of 25 articles: four in issue 1, four in issue 2, four in issue 3, two in issue 4, three in issue 5, and four in issue 6. A large number of these articles, 32, touched on some aspect of law and the legal dimensions of the Arctic. Among them were 10 on environmental law (the single most prevalent topic), five on international law, four on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and three on the legal and historical dimensions of sovereignty and territoriality. Seventeen of the articles also covered Arctic policy and strategy, with five on Arctic navigation routes, four on Chinese Arctic policy, two on

⁸ Jakobson and Peng, 2012: 4, 22.

⁹ Humpert and Raspotnik, 2012.

¹⁰ *Journal of [the] Ocean University of China (Social Sciences Edition)*; JOUC.

Canadian Arctic policy, and one each on American and EU Arctic policy. All coverage of environmental issues was from a legal point of view, which would be expected from the social sciences section of OUC. Twenty-six of these articles were written in full or part by three professors in the OUC's School of Law and Political Science: Liu Huirong with 11; Dong Yue with nine, and Guo Peiqing with six.

The multiplicity and cacophony of these articles in 2009 and 2010 was (and perhaps still is) the message – it was *prima facie* evidence of the fluid and *ad hoc* nature of Chinese Arctic policy. Authors offered input and opinions during these two years regarding Chinese Arctic policy because the government did not yet have one – hence the Arctic's currency and topicality at the time. Some of the input from these scholars was provocative, strident, and *outré*, and the observation that ‘Policy recommendations from this period contained assertive and even hawkish stances’¹¹ is an understatement. The articles were important because they were part of an apparently concerted effort to establish China as an authoritative and knowledgeable commentator engaged in Arctic affairs, and also to inform Chinese intellectuals about Arctic issues.¹²

By 2011, however, the numbers of articles on Arctic issues had dropped significantly: two in issue 1, two in issue 2, and none for the rest of the year. The decline for 2012 has been even more precipitous, with one article in issue 1 (by Sun Kai and the Ocean University of China’s indefatigable Guo Peiqing on reforms in the Arctic Council) and no more so far this year, including issues 2, 3, and 4.

Given these trends, one can only assume that Chinese academics interested in the Arctic in general, along with the more strident commentators among their number in particular, have been instructed to reduce their Arctic-related scholarship or at least to cool their rhetoric over it; indeed, since 2011, ‘Chinese Arctic scholars have become more subdued in public. The concern that overly proactive statements run the risk of offending Arctic states and consequently undermining China's position in the Arctic today shapes the public face of Chinese analysis.’¹³ As opposed to many Arctic scholars in China, the government of China itself is being more circumspect: ‘Apart from speaking out about China's desire to be a permanent observer in the Arctic Council,

¹¹ Jakobson and Peng, 2012: 15.

¹² See the Appendix for a list of these articles.

¹³ Jakobson and Peng, 2012: *v*.

Chinese officials have maintained a discreet posture in other approaches to Arctic politics – a sign that the Chinese Government is being cautious.¹⁴ As well, the implications of Arctic sovereignty on the South and East China Sea disputes are obvious: 'Because of China's insistence on respect for sovereignty and its preoccupation with staunchly defending its perceived sovereign rights in the South and East China seas, China can be expected to continue to respect the sovereign rights of the Arctic littoral states.'¹⁵ This expectation is solid and real. Squaring what Beijing wants in terms of UNCLOS and Exclusive Economic Zones in the East and South China Seas with what it wants of these same things in the Arctic seems to be an impossible task and may account for Beijing's reticence regarding Arctic policy announcements. In fact, perhaps because of these considerations there may never be an official Chinese Arctic policy.

China's sense of exceptionalism and entitlement

In addition to its aggrieved nationalism and frustrated superpower psychology, China nurses a sense of exceptionalism that rivals that of the United States. That is, China at the very least sees itself as exceptional large and powerful but also peaceable and constructive member of the international community. Therefore, China nurses a sense of entitlement to participate in most major global decisions. Some Chinese theoreticians and commentators have even imagined a new international dispensation in which China's 'Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence'¹⁶ would supplant the current 'Yalta System' of stable 'spheres of influence' and usher in an international order more to China's liking.¹⁷

So could China want to be something more than just another interested party and stakeholder in Arctic affairs? Could it have ambitions of becoming one of the boys (whether as a permanent observer at the AC or no), perhaps as important as the permanent member states of the Arctic Council, in determining the outcomes of international policy in the Arctic? China's potential and real influence over Arctic policy

¹⁴ Jakobson and Peng, 2012: 20.

¹⁵ Jakobson and Peng, 2012: *vi*; see also 23.

¹⁶ Mutual respect for territorial integrity, nonaggression, non-interference, equality, and mutual benefit.

¹⁷ Pillsbury, 2000: xxv, 4-5, 17, 56, 178, 242, 305, 309.

and Arctic issues should not be underestimated. That China lacks a mechanism within the Arctic Council to comment on, oppose, or criticise Arctic policy decisions does not necessarily mean China can do nothing about them. There could very well be, I predict, economic, political, diplomatic, and even cultural exchange consequences for states that favour Arctic policies China does not like. China is quite capable of throwing its weight and elbows around and making its displeasure felt through a number of means. Guo Peiqing believes that China should not seek permanent observer status on the Arctic Council because this makes China the supplicant and is thus undignified for China.¹⁸ He holds that China can make its voice heard and influence felt in Arctic affairs through other means, and in my view he is quite correct about this.

