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Snow Dragon: China's Arctic Policy Facing New Challenges

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Abstract. The sharp deterioration between Russia and the West that began in February 2022 has posed a serious challenge to the advancement of Arctic cooperation, which has become increasingly intense, fruitful, and, to a large extent, mutually beneficial for its participants over the past several decades. China, which has demonstrated to the world that it has ambitions in the region, is facing difficult challenges. In this regard, some research questions about Beijing's Arctic strategy need to be addressed. Will the strengthening of cooperation with Russia harm the building of interaction with the other Arctic states? To what extent will the security crisis and the gradual transformation of the established system of international cooperation in the Arctic affect China's plans to integrate the region into its global strategic projects? What role can China play in the future Arctic governance system? The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the changes currently taking place in China's Arctic policy. The methodological foundation of the study is the theory of regional security complexes by B. Buzan and O. Wæver. It has been determined that the policy of building an Arctic identity, one of the key components of which is the securitization of the climate discourse, is meeting increasing resistance from Western countries. In the context of the current crisis, Beijing is also forced to balance its bilateral relations with Russia and the states of Northern Europe. The erosion of the existing international Arctic cooperation framework is highly undesirable for China, as it allowed Beijing to legitimately take a limited role in the governance of the region, as opposed to the regulatory regimes of total domination of the Arctic states (sectoral approach). However, at the doctrinal level, there has been a shift in the focus in China's Arctic policy toward a more global vision of the region's development. The foreign policy shift has been driven by a number of external factors, including the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic and the intensifying Sino-American strategic confrontation.

Key words: People's Republic of China, PRC, Arctic region, identity, international cooperation, crisis, Russia, Arctic Council

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Снежный Дракон: политика Китая в Арктике перед лицом новых вызовов

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Аннотация. Резкое обострение отношений между Россией и странами Запада, начавшееся в феврале 2022 г., стало серьезным вызовом арктическому сотрудничеству, которое на протяжении нескольких последних десятилетий становилось все более интенсивным, плодотворным и в немалой степени взаимовыгодным для его участников. Китай, успевший продемонстрировать всему миру наличие у него амбиций в Арктическом регионе, находится перед лицом непростых вызовов. Ряд исследовательских вопросов, связанных с арктической стратегией Пекина, в этой связи требует уточнения. Не навредит ли укрепление сотрудничества с Россией выстраиванию взаимодействия с остальными арктическими государствами? В какой мере кризис безопасности и постепенная трансформация сложившейся системы международного сотрудничества в Арктике повлияет на планы Китая по интеграции региона в глобальные стратегические проекты Пекина? Какое место может быть отведено Китаю в будущей системе управления Арктикой? Цель исследования — выявление изменений, происходящих в настоящее время в китайской арктической политике. Методологическую основу исследования составляет теория комплексов региональной безопасности Б. Бузана и О. Вейвера. Установлено, что политика выстраивания арктической идентичности, одной из ключевых составляющих которой выступает секьюритизация климатического дискурса, встречает все большее сопротивление со стороны западных стран. В условиях современного кризиса Пекин также вынужден поддерживать баланс двусторонних отношений с Россией и государствами Северной Европы. Эрозия сложившейся системы международного арктического сотрудничества для Китая представляется крайне нежелательной, поскольку эта система вопреки нормативно-правовым режимам полного господства арктических стран (секторальный подход) позволяла Пекину на законных основаниях принимать ограниченное участие в управлении регионом. Вместе с тем на доктринальном уровне отмечается смещение фокуса арктической политики Китая на более глобальное видение развития региона. Внешнеполитические трансформации вызваны рядом сторонних факторов, среди которых можно выделить последствия пандемии коронавируса и усиливающееся китайско-американское стратегическое противостояние.

