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China's Arctic Policy in a Time of Global Geopolitical Transformation: A Northern Orientation

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Abstract. Since the early 2000s, China has been putting consistent efforts to push its way into the Arctic and secure a position as an equal participant in international political and economic processes in the region. The relevance of this research lies in the crucial importance of the Arctic for the Russian Federation and, consequently, the necessity of developing a balanced foreign policy approach based on an objective assessment of the strategies of major “players” in the region, including China, which is gradually expanding its presence in the Far North. Despite the considerable number of studies conducted by Russian and foreign scientists on various aspects of China’s Arctic policy, the long-term goals of Beijing in the Arctic in the context of its strategy to transform the global governance system remain insufficiently researched. This study aims to identify the key drivers of China’s Arctic policy and to assess the way the implementation of China’s approaches to the core issues of the future development of the region could pose a threat to Russia’s interests. The study is based on the theory of offensive realism, which allows to justify the high degree of competition between the world powers in the geopolitical space of the Arctic and to explain the significant offensive potential of China’s foreign policy, including its northern dimension. The author employed a combination of institutional, logical, and expert assessment methods. The cornerstone of the methodological framework of the research is the systematic approach, through which the Arctic policy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is analyzed in a variety of its components with respect to the changing international environment, as well as in the broader context of Beijing’s global foreign policy strategy. Based on the analysis of China’s Arctic policy over the past decades, the author identifies the risks associated with the increased involvement of Chinese capital in the infrastructure projects in the High North and the integration of Russia’s northern logistic route into China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to transform the global economic system and the structure of international relations to China’s advantage.

Key words: Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, the Northern Sea Route, Ice Silk Road, liquefied natural gas, LNG, science diplomacy

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Курс на Север: арктическая политика Китая в контексте глобальных геополитических изменений

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Аннотация. С начала 2000-х гг. Китай прилагает последовательные и настойчивые усилия по проникновению в Арктический регион и закреплению в нем в качестве полноценного участника международных политических и экономических процессов, претендуя на статус полноправного актора системы управления Арктикой. Актуальность темы исследования определяется стратегическим значением Арктики для интересов Российской Федерации и обусловленной этим потребностью выстраивать выверенный внешнеполитический курс на основе объективной оценки политики ключевых «игроков» в данном регионе, одним из которых становится Китай, наращивающий свое присутствие в Заполярье. Несмотря на значительное число работ российских и зарубежных исследователей по различным аспектам арктической политики Пекина, недостаточно изученным остается вопрос долгосрочных задач Китая в Арктике в контексте реализуемой им стратегии трансформации системы мирового управления. Автор ставит целью определение ключевых движущих факторов арктической политики Китайской Народной Республики (КНР) и оценку потенциальных угроз интересам России при реализации Китаем своих подходов к значимым вопросам будущего развития региона. Исследование осуществлено с опорой на теорию наступательного реализма, которая позволяет обосновывать высокую степень конкуренции мировых держав в геополитическом пространстве Арктики и объяснить значительный наступательный потенциал внешней политики Китая, в том числе на северном направлении. Использованы институциональный, логический методы и метод экспертной оценки. В основу положен системный подход к рассмотрению арктической политики КНР в совокупности ее различных элементов и меняющейся международной среды, а в более широком контексте — глобальной внешнеполитической стратегии Пекина. На основе анализа политики Китая на арктическом направлении за минувшее десятилетие выявляются риски, связанные с интенсивным привлечением китайского капитала в инфраструктурные проекты в высоких широтах и встраиванием российского северного логистического маршрута во всеобъемлющую китайскую инициативу «Пояс и путь», которая направлена на трансформацию мировой экономической системы и структуры международных отношений в интересах КНР.

Ключевые слова: Пояс и путь, Северный морской путь, Ледяной шелковый путь, сжиженный природный газ, СПГ, научная дипломатия

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, the world along with the system of international relations has undergone substantial transformations. The Arctic, which is of strategic importance for the national interests of the Russian Federation, has undergone a transformation from a peripheral area of the world political processes into a global macro-region, which not only the countries belonging to it, but also the states very remote from the Arctic Circle, began to claim

participation in its development. China being one of them, which over the past three decades has made a rapid leap in its development, transforming itself from an agrarian country to the second largest country in the world after the United States in terms of nominal gross domestic product (GDP), and by some indicators, including purchasing power parity (PPP), to an absolute leader.¹ The growth of

¹ Russia Has Entered the Top Five Economies in the World in Terms of Purchasing Power Parity //

economic power was accompanied by a consistent increase in Beijing's confidence in international relations and unwillingness to continue to remain detached in global affairs (Leksyutina, 2018, p. 65). This was reflected in a gradual shift from Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy concept of the quiet rise of China, aimed at "hiding capacities and maintaining a low profile" in the interests of securing conditions for the country's internal development, and to the doctrine of a great power with global responsibility for the fate of humanity (Boyarkina, 2023).