China is sensitive and prickly about any hint or whiff of possibly being excluded from full access to the Arctic and full influence in the formation of new Arctic regimes. Developments in the Arctic sometimes elicit piquant responses from scholars and analysts in China who write on Arctic affairs for both scholarly journals and popular media outlets. A response by Guo Peiqing in the autumn of 2011 to the Nuuk Declaration in the spring of that year compared it to the American ‘Monroe Doctrine’ of the early nineteenth century, or the declaration that the United States government would view attempts to strengthen or further European interests in the Western Hemisphere as hostile and quite possibly incite American military action. In other words, Guo saw the Nuuk Declaration as the A8’s declaration to the rest of the world in general and China in particular that the Arctic belonged to them and that everyone else had better stay away. Guo’s response can only be characterised as strident and perplexed, and its opening paragraphs convey this stridency and perplexity clearly:

Not long ago,¹⁹ the A8 (Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, the U.S., Sweden, and Finland) convened the Seventh Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council at the capital of Nuuk on Denmark’s Greenland Island. The “high-level official report’ launched at the meeting declared the standards and obligations for the entrance of observers to the Council: From that day onward, states wishing to apply to become observers at the Arctic Council must recognise the sovereignty, sovereign authority,

¹⁸ Guo Peiqing, personal conversation, early October 2012. Cited here with Guo’s knowledge and permission. Guo has an English-language article on this in progress.

¹⁹ 12 May 2011.

and jurisdiction of Arctic states (the three recognitions); the duties of observers are limited to participating in scientific research or financial subsidies and the like; and the subsidy amounts must not exceed those of Arctic states.

The 'high-level official report' marks the emergence of the Arctic edition of the Monroe Doctrine. The Arctic states have declared to the world that the Arctic is the Arctic of 'the Arctic states.' They oppose the notion that the Arctic is the common heritage of all humankind and hope by means of the Monroe Doctrine to break up interests within their domain and weaken the rights to participation of states outside it.

Observers gain only the right to sit on the back row and 'observe' the meetings, but the obligations they assume are very clear: They must accept the restrictions presented by the 'three recognitions.' The 'sovereignty' within 'the three recognitions' relates to territory, internal waters, territorial waters, and territorial air space. Other than Hans Island there exist no issues pertaining to territoriality, but territorial waters and internal waters are another matter entirely. As soon as you become an observer state, are you going to recognise each [Arctic] state's declared super-long straight baselines and the territorial waters they enclose as internal waters?

Interpreting intentions

Discerning what China has in mind about the Arctic's natural resource wealth is somewhat tricky. It seems unlikely that China will be content simply to be a customer for these resources. It will want to participate in the development and extraction of them, and its investment capital for this could well be very attractive in these efforts. The cabinet of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper is, for instance, considering a proposal by China Minmetals Corp. to exploit the zinc and copper of Izok Lake, around 260 kilometres south of Kugluktuk. The project, if approved, could see the lake (which would be drained) become a productive source of natural resource wealth: 180,000 tons of zinc and 50,000 tonnes of copper a year.²⁰

²⁰ Weber, 2012.

When China speaks of access to navigation routes and waterways, what does it mean? In my view it means that China wants free and unimpeded access through them and, like the EU and the US, seeks to dispute Canada's claimed sovereignty and sovereign authority over the Northwest Passages.

Supposed Military Ambitions in the Arctic

In addition to these objectives in the Arctic, could China harbour another potentially more ominous one, a military one? Might China eventually want a naval base in the Arctic? In 2011, Chinese businessman Huang Nubo proposed purchasing and developing 300 square kilometers of land in northern Iceland into an Arctic ecotourism centre, but the government of Iceland rejected it because of suspicions of ulterior motives within the Chinese military for use of the land. But I find concerns that China might have in mind the eventual construction of a naval base in the Arctic, in Iceland for instance, to be overblown and overwrought, not because I am convinced that China's intentions towards the Arctic are completely benign but because any such Chinese base in Iceland or anywhere else in the Arctic would be, like China's newly launched and planned aircraft carrier, more targets and liabilities than military assets. What could China possibly hope to gain by attempting to establish a military base in foreign territory in the most militarised region on earth?

This is not, however, to say that China will never have a military presence or military deployments in the Arctic. The Chinese keep a close eye on the military activities of Arctic states in the Arctic and even watch other states watching them. (For instance, the Chinese have observed that the Russians are concerned that China now sees the Arctic as an important military and strategic area of interest.²¹ Military-oriented Chinese publications scoff at a 2012 SIPRI report that China's new icebreaker is being built in preparation to enter the Arctic militarily²² but have long insisted that with Canada, Russia, and the United States glowering menacingly about their sovereignty over the Arctic the way a tiger watches his prey, and that with the extensive military presence and exercises of these countries in the region, China cannot help but get

²¹ Lin 2012; <http://big5.eastday.com:82/gate/big5/mil.eastday.com/m/20120205/u1a6345392.html>

²² Anonymous, 2012.

involved by, among other things, formulating a strategy²³ for the Arctic.²⁴ Further, I have predicted elsewhere that China may eventually deploy submarines to the Arctic (Wright 2011: 35), and since then the likelihood of this has not diminished.