Ключевые слова: Китайская Народная Республика, КНР, Арктический регион, идентичность, международное сотрудничество, кризис, Россия, Арктический совет

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Introduction

In recent decades, the world's attention to the Arctic has steadily increased. The main factors driving the surge in interest in the Arctic region, as identified by researchers, include climate change (Koivurova, 2012; Nuttall, 2012), large reserves of natural resources,¹

and the potential for year-round shipping along routes that are potentially an alternative to traditional routes (Østreng et al., 2013; Keupp, 2015). Experts have presented the Arctic as an example of mutually beneficial cooperation between states (Heininen, 2019; Steinveg, 2021), a model for peaceful conflict

¹ Charpentier R., Klett T., Attanasi E. Database for Assessment Unit-Scale Analogs (Exclusive of the United

States) // U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report. 2008. URL: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/publication/ofr20071404> (accessed: 25.03.2024). See also: (Zellen, 2009).

resolution under international law (Stokke, 2011; Byers, 2013; Bertelsen, 2019), and a trend towards the involvement of non-Arctic states in regional governance through the gradual and peaceful evolution of interstate structures, particularly the Arctic Council (Wiseman, 2020).

Today, in the context of escalating relations between Russia and Western countries that threaten international cooperation in the Arctic, China faces a number of challenges that may impede its ability to engage in the governance of the Arctic region. Moscow has traditionally been Beijing's main conduit to the polar latitudes, particularly in the use of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). However, China is also engaged in active cooperation with Greenland and Iceland.² Will strengthening cooperation with Russia harm the building of cooperation with the other Arctic states?

Additionally, the increasing militarization potentially limits the scope for participation in Arctic governance not only by non-state actors, but also by non-Arctic states by reducing the potential for scientific and economic cooperation. To what extent will the security crisis and the gradual transformation of the established system of international cooperation in the Arctic affect China's plans to integrate the region into its global strategic projects? How will China's rivalry with Washington impact its Arctic policy?³

² Dams T., van Schaik L., Stoetman A. Presence Before Power: China's Arctic Strategy in Iceland and Greenland // Clingendael Report. June 2020. URL: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/presence-before-power/> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

³ See: Wishnick E. China's Interests and Goals in the Arctic: Implications for the United States // US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. March 1, 2017. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11274> (accessed: 03.04.2024); Patey L. Managing US — China Rivalry in the Arctic: Small States Can Be Players in Great Power Competition // Danish Institute for International Studies. October 9, 2020. URL: <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/managing-us-china-rivalry-in-the-arctic> (accessed: 03.04.2024); Anthony I., Su F. A Strategic Triangle in the Arctic? Implications of China — Russia — United States

In the years preceding the current crisis, the view that international institutions such as the Arctic Council need to be reformed became increasingly popular (Nord, 2016; Young, 2016). The future format of interaction between states in the Arctic, regardless of its configuration, must inevitably take into account the expectations and demands of initially non-Arctic actors. What is China's place in the future system of Arctic governance under the conditions of the 'new normal'?

In this article, we examine the changes taking place in the Arctic and in Chinese Arctic policy within the framework of the theory of regional security complexes by B. Buzan and O. Wæver (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Many reputable international relations scholars have tested this approach in the region (Lanteigne, 2020), including after the events of February 2022 (Stackhouse, 2023). Despite major changes in the geopolitical landscape of the Arctic, constructivism, unlike realism and its variants, appears to be a more appropriate analytical tool that can answer pressing questions about Arctic governance. For example, in the case of China, it remains relevant to analyze its policy of building an Arctic identity (Lanteigne, 2015), implemented through the securitization of the climate agenda (Akimov, 2023; Conger & Sikorsky, 2023), as well as capacity building for *norm entrepreneurship*.⁴

Arctic Governance and Regional Security Through a Constructivist Lens

The changing nature and scope of threats, caused not only by objective material but also

Power Dynamics for Regional Security // Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. March 2021. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/strategic-triangle-arctic-implications-china-russia-united-states-power-dynamics-regional-security> (accessed: 03.04.2024).