The transition to new doctrinal attitudes regarding China's foreign policy and role in the international arena was marked with the coming to power of Xi Jinping in 2013 and is directly linked by analysts to the personality of a representative of the fifth generation of Chinese leaders (Denisov & Adamova, 2017; Verchenko, 2020). Meanwhile, the idea of China's rise and transformation into a global leader promoted by the current President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is based on the ideological foundation laid by the previous leaders of the country, which can be traced in one way or another in their program ideology throughout the 20th century. It consists in striving for the realization of the "Chinese dream" of the great revival and prosperity of the Chinese nation, the formation of China as the world's greatest superpower (Skripkar, 2015, pp. 395–396). The new understanding of this doctrine was proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013 and was reflected in the concept of building a "community of the common destiny of mankind," which is currently being actively promoted by Chinese diplomatic initiatives (Verchenko, 2020).

A significant number of articles by Russian and foreign researchers (Semenov & Tsvyk, 2019; Boyarkina, 2020; Verchenko, 2020) are devoted to the analysis of this initiative,

interpreting it as a Chinese attempt to transform the world economy crisis and the modern model of global governance on the basis of its own value system and taking into account the special role of Beijing in the international arena. The "One Belt, One Road"² concept proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013, which also extended to the Arctic dimension, serves as a tool for implementing this strategy. The initiative aims to establish transcontinental logistics corridors to ensure stable and diversified energy supplies, China's sustainable access to commodity markets, as well as channels for uninterrupted export of Chinese industrial capacities and technologies with the purpose of implementation of projects abroad, including in remote regions of the world (Boyarkina, 2020).

China's strategy towards the Arctic is consistent with the broader logic of Xi Jinping's course to create a new model of globalization, which he has characterized as a "Chinese design," and to transform the world order with Beijing taking the leading role. This approach carries with it the potential for risks to Russia's interests in the Far North over the longer term. The basis for analyzing the Arctic policy of the PRC, as it seems, can be found in J. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, according to which the international system creates strong incentives for states to seek opportunities to strengthen power at the expense of competitors and use advantages in situations where the benefits outweigh the costs (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 61). The Arctic region holds enormous benefits, and China's development of Arctic potential in the field of economics, transport, science and technology portends significant advantages over potential competitors, which may eventually include Russia.

Kommersant. August 4, 2023. (In Russian) URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6146763> (accessed: 14.03.2024).

² Three years later the English name was evolved to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

“Influence Is Determined by Presence”: China’s Efforts to Penetrate the Arctic

Chinese researchers arguing for China’s special connection to the Arctic region, focus on the fact that Beijing joined the Svalbard Treaty in 1925 (Xu, 2016, p. 52). Even though China, along with 46 other countries of the world, has been a party to this treaty for a long time, until the early 1990s the country demonstrated minimal interest in the Arctic region, implementing research projects in the area of the Earth’s Southern geographic pole. Chinese scientists first participated in the Arctic research program in 1992, having implemented a five-year scientific project together with colleagues from Germany (Cui, 2024, p. 143). The institutional basis for the Arctic orientation of China’s foreign policy began to take shape in the 1980s. In 1989, the Polar Research Institute of China was established, which competence since the early 1990s has included the implementation of scientific programs in the Arctic. Currently, it is a large scientific research center based in Shanghai, which coordinates and finances national polar research projects and performs a connecting function between government agencies and the scientific and expert community of the country involved in this field.³

Following the establishment of the Arctic Council (AC) by eight Arctic states in 1996, China expanded the responsibilities of the National Antarctic Expedition Committee of the PRC, established in 1981, and incorporated it into the state administrative structure, which included Arctic issues. This structure was subsequently renamed to the China Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA). It is noteworthy that after the reformation of the public authorities in 2018, the institution formally engaged in scientific research became subordinate to the Ministry of Natural

³ Polar Research Institute of China // The China — Nordic Research Center. URL: <https://www.cnarc.info/members/chinese-members/polar-research-institute-of-china> (accessed: 03.03.2024).

Resources of China (Petrovsky & Filippova, 2022, p. 89).

An indicator of the aspiration of China’s intentions regarding the exploration of the North was its purchase of the world’s largest diesel-electric icebreaker (Project 10621) from Ukraine in 1994 (Filippova, 2019, p. 285). Designed by Soviet designers and built at the Kherson Shipyard in 1993, the icebreaker, later called the *Xue Long*, opened new frontiers for China in the study of polar expanses, and shed light on the technology of building ships of this class. In 2019, the *Xue Long 2*, a more powerful analogue of the previously acquired icebreaker, this time of its own Chinese production, was launched at the Shanghai shipyard.⁴ Both vessels are being operated by the Polar Research Institute of China and are actively used for expeditions in the Arctic and Antarctic.