Conclusion

In summary, then, if I were to hazard a prioritised ranking of China's four areas of interest in the Arctic, it would be as follows:

1. Navigation routes
2. Energy and natural resources
3. Scientific study
4. Climate change.

Additionally, in my view of the foreseeable future, China will keep a low profile in the Arctic in order not to cause alarm; endeavour to influence Arctic decisions and affairs, whether inside the Arctic Council or outside it; may speak up against extended continental shelf applications by A5 states; will continue to be prickly and sensitive about slights, real or perceived, to its 'rights and interests' in the Arctic; will continue to comment on Arctic affairs; and will not build military bases in the Arctic but may deploy submarines there.

The panda bear has made its way into the Arctic and will not be shooed away. How influential it will be is for Arctic states to determine and time to tell.

²³ *Zhanlue* 战略, a term with both non-military and military connotations and associations that can mean strategy in general or, more concretely and literally, 'battle plans.'

²⁴ Anonymous, 2009. http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2009-08/26/content_11945066.html Accessed 7 October 2012.

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Appendix: Major Chinese-language articles on the Arctic in selected Chinese academic periodicals, 2007-October 2012

Zhongguo Hanghai 中国航海 32.2 (2009):

Li Zhenfu 李振福, '*Zhongguo canyu Beiji hangxian guoji jizhi de zhang'ai ji duice* 中国参与北极航线国际机制的障碍及对策' ['China's Participation in International Arctic Route Mechanisms: Obstacles and Countermeasures'].

Guoji Guanxi Xueyuan xuebao 国际关系学院学报

2011.3:

Lu Junyuan 陆俊元, '*Beiji guojia xin Beiji zhengce de gongtong quxiang ji duice sikao* 北极国家新北极政策的共同取向 [sic; 趋向] 及对策思考' ['The Common Direction of the Arctic States' New Arctic Policies and Reflections on Countermeasures'].

2010.2:

Xu Zhenwei 徐振伟 and Xu Yuanyuan 徐园园, '*Beiji xiaorong beihou de Mei Jia E boyi* 北极消融背后的美加俄博弈' ['The American-Canadian-Russian Chess Match Behind the Scenes of the Melting Arctic'].

2007.5:

Wu Hui 吴慧, '*Beiji zhengduozhan de guojifa fenxi* 北极争夺战的国际法分析' ['An International Law Analysis of the Battle over the Arctic'].

Zhongguo ruan kexue 中国软科学

Li Zhenfu 李振福, '*Beiji hangxian de Zhongguo zhanlue fenxi* 北极航线的中国战略分析' ['A Chinese Strategic Analysis of Arctic Routes'].

Shanghai haishi Daxue xuebao 上海海事大学学报

2009.4:

Li Zhenfu 李振福, '*Zhongguo Beiji hangxian zhanlue de SWOT dongtai fenxi* 中国北极航线战略的 SWOT 动态分析' ['Dynamic SWOT Analysis of China's Arctic Routes Strategy'].

Zhongguo Haiyang Daxue xuebao (shekeban) 中国海洋大学学报 (社科版)

2012.1:

Sun Kai 孫凱 and Guo Peiqing 郭培清, '*Beiji lishihui de gaige yu bianqian yanjiu* 北极理事会的改革与变迁研究' ["Research on Reforms and Changes in the Arctic Council"].

2011.1:

Gui Jing 桂靜, '*Jianada Beiji yingdui celue pingxi* 加拿大北极应对策略平析' ["Critical Analysis of Canada's Arctic Response Tactics"].

Guo Peiqing 郭培清 and Chang Jing 常晶, '*Jianxi goujian Jianada Beiji huanjing zhengce de zhuyao yinsu* 简析构建加拿大北极环境政策的主要因素' ["Brief Analysis and Construction of the Main Factors in Canada's Arctic Environmental Policies"].

2011.2:

Liu Huirong 刘惠荣 and Dong Yue 董跃, '*Beiji huanjing zhili de falü lujing yu zhanwang* 北极环境治理的法律路径分析与展望' ["Legal Ways and Means for Arctic Environmental Administration: Analysis and Prospects"].

Han Yichou 韩逸畴, '*Lun Lianheguo yu Beiji diqu zhi guojifa zhili* 论联合国与北极地区之国际法治理' ["On the United Nations and the Administration of International Law in the Arctic Region"].

2010.1:

Liu Huirong 刘惠荣 and Han Yang 韩洋, '*Beiji falü wenti: shiyong haiyangfa jiben yuanze de jichuxing sikao* 北极法律问题:适用海洋法基本原则的基础性思考' ['Arctic Legal

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