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RELATIONS ON THIN ICE: A narrative analysis of Chinese governance in the Arctic

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Abstract: In a fractured governance architecture, the Arctic region is increasingly faced with complex challenges like climate change, indigenous rights and commercialisation. Shedding light on a sorely overlooked topic in the literature – China's Arctic discourse and strategy – this article applies an inductive, social constructivist approach, utilising qualitative content analysis and constituent dimensions to analyse Chinese Arctic narratives. Seeking to answer the questions: "How has China attempted to position itself as a legitimate actor in the Arctic, and has it been accepted?" and "How will this impact governance architecture in the region?" the results show that China has been accepted a legitimate actor in Arctic governance via a discourse of scientific exploration and cultural ties. Further, an increasingly dissatisfied China is challenging Arctic governance, replacing its scientific engagement narrative with one of commercial engagement, geo-economic power and, ultimately, prestige.

Keywords: Arctic Council, governance, qualitative content analysis, Chinese discourse analysis

“In terms of global governance of the Arctic, China’s role has shifted from a ‘rule follower’ to a ‘rule maker’” (Liu, 2018: 1).

1. INTRODUCTION

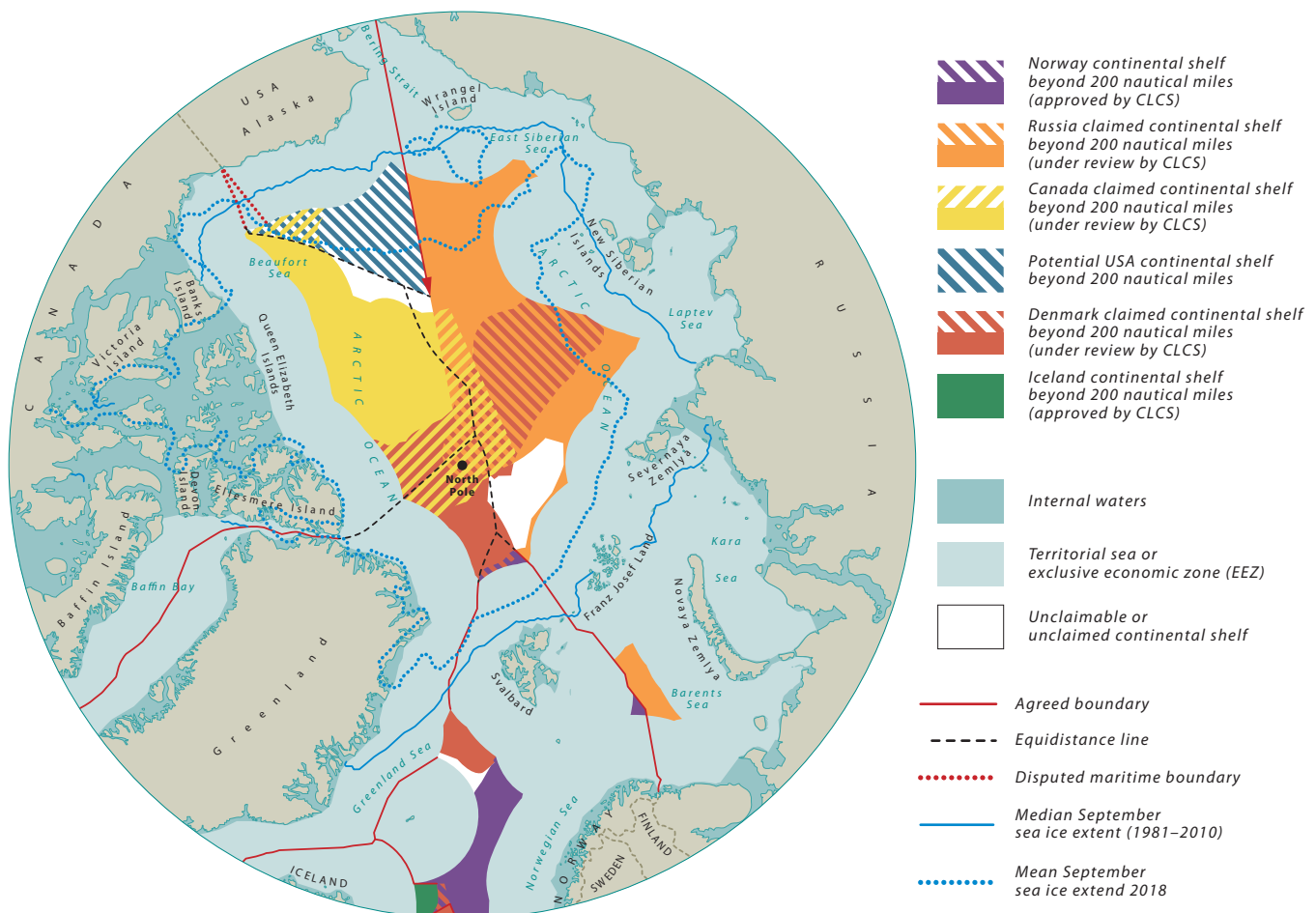
The Arctic region has historically been conceptualised in peaceful terms. Once seen as an impenetrable region, 21st century issues of climate change, digital connectivity and increasing energy scarcity have brought the Arctic to the forefront of attention in the international community. Increasingly, what happens in the Arctic is relevant to the global community – and to the cooperation that underpins Arctic peace. Greater attention to the Arctic region can be seen among politicians, governments, multilateral institutions, indigenous rights groups and environmental organisations. In the last decade, dozens of nations have updated or created their first national policies on Arctic affairs, while issues that were once sidelined, like environmental protection, shifting boundaries, Arctic development and security, are becoming increasingly important in political discourse in Arctic and non-Arctic countries alike. Well-stated by Lajeunesse, Adam et. al., “whether viewed as a barometer for the global climate, a scientific or resource frontier, a transit route to elsewhere, a tourist destination, or a homeland, the Arctic has captured the attention of the world –

from Baffin Island to Beijing” (Lajeunesse, 2018). Through the Arctic the international community now sees issues of political consensus, climate change response and multilateral failures play out with increasing relevance.

When it comes to governance, security and development, the Arctic is now considered with increasing urgency. And yet scholarship remains thin on the geopolitical importance of this rapidly shifting region with the potential to upend critical systems. Melting ice in the Arctic will result in sea-level rise to the immediate detriment of coastal and island nations. New shipping routes in Arctic seas will replace relied-upon Latin American transits, upheaving the global trading system. Indigenous populations pursuing independence in Greenland will greatly impact the power dynamics of historically powerful nations. Melting ice has the potential to unearth frozen viruses and chemicals that could result in the next global pandemic.

Yet the Arctic region has traditionally been one of cooperation among the Arctic Council and its eight Arctic members: Canada, Denmark (via Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. These nations have pursued a myriad of diverse interests in the Arctic: scientific, commercial, maritime, energy and mining, governance, political and military. All territorial

Figure 1. Overlapping territorial claims in the Arctic



Source: World Ocean Review, 6: 5 (2019).

disputes have been resolved relatively peacefully without military action, and international and regional forms of governance continue to be accepted. No state has yet sought to dominate the Arctic, making it a unique region (Sacks, 2021).

Now, with 13 observer states and increasing international attention, the Arctic Council faces a future of challenged and fractured governance architecture in the Arctic – one that it leads alongside the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This governance is challenged by sovereignty disputes and shifting borders due to sea ice melt, resulting in territorial claims overlapping with dissonant governance mechanisms. The Arctic is also facing the geopolitical impacts of an independent Greenland and the participation of new actors. These three bodies are sorely underprepared to respond to the contemporary issues of governance, security, development and climate change impacting the region.

It is within this context that China has shown significant interest in the Arctic. Hefty investments in Nordic tourism, scientific research, bilateral commercial ventures and foreign direct investment (FDI) bely a Chinese discourse that until 2018 hesitated to declare clear interests or policy directions. By 2015, Chinese Arctic scholarship showed attempts by China to legitimate itself as an actor in the region by reframing itself as a “near-Arctic” state (近北极国家 *jìn běijí guójiā*) and approaching climate change and scientific expeditions through a *globalist* Arctic narrative. Despite gaining observer status to the Arctic Council in 2013, investing heavily in what is now one of the most powerful Arctic fleets on Earth, and with the state-backed China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) holding nearly 30% of the Russian Yamal Peninsula LNG project by 2017, China continued to publicly claim that it possessed no Arctic policy until the release of its 2018 White Paper. Official discourse on Arctic involvement by China remains quite heavily focused on scientific research, climate change, environmental protection, Arctic communications and hosting and participating in international meetings, which complicates the understanding of Chinese strategy in the Arctic and furthers concerns about “dual-use” missions and facilities. This ultimately results in a China whose actions and discourse do not align.