Relying on “soft power” tools, primarily scientific diplomacy is currently a key element of China’s Arctic policy. Having no territory beyond the Arctic Circle, China uses the development of national Arctic research and international cooperation in this field as the main argument for legitimizing its interests and special rights in the Arctic region. At the same time, by expanding the network of scientific laboratories and programs, Beijing is not only creating centers of its presence in the Arctic, but also collecting scientific data that may be of interest in the context of strategic planning of the Chinese Arctic policy. Since 1999, China has carried out 13 scientific expeditions to the Arctic, and since 2016 it has been organizing them on an almost annual basis and has been actively developing international cooperation in the field of Arctic science (Petrovsky & Filippova, 2022, p. 93).

Currently, the PRC has three research facilities in the Arctic region. The first is the

⁴ Faskhutdinov R. China Is Turning into an Icebreaking Power // Korabel.ru. August 10, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://www.korabel.ru/news/comments/kitay_prevr_aschaetsya_v_ledokolnuyu_derzhavu.html?ysclid=lvfdiajm1c425029868 (accessed: 15.03.2024).

Yellow River Station, which began operating in the Svalbard Archipelago in 2004.⁵ In 2016, China opened the first satellite communications ground station outside its territory in the Swedish city of Kiruna, located beyond the Arctic Circle, on the territory of the Esrange Space Center.⁶ Professor Liao Mingsheng, who specializes in satellite radar at the State Key Laboratory of Information Engineering in Surveying, Mapping and Remote Sensing, said that the station is equipped with the best and most sensitive signal reception devices ever created by China and the fastest data processing speed in the world.⁷

China's third scientific laboratory in the Arctic was a joint Chinese-Icelandic station, which was put into operation in 2018.⁸ A wide range of research is being conducted on its basis, with an emphasis on the problems of climate change and the impact of this process on the state of the Arctic Ocean ice cover. It is noteworthy that of the nine formats of international and regional cooperation on Arctic issues in which China participates, six have a research profile. These include the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC), the University of the Arctic, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences, the China — Nordic Arctic Research Center, and the Pacific Arctic Group (Nong, 2020). Thus, in a relatively short period of time, China has managed not only to develop Arctic

science, providing it with the necessary infrastructure, but also to gain a foothold in the global socio-political discourse as a major participant in international scientific cooperation in this region.

The Common Heritage of Mankind and the “Great Polar Power” — A Look at the Arctic from Beijing

Despite China's efforts to create an image of a state that is ready to contribute to the study of the Arctic for the benefit of mankind and to respect the interests and sovereignty of the Arctic states, Beijing's policy in the Arctic is considered controversial by several Russian and foreign researchers (Komissina, 2015; Brady, 2017; Vylegzhanin & Kiyenko, 2021). On the one hand, this is due to the economic power and technological potential of Beijing, and on the other — to the understanding of the differences in the interests of China and the Arctic littoral states, including Russia, in the long term. The Arctic strategy of the PRC is based on the doctrine of the internationalization of the Arctic as the common heritage of all mankind and is supported by the principle of freedom of navigation. According to China, this implies the right of all states, including non-Arctic ones, to develop the region and free access to its transport routes. This approach has been repeatedly tested by leading Chinese international researchers and later recorded in the first regulatory document on the future development of the Arctic region, the White Paper *China's Arctic Policy*, published in 2018. It declares the need to ensure freedom of navigation in the Arctic in the interests of all states in accordance with international law.⁹

China publishes such White Papers specifically on the most significant areas of its

⁵ China's Polar Studies Contribute to Tackling Climate Change: Researcher // China Daily. November 30, 2023. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202311/30/WS6567e9a7a31090682a5f0b4e.html> (accessed: 03.04.2024).

⁶ China Launches Its First Fully Owned Overseas Satellite Ground Station near North Pole // South China Morning Post. December 16, 2016. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2055224/china-launches-its-first-fully-owned-overseas-satellite> (accessed: 15.03.2024).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ China — Iceland Arctic Science Observatory Inaugurated in Northern Iceland // Xinhua. October 19, 2018. URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/19/c_137542493.htm (accessed: 03.04.2024).

⁹ China's Arctic Policy // The State Council 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: 17.03.2024).

foreign policy, therefore, the publication of a document on Arctic issues testifies to the special place of this region in the system of Beijing's foreign policy priorities.¹⁰ It is based on the results of a wide range of Chinese scientific research on the geopolitical and geo-economic aspects of Arctic exploration (Petrovsky & Filipova, 2018, p. 171). The White Paper, apparently intended to demonstrate the balanced and peaceful nature of Chinese Arctic aspirations, clearly traces a line towards blurring the special status and rights of the Arctic states in the region. In particular, the document states that although non-Arctic states do not have territorial sovereignty in this region, "they have the right to conduct scientific research, navigation, flights, fishing, laying underwater cables and pipelines in the high seas and other relevant marine areas of the Arctic Ocean, as well as the right to explore and the exploitation of resources in the Area."¹¹ Thus, China proceeds from the presence of an international seabed area in the high-latitude Arctic beyond the national jurisdiction of five coastal Arctic States, which, according to Article 136 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is the common heritage of humanity.¹²

According to one of the most authoritative Russian experts on international maritime law, Professor A.N. Vylegzhanin (MGIMO University) and his co-author E.V. Kienko, "The peremptory statement in the Arctic

policy¹³ about the presence of an Area¹⁴ in the Arctic hardly contributes to the stable and legitimate provision of China's national natural resource interests in relation to the mineral resources of the Arctic Ocean floor" (Vylegzhanin & Kienko, 2021, p. 304). Moreover, this stance of the PRC does not correspond to the current international legal status of the Arctic Ocean, since today none of the Arctic coastal states has delimited its continental shelf from such an alleged Area, while the United States is not a party to the Convention at all (Vylegzhanin & Kienko, 2021, p. 304).

China consistently defends its views on clarifying the legal regime and its own role in the Arctic governance. Although the rhetoric is sometimes softened for opportunistic reasons, the state always sticks to the planned course, which is reflected in numerous statements by officials and representatives of the scientific community. At the same time, Beijing not only declares its ambitions, but also attempts to justify the legitimacy of its claims to participate in the management of the region by deliberately developing and implementing concepts of the country's special involvement in the Arctic. In order to establish an Arctic identity for the PRC, in 2010, Chinese scientist Lu Junyuan, in his monograph *Geopolitics in the Arctic and China's Response*, proposed the concept of a "near-Arctic state" — a state whose rights to participate in the development of resources and the use of transport opportunities in the region are determined by its close location to it (Lei, 2021, p. 103). This concept was tested at the expert level, reflected in the rhetoric of Chinese officials, and then formed the basis of the argumentation base of *China's Arctic Policy*. At the same time, Chinese officials began to promote the idea of China as a "great polar power." This thesis was initially articulated by

¹⁰ Nong H. China and the United States in the Arctic: Exploring the Divergence and Convergence of Interests // Institute for China — America Studies. October 20, 2022. P. 6. URL: <https://chinaus-icas.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/China-US-Arctic-Report-10.2022-Final.pdf> (accessed: 17.03.2024).

¹¹ China's Arctic Policy // The State Council 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: 17.03.2024).

¹² The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea // United Nations. (In Russian). URL: https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_r.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2024).

¹³ This refers to the White paper *China's Arctic Policy*.

¹⁴ Area, or international seabed area is a part of a seabed located beyond the jurisdiction of states.

Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2014 during his visit to Australia (it is noteworthy that it was said on board of the Chinese icebreaker *Xue Long* moored off Hobart Island) (Brady, 2017, p. 38).

Recognizing the obviously artificial nature of this concept in relation to a state whose northernmost point is 1,500 km away from the Arctic Circle, China later developed and introduced a new term — Arctic stakeholder.¹⁵ This characteristic allowed China to move away from the geographical principle and justify the legitimacy of China's interest in the Arctic region with a set of parameters, including the level of its involvement in scientific research and economic projects in the Arctic, as well as the degree of vulnerability of ecosystems in China itself to climate change occurring in the polar regions (Lei, 2021). In addition, the expansive nature of the identity of the Arctic stakeholder has allowed Chinese diplomacy to consolidate a number of Asian countries around Arctic issues through the creation of new discussion platforms. Such tactics, which predictably became an irritant for the Arctic states, were adopted shortly after the diplomatic success of China in gaining permanent observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013.¹⁶

This event is regarded by researchers as a pivotal moment, after which Beijing has moved to a more active and ambitious strategy to promote its interests in the Arctic (Steinveg, 2021, p. 52). From that point forward, China began to make attempts not only to integrate into the existing institutional structure of the international relations in the region, but also to act proactively, trying to form new variations of it by creating alternative formats. One of them

was the organization of the Arctic Circle Assembly, which was inspired by China and established by the President of Iceland O.R. Grimsson in 2013 — the year of the signing of the Free Trade Agreement between Iceland and the PRC.¹⁷ The concept of the “Arctic Circle” initially entailed an inclusive nature of interaction on key aspects of the development of the Arctic region with broad involvement of non-regional, primarily Asian countries. This was personally emphasized by O.R. Grimsson, who stated: “Please participate in the Arctic Circle. You will be treated as equals” (Steinveg, 2021, p. 44).

Since its inception, this forum has become a high-level status event, bringing together over 2,000 people from 60 countries from all over the world annually in Iceland to discuss topical issues of Arctic development.¹⁸ Many researchers believe that such “Arctic Circle” initiatives are beneficial for representatives of non-Arctic states, who seek to legitimize their presence in the region by participating in them (Brady, 2017; Steinveg, 2021; Vylegzhanin & Kienko, 2021). In addition, the growing authority of these formats is gradually eroding the exclusivity of the rights of the Arctic states and, thereby, creating conditions for the internationalization of the Arctic. Some researchers believe that the recent innovations introduced into the activities of the forum indicate the desire of its organizers to give the “Arctic Circle” a special role in the management of the Arctic, which goes beyond the mandate of this conference (Steinveg, Rottem & Andreeva, 2023, p. 4). The risks of such a development have increased especially after 2022, when the status acquired by the Arctic Council was put at risk as a result of a full-scale “hybrid attack” launched by Western

¹⁵ China's Arctic Policy // The State Council 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: 17.03.2024).

¹⁶ McGrath M. China Joins Arctic Council but a Decision on the EU Is Deferred // BBC. May 15, 2013. URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-22527822> (accessed: 17.03.2024).

¹⁷ Arctic Circle. URL: <https://www.arcticcircle.org/about> (accessed: 11.04.2024).

¹⁸ Arctic Circle Assembly // Russian Federation's Chairmanship of the Arctic Council 2021–2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://as.arctic-russia.ru/events/ekonomicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo/assambleya-arkticheskiy-krug/?ysclid=lv83cd7ebg835278558> (accessed: 11.04.2024).

countries against Russia, which in fact blocked the work within the framework of the Arctic Council and challenged the very existence of this intergovernmental regional forum.¹⁹

In 2016, China, along with South Korea and Japan, became a participant in a new structure — the Trilateral High-level Dialogue on Arctic issues, aimed at coordinating the approaches of these states to the implementation of their Arctic strategies and the determination of the legal regime of the Arctic.²⁰ The results of the work in this format are highly valued by Chinese scientists, who proceed from the fact that “The cooperation of the three countries in the Arctic has gone beyond exclusively scientific research and covered various areas of Arctic relations, including the development of a global governance platform” (Gong, 2020, p. 72). This arrangement undoubtedly does not meet the interests of the five Arctic littoral states, but, as A.N. Vylegzhanin and E.V. Kienko note, it is worth recognizing that the documents on the Arctic Ocean regime agreed upon during the meetings of China, South Korea and Japan have become a political and legal reality. In his opinion, the potentially negative effect of this trilateral interaction could be offset by the participation in the above-mentioned consultations of scientists and specialists from the Arctic states in order to ensure openness and prevent the adoption by China, South Korea and Japan of acts that may have unpredictable international legal consequences (Vylegzhanin & Kienko, 2021, p. 304).

¹⁹ Vylegzhanin A. N., Lysenko M. N., Vyakhireva N. S., Snyatkov A. A. The Future of the Arctic Council // RIAC Working paper. 2023. No. 75. P. 7. (In Russian). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Arctic-Council-WorkingPaper75.pdf> (accessed: 11.04.2024).

²⁰ China's Arctic Policy // The State Council 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: 17.03.2024).

The Ice Silk Road in the Context of China's Approach to Freedom of Navigation

Due to its geographical location and production level, China occupies a leading position in global maritime transport, delivering about 95% of imported and exported goods by sea (Sazonov, 2021, p. 378). This circumstance is due to the perception of the political establishment of the PRC about the vital need to ensure the constant functioning of maritime transport corridors as a significant resource for the development of the country. On this basis, at the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China in November 2012 the task of turning the PRC “into a great maritime power” was formulated (Larin & Pestsov, 2020, p. 28). In 2013, Xi Jinping announced the above mentioned Belt and Road initiative to launch a global project to increase transport connectivity of the regions of the world, an integral part of which, as he stated during his visit to Russia in 2017, should be an Ice Silk Road through the waters of the Arctic Ocean.²¹

Beijing assigns a special place in the implementation of this goal to the Arctic. In the *China's Arctic Policy*, a special section is devoted to the prospects of the country's participation in the development of Arctic shipping arteries. It notes that these routes, including the Northeastern (Northern Sea Route, NSR), Northwestern and Central Passages, have the potential to become important transport corridors due to climate change, and also emphasizes that China respects the powers of the Arctic states in waters under their jurisdiction. At the same time — and here the dual nature of the PRC's Arctic policy is manifested — the management of Arctic shipping routes should be carried out in accordance with international treaties, including

²¹ Gong Z. Ice Silk Road: China's Science and Transportation Efforts on the Arctic // China Global Television Network. September 24, 2017. URL: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/336b544e77597a6333566d54/index.html> (accessed: 17.04.2024).

the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, while respecting the rights of all countries to use them and ensuring freedom of navigation.²²

The five-year development plan approved by China's National People's Congress in 2021 mentioned the Arctic region for the first time and focused on the prospect of the country's participation in the Ice Silk Road transport and logistics project.²³ The fact that the Arctic is mentioned only in the section devoted to the development of the maritime economy may serve as evidence that Beijing views the Arctic region primarily in the context of ocean management and freedom of navigation as a fundamental principle for securing its rights to access northern transport routes. Representatives of the expert community of the PRC periodically give statements of varying degrees of determination in regard to the regimes of use of the NSR, the general essence of which boils down to China's disagreement with its special regime as a historically established Russian national transport communication and the need to give the waters of this navigable highway the status of international straits (Komissina, 2015, pp. 69–70). In the meantime, according to the deputy director of the China Institute of Polar Research of the State Oceanic Administration of the PRC Li Yuansheng, China expects to receive preferences for the passage of ships through the waters of the NSR (Petrovsky & Filippova, 2022, p. 43). In particular, it concerns the tariffs for icebreaking and pilotage of vessels in the waters of the NSR, which China considers too high.

China is not limiting itself to statements and is currently taking steps to equip its fleet

²² China's Arctic Policy // The State Council 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: 17.03.2024).

²³ 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: 05.04.2024).

with nuclear icebreakers. In 2018, the People's Liberation Army Academy of Military Sciences announced China's plans to build ships with a nuclear power plant in order to conduct polar research.²⁴ In the same year, the Chinese National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) announced a tender for the construction of a multipurpose nuclear icebreaker in China according to a project developed by the Chinese company Maritime Nuclear Power Development.²⁵ The successful implementation of this project would result in China becoming the second country, after Russia, to possess nuclear icebreakers.

The reactor the new icebreaker will be equipped with belongs to the *ACP-100 Linglong-1* pressurized water reactor, is compact and is used in the mini-nuclear power plant project currently being implemented on Hainan.²⁶ Most experts believe that this icebreaker is specially designed for the harsher conditions of the Arctic and is a confirmation of the aspiration and long-term ambitions of China in this region. The construction of its own nuclear icebreaker fleet will provide the PRC with a special status as a completely autonomous player in the Arctic, which will be able to pave the way through Arctic routes independently, without Russian ice-breaking assistance. At the same time, Beijing will be able to use both the high-latitude routes bypassing the NSR and the Transarctic route through the geographic North Pole, referred to

²⁴ China Will Use Nuclear-Powered Ships to Conduct Polar Research // TASS. February 21, 2013. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/549098?ysclid=lvilnqug5703680899> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁵ Vladimirskaya K. China to Build Nuclear Icebreakers to Operate in High Arctic Latitudes // Rossiyskaya gazeta. August 29, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <https://rg.ru/2018/08/29/kitaj-postroit-atomnye-ledokoly-dlia-raboty-v-arkticheskikh-shirotah.html?ysclid=lux7p4ehyz644554377> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁶ CNNC Announced the Start of Linglong One Project // Atomnaya Energiya 2.0. July 22, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.atomic-energy.ru/news/2019/07/22/96343?ysclid=lvimc5wru1396118008> (accessed: 11.04.2024).

as the Central Passage in the *China's Arctic Policy*. China may well consider the latter to be the main route in the future, with the expectation that the temperature in the Arctic will rise by 3–5 degrees Celsius by 2050, according to recent United Nations (UN) projections, leading to ice melting.²⁷ To prove that such a scenario is being considered seriously, in 2012 the icebreaker *Xue Long*, on its way back from the fifth Arctic expedition, passed near the North Pole along a route that was characterized by Chinese researchers as a “future shipping route through the Central Arctic.”²⁸ In 2023, this was successfully repeated by the icebreaker *Xue Long 2*.²⁹

However, there is no reason to exclude another, even more unfavorable scenario for Russia, in which China may at some point consider it possible to claim a special status for its icebreakers in the waters of the NSR, up to the point of refusing to recognize Russian sovereignty over this transport artery. Obviously, the higher the involvement of the Chinese capital in the development of the infrastructure of the NSR is, the more likely Beijing's claims to participate in the decision-making process on this route may arise in the future. The involvement of co-investors from the Global South could serve to mitigate the potential risks associated with such a development.

For Russia, the development of the NSR is primarily a geopolitical task aimed at reducing

the state's transport and logistics vulnerability, including sanction pressure. In this regard, the project to expand the use of this route — both for domestic and international transportation — fully meets the interests of the country, is strategically important and requires a high degree of caution in order to exclude excessive strengthening of the influence of external actors in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation.

The Key to the Arctic Treasure Trove — Investments as an Influencing Factor

It is well known that the Arctic is rich in natural minerals, the prospect of extraction of which is stimulating the growing attention of a wide range of countries to this region. Over the past 10 years, China has invested more than 90 billion USD in Arctic projects, most of which are in the extraction of energy and mineral resources.³⁰ For various reasons, however, not all of them have become successful. Given the small size of the economies and territories of the Northern European Arctic states, China's investments have significantly affected their economic performance and raised concerns among local elites about the excessive growth of Chinese influence. Thus, China's direct accumulated investments in the extractive sector of the Greenland economy — mainly in projects for the development and extraction of uranium and iron ore — amounted to 1.7 billion USD as of 2017, equivalent to 12% of the GDP of this autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark.³¹ In Iceland, investments by Chinese companies in various projects also amounted to a tangible 6% of the country's GDP.³²

The need to attract migrant workers is a deterrent to Chinese investment in Arctic projects in these countries. This problem clearly

²⁷ UN: Millions of People Are at Risk of Premature Death Due to Climate Change // *Argumenty i Fakty*. March 16, 2019. (In Russian). URL: https://aif.ru/society/nature/oon_millionam_lyudey_grozit_prezhdevremennaya_smert_iz-za_izmeneniy_klimata (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁸ Sidorov I. China's Policy in the Arctic and Its Impact on the Region // *Voенно-Politicheskaya Analitika*. July 10, 2018. (In Russian) URL: <https://vpoanalytics.com/geopolitika-i-bezopasnost/politika-kitaya-v-arktike-i-ee-vliyanie-na-region/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁹ The Chinese Arctic Expedition Reached the North Pole on the Icebreaker “Xue Long-2” for the First Time // CGTN. September 13, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://russian.cgtn.com/news/2023-09-13/1701879732341190658/index.html> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

³⁰ China Regional Snapshot: Arctic // United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs. October 25, 2022. URL: <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/china-regional-snapshot-arctic/> (accessed: 11.04.2024).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

manifested in Greenland's Isua iron ore and Maniitsoq aluminum mines. To carry out work on these projects alone in 2013, Chinese companies would need to attract over 4.7 thousand specialists from China, which is equivalent to 9% of the entire population of the autonomy.³³ The prospect of creating a demographic imbalance on the island, which has a population of 56.5 thousand people, has caused serious concern for the Danish government and has become an additional factor limiting investment cooperation with China in the Danish Arctic.

Investing in Arctic projects carries significant risks for China, forcing Beijing to be more cautious. A number of Chinese projects could not be implemented due to their technological complexity, such as the Dreki project for gas exploration and production on the Icelandic continental shelf, in which the share of the Chinese oil company China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) was 60%.³⁴ China has suspended its participation in the development of the Kvanefjeld uranium deposits in Greenland.³⁵ Of the 20 major investment projects in the Arctic that Chinese companies have been allowed to participate in since 2008, about 12 are currently being implemented, 8 of them in Russia.³⁶

³³ Notat om den grønlandske storskalalov og Grønlands ILO-forpligtelser i relation hertil // Folketinget. Beskæftigelsesudvalget 2012–2013. Marts 2013. URL: <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20121/almdel/beu/bilag/129/1224119.pdf> (accessed: 13.03.2024).

³⁴ Not Found. CNOOC и Petoro Withdrew from the Offshore Hydrocarbon Reserves Development Project in Iceland // Neftegaz.RU. January 23, 2018. (In Russian) URL: <https://neftegaz.ru/news/Geological-exploration/203988-ne-nashli-cnooc-i-petoro-vyshli-iz-proekta-po-osvoeniyu-uglevodorodnykh-zapasov-na-shelfe-islandii/> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³⁵ Yang J. Chinese Investment in Greenland: Origins, Progress and Actors // DIIS Report. November 17, 2021. P. 24–27. URL: https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/4834625/Chinese_investments_in_Greenland_DIIS_Report_2021_05.pdf (accessed: 17.03.2024).

³⁶ Holz H., Taffer A., Miller A., DeThomas B. Exploring the Relationship Between China's Investment in the Arctic and Its National Strategy // Center for Naval

Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) and Arctic LNG are flagship projects with the participation of China for the extraction of natural gas and its liquefaction in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation, implemented by *Novatek* on the Yamal and Gyda Peninsulas within the framework of an international consortium. Yamal LNG was launched in three stages in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Chinese investors own 29.9% of shares in it, of which 20% belongs to the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and 9.9% to the Silk Road Fund.³⁷ Within the framework of *Arctic LNG-2*, a large-capacity liquefied natural gas production plant with a total capacity of 19.8 million tons is being built on the Gydan Peninsula. The launch of three production lines of which was originally planned for 2023, 2024 and 2025. In the 21.3 billion USD project, 60% of the shares belong to *Novatek*, 10% each to French *TotalEnergies*, Chinese CNPC and CNOOC, as well as a consortium of Japanese *Mitsui* and *JOGMEC*.³⁸ Currently, *Arctic LNG-2* is experiencing difficulties related to unprecedented sanctions pressure from the US Treasury Department, which included on September 14 and November 2, 2023, a number of companies providing construction and engineering services for this project, as well as elements of *Novatek's* logistics scheme for transshipment of liquefied natural gas through floating storage facilities.³⁹ Despite the severe

Analyses. January 2022. P. 30–31. URL: <https://www.cna.org/reports/2022/01/exploring-the-relationship-between-chinas-arctic-investment-and-its-national-strategy.pdf> (accessed: 11.03.2024).

³⁷ Yamal LNG Project // Neftegaz.RU. December 12, 2017. (In Russian) URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20191023101237/https://neftegaz.ru/tech-library/pererabotka-nefti-i-gaza/142429-yamal-spg-proekt/> (accessed: 06.04.2024).

³⁸ “Arctic LNG-2”: History and Significance of the Project // Kommersant. November 9, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6323377?ysclid=lvjipi7rrq11091083> (accessed: 10.04.2024).

³⁹ Shipbuilding Enterprise Zvezda, RusChemAlliance, Rusgeology, Rosatom Structures. The United States Has Imposed an Extensive Package of Anti-Russian

sanction pressure, the company managed to complete the construction of one technological line of the project, the other two are under construction. According to a number of experts, the continuation of construction work was made possible thanks to Beijing's help in filling the "technological and logistical vacuum from the departure of Western companies."⁴⁰ In particular, it is not clear whether a decision will be made to reduce the size of the project or how the company will continue to sell the gas produced on foreign markets.

Undoubtedly, facing an unprecedented attack by the United States and its allies in the energy sector, Russia is meeting a serious challenge to its Arctic policy, and the partnership with China is becoming a significant factor in the development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, the current situation also reveals the weaknesses of Russia's long time used approach to implementing large, strategically significant Arctic projects, which was based on the import of high-tech equipment. So, in the report *Russia's Arctic Policy: International Aspects*, presented in 2021 by a team of scientists from the Higher School of Economics, led by S.A. Karaganov noted that "70% of the equipment for the flagship Arctic Yamal LNG project is produced in China, and the gas itself is transported on ships built in the Republic of Korea and China. In this scheme," the document notes, "Russia is needed primarily for resources."⁴¹

Sanctions // Neftgaz.RU. February 23, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://neftgaz.ru/news/gosreg/820313-ssk-zvezdarskhimalyans-rosgeologiya-struktury-rosatoma-sshavveli-obshirnyy-paket-antirossiyskikh/> (accessed: 15.04.2024).

⁴⁰ Russia Foils Western Sanctions on Natural Gas Project as Shipments Near // Financial Times. February 21, 2024. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/665e913d-ae92-4c29-8bbb-598e121ffd50> (accessed: 29.02.2024).

⁴¹ Karaganov S. A., Boklan D. S., Kashin V. B., Likhacheva A. B., Makarov I. A., et al. Arctic Policy of Russia: International Aspects : Report to the XXII April International Scientific Conference on the Problems of Economic and Social Development // National Research

Such an approach to the development of the Arctic inevitably creates the vulnerability of the Russian economy open to external factors, increases its technological shortcomings and dependence on foreign equipment, whether Western or Asian. The geopolitical confrontation with the West actualizes the task of localization of production, development of domestic industry and technology, especially in connection with the plans for the development of the Northern Sea Route, the largest national transport and logistics project in the Arctic.

Conclusion

Having achieved a breakthrough in its economic development at the beginning of the 21st century, China is implementing an ambitious strategy aimed at global leadership and the transformation of the current international system, taking into account new geopolitical realities and its interests. The Arctic occupies a significant place in this strategy as a region with substantial resource and transport and logistics potential. While declaring its interest in high latitude projects, at the official level, the PRC is extