

# NORTHERN EXPEDITION: CHINA'S ARCTIC ACTIVITIES AND AMBITIONS

RUSH DOSHI  
ALEXIS DALE-HUANG  
GAOQI ZHANG

APRIL 2021

Read the full report: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/northern-expedition-chinas-arctic-ambition-and-activism/>

## TWELVE TAKEAWAYS

### **1 China seeks to become a “polar great power” but downplays this goal publicly.**

Speeches by President Xi Jinping and senior Chinese officials with responsibility for Arctic policy are clear that building China into a “polar great power” by 2030 is China’s top polar goal. Despite the prominence of this goal in these texts, China’s externally facing documents — including its white papers — rarely if ever mention it, suggesting a desire to calibrate external perceptions about its Arctic ambitions, particularly as its Arctic activities become the focus of greater international attention.

### **2 China describes the Arctic as one of the world’s “new strategic frontiers,” ripe for rivalry and extraction.**<sup>1</sup>

China sees the Arctic — along with the Antarctic, the seabed, and space — as ungoverned or undergoverned spaces. While some of its external discourse emphasizes the need to constrain competition in these domains, several others take a more cynical view, emphasizing the need to prepare for competition within them and over their resources. A head of the Polar Research Institute for China, for example, called these kinds of public spaces the “most competitive resource treasures,” China’s National Security Law creates the legal capability to protect China’s rights across them, and top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials have suggested China’s share of these resources should be equal to its share of the global population.<sup>2</sup>

### **3 Chinese military texts treat the Arctic as a zone of future military competition.**

Although several externally facing Chinese texts downplay the risk of military competition in the Arctic, which would likely be harmful to Chinese goals, military texts take the opposite perspective. They note that, “the game of great powers” will “increasingly focus on the struggle over and control of global public spaces” like the Arctic and Antarctic and argue that China “cannot rule out the possibility of using force”

in this coming “scramble for new strategic spaces.”<sup>3</sup> Chinese diplomats describe the region as the “new commanding heights” for global military competition too while scholars suggest controlling it allows one to obtain the “three continents and two oceans’ geographical advantage” over the Northern Hemisphere.<sup>4</sup>

**4 Chinese texts make clear that its investments in Arctic science are intended to buttress its Arctic influence and strategic position.** Although externally facing messaging indicates China’s desire to pursue scientific research for its own benefit and for global welfare, China’s top scientific figures and high-level CCP members are clear that science is also motivated by a drive for “the right to speak,” for cultivating China’s “identity” as an Arctic state, and for securing resources and strategic access.<sup>5</sup> China’s polar expeditions and various research stations assist Beijing with its resource extraction, with Arctic access, and with acquiring experience operating in the Arctic climate.

**5 China supports existing Arctic governance mechanisms publicly but complains about them privately.** Several Chinese texts indicate frustration with Arctic mechanisms and concern that the country will be excluded from the region’s resources. Official texts suggest gently that the region’s importance now transcends “its original inter-Arctic States,” while scholars once feared Arctic states would launch an admittedly unlikely “eight-state polar region alliance” or institutionalize the Arctic Council in ways that “strengthen their dominant position” at China’s expense.<sup>6</sup> These texts stress China’s pursuit of “identity diplomacy,” namely, terming China a “near-Arctic State” because it is affected by climate change.<sup>7</sup> They also indicate an interest in pushing alternative Chinese governance concepts — in some cases to supplement and other cases to run outside the Arctic Council — including a “Polar Silk Road” and China’s “community with a shared future for mankind,” though specifics are often lacking.<sup>8</sup>

**6 Accommodating China’s Arctic ambitions rarely produces enduring goodwill.** Norway was the first country to allow China to build an Arctic science station and Sweden was the first worldwide to allow China to build its own completely China-owned satellite facility. Both these efforts, which were richly praised by China at the time, did not protect either country from later economic coercion and harsh condemnation by China. In both cases, China punished these countries not only for the actions of their governments but also for the independent actions of their civil societies, which were to award Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo the Nobel Peace Prize and to investigate China’s kidnapping of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai. Efforts by both Norway and Sweden to reverse the slide — with Sweden keeping relatively quiet about the rendition of its citizen and Norway vigorously backing China’s pursuit of Arctic Council observer status — were only met with restrictions on Norwegian fish exports and colorful threats of coercion against Sweden.