⁴ Pelaudeix C. Along the Road: China in the Arctic // European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). December 1, 2018. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21468> (accessed: 09.02.2024).

by socially constructed factors and phenomena, has stimulated an expansion of the spheres included in the problem of security and an increase in the number of reference objects labelled as requiring protection: ecology, climate, culture, identity, individual social groups, and the individual. In this context, classical rationalist approaches to the interpretation of security, primarily political realism and its various derivatives, have limited explanatory potential. They narrow the socio-political reality, treating international relations as an endless military-political rivalry and a series of inevitable violent conflicts between their main subjects, states (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 17–18). Security is understood as the absence of political and military threats to the sovereignty, stability, and national interests of the state, which is forced to increase the means to ensure security in a world of self-help and anarchy of international relations (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 19).

The study of the security structure that has emerged in the Arctic region and its modern transformation, as well as the analysis of the place and role of Chinese policy in this structure, requires the use of cognitive optics that expand the range of referent objects of security. Constructivist theories that emerged after the end of the Cold War and the intensive development of globalization trends, in particular the theory of regional security complexes by B. Buzan and O. Wæver, have such a perspective. This is due not only to its focus on the problem of building security systems in specific regions but also to the fact that it provides tools to take into account the unique role of the Arctic in the world. At the core of this theory are regional security structures, namely complexes of states and other referent objects of securitization that are so interconnected that security issues in the region to which they belong cannot be resolved autonomously (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 44). We believe that the Arctic is just such a complex, a point of intersection between the interests of both the major Arctic

states and non-Arctic states, including China, as well as a variety of commercial and non-commercial stakeholders that have already become part of the system of relations in the region.

In such complexes or clusters, a significant share of high-intensity international processes of securitization and desecuritization occur, and their dynamics depend on the interaction of reference objects. The global security structure, on the other hand, is a set of regional complexes, between which the international security processes are less intensive and interrelations are weaker. This is due to the fact that security threats are more likely to spread over short distances, so the risk of conflict increases between units located in close geographical proximity to each other (Buzan, 2003, p. 141).

The factor of geographical proximity implies the existence of political-social, economic, and cultural ties between the units of a regional security complex, which predetermines the need to jointly address the problems of security and risk management. In this regard, the ability of actors to agree on what constitutes an existential threat that requires an urgent response is important (Buzan, 2003, p. 141). This process is defined by B. Buzan and O. Wæver as an extreme version of politicization or securitization — a speech act designed to convince the target audience that an event, phenomenon, or actor calls into question the survival of a referent security object, e.g., state, person, nation, culture, environment, etc. (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 24–25). The problem is securitized only when the target audience accepts it as such. If the securitizing agent has achieved its goal, this legitimizes the application of all necessary means beyond standard political procedures to neutralize the threat.

It should be noted that both the referent object and the existential threat can be located in the military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 22–23). Because

the Arctic is a unique region with a complex set of relationships and the concentrated interests of different actors, it is characterized by a multi-sectoral security environment (Buzan, 2003, p. 157). This implies that a threat arising in one sector inevitably affects and spreads to other sectors. Therefore, only a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of securitization and desecuritization will make it possible to provide an objective assessment of the security structure that has emerged in the Arctic today.

Thus, an existential threat does not necessarily exist objectively but can be socially constructed and embedded in the securitization discourse of a regional cluster, resulting in a security problem that is precisely what is defined and accepted as such. However, this does not imply that all security problems are exclusively communicative constructs. Moreover, many of them may not be politicized and may not be the object of interest of the state or society at a particular unit of time, or they may be politicized and embedded in the framework of state policy or some other form of social governance, and under the pressure of various events or circumstances through acts of communication, they are able to be securitized, i.e., transformed into a problem of existential danger. Such a metamorphosis occurred at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, for example, with the problems of environmental protection and overcoming climate change in the Arctic. Today, environmental narratives are actively used by China in a securitizing discourse to promote its own interests in the region.