This research seeks to answer the questions: “How has China attempted to position itself as a legitimate actor in the Arctic, and has it been accepted?” and “How will this impact governance architecture in the region?” through an analysis of Chinese discourse using qualitative content analysis via the software NVivo. The results show a China that is seeking to find legitimacy in the Arctic through scientific diplomacy, a universalist approach to Arctic conceptualisations and developmental projects that retain a respect for sovereignty not seen in “Western” approaches. China has successfully established itself as an actor in the Arctic – if not in the Arctic Council – via this discourse. Analysis also shows that NATO remains behind in its discourse, continuing to lump Chinese

policy into its “Sea, Space, and Cyber” discourse. Russia, meanwhile, is working off Chinese discourse to create its own illiberal narrative that the two countries form a loose alliance. However, this is not supported by data. Instead, China continues to act alone, unwilling to threaten already difficult relations with the United States and Canada. Finally, this inductive research sees a geo-economic future of Arctic governance dominated not by traditional institutionalism, but by the unregulated forces of international trade, foreign direct investment and energy scarcity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Always a place of intrigue, Arctic affairs are becoming ever more important because of climate change. Climate change has resulted in an Arctic that is rapidly changing, warming at twice the speed of the rest of the globe, threatening vulnerable populations, increasing sea levels and creating new opportunities for trade, shipping and investment. While the Northern Sea Route (NSR) was previously inaccessible for commercialisation, melting ice has resulted in an area accessible for an increasing number of months per year. This newfound ability to use the NSR has increased interest in a region traditionally isolated by a harsh climate and enmeshed in the politics of the Cold War.

Considerations in the literature of nationalist and internationalist conceptualisations in the Arctic reflect a greater insecurity about whether it is a region in dispute or not: that is, whether China and other observer states are primarily concerned with uniquely Arctic affairs, or whether “changing power dynamics in the Arctic are unlikely to derive from regional disputes ... and instead will be a reflection of broader international forces and dynamics” (Lackenbauer, 2021: 5). China takes a clear internationalist approach to Arctic governance – advocating for its participation and role in the Arctic on terms with its participation in international affairs. Other players, including Canada, Russia, the European Union and indigenous groups, take nationalist approaches that reject the inclusion of governance actors from outside nations.

2.1. Securitisation in the Arctic

In most of the literature, Russia remains the primary target of securitisation discourse due to its heavy militarisation and commercialisation of the Arctic, as well as its advanced northern capabilities. While China and Russia are typically seen as opposing states in discussions of security and great power competition, this research accepts that in the Arctic, Russia and China must be considered together, and as potential cooperators, due to China’s reliance on Russian energy sources in the Arctic and its willingness to “use economic tools as leverage” in a “grand strategy based on economics rather than on values” (Pincus, 2020: 44). However, the author finds this relationship temporary at best, with the most likely future one in which Chinese and

Through the Arctic the international community now sees issues of political consensus, climate change response and multilateral failures play out with increasing relevance.

Russian interests in the Arctic converge, diverge and then conflict (Havnes, 2020: 126).

The Arctic is a region that is historically enmeshed in Cold War politics, acting as a buffer zone between the United States and Russia since 1947. It is within this context that the Arctic has in recent years seen a return of securitised discourse, the origin of which remains contested in the literature. The security concerns in the region are heightened by climate change, with “a continually changing physical setting... [and] changing political and economic environment” challenging security responses (Backus and Strickland, 2008: 9). Backus and Strickland (2008), who are concerned with military conflict as a result of terrorism and supply chain security, are right to argue that multinational companies and government security will “become intertwined” in complex spaces impacted by climate change.

What is now feared is what Andrea Beck (2014: 307) terms an “Arctic oil rush” and a “nationalist scramble” for resources that results in a higher possibility of conflict. In this rapidly changing arena, national policies toward the Arctic remain dated, having yet to crystallise. Andreas Østhagen asks, “In this new Arctic environment, what role is there for the EU? The EU’s involvement in the Arctic is one characterised by ambivalence” (2019: 15). This is similar to analyses of the United States, which has been referred to as a “reluctant Arctic power” by scholar Rob Huebert (Teepie, 2020). Accordingly, Huebert posits that a “New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment” is forming where “the core strategic interests of Russia, China and United States are now converging at the top of the world” in a “great game” not *over* the Arctic but *through* it (Huebert, 2020: 19), which for the first time in history is accessible.

2.2. Governance architecture in the Arctic

The Arctic is currently governed by a patchwork architecture of regional Arctic-focused organisations, state actor-led consensus-based multilateral bodies, international maritime treaties, indigenous groups and bilateral forums, including academic and scientific exchanges. This includes the first major Arctic agreement, The Svalbard Treaty (originally the Spitsbergen Treaty) signed during the Versailles negotiations following World War I in 1920. While the purpose of the treaty was to declare Svalbard a part of Norway, it effectively, though not entirely, demilitarised the archipelago while allowing the signatories equal rights to engage in commercial activities on the islands. The Svalbard Treaty has had the practical significance of contextualising the Arctic in commercial, environmental, sovereign and non-militarised terms.

Today’s Arctic region is composed of a fragmented governance architecture built around three main legal components: the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the Arctic Council. These bodies have created a significant governance mechanism for the Arctic, including the Polar Code – which provides a mandatory framework for ships operating in polar waters, multilateral environmental protection agreements and regional cooperation through the Arctic Council (Gayazova, 2013: 73). Through these three bodies, Arctic governance has been conceptualised in maritime and environmental terms.

Other governing structures include the Ilulissat Declaration signed in 2008 by the foreign ministers of the five Arctic coastal states (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States, now known as the A-5) in Greenland. Significantly, the Ilulissat Declaration recognised the primary Arctic threat of climate change, reaffirmed members’ commitment to UNCLOS, and “reject[ed] the need for ‘a new comprehensive legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean’”. It is therefore seen as a “pre-emptive” effort to discourage Arctic participation by non-A-5 members and continue with a sovereign, nationalist governance framework (Yeager, 2008).

Other relevant governance mechanisms in the Arctic include the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears, the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (169), and the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation. These treaties focus on indigenous rights, environmental conservation and social development. In terms of security, defence and militarisation, no binding treaties or supranational organisations exist.

According to Timo Koivurova, “If the Arctic Council continues without a legal mandate, there is a great danger of it becoming a façade under which unilateral and uncoordinated policies of the States in the region can proceed” (Beck, 2014: 315). This position has been corroborated by the work of other scholars, such as Michael T. Geiselhart, who advocates for new governance architecture based on the principles of the Antarctic region. In Geiselhart’s view (2014: 167), the Arctic exists “within a governance framework that is a patchwork of legal regimes” consisting of the sovereign Arctic states operating through their own domestic legal systems, the binding and nonbinding multilateral and bilateral treaties and customary international law that should be reformed to allow the Arctic Council to make binding law. This aligns with the work of Elisabeth Rosenthal, who sees the Arctic Council as needing to change “from a forum to a decision-making body” (Rosenthal, 2012). No longer relegated to environmental issues, it has been suggested that the Arctic Council should embrace the so-called “third rail” in regional policy discourse, which opts for an Arctic Treaty that recognises the internationalisation of the Arctic with a boundary agreed upon by all. Scholars like Marc Lanteigne posit that a “third rail” approach will ultimately fail – in part due to the lack of defined boundaries in the Arctic, as well as the sovereignty and security issues amongst the Arctic Eight (Lanteigne, 2020b: 394). Without agreement on remedy, it is well established in the literature that the Arctic Council is ill-prepared to address the security, governance and economic issues that it will be increasingly tasked with handling.

Kristin Bartenstein states: “The Arctic’s warming and the resulting new threats and opportunities have entailed political destabilisation in the region. Defining a new balance of power and devising an appropriate governance model therefore becomes increasingly urgent” (Bartenstein 2015: 475). Within this context it is argued that “when states have emerging challenges, they must either turn to existing international organizations and governing norms or create new ones” (Conley et. al., 2012). On this topic, Chinese scholars often advocate for a revision of Arctic governance, claiming a “governance consensus deficit” whereby China’s “community

with a shared future for mankind” [人类命运共同体 *rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ*] concept “provides a new value guide for global governance” (Doshi et al., 2021: 16). When applied to the Arctic, this constitutes a decidedly internationalist approach.

2.3. Chinese Arctic engagement & discourse

With temperatures increasing at twice the speed of the rest of the planet, Arctic land and sea are constantly shifting, something which has led Sanna Kopra to claim that “Concerning international climate politics, the fate of the Arctic is deeply interconnected with China’s climate change policies; while the Arctic is the fastest warming region on the earth, China is the biggest greenhouse gas emitter in the world” (Kopra, 2013: 2). In this way, Kopra argues that Chinese policy – like any other nation’s policies on Arctic affairs and climate change – can not be disconnected.