**7 Arctic dependence on trade with China is often overstated, and trade flows are smaller than with other powers.** Chinese economic statecraft is feared by some in the Arctic and around the world, but the region’s dependence on China is remarkably small. For the five smallest Arctic economies — Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland — China accounts for an average of only 4.0% of their exports, less than the United States (6.2%) and far less than the NATO and EU economies excluding the United States (70.3%).<sup>9</sup>

**8 China has invested significantly in Arctic diplomacy to boost its regional influence.** China has sent high-level figures — at the levels of president, premier, vice president, foreign minister, and defense minister — to visit Arctic countries other than the United States and Russia 33 times over the last 20 years. Beijing lobbied heavily to become an Arctic Council observer, became a strong presence at many other regional Track II fora, and launched its own diplomatic and Track II regional efforts, including a China-Russia Arctic Forum and the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, to deepen relations with governments and sub-national actors.

**9 China's military profile in the Arctic has increased, and its scientific efforts provide strategic advantages too.** China has dispatched naval vessels to the Arctic on two occasions, including to Alaska and later to Denmark, Sweden, and Finland for goodwill visits. It has built its first indigenously produced icebreaker, has plans for more conventional heavy icebreakers, and is considering investments in nuclear-powered icebreakers too.

**10 China's scientific activities in the Arctic give it greater operational experience and access.** China has sent 10 scientific expeditions into the region on its *Xuelong* icebreaker, generally with more than 100 crew members, that officials acknowledge give it useful operational and navigational experience. China has also established science and satellite facilities in Norway, Iceland, and Sweden while pursuing additional facilities in Canada and Greenland — with its facility in Norway able to berth more than two dozen individuals and provide resupply. Finally, China has used the Arctic as a testing ground for new capabilities whether related to satellites coverage, fixed-wing aircraft, autonomous underwater gliders, buoys, and even an “unmanned ice station” configured for research.

**11 China's infrastructure investments in the Arctic sometimes appear dual-use.** Several Chinese infrastructure projects that have little economic gain have raised concerns about strategic motivations and dual-use capabilities. These include efforts by a former Chinese propaganda official to purchase 250 square kilometers of Iceland to build a golf course and airfield in an area where golf cannot be played and later to buy 200 square kilometers of Norway's Svalbard archipelago. Chinese companies have also sought to purchase an old naval base in Greenland; to build three airports in Greenland; to build Scandinavia's largest port in Sweden; to acquire (successfully) a Swedish submarine base; to link Finland and the wider Arctic to China through rail; and to do the same with a major port and railway in Arkhangelsk in Russia.

**12 China's commodity investments in the Arctic have a mixed track record.** Despite some important successes, a large number of Chinese investments have failed. For example, a major Chinese firm abandoned a Canadian zinc mine, refused to pay creditors, and left local governments to pay to clean up an environmental disaster. Another firm disappointed in its investment later sued, saying it had overpaid. In Greenland, a Chinese conglomerate abandoned its iron mine after running into legal trouble in China. In Iceland, a Chinese company withdrew from an Arctic exploration partnership due to poor initial resource estimates.



# CHINA'S "TWO VOICES" ON THE ARCTIC

RUSH DOSHI  
JOHN FERGUSON  
ALEXIS DALE-HUANG  
GAOQI ZHANG

*The Chinese government outwardly messages a set of assumptions and goals that contradict those communicated internally. Below are some key examples of those contradictions.*

## AMBITIONS: BECOMING A "POLAR GREAT POWER"

**External messaging:** The term "polar great power" [极地强国] does not appear in China's 2018 Arctic White Paper and has never appeared in Foreign Ministry spokesperson remarks.

**For internal Chinese audiences:** "The profoundly changing international situation requires us to better carry out polar work... The geopolitics of the Arctic and its economic relations with other regions of the world are undergoing significant changes... Given this situation, China urgently needs to... enter the ranks of the world's polar great powers."<sup>10</sup>

From an official commentary on Xi Jinping's November 18, 2014 speech on China's polar ambitions printed in the newspaper of the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), which oversees many Arctic programs. The speech is unpublished, but the commentary here and the related SOA study sessions shed light on its likely content.

## PERCEPTIONS: "CHINA'S NEW STRATEGIC FRONTIERS"

**External:** "The future of the Arctic is related to the interests of Arctic countries, and it is related to the well-being of countries outside the Arctic and all mankind. As a responsible major country, China does not want to see tensions in the Arctic region, and does not want to build a sphere of influence in the Arctic region. China is willing to work with relevant countries, including Iceland, to actively respond to various Arctic-related climate change and environmental protection. Challenges and contributions to the peace, stability and sustainable development of the Arctic."<sup>11</sup>

Chinese Ambassador to Iceland Jin Zhijian in an October 2019 letter published in an Icelandic media outlet.