Building China's Arctic Identity

The rapid economic growth of the People's Republic of China in recent decades has contributed to Beijing's transformation into one of the leading players on the world stage, whose foreign policy interests are present in virtually all parts of the globe (Mladenov, 2021, pp. 97–

142). The Arctic region, with its explored and projected resource potential, as well as promising transportation opportunities, is no exception. However, if Chinese foreign economic expansion implied the growth of its political influence in individual countries and regions (Razumnova & Migaleva, 2019), the situation in the Arctic is characterized by some distinctive features. The so-called "Arctic governance regime" (Young, 2012), which emerged as a result of the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996, is a system of regional governance (Arctic governance), the privileged participants of which are, in a narrower sense, the five coastal states (Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway, and Denmark) and, in a broader sense, the eight Arctic states-permanent members of the Arctic Council (the above-mentioned plus Finland, Iceland, and Sweden), which have sovereignty over the land territories within the Arctic Circle.

China has made significant investments in a number of projects in the listed Arctic states.⁵ Active cooperation with Scandinavian countries is widely known (Serova & Skripka, 2022), and Iceland was the first European country to sign a free trade agreement with Beijing in 2013.⁶ The strengthening of Sino-Russian regional cooperation, especially after the imposition of sanctions against Moscow, should also be emphasized. In addition to a number of major natural resource extraction projects, the Ice Silk Road concept, which implies the use of the NSR as a transportation and logistics highway and is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), became widely known in 2017–2018 (Mikhaylichenko, 2019).

⁵ Sengupta S., Myers S.-L. Latest Arena for China's Growing Global Ambitions: The Arctic // *The New York Times*. May 24, 2019. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/24/climate/china-arctic.html> (accessed: 09.02.2024).

⁶ Valdimarsson O. R. Iceland Is First in Europe to Sign Free Trade Pact with China // *Bloomberg*. April 15, 2013. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-04-15/iceland-is-first-in-europe-to-sign-free-trade-pact-with-china> (accessed: 09.02.2024).

However, despite the measures taken to develop bilateral relations, due to the presence of institutional barriers, China, as a non-Arctic state, has had very limited influence on the governance of the region. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, Beijing has embarked on a different policy toward the Arctic through a series of successive steps aimed at bringing it into the circle of Arctic governance actors and building its capacity to manage the decision-making process. This policy is part of a broader strategy of using discursive power and the global promotion of the Chinese narratives to transform the existing international system (Boc, 2015; Yang, 2021). The essence of this Arctic policy has been to construct a regional identity by essentially securitizing the agenda of climate change impacts. In this sense, joining the Arctic Council as an observer state in 2013 was the starting point for the practical implementation of this policy, allowing Beijing to gain some formal grounds to justify its views on Arctic governance.

The White Paper *China's Arctic Policy*,⁷ published in 2018, was the first official document to reflect the fundamental principles, goals, objectives, and strategic orientations of China's Arctic policy. While much of the content had previously been voiced by Chinese diplomats during speeches at regional platforms and forums,⁸ the publication was a major event that confirmed Beijing's intentions to position itself as an "Arctic stakeholder."⁹

⁷ China's Arctic Policy // The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. January 26, 2018. URL: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm (accessed: 11.02.2024).

⁸ Keynote Speech by Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming at the China Country Session of the Third Arctic Circle Assembly // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. October 17, 2015. URL: http://is.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zbgs/kjil/201510/t20151018_3164910.htm (accessed: 11.02.2024).

⁹ China Defines Itself as a 'Near-Arctic State', Says SIPRI // Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. May 10, 2012. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2012/china-defines-itself-near-arctic-state-says-sipri> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

Thus, the introduction notes that due to the changes taking place in the Arctic, primarily climatic changes, the region has become a subject of interest not only for the Arctic states but also for the international community as a whole.