Utilising *defensive-neorealism*, Camilla Sørensen focuses on Chinese engagement in order to establish itself as a *necessary* partner in the region – focusing on bilateral ties with Nordic countries on, for example, the expansion of Sweden’s Lysekil port, the rollout of China’s civil-military “BeiDou-2” [北斗-2] Arctic satellite navigation system, and a new railroad connecting Rovaniemi, Finland to Kirkenes, Norway (Sørensen, 2019: 6). It is through these bilateral investments, argues Sørensen, that China seeks to counterbalance other Arctic actors in the region and ensure its continued involvement.

Contrary to most Western analyses, Chinese scholar Chih Yuan Woon posits that China’s engagement through the Polar Silk Road paints a positive picture of Chinese involvement, and that viewing this as a threat ultimately subscribes to a “New Cold War mentality” [新冷战遏制色彩 *xīn lěngzhàn hè zhì sècǎi*] based on Western fears of a successful non-Western power. To support this argument, Woon performs a discourse analysis on Chinese government claims about “not overstepping” [不越位 *bù yuèwèi*] in the Arctic, ultimately citing the need for more non-Western analyses of China’s Polar Silk Road and Arctic strategy (Woon, 2020: 5). While an insightful argument, it remains difficult for most scholars to maintain a dovish perspective towards China’s Arctic strategy in the face of events like the Norway–China dispute of 2006, in which China imposed import controls on Norwegian Arctic salmon for six years following the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo for his work on human rights (Pincus, 2020: 52).

Contested governance has encouraged some academics to analyse whether China’s actions in the Arctic should be considered “lawfare”, in the sense of an attempt to “rewrite” current governance in the Arctic (Robinson, 2013). Andrea Beck claims that China’s actions are not lawfare, but comply with UNCLOS, ultimately suggesting China has *commercial* rather than *military* objectives in the region (Beck, 2014: 306). One issue with Beck’s argument is that her three pillars of Chinese involvement – scientific expeditions, participation in Arctic governance and Nordic diplomacy – fail to incorporate an increasing recognition of geo-economics or the securitisation of traditionally non-securitised sectors into national decision-making. While China may not be blatantly breaking laws in the Arctic, this article does not accept this as a reason to believe the

country does not have a wider strategy in the region. Rather, the work of scholars Robinson and Lanteigne on Chinese defence and military infrastructure in the Arctic show that Chinese interests are no longer confined to scientific or commercial endeavours. That is to say, the data shows China’s increasing military and security interest in Arctic affairs.

More hawkish views claim that a clear “China Threat” in the Arctic suggests the need for an immediate governing treaty (Connolly, 2017: 8). Sørensen weighs the balance of power in Arctic affairs, positing that China seeks to counterbalance the Arctic great powers by establishing relations with smaller Arctic states like Iceland and Greenland (Sørensen, 2019). This lens, while useful, does not consider the deeper question of *why*. Indeed, focusing on China’s narrative and discursive strategies may shed light on the reasoning and strategy behind the country’s actions in the region.

The widening scholarship on a historically ignored topic shows that that while official discourse on Arctic involvement by China focuses extensively on scientific research, climate change, environmental protection, resource conservation, communications on Arctic affairs and the hosting and participation of international meetings (“The People’s Republic of China 2018 Observer Review Report to the Arctic Council”, 2019), internally focused Arctic discourse differs dramatically.

Pre-2018 analyses of Chinese Arctic discourse illustrate a hesitance to declare clear interests or policy direction on Arctic affairs despite tremendous increases in activity. By 2015, Chinese Arctic scholarship saw China attempting to legitimate itself as an actor in the Arctic by reframing itself as a “near-Arctic” state [近北极国家 *jìn běijí guójiā*] and approaching climate change and scientific expeditions through a *globalist* Arctic narrative (Bennett, 2015). A 2016 study of scientific studies on Arctic issues showed Chinese publications had increased 260% over the previous decade – the highest increase of any nation (Aksnes et al., 2016). Despite gaining observer status to the Arctic Council in 2013, investing heavily in what is now one of the most powerful Arctic fleets on Earth, and with its state-backed China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) holding nearly 30% of the total LNG Russian Yamal Peninsula project by 2017 (Conley, 2018), China continued to publicly claim they possessed no Arctic policy until the release of their 2018 White Paper on Arctic affairs. This ultimately results in a China whose actions and discourse do not align.

For this reason, China’s actions in the Arctic have been described as “a kind of doubly calculated diplomatic face-strategy” (Cassotta et al., 2015) that outwardly projects peaceful plans for scientific research, partnerships, investments and climate change response, while simultaneously investing heavily in maritime power and taking assertive action at sea around the world and in outer space – suggesting that the country shows “a clear intention to re-interpret and re-design the conceptual international public order of UNCLOS” (Cassotta et al., 2015). Continued analyses of discourse remain relevant because China’s revisionist behaviour may ultimately be viable as “changes in public political discourses can ... strengthen or weaken a cause significantly ... [to] create windows of opportunity for specific causes” (Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2019: 119).

However, the literature remains somewhat weak on Chinese discourse on Arctic affairs. While *realists* like Roger Robinson see “Beijing’s Arctic strategy as underpinned by the initial use of soft power to attain its regional objectives” in a “long con” approach, others see Chinese engagement as purely scientific in nature. As Yue Wang rightly states, “[t]he existing research mostly ignores the systematic examination of whether non-Arctic actors actually justify their Arctic participation in line with those academic views on justification”. Wang’s study, which focuses on environmental discourse analysis and utilizes *Appraisal Theory* to code attitudes and stances of EU member states and China on Arctic affairs, ultimately posits that China heavily utilises its “near-Arctic actor” status to justify environmental stakeholder participation (Wang, 2020).

Gang Chen (2012) argues that resource needs are a major discursive impactor, positing that China’s Arctic strategy is but one component of its maritime – and thus *grand* – strategy, “hiding its capabilities and biding its time” without clearly expressing a strategy. One important assumption of Chen’s argument is that China’s maritime strategy *is* its grand strategy, tying China’s “insatiable appetite for energy, minerals, and other resources” to its outward expansion – ultimately seeing China’s “Arctic strategy and grand strategy [as] analogical in terms of guidelines and ultimate goals to be achieved” (Chen, 2012: 358). This is corroborated by the work of Li Xing and Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen, who illustrate that China’s “soaring demand for energy in connection with its export-oriented economy poses a variety of new challenges for its foreign policy: the country will become more and more dependent on the purchase of natural resources abroad for sustaining its economic development” (Xing and Gjedssø Bertelsen, 2013: 11).

Adam Lajeunesse, P. Whitney Lackenbauer, James Manicom and Frédéric Lasserre’s *China’s Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada* (2020) takes an all-encompassing approach to understanding Chinese actions in the Arctic from a Canadian perspective, with the goal of understanding what China’s interests are in the Arctic and whether it is a revisionist actor in the region. While this piece recognises the impact of “threat narratives” in the Arctic, this study does not focus specifically on Chinese discourse, rather it makes a broader examination of Chinese actions in the Arctic and the Canadian response (Lajeunesse, 2018).

Other notable existing scholarship includes Njord Wegge’s examination of Chinese investments and infrastructure in Iceland and Greenland, which stresses that “China’s reputation for large scale economic investments and huge appetite for mineral and energy resources has ... led to questions concerning China’s long term political intentions in the Arctic” (Wegge 2014: 91). Wegge ultimately examines Chinese investments from a geo-economic perspective, claiming *liberalism* as the most useful framework for understanding Chinese policy in the region, thus rejecting claims of China as a “revisionist state”

and seeing it as a legitimate actor in the Arctic – much like the work of Lackenbauer et al. (2020).

2.4. Chinese identity formation & Arctic policy

In an examination of actor legitimacy, Mia Bennett sees China attempting to legitimise itself as an actor by gaining observer status to the Arctic Council in 2013, labelling itself as a “near-Arctic country” and rendering the Arctic a global space. As an *extra-regional* state, China is “creating a ‘spatial component of (polar) identity’” (Bennett, 2015: 656) towards two conceptions of the Arctic – a territorial and globalist narrative – that are only able to “coexist” because of insecurity on the part of Arctic states and weak governance architecture.

Recognising the complexities of identity formation, research on “club institutions” seeks to understand how emerging powers like China gain inclusion into exclusive governance institutions. In an examination of the Arctic Council, Stephen and Stephen (2020) argue that China must sell itself as a worthy partner and the institution must be able to incentivise the club through a control of power and resources – meaning the club must have an incentive to open to non-members. Ultimately it is posited that “[if] such goods as policy influence, security, status, or network opportunities are easily attained without club membership, we see no reason

for emerging powers to seek membership” (Stephen and Stephen, 2020: 53), and while the incentives to join the Arctic Council are obvious and many – access to shipping lanes like the Northwest Passage, scientific research and more – the incentives for allowing China to join may be

based on something harder to describe, that is, the success of the narrative of an international Arctic not bound by regional governance mechanisms. It seems a strong argument that “negotiations over institutional adaptations to international power shifts should rather be understood as a perennial feature of international politics in which power politics may be either explicit or latent but are never far away” (Stephen and Stephen, 2020: 59).

China’s actions in the Arctic outwardly project peaceful plans for scientific research, partnerships, investments and climate change response with an internal strategy. There remains further concern about what is termed “debt diplomacy”, with the United States Department of Defense stating: “there is a risk that [China’s] predatory economic behavior globally may be repeated in the Arctic” (Havnes, 2020: 126). Scholarship on the subject remains divisive. It is within this chasm between China’s discourse and its actions that some scholars have made a comparison between the Arctic and the South China Sea dispute in that both revolve heavily around maritime contestations and confused discourse (Ikeshima, 2013: 78). While there remains no concrete evidence that China has exceeded its bounds in the Arctic at the moment, China’s “increasing maritime military capabilities have caused alarm among both Arctic and non-Arctic states”, particularly following Hu Jintao’s speech in which he stated that China

China’s actions in the Arctic outwardly project peaceful plans for scientific research, partnerships, investments and climate change response with an internal strategy.

should become a “maritime power” (Havnes, 2020: 125). For many, China’s actions resemble a “dual-track” approach of advocating for peace while increasing capabilities in military and Arctic combat (Conley et al., 2012: 34).

For scholars, seeking to deduce meaning in Chinese foreign policies remains challenging, as the government is opaque and indirect in its objectives. Many studies of the country remain weakened by a reliance on law and policy for the basis of their arguments, giving rise to feeble statements like the following:

Despite China’s assertive behaviour towards the Arctic Environmental Ocean and its rise as global sea power, and its activities as a revisionist ... China cannot be considered to jeopardize Arctic security as there are no sufficient legal and policy objective elements to adduct that it constitutes a threat (Cassotta et al., 2015: 201).

Recognising the challenges facing the literature on China in the Arctic, this article seeks to use content analysis to understand Chinese discourse on the Arctic more fully – taking cues from the relationship between Chinese discourse and its actions in the region. It will correspondingly examine the discourse of Russia and NATO in response to China and ultimately gauge the impact on governance, legitimisation and the future of Arctic security.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Conceptualisation & operationalisation

Defining the Arctic

This article accepts a broad definition of the Arctic. Here, the Arctic refers to the land and sea area north of 60 degrees, including territory of the United States, Canada, Russia, Denmark (via Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. Rapid environmental change complicates efforts to define the territorial shape of the Arctic, as what was once frozen is now open water for certain parts of the year – resulting in “cartographic anxiety” in institutional efforts to define the region (Bennett, 2015: 650–651).

In terms of resources, the United States Geological Survey posits that potential undiscovered oil and gas reserves in the Arctic are approximately 13% and 30% of total world reserves, respectively, with 80% located offshore. Current oil and gas production in the Arctic accounts for 10% and 25%, respectively, of global output. Minerals in the Arctic include gold, copper, iron, lead, platinum, nickel, zinc and diamonds (Beck, 2014: 307), with significant coal reserves in the Arctic accounting for up to 9% of the world’s total. The Arctic region has abundant cod fish, snapper, salmon and Arctic shrimp. Notably, climate change has caused fish populations to move northward from traditional fishing grounds in Alaska and, consequently, the North Sea, Barents Sea, Beaufort Sea and other Arctic waters are predicted to become new and major fishing grounds (Tang, 2013: 29–48).

Arctic conceptualisations

On Arctic exceptionalism versus normalism, Käpylä, Juha and Harri Mikkola state that “the idea of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ has referred to a romantic tradition of thought that emphasizes the exotic and unique properties of physical, biological and human systems in the region,” which are uniquely “uncontaminated by the forces of modernity” that impact the rest of the globe (Käpylä and Mikkola, 2015: 5). This article does not accept the idea that the Arctic is an “exceptional place” in international relations (Stephen and Knecht, 2018), but rather that international relations forces operate *through* the Arctic much like other regions of the world.

However, this article does accept that the Arctic plays a “global” role in international affairs due to the influences of climate change. It is a region of global intrigue that will, and arguably already does, influence global perspectives and discourse on climate change, environmental protection and indigenous rights makes the Arctic a uniquely global area for national policies.

Conceptions of narrative

Importantly, one cannot analyse narratives without applying a usable definition. Here, *narrative* refers to the framing of issues in relation to politics, interests, actors and dynamics with the purpose of “provid[ing] both a diagnosis and a set of measures and interventions” by which to solve a problem (Wolmer, 2006). In an examination of policy narratives, Mark McBeth posits that narratives are “both the visible outcome of differences in policy beliefs and the equally visible outcome of political strategizing” (McBeth et al., 2007). This article will operationalise its terms using themes that relate to Arctic narratives.

Strategy & securitisation

As a commonly referenced term in this article, *strategy* must be defined. As a term influenced by Clausewitzian thinking, it is here used to mean “the level at which a nation or group of nations determines national or multinational security objectives and deploys national, including military, resources to achieve them” (Wegge, 2020: 360–82). However, it must also be recognised that strategy is somewhat of a misnomer, as strategy operates as “a collection of ideas, goals, and policies rather than as one grand vision in which all domestic stakeholders have reached consensus and are operating with a common purpose” (MacDonald et al., 2004). This challenges the ability of researchers to determine set “strategies” for a nation. However, in the case of China, ruled by the Chinese Communist Party with tight control over institutions and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), seeking a national strategy becomes more attainable.

In defining *securitization*, this article recognises Ole Wæver’s *constructivist* call for a wider view of the concept that recognises the role of discourse: “by labelling something a security issue ... it becomes one” (Taureck, 2006: 53–61). This definition is fitting here because China directly influences the securitisation of the Arctic through public discourse and

narrative changes. Considering the importance of the political and social context in which actors engage in securitisation, one must remain cognisant that:

By stating that a particular referent object is threatened in its existence, a securitizing actor claims a right to extraordinary measures to ensure the referent object's survival. This issue can then be moved out of the sphere of normal politics into the realm of emergency politics, where it can be dealt with swiftly and without the normal (democratic) rules and regulations of policymaking. For security this means that it no longer has any given (preexisting) meaning but that it can be anything a securitizing actor says it is. Security is a social and intersubjective construction (Taureck, 2006: 55).

By considering securitisation a “successful speech act” which then enables exceptional – and often controversial – measures, this article takes a somewhat Foucauldian approach towards concepts like securitisation, whereby they are considered within the discursive context in order to thoroughly grasp where a given narrative gains power (Stritzel, 2007). A Foucauldian approach is post-positivist in nature, positing that language and knowledge produces a social reality through embedded meanings and identities (Dunn and Neumann, 2016: 263).

Utilizing this conception of *narrative*, it is accepted here that narratives can bypass legal architecture as repeated misuse of certain legal and political concepts in discourse will impact the prevailing reality in a given case (Jakobson, 2010).

3.2 Research questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1: How has China attempted to position itself as a legitimate actor in the Arctic?

Q1.1: How has China sought to do so through discourse?

Q2: How will this impact governance architecture in the region?

Q2.1: What is the future of Arctic governance with increasing Chinese involvement?

3.3 Applied theories

Applying a *social constructivist* lens, this research is guided by a semi-post-positivist approach that lends itself to qualitative methods. This research will take an *inductive* approach to Chinese identity in the Arctic that views actors not as atomic beings, but as continuously shifting bodies impacted by norms, identities and other actors. Data for this article will pay particular attention to *critical moments* when tensions were highest – for example, following the release of China's first White Paper on the Arctic in 2018, or when in August 2019 Donald Trump offered to purchase Greenland from the Danish government.

The articles will be coded for meaning using the software NVivo, seeking out *meaning units*, data fragments where meaning is found or constructed (Faustini-Torres, 2020). These meaning units will be based around operationalised concepts and analysed for narrative shifts. Visual diagrams will be created that demonstrate how narratives are competing and what themes have been found. This will be analysed in juxtaposition with major events and national interests in Arctic affairs.

4. METHOD & METHODOLOGY

4.1 Content analysis & case selection

Content analysis

This article applies content analysis to Chinese Arctic discourse utilising a case study approach to discursive analysis. Content analysis involves developing “a set of procedures to make inferences from text” (Weber, 1990) in an attempt to understand communication's purposeful components (Hermann, 2008: 151–67). Content analysis operationalises *units of analysis* to form a unique qualitative method that systematically examines the manifest units of communication. In this article, an inductive approach is taken. Content analysis relies on available and honest data, which may pose a challenge in this case.

China directly influences the securitisation of the Arctic through public discourse and narrative changes.

Content analysis is chosen here because it is flexible, iterative and systematic: “content analysis is useful for identifying both conscious and unconscious messages communicated by text” (Julien, 2012: 121-22). This is highly useful for examining the case of China and Russia as these governments are authoritarian and opaque and content analysis may shine light on which topics are of importance to the government and how they are being used.

This article utilises the above method to examine documents for *Narrative Shifts* in the period from 2018 to the present. Interviews were not used as they do not align with the scope of this article, which focusses on official government narratives. Narrative shifts occur when a government stance on a particular concept changes through repeated use of new terminology, references and ideas. While this may be analysed through lexicon word counts, this article seeks more rigorous analysis through scrutiny of “meaning unit” changes over time to show the shifts in the arguments within a given narrative (Faustini-Torres, 2020: 6).

4.2 Data collection & constituent dimensions of narratives

Data collection

This article will utilise qualitative content analysis to perform an analysis of narratives towards the Arctic from China and, briefly, the response to them from Russia and NATO. Scrutiny of government statements, press releases,

government-backed media and speeches will represent the official position of governments and organisations. Data will be collected from the following sites: *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News*, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations using search terms related to the Arctic (北极 *Běiji*). Data will be collected in both Chinese and English, depending on available translations, with the aim of collecting the most available data as possible in both languages. For example, while many media articles are available in English as well as Chinese, certain journal articles, speeches and reports are only available in Chinese.

Constituent dimensions of narratives

Table 1. Seven constituent dimensions of Arctic narratives

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Sub-Themes</i>
The Arctic as "Common Heritage"	Climate Change Historic Heritage Scientific Exploration
China as a "Near-Arctic" State	The Arctic as a Region Chinese State Legitimacy
Increasing Bilateral Ties	<i>none</i>
Sustainable Development	Commercialization Tourism Digital Connectivity Polar Silk Road/Belt Road Initiative Maritime Cooperation
Sovereignty	Arctic Council
Military & Security Concerns	<i>none</i>
Inadequate Governance	Lack of Legitimacy U.S. Failure U.S. and Arctic Council Aggression & Rejection

Source: *author.*

The term "common heritage" is taken from the literature on Arctic discourse and relates to terms like "common", "sharing" and "mutuality", in contrast to the terms of exclusivity that dominate Arctic states' discourse. Here, "common heritage" rejects sovereignty not only by making a space "common" but by making it a "heritage" location which belongs (and has historically belonged) to everyone (Bartenstein, 2015).

4.3 Challenges & limitations

This study retains weaknesses. The theoretical basis for the examination of this case could be lost in a close-range examination, while increasing the number of cases examined risks decreasing the *internal validity* of a study already lacking in generalisability (*external validity*). Additionally,

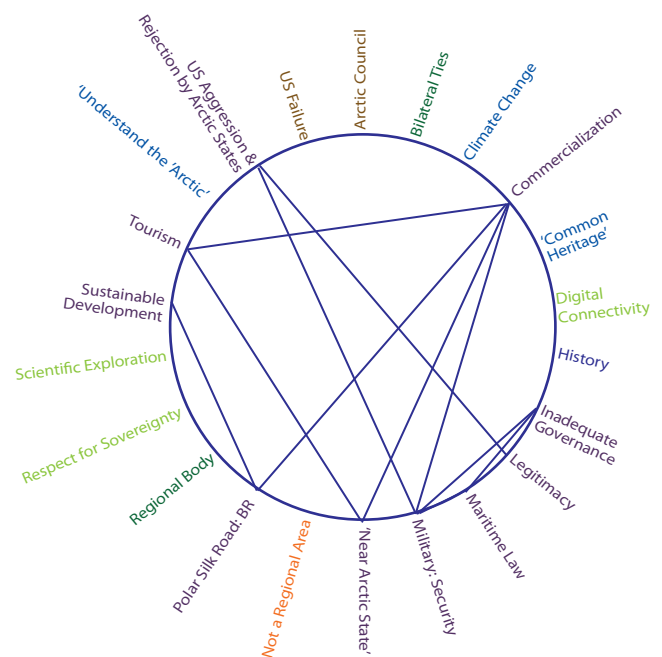
narrative concepts frequently overlap in usage and purpose, resulting in a form of *multicollinearity* that is difficult to avoid in social science research. This is further challenged by contested conceptualisations – particularly regarding whether a researcher takes a dovish or hawkish approach to foreign policy analysis. This is in turn challenged by the risks associated with attempting to understand how foreign policy is impacted by internal vulnerabilities. A myriad of vulnerabilities and liabilities are present within all foreign policy decisions, many of which may not correspond to others, challenging one's ability to understand Chinese strategy as a whole.

Further, while I possess some Mandarin language skills, I am not a native Chinese speaker, meaning some analyses could be misinterpreted or lack certain information.

Methodological challenges include the number of documents analysed – a greater number of documents and players analysed would produce stronger analysis. Further, content analysis relies on the integrity of the data (Smyth, 2012: 564-5), which could not be guaranteed in the case of Chinese documents.

Quantitative data might also strengthen this research, as "statistical and formal work" adds stringency and systemisation to an otherwise non-rigorous analytical approach. Additionally, addressing issues of multicollinearity might improve this study. Using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient, a Cluster Analysis Map shows an analysis of the codes based on word similarity in the documents. Not all the discursive concepts were operationalised perfectly. For example, while Commercialization ties heavily with its sub-themes of Tourism and the Polar Silk Road – an example of the success of tying these themes together – other themes unexpectedly connect with each other, such as Tourism and "near-Arctic state".

Figure 2. Items clustered by word similarity



Source: *author.*

5. CASE STUDY: CHINESE ARCTIC DISCOURSE

Evaluating the discourse using the above-listed concepts shows notable shifts and robust results since 2018. On broad trends, Chinese discourse has shifted in the last few years to focus less on *scientific endeavours* under the guise of “common heritage” and towards the need for a *new governance framework* – an internationalist approach that poses challenges for the Arctic Council. Further, China’s focus on commercialisation and Polar Silk Road investments has decreased since the production of China’s Arctic White Paper and the discourse has shown a greater focus on strengthening bilateral ties with Arctic countries like Norway, Iceland and Greenland. Scientific endeavours continue to serve as the basis for China’s interest in the Arctic, but increasing discourse on digital connectivity and surveillance (for the purposes of scientific endeavours) has resulted in increasing scholarship on the possible threat of dual-use facilities in the region.

5.1 Notable themes in Chinese Arctic discourse

Sustainable development & the Polar Silk Road (冰上丝绸之路 Bīng shàng sīchóu zhī lù)

China continually cites the goal of “sustainable development” and “win-win cooperation” in the Arctic, initially through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Polar Silk Road, but increasingly through bilateral investments and diplomacy, private investments, and digital connectivity. China “focuses on forward-looking investment in Arctic waterway and energy cooperation and development, so as to contribute to infrastructure construction and digital construction in the Arctic region” (Guan, 2018).

Tightening Sino–Russian ties

While China and Russia are not typically considered major allies, Chinese Arctic discourse suggests that Russia and China will increasingly work together on Polar Silk Road projects and bilateral investment in political–military and commercial affairs. This can be seen in large-scale energy projects such the Arctic LNG-2 project on the Yamal peninsula (Sassi, 2021), as

well as references to the entire Polar Silk Road developing in joint cooperation with Russia (Guan et al., 2018).

Digital connectivity & Arctic surveillance

China’s Arctic Connect project to install sea cables in the region and its satellites, including the Chang’e-4 and BNU-1, are increasingly discussed in relation to Arctic affairs – both can be used to monitor and control communications in the Arctic. Chinese discourse states that it will “actively promote digital connectivity in the Arctic and gradually build an international infrastructure network” in line with its goal of “sustainable development”¹ while also “enabl[ing] China to put an end to its heavy reliance on Western companies’ satellites for images and data from polar regions” (Lei, 2019).

Inadequate governance & increased bilateralism

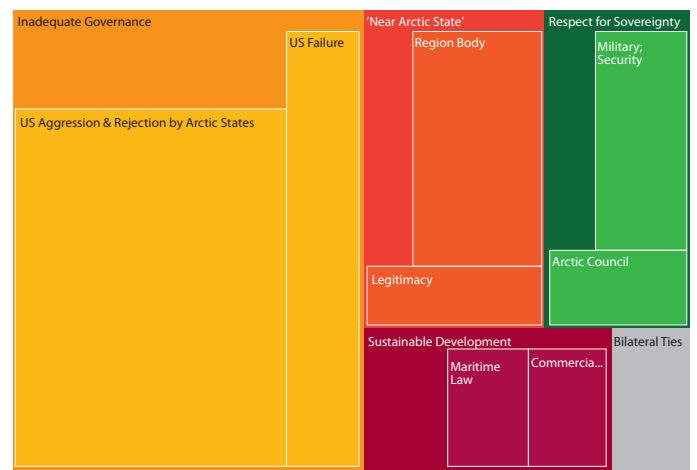
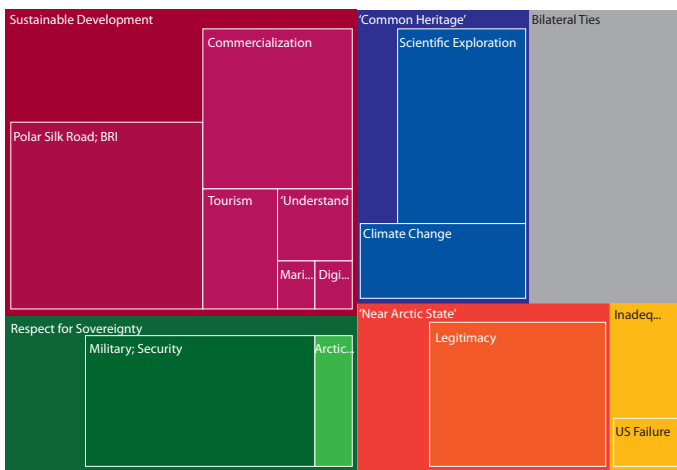
The discourse analysis shows that growing attention is paid in Chinese discourse to the inadequate governance of the region, while increased bilateralism is mentioned in many articles. A discursive shift towards greater criticism of the current governance structures in the Arctic shows China propagating a revisionist narrative of Arctic affairs. Discourse has increased on illegitimate and failing governance structures that will ultimately require Chinese participation: “China is not only a ‘stakeholder’ in Arctic affairs, but also a successor to Arctic governance” (Xiao, 2020).² One can see mentions of bilateral ties increasing along with mentions of inadequate governance, while “Common Heritage” remains a central theme that is given less importance by 2020 and 2021.

US aggression and failure in the Arctic

Chinese media regularly cites US aggression and failure in the Arctic, particularly utilising the US withdrawal from the Paris

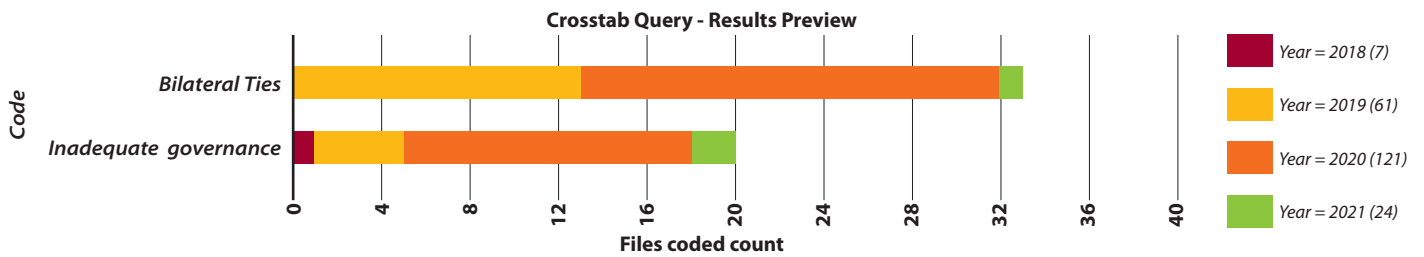
1. Original Text: 积极促进北极数字互联互通和逐步构建国际性基础设施网络等
2. Original Text: “中国不仅是北 极事务的” 利益攸关方” ,也是北极治理的后来者”

Figures 3 and 4. Broad narrative shifts from 2018 to 2021



Source: author.

Figure 5. Bilateral ties and inadequate governance narratives have both increased since 2018



Source: author.

Figure 6. Table of codes show an increase in “bilateral ties,” “Near-Arctic State,” “Common Heritage,” and “inadequate governance” references since 2018

Codes	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bilateral Ties	0	13	19	1
“Common Heritage”	0	2	8	0
“Inadequate Governance”	1	4	13	2
Near Arctic State	2	4	5	1

Source: author.

Agreement as a failure on climate change and a major failure in Arctic diplomacy. This is then used to justify increasing scientific research in the Arctic, and by extension, greater Chinese legitimacy. In one article, scientific engagement is explicitly linked with “the national goal”.³ China accuses the US of aggressive Arctic monitoring through the Arctic Mobile Observation System (AMOS) (Lan Haixing et al., 2018) as well as “infiltrating into the Arctic region, in an attempt to compress Russia’s space in the Arctic region” (*People’s Daily*, 2020). Further, on the United States: “According to all kinds of information disclosed in recent years, we all know who in the world is monitoring, stealing secrets and infiltrating other countries on a large scale, maintaining and exerting influence on the polar regions” (“The ‘China Threat Theory’ advocated by the West reflects its mentality of trying to dominate the world forever”) (西方宣扬 ‘中国威胁论’ 反映其妄图永霸世界心态, 2018).⁴

Cultural engagement in a widened imagined community

China is increasingly producing discourse establishing it as a “near-Arctic state”, which is then used to engage culturally with local Arctic communities. By acting as “cultural ambassadors” for the Arctic, this discourse is then used to justify legitimacy in Arctic governance, as well as “Chinese values”. Cultural engagement takes the form of cultural

3. Original Text: 如科学计划与国家目标挂钩.

4. Original Text: 你心里怎么想, 你眼里的世界就是什么样。从这个意义上讲, 世界上最大的情报头目说出那样的话, 并不奇怪。” 外交部发言人华春莹1日在例行记者会上用“相由心生”一词回应美澳情报部门的“中国间谍威胁论”, 狠狠打了发言者一巴掌。“事实胜于雄辩。根据近年来披露出的各种信息, 世界上到底是谁在对其他国家实施大范围监听、监控、窃密、渗透, 无所不用其极地维持并施加影响力, 大家心中其实都很清楚

Figure 7. Increasing references to “aggression and rejection by the United States,” and military/security concerns were found

Codes	2018	2019	2020	2021
Aggression & Rejection by Arctic States	0	7	12	8
Failures of United States in the Arctic	0	10	9	3
Military & Security Concerns	0	11	35	2

Source: author.

events, movies (for example, the movie *The Light Whisperer* [光语者 *Guāng yǔ zhě*] a documentary film about a Chinese man living in the Arctic) and other media that ties Chinese regions to Arctic affairs.

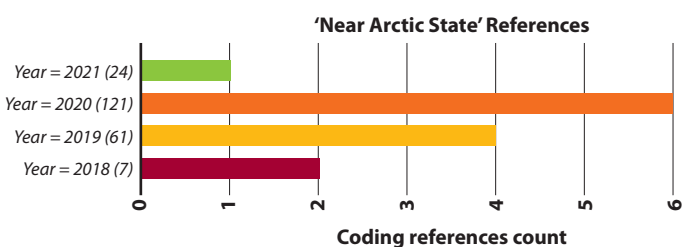
An increase in “near-Arctic state” references

China also discursively refers to itself as a “near-Arctic state” in attempt to legitimise itself as an actor and governance participant in Arctic affairs. By placing itself within the realm of other Arctic Council members and considering itself an Arctic state by geographical distance, China allows itself to participate legitimately in affairs that it should not.

5.2 Russia’s response

Russian discourse in response to China in the Arctic remains highly positive. Considering the Arctic its “backyard” in foreign policy terms, Russia publicly welcomes China into economic and, increasingly, political ventures in the Arctic. Referring to China not as a threat, but as an opportunity for geo-economic ventures including subsea cables, development

Figure 8. “Near-Arctic State” references continue to increase



Source: author.

projects through the Polar Silk Road and Belt Road Initiative, and investments in minerals and oil in the region.

Figure 9. Coded references of Russian discourse towards China in the Arctic

Codes	Pre-2018	2018	2019	2020	2021
China is <i>not</i> a threat	0	0	4	1	1
China working with Russia	0	1	2	2	0
Increasing Need for Militarization	0	0	0	1	1
The U.S. as the Main Threat	1	0	2	2	2

Source: author.

Notably, Russian discourse on China in the Arctic increasingly focuses on mechanisms of governance as an opportunity for furthering the relationship between the two traditionally separate countries. Increasingly in 2019 and 2020 discourse, topics of norm development permeated Russian discourse on China, particularly as a backlash against the “Western” norms of NATO and the liberal values of US foreign policy. It is within this context that Russian discourse is able to find solidarity with illiberal Chinese policies, taking a more directly oppositional approach to NATO and the United States *via* China’s participation as a legitimate actor in Arctic governance.

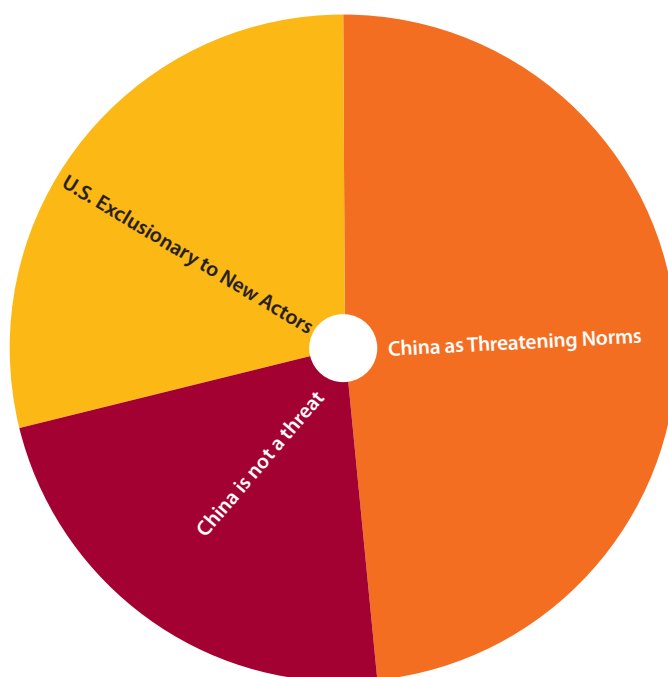
5.3 NATO’s response

In spite of their thematic similarity, Russian discourse directly challenges NATO discourse on China in the Arctic, which increasingly sees Russia and China as illiberal partners in Arctic affairs. However, while NATO’s discourse on China in the Arctic sees China as a direct threat, recognition of these potential threats has only materialised in the last two years and remains relatively weak as compared to US discourse. China is seen not as a current but a future threat challenging the norms and values of NATO’s security perspectives in the region.

NATO did not recognise China as a threat to Arctic affairs until 2019: “It was actually at our summit in 2019 ... that was the first time we as an Alliance, made common decisions, had agreed language on how to address the rise of China” (“Discussion with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg”, 2021). Now that NATO finds itself focusing on issues of sea, space and cyber, and with an increasing understanding that China *does* impact NATO and cannot be ignored, recognition of the need for greater governance architecture and norm development underpins much of the discussion on China in the Arctic.

Further, NATO discourse on China in the Arctic appears to find China to be a threat economically through the increasingly recognised geo-economic security issues associated with high foreign direct investment in the region. This ultimately leaves a discourse that is ruptured, bifurcated between a diplomatic insistence that China is not a security threat in the region, and the recognition that the normative values underpinning NATO are threatened by Chinese and Russian joint participation. NATO vacillates between describing China not as a threat but as an opportunity, and as a threat to the broader norms and values of NATO as an institution.

Figure 10. A NATO without a clear mandate struggles to form a clear narrative



Source: author.

6. ANALYSIS

6.1 A China seeking legitimacy & challenging governance

The results demonstrate a China that is seeking to find legitimacy in the Arctic through scientific diplomacy, a universalist approach to Arctic conceptualisations, and developmental projects that retain a respect for sovereignty not seen in “Western” approaches. China has successfully established itself as an actor in the Arctic – if not in the Arctic Council – via this discourse. Scientific research, and by extension scientific diplomacy, is utilised as a means to justify China’s increasing presence in the Arctic through an historically centred narrative that implies a lengthy and close relationship between China and the Arctic region. This is explicitly stated when China’s claims itself to be a “near-Arctic state” that has been involved in Arctic research and diplomacy since the Spitsbergen Treaty in 1920 (now the Svalbard Treaty). This is complemented by a discourse that is inherently internationalist in scope on Arctic affairs: “[the] Arctic impacts not just arctic countries but has a global significant and international influence” (Yuan Yong, 2018), and can be seen further in repeated phrases throughout Chinese discourse such as, “No offside, No absence”, which implies that China is prepared to justify a permanent position in Arctic affairs.

However, the discursive methodology – here focused on foreign or “outwardly-focused” discourse – varies between that and domestic or “internally focused” discourse. While externally focused discourse retains a cooperative, multilateral lens of “win-win” diplomacy, Chinese domestic discourse takes a more militarised and securitised approach to Arctic engagement that accepts geopolitical and geo-economic competition in the changing region as a result of failed governance.

China appears to use its increasing legitimacy in Arctic affairs to challenge a fractured governance architecture. This can be seen in its aggressive bilateral investments and the corresponding political ties that come with them. Again, it is worth mentioning the example of Norway and the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Liu Xiaobo in 2006, which resulted in a six-year trade freeze that badly damaged the Norwegian economy. In similar bouts of politicised pressure, China's attempted purchase of the northernmost region of Iceland and the resulting fall-out demonstrate that the "debt-trap diplomacy" seen in other parts of the world may be making its way to the Arctic. "Debt-trap diplomacy" or "debt diplomacy" operates in cadence with the Belt and Road Initiative and high developmental investments that are over-credited and exchanged for political pressure. As this expands into the Arctic region with an increasingly powerful China, the country seeks to destabilise governance mechanisms enough to place itself within the realm of relevant actors through openings of what is here termed *political convolution*. By deliberately inserting itself in gaps in the governance architecture, particularly via new mechanisms of governance and security not traditionally accounted for in international relations, like geo-economics, which lacks the regulatory oversight and historical understanding institutions require to govern it, China uses *political convolution* to create *openings* and a place for itself in regions, creating new forms of institutional design. It does this through economic and political influence under the strategy of the Belt Road Initiative, and here, the Polar Silk Road.

Political convolution works for China as a cyclical tool to increase legitimacy while simultaneously introducing new concepts in Arctic governance: that the Arctic is a *unique* area that is inherently modern in its centralisation around the impacts of climate change and global warning; that the Arctic is and has been a global arena not defined by regional and national architecture; and that the Arctic – a region "undiscovered" and "being realized" in real time – should be governed by the laws of geo-economics within the conceptualisation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Hence, it should no longer be defined by "Western" conceptions of liberalism. It is here that China strives for prestige and modernisation in its fullest and most nationalistic form in a globe not defined by two poles but by *three*: the North Pole, the South Pole and the Chinese (Tibetan) Plateau, referred to as the "roof of the world" (Qiu, 2008: 1) in Chinese discourse.

What makes this governance destabilisation particularly concerning is the uniquely enmeshed system China operates in as an authoritarian state. With economic and military activities inherently intertwined, economic participation cannot be separated as distinctly as with open markets, with state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and civilian infrastructure development operating in the same realm as national defence. All Chinese companies are legally required to "support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts" and government intelligence agencies are legally able to access,

even forcibly, any information stored by Chinese companies. This means that, regardless of a company's active complicity in government strategy, the only safe assumption is that any information collected by Chinese companies and held on Chinese servers can be exploited by the Chinese government towards the national goal (Kitchen, 2019: 2–5).

Ultimately, while China does not exhibit an aggressively illiberal outward narrative in its Arctic affairs, its narrative has been co-opted by a more forward Russian discourse, making it appear that Sino–Russian Arctic cooperation is increasing and that the two nations form a sort of loose alliance. This illiberal narrative is often centred around anti-American stances on militarisation, domestic engagement and issues of sovereignty seen in other Chinese and Russian discourses towards the United States. Whether this discursive strategy says something about Chinese policy remains unclear, and it is ultimately argued here that this Sino–Russian cooperation narrative is largely meaningless for China, being an empty threat against liberal forces in the Arctic. An examination of Chinese and Russian discourse finds that each country loosely mirrors the other in anti-American and sovereignty discourse, without an obvious active strategy in international dealings. Rather these discourses are primarily domestic in nature, seeking to impact internal policies and public opinion towards Western countries.

China appears to use its increasing legitimacy in Arctic affairs to challenge a fractured governance architecture. This can be seen in its aggressive bilateral investments and the corresponding political ties that come with them.

6.2 Discourse reception: Russia and NATO

Russia, which arguably has as much to gain – and more to lose – in Arctic affairs any other country, is increasingly deploying a discourse that piggybacks off China's, co-opting the usual anti-American, pro-sovereignty discourse of China to frame Sino–Russian cooperation as an act of illiberal partnership. Even with increasing economic partnerships in Arctic affairs, it remains unclear whether China and Russia are partners in the region beyond what is purely necessary, particularly when most of this discourse is internally focused and domestic, rather than from the ministries of foreign affairs. One can see that Russia is increasingly using China as a fallback for its negative relations with its Arctic partners – most of which are NATO members and US allies – while China gains from the support of Russian discourse in its bilateral relations with the country.

Until 2019, NATO did not mention China at all in its risk assessments. China's arrival in the Arctic and wider European region can be seen as the main reason for NATO's increasing concerns – as the discourse explicitly says – because NATO does not focus on Asia–Pacific affairs unless they directly impact European affairs. Asia–Pacific securitisation efforts are generally led by the United States, with NATO entrusting itself to focus on the Euro-region. The Belt and Road Initiative and the Polar Silk Road, now impacting European economic engagement and security, have only recently forced NATO to begin considering China a threat in the region. However, NATO discourse since 2018 has retained a significant focus

on China within its “Sea, Space, and Cyber” lens, repeatedly declaring China “not a threat, but an opportunity” and stating the need to engage on these issues. Besides illustrating the dated and delayed nature of NATO analyses, this shows a NATO unwilling to present a clear narrative on its perspectives of China – simultaneously recognising the country as a threat to Arctic engagement, but also retaining an “opportunity”-based discourse. This may be partially because NATO’s role in Arctic governance remains under challenge. While five Arctic countries are NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and the United States) and two are potential members (Finland and Sweden), NATO does not possess a clear mandate for its role in Arctic affairs. This results in a NATO that does not see China as the main immediate threat, and a mildly confused discourse that has yet to respond to China’s increasing engagement. NATO may thus be seen as a late actor in engaging with China in the region – eventually, though not yet – to connect its analyses of “Sea, Space, and Cyber” with Chinese Arctic policy.

6.3 Future threats to Arctic governance

Geo-economics as a governance fallback

With the lack of incentive for Arctic nations to establish a supranational body that may threaten sovereignty and the increasing need for more resources by wealthy nations, the Arctic risks becoming a region ruled not by governance mechanisms, but by the inherently deregulated and geo-economic tendencies of the region developed amidst the civilian–military fusion of modern economies.

Deregulated in its development, and without solid regional governance, FDI and trade-centric policies may leave an Arctic *defined* by private sector infrastructure.

An Arctic “String of Pearls”

The “String of Pearls” concept, which envisages a strategy of Chinese bases stretching from the Middle East to southern China to protect its maritime operations and energy access is one that can be applied to future Arctic affairs. In an increasingly resource-starved world, Chinese Arctic discourse appears strategically oriented towards a future where the Arctic is the last remnant of oil and rare earth element (REE) access. Strategic “long game” approaches to becoming a world power aside, the Belt and Road Initiative certainly reflects an anxiety about the economic implications of a faltering energy sector, making the String of Pearls a conceptually relevant theory here.

By way of creating *openings* through *political convolution*, China may establish itself –first discursively, then physically – through bases and “research centres” that span the Arctic. The String of Pearls theory, which operates in an arena where China has historically been a member – South Asia and the Pacific – is becoming established in the

Arctic and realised through scientific diplomacy centres. This realisation is happening rapidly, and one can expect to find numerous scientific research centres and other bilateral centres involving China opening in the coming years. This follows the general trend of Chinese operations working under the guise of other countries – for example, Chinese shipping and maritime operations in the Arctic are frequently through Greek and Russian carriers, confusing efforts to establish a clear national presence.

The Arctic as a gauge for national identity

Ultimately the Arctic may find itself becoming a pivot point for national identities. As more countries crystallise their Arctic policies around modern themes of geo-economic competition, climate change, the Right to Protect and multilateral cultural engagement, the Arctic may become a gauge for national identities in the 21st century. So crucial to discussions on climate change, institutional failure and multilevel governance architecture, national and international identities may increasingly use the Arctic to declare themselves modern nations. Countries may use the Arctic to confer upon themselves prestige and modernity in their discourse via participation in a region that is so distant, shifting and extreme – at the edge of the world and

synonymous with the final frontier. Arctic discourse may ultimately be a canvas on which countries can expound their values, their influence and their extremity in much the same way outer space politics operate now. Here China will find itself at the farther point possible, the North Pole, fully realised as a country rebounding from

a once-closed economy that is open now to the entire globe and beyond.

These threats can be seen to inform the literature in broader terms regarding geo-political shifts in the Arctic – showing a move towards geo-economic forces where FDI and trade dominate governance forces in the region. This may have a profound impact beyond the Arctic on the international order, if a shift away from liberal institutionalism occurs, first regionally and then globally, as institutions continue to fail to respond to contemporary issues. Additionally, geo-economic approaches to norm contestation may be seen more broadly in nations seeking to become leaders in global governance, particularly as the international order becomes more dominated by unregulated forces.

7. CONCLUSION

The Arctic is a shifting landscape that is no longer defined by frozen stagnancy but by rapid change. It is through the Arctic that 21st century challenges of climate change, multilateral governance, geo-economics and geopolitics will be seen most clearly by the international community – a bright arena where US, Chinese and Russian grand

strategies converge. Further examinations and deeper scholarship using strategic foresight, case study analysis and both qualitative and quantitative analyses are necessary for both the academic community and national governments to better predict and understand future challenges in the region before governance policies crystallise, which, in their current states, are fractured and ultimately fractionable in light of these new challenges. Greater attention to multilevel governance mechanisms, the limitations of state actor-led organisations like the Arctic Council and the role of discourse in securitising international affairs is increasingly necessary. This research serves as a basis for continuing study on these topics.

This research has established the importance of Chinese, Russian and NATO discourse in understanding Arctic strategy. It has also shown notable themes and patterns in Chinese discourse since 2018, demonstrating through inductive qualitative content analysis that China has shifted its discourse from one of scientific exploration and multilateral communicative engagement towards one of commercial, militarised geo-economic gain. The discourse has shown that while China began its Arctic legitimacy through scientific endeavours, it has ultimately pursued a discourse centred around US failure in the region, its own legitimacy as an actor in the Arctic, and its right to access commercialised products via a physical presence. Further, China has embraced a cultural stance of being a “near-Arctic state” that embodies the cultural values of indigenous Arctic peoples. It is through this discourse that China has effectively established itself as a legitimate actor in the Arctic – if not in the Arctic Council – and may seek to create *openings* through *political convolution* via bilateral investments, commercial participation and the enmeshment of private FDI with the national goal. Therefore, further work to map Chinese investments in research, academic exchanges, bilateral and multilateral conferences on Arctic affairs, publications in Chinese and scientific diplomacy by Chinese actors would be highly beneficial.

With a host of uncertainties as to how the dynamics of the Arctic will proceed in the future, the literature remains lacking in Arctic foresight strategies, instead focusing on explanations of *why* the dynamics are rapidly shifting. This research presents a future Arctic that acts as a “String of Pearls” in China’s great energy game, an Arctic that defines national identities and acts as a lightning rod for modernity and extremity in a well-explored and established world. The presentation of the *openings* and *political convolutions* theory, by which China places itself within the gaps of governance architectures in new 21st century arenas to declare a position for itself with legitimacy and confidence, adds greatly to the present scholarship on Chinese Arctic affairs.

Finally, this article serves as a basis for further scholarship on Chinese identity formation and shifts through discursive analyses, which would be further complemented by more quantitative studies of content analysis that utilise fragmented meaning units or cross-case analyses of Chinese identity in different contexts. This may lend itself towards a better understanding of the Arctic Council dynamics and identity formation surrounding China as it crystallises its Arctic policy and legitimises itself during a time of rapid change.

The research presented here, while robust, is not without limitations. Issues of multicollinearity are present, much like other discursive studies, due to the inherently challenging nature of mapping social and political concepts into distinct groups. Language barriers and translation challenges also exist and researchers with language skills in Russian and French (for NATO) may be better able to analyse the texts included in this analysis. Further, analysing national goals always remains arduous in social science research, as it is never safe to assume that one actor is participating fully in a national goal or strategy. Like other grand strategy analyses, this research suffers from an inability to fully analyse national systems as one distinct body with one distinct and established goal.

However, these issues are considered and the research remains strong.

Ultimately, the Arctic, like outer space, is becoming a frontier to be crossed, a region where powerful nations seek to define themselves and their legitimacy through research, economic prowess and development. Without a concrete governance structure to respond to these challenges, the Arctic is at increasing risk of becoming

a region of conflict, geo-economics and unregulated great power competition that ignores the fundamental problems of climate change and indigenous rights that must remain central to Arctic policy.

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