**Internal:** "I have said on many occasions that China's population accounts for one-fifth of the world's population, so can't we get a fifth of the interests in the Antarctic and Arctic? Because this is the common heritage of mankind, everyone has a share. If you do not defend it, do not fight for it, then you have no say... We cannot leave it all to others; the Chinese people have rights there."<sup>12</sup>

Chinese naval Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo on the sidelines of the "Two Sessions" political conclave in 2010.

## MILITARY: "NEW COMMANDING HEIGHTS OF MILITARY STRATEGY"

**External:** "China's policy goals on the Arctic are: to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic, so as to safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic, and promote sustainable development of the Arctic."<sup>13</sup>

From the 2018 Arctic White Paper, one of the most authoritative Chinese sources outlining Beijing's Arctic goals and ambitions.

**Internal:** "In modern times, international geopolitical battles have long been manifested as conflicts on sea power and land power. The essence of that battle is the fight for strategic locations, strategic resources, and strategic channels... At the same time, the new geopolitical battles on the control of oceans, polar regions, space, internet, and other global public spaces will become fierce and will surely have major and far-reaching impacts on the military strategies of major powers."<sup>14</sup>

From the 2013 "Science of Military Strategy," one of China's most authoritative texts on military thinking.

**Internal:** "The Arctic region also has important military strategic value. The Arctic region is a strategic keystone for the continents of Asia, Europe and North America. Military experts believe that if you dominate the Arctic region, you can occupy the 'commanding heights' of the world's military."<sup>15</sup>

Former Chinese Ambassador to Norway Tang Guoqiang in a 2013 essay for the China Institute of International Studies.

## SCIENCE: "THE RIGHT TO SPEAK"

**External:** "China is steadily advancing the construction of ecological civilization and actively participating in international cooperation on climate change. The emission reduction measures adopted by China have a positive impact on the protection of the climate and ecological environment of the Arctic. We are willing to continue working with all parties concerned to build political consensus, strengthen exchanges and cooperation, and effectively manage the challenges that climate change brings to the Arctic."<sup>16</sup>

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang in a May 2019 press conference.

**Internal:** "...the three most competitive resource treasures in the world are the seabed, the moon, and Antarctica. In order to gain a greater say in the Antarctic issue, some small countries are also doing everything possible to set up stations in Antarctica to 'plant flags.' It can be said that the loss of the scientific research base in Antarctica means the loss of space for resource development."<sup>17</sup>

| Yang Huigen, one of China's top polar officials, in 2005.

## DIPLOMACY: CHINA AS A "NEAR ARCTIC STATE"

**External:** "'Respect' is the key basis for China's participation in Arctic affairs. Respect should be reciprocal. It means all States should abide by international treaties such as the UN Charter and the UNCLOS, as well as general international law."<sup>18</sup>

| From China's 2018 Arctic White Paper.

**External:** "The Arctic is not like Antarctica, which is open for every country in the world. If other countries want to participate in the exploration and development of the Arctic, they have to cooperate with the countries surrounding it, and countries in northern Europe... are ideal partners for China to find the path to the Arctic."<sup>19</sup>

| Former Chinese Ambassador to Sweden Chen Mingming in a 2017 interview.

**Internal:** "Even if the Arctic countries succeed in expanding their continental shelves, their overlying water bodies will still be the international high seas."

**Internal:** "China has no land in the Arctic, but it is not without interests."<sup>20</sup>

| Guo Peiqing, one of China's most prominent Arctic scholars, in April 2016.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 For an example, see “合作才能避免失序” [Cooperation to Avoid Disaster], 中工网 [Zhonggongwang], May 12, 2014, <http://world.workercn.cn/63/201405/12/140512054028106.shtml>. This piece was written by Tang Yongsheng, the executive deputy director of the National Defense University’s Strategic Research Institute.
- 2 “本报记者专访中国极地研究中心副主任杨惠根博士我国酝酿环球考察” [Our Reporter Interviewed Dr. Yang Huigen, Deputy Director of the China Polar Research Center, My Country Is Preparing for a Global Expedition], 新闻中心 [Sina], December 5, 2005, <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2005-12-05/00437617786s.shtml>.
- 3 战略学 (2013年版) [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Press], 2013), 16, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/sms-2013.pdf>, 74, 105-6.
- 4 郭培清 [Guo Peiqing], “郭培清：中国在北极没土地，但有利益” [Guo Peiqing: China Has No Land in the Arctic, but It Has Benefits], 环球网 [Huanqiu Wang], April 29, 2016, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJV498>; 唐国强 [Tang Guoqiang], “北极问题与中国的政策” [Arctic Issues and China’s Policies], 国际问题研究 [International Studies] (2013), CNKI: D993.5.
- 5 For an example, see 郭云青 [Guo Yunqing], “探秘中国南极新站选址” [Exploring the Location of China’s New Antarctic Station], 人民日报 [People’s Daily], January 14, 2013, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2013/0114/c157278-20186013.html>.
- 6 “Full Text: China’s Arctic Policy,” (Beijing: The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, January 26, 2018), [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm); “‘极地未来对中国影响重大’——专访中国海洋大学极地问题专家郭培清” [The Future of the Polar Regions Will Have a Significant Impact on China’ - Interview with Guo Peiqing, an Expert on Polar Issues at Ocean University of China], 上海市科学技术协会 [Shanghai Association for Science & Technology], July 10, 2008, <http://sast.gov.cn/view/8013.html>; and 程保志 [Cheng Baozhi], “试析北极理事会的功能转型与中国的应对策略” [On the Functional Transformation of the Arctic Council and China’s Countermeasures], 国际论坛 [International Forum] 15, no. 3 (2013), CNKI: D815.3.
- 7 孙凯 [Sun Kai] and 武珺欢 [Wu Junhuan], “北极治理新态势与中国的深度参与战略” [The New Situation of Arctic Governance and China’s Deep Participation Strategy] 国际展望 [Global Review] no. 6 (2015): 75, <http://www.sis.org.cn/shgjw201512107417/UploadFiles/file/20161223/201506007%20%E5%AD%99%20%20%E5%87%AF.pdf>.
- 8 “Full Text: China’s Arctic Policy,” The State Council of the People’s Republic of China. Also see 杨剑 [Yang Jian] and 郑英琴 [Zheng Yingqin], “‘人类命运共同体’思想与新疆域的国际治理” [The Idea of ‘Community of Shared Future for Mankind’ and International Governance in New Frontiers], 上海国际问题研究院 [Shanghai Institutes for International Studies], October 10, 2017, <http://www.sis.org.cn/Research/Info/4256>.
- 9 2019 data from UN Comtrade Database, <https://comtrade.un.org/>.
- 10 “二论深入学习贯彻习近平主席重要讲话精神” [Second Discussion on the In-Depth Study and Implementation of the Spirit of Chairman Xi Jinping’s Important Speech], 中国海洋报 [China Ocean News], November 25, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191213230323/http://www.oceanol.com/redian/shipping/2014-11-25/38013.html>.
- 11 “驻冰岛大使金智健在冰岛《晨报》发表署名文章《中国是促进北极发展的重要力量》” [Ambassador Jin Zhijian in Iceland Published a Signed Article ‘China Is an Important Force for the Development of the Arctic’ in Iceland’s Morning Post], 中华人民共和国驻冰岛共和国大使馆 [Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Iceland], October 15, 2019, <http://is.china-embassy.org/chn/zbgx/gjhz/t1708048.htm>.

- 12 “‘尹卓：美国海上霸权威胁中国安全’ [Yin Zhuo: U.S. Maritime Hegemony Threatens China's Security], 中国网 [China Internet Information Center], March 8, 2010, [http://www.china.com.cn/fangtan/zhuanti/2010lianghui/2010-03/08/content\\_19556085.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/fangtan/zhuanti/2010lianghui/2010-03/08/content_19556085.htm).
- 13 “Full Text: China's Arctic Policy,” The State Council of the People's Republic of China, January 26, 2018, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm).
- 14 军事科学院军事战略研究部 [Military Strategic Research Department of the Academy of Military Science], 战略学 (2013年版) [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Press], 2013), 16, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/sms-2013.pdf>.
- 15 唐国强 [Tang Guoqiang], “北极问题与中国的政策” [Arctic Issues and China's Policies].
- 16 “2019年5月8日外交部发言人耿爽主持例行记者会” [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on May 8, 2019], 中华人民共和国外交部 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China], May 9, 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt\\_673021/t1661695.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1661695.shtml).
- 17 “本报记者专访中国极地研究中心副主任杨惠根博士我国酝酿环球考察” [Our Reporter Interviewed Dr. Yang Huigen, Deputy Director of the China Polar Research Center, My Country Is Preparing for a Global Expedition], 新闻中心 [Sina], December 5, 2005, <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2005-12-05/00437617786s.shtml>.
- 18 “Full Text: China's Arctic Policy,” The State Council of the People's Republic of China.”
- 19 Yang Sheng, “President Xi's Finland Trip Offers Arctic Opportunities,” *Global Times*, March 30, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1040482.shtml>.
- 20 郭培清 [Guo Peiqing], “郭培清：中国在北极没土地，但有利益” [Guo Peiqing: China Has No Land in the Arctic, but It Has Benefits], 环球网 [Huanqiu Wang], April 29, 2016, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJV498>.