Following a brief physical and geographic characterization of the Arctic, as well as a list of current challenges and opportunities, China identifies itself as a "near-Arctic state." The justification for this characterization is based on the thesis of the direct impact of ongoing climate change, with the Arctic at its epicenter, on China's economic interests in various sectors, including agriculture, forestry, fisheries, the maritime industry, and others. Despite the evidence that there is a correlation between the reduction of ice surface area in the Arctic Ocean and the melting of the Greenland glaciers and the increase in global temperatures (Dethloff et al., 2006), this self-proclamation was received very negatively by U.S. officials,¹⁰ and Western experts characterized Beijing's move as an attempt to "insert itself into the semantics of the Arctic theme."¹¹

Another important component of the Arctic identity narrative is the historical interpretation of the timeline of China's presence in the region. In 1925, China indeed acceded to the Svalbard Treaty 1920, the first multilateral agreement in the Arctic, making China's Arctic history almost a full century long, which reinforces the validity of Chinese involvement in regional governance. However, Liu Nengye (Liu, 2021) argues that China was not involved in the decision-making process of the Svalbard Treaty, and its invitation to join the Treaty by

¹⁰ Fang A. US Rejects China's 'Near-Arctic State' Claim in New Cold War // Nikkei Asia. April 24, 2020. URL: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-rejects-China-s-near-Arctic-state-claim-in-new-cold-war> (accessed: 23.02.2024).

¹¹ Durkee J. China: The New "Near-Arctic State" // Wilson Center. February 6, 2018. URL: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/china-the-new-near-arctic-state> (accessed: 23.02.2024).

France was due to the latter's rivalry with the increasingly influential United States. Thus, China's participation in the Treaty was more a part of the post-World War I international order than an Arctic issue. It is only since the 1990s that China's Arctic policy can begin to take shape. The Chinese undertook their first Arctic expedition in 1999, and opened their first polar station, Yellow River, on Svalbard only in 2004.¹²

Consistently, issues related to Arctic policy have also been reflected in China's more serious strategic documents. For example, China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) for the first time mentioned the Arctic and not the polar regions in general. Article 33 states the intention to engage in pragmatic cooperation in the Arctic and to build an "Ice Silk Road." Some scholars have characterized this project as an alternative to the regional status quo centered around the Arctic Council (Yang & Zhao, 2019; Ushakova, 2021). It should also be noted that while the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) mentioned maritime policy issues mainly in the context of protecting China's interests in the nearby seas, the text of the latest five-year plan is much more outward-looking and emphasizes China's role in shaping global ocean governance.¹³ In addition, one of the most important strategic documents, the National Transportation System Development Plan, which defines the development of the transportation system in China with a planning period from 2021 to 2035, also mentions the Arctic Ocean. The polar route is presented there for the first time as part of the strategy to

diversify access to global transportation corridors.¹⁴

The Crisis of International Cooperation in the Arctic: Implications for Beijing

As a result of the escalation of the Russia — Ukraine conflict in February 2022, most regional institutions, as well as all seven remaining Arctic states, have drastically reduced their engagement with Russia.¹⁵ Several additional sanctions restrictions were imposed on Moscow, in particular those aimed at further reducing financial and technological opportunities to develop the resources of the Arctic continental shelf. In addition, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO was a manifestation of the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape in the region, turning it into an arena for strategic confrontation.¹⁶ On initial examination, these and other consequences of the cooperation crisis for the People's Republic of China (PRC) can be assessed in two ways. For example, in the context of the erosion of the region's governance system and the fragmentation of the Arctic states, it could theoretically be easier for Beijing to qualitatively strengthen its position as a major Arctic stakeholder.

However, first, serious disagreements among the Arctic countries are present only along the "Russia — Western countries" line.

¹² Kopra S. China and Its Arctic Trajectories: The Arctic Institute's China Series 2020 // The Arctic Institute. April 24, 2020. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-arctic-trajectories-the-arctic-institute-china-series-2020/> (accessed: 23.02.2024).

¹³ Eiterjord T. What the 14th Five-Year Plan Says About China's Arctic Interests // The Arctic Institute. November 23, 2023. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/14th-five-year-plan-chinas-arctic-interests/> (accessed: 05.03.2024).

¹⁴ Ibold S., Yun X. National Comprehensive Three-dimensional Transportation Network Planning Outline // GIZ. February 24, 2021. URL: <https://transition-china.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Outline-of-the-National-Comprehensive-TDT-network.pdf> (accessed: 05.03.2024).

¹⁵ Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine // IARPC Collaborations. March 3, 2022. URL: <https://www.iarpcollaborations.org/updates/22591> (accessed: 09.03.2024).

¹⁶ Paul M. U.S. Arctic Security Policy: North American Arctic Strategies, Russian Hubris and Chinese Ambitions // SWP Comment. 2023 (July 18). No. 40. URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C40/> (accessed: 03.04.2024).

Under these conditions, the alliance of the Arctic states of Northern Europe with Canada and the United States, including around the anti-China agenda, is becoming even more united.¹⁷ In such a scenario, it is more logical to assume Beijing's need to balance cooperation between the opposing sides, as there are obvious risks from strengthening regional cooperation with Moscow and potential countermeasures from other Arctic states.¹⁸ Despite the great opportunities offered by the Pivot to the East policy,¹⁹ China is very carefully assessing its own risks from the growing anti-Russian sanctions, as exemplified by the difficulties encountered in the implementation of a number of major projects involving Chinese shareholders, such as liquid natural gas (LNG) project *Arctic LNG 2*.²⁰

Second, the established system of Arctic governance, although rather rigid, still provided Beijing with opportunities for gradual integration on a completely formal basis. It is no coincidence that at the Arctic Circle Forum in October 2022, China's chargé d'affaires for the

Arctic called for an early resumption of cooperation.²¹ In addition, after China's accession to the Arctic Council and the intensification of its Arctic policy, research publications have increasingly raised the question of the need to reform the organization taking into account the new realities (Young, 2016; Knecht & Keil, 2017; Wiseman, 2020). It would be quite logical to assume, if not an expansion of the number of permanent members of the Arctic Council, then a strengthening of the rights of observer states. In addition, Beijing has been increasing its presence in other, less institutionalized regional venues, such as the Arctic Circle Conference, which was established in 2013.²²

The PRC also greatly benefits from the existing regulatory regime for the Arctic Ocean and Arctic seas governed by the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and a few other international treaties, under which non-Arctic countries are allowed a wide range of activities on the high seas (beyond the 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ)), including exploration and extraction of natural resources (Bennett, 2015). The previous sectoral approach completely excluded non-coastal states from being allowed to manage the Arctic Ocean space.

However, a number of recent studies suggest that meaningful changes in China's Arctic policy have been influenced, among other things, by factors related to the aftermath of the pandemic and increasing competition with Washington (Ferchen, 2023; Zhou, 2023, pp. 77–105). For example, economic difficulties have had a negative impact on China's ability to finance infrastructure projects around the world

¹⁷ Peiqing G., Huiwen C. Chinese Perspective on the Arctic and Its Implication for Nordic Countries // The Arctic Institute. June 20, 2023. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/chinese-perspective-arctic-implication-nordic-countries/> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

¹⁸ Chen C. China — Russia Arctic Cooperation in the Context of a Divided Arctic // The Arctic Institute. April 4, 2023. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-russia-arctic-cooperation-context-divided-arctic/> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

¹⁹ See: RUSTITAN Group and China Communications and Construction Company Discussed the Project to Develop the Pizhenskoye Field in the Komi Republic // Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. January 20, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://rspp.ru/events/news/gk-rustitan-i-kitayskaya-kompaniya-kommunikatsiy-i-stroitelstva-obsudili-proekt-osvoeniya-pizhenskogo-mestorozhdeniya-v-respublike-komi-63ce39f4e1909/> (accessed: 15.03.2024); NOVATEK and Sovcomflot Created a Joint Venture to Ensure Year-Round Supplies from LNG Projects // Kommersant. September 4, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4081158> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

²⁰ Arctic LNG 2 Is Now on Its Own // Kommersant. December 25, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6425739> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

²¹ Schreiber M. China Will Not Recognize an Arctic Council Without Russia, Envoy Says // Arctic Today. October 17, 2022. URL: <https://www.arctictoday.com/china-will-not-recognize-an-arctic-council-without-russia-envoy-says/> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

²² China to Send Delegation to 3rd Assembly of Arctic Circle Forum // Renmin Ribao. October 15, 2015. (In Russian). URL: <http://russian.people.com.cn/n/2015/1015/c31516-8962377.html> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

as part of its global initiatives, and the confrontational policies of the Donald Trump administration have increased concerns among Western countries about Beijing's possible militarization of the region. Separately, it is worth noting that Western countries' skepticism about China's peaceful Arctic rhetoric is significantly linked to the PRC's growing capabilities as a major maritime power. Thus, in 2019, at an event commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy), Xi Jinping formally introduced the concept of a maritime community of unified destiny as a solution for global ocean governance, expressing the PRC's willingness to "discuss more and discuss everything" (Wang, 2023). It should also be noted that NATO's intensification in the Arctic over the past decade has also been linked to China's growing attention to the region.²³ The official communiqué of the Brussels Summit in 2021 explicitly stated that China's ambitions and assertive behavior pose systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and directly to the security of the NATO.²⁴

Today, Western countries' concerns are heightened by Beijing's military-political interaction with Moscow. The latter, according to some researchers, under the conditions of redistribution of defense spending in favor of the Ukrainian conflict, may agree to give its eastern neighbor even more preferences and opportunities to expand its presence in the region.²⁵ Thus, in April 2023, a delegation

from China attended the exercises in the Barents Sea as observers.²⁶ A month earlier, it was announced that the two countries were ready to create a joint working body for the development of the NSR.²⁷ At the same time, the possibility of forming a military alliance between Russia and China seems unlikely.²⁸ The 1961 defense treaty with North Korea remains the only Chinese document of this kind. Beijing's interest in the Northern Sea Route can be characterized as strategic rather than tactical, since, according to some researchers, the BRI seems to have given way to new, non-infrastructure-related Chinese projects to develop the globe.²⁹ Although the China National Nuclear Corporation's (CNNC) plans to build nuclear icebreakers became known back in 2018. Although there is still little concrete information, a number of patent applications filed by engineers at CNNC Marine Nuclear Power, a subsidiary, may be evidence of ongoing work in this direction.³⁰

In the future, official Beijing will most likely avoid focusing on issues that provoke painful reactions from Western countries, such as the extraction of Arctic natural resources or the use of the region's maritime transportation

²³ Lanteigne M. The Changing Shape of Arctic Security // NATO. June 28, 2019. URL: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/06/28/the-changing-shape-of-arctic-security/index.html> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

²⁴ Brussels Summit Communiqué // NATO. June 14, 2021. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm (accessed: 15.03.2024).

²⁵ Shifting Ice: Russia's Increasing Reliance on The Private Sector and the PRC in the Arctic // Strider. URL: <https://www.striderintel.com/resources/shifting-ice-russias-increasing-reliance-on-the-private-sector-and-the-prc-in-the-arctic/> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

²⁶ Shiryayev S. The Arctic Patrol Exercises Took Place in the Barents Sea // Vesti.ru. April 26, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/3322395> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

²⁷ Putin Said that Russia and China Are Ready to Cooperate on the Development of the Northern Sea Route // TASS. March 21, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17329179> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

²⁸ Devyatkin P. China and the Arctic: Reflections in 2023 // The Arctic Institute. November 9, 2023. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-arctic-reflections-2023/> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

²⁹ Wu L. China's Transition from the Belt and Road to the Global Development Initiative // The Diplomat. July 11, 2023. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/chinas-switch-from-the-belt-and-road-to-the-global-development-initiative/> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

³⁰ Eiterjord T. Checking Back in on China's Nuclear Icebreaker // The Diplomat. February 13, 2023. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/checking-back-in-on-chinas-nuclear-icebreaker/> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

capabilities. The main emphasis in public rhetoric and doctrinal legal acts is already on understanding the Arctic as a predominantly maritime space with a still-emerging governance architecture and characterized by extremely general language. For example, in the 2023 White Paper *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of a Global Community of Shared Future* there is not a single word about the Arctic or the NSR.³¹ Only the polar regions are mentioned in the context of improving existing multilateral governance and cooperation mechanisms to promote governance mechanisms in emerging areas. In another White Paper, *A Global Community for a Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions* (2023), the polar regions are mentioned only in the context of promoting the development of a set of rules for global digital governance, along with outer space and the seabed as “new frontiers.”³²

Evidence of China's changing policy in the Arctic can also be traced in its public rhetoric. For example, the February 4, 2022 joint statement by Russian President V.V. Putin and China's President Xi Jinping stated that the two sides “agreed to consistently deepen practical cooperation in the field of sustainable development of the Arctic.”³³ It also called on all interested states to participate in the development of “exploitation of Arctic routes”

³¹ The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future // China Daily. October 11, 2023. URL: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/11/WS6525de2ba31090682a5e7d01.html> (accessed: 25.03.2024).

³² Full Text: A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions // The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. September 26, 2023. URL: https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202309/26/content_WS6512703dc6d0868f4e8dfc37.html (accessed: 25.03.2024).

³³ Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on International Relations Entering a New Era and Global Sustainable Development // The President of Russia. February 4, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

was also mentioned.³⁴ A similarly worded statement of March 21, 2023 said that the parties would “continue to deepen practical cooperation in the fields of polar scientific research, environmental protection and expedition organization, and make greater public contributions to the global governance of the seas and oceans.”³⁵ Thus, there are quite similar emphases on China's global, strategic approach to the Arctic.

Conclusion

The intensification of China's Arctic foreign policy over the past decade has been driven by the same factors that have contributed to a general increase in attention to the region. Its content was based on efforts to build an Arctic identity, which consisted of Beijing's active influence on the regional agenda by arguing the importance of Arctic natural resources for its socio-economic development, as well as securitizing the issue of climate change as a threat to national security.

The crisis in regional cooperation has added to the range of challenges Beijing now faces, including the aftermath of the pandemic, including economic difficulties, as well as increased strategic rivalry with Washington. Once presented to the public, Beijing's Arctic strategy is gradually becoming somewhat of a ‘thing in itself’ again, with only occasional references to the Arctic in doctrinal legal texts. However, this does not mean that China has lost interest in the region and is unlikely to have a significant impact on the ongoing construction of the national icebreaker fleet. Assuming that the existing legal and regulatory regime in the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas is maintained,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Joint Statement by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Entering a New Era // The President of Russia. March 21, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5920?fbclid=IwAR2lxA7WtyA-D7VYE00PP6TrX8bUebMyco9QLAVWbvV4NyWCNrWuhrxdAA0> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

China needs to maintain acceptable relations with Arctic states for unimpeded passage through their territorial waters and straits, as well as work to ensure the physical capability of its potential presence in the Arctic.

In addition, there is still room for a gradual restoration of the current system of cooperation.

China's long-term and strategic goal remains its involvement in the governance of the Arctic region. Therefore, Beijing's support for the existing multilateral Arctic structures, rather than creating or promoting alternatives, seems to be the most likely development in the near future.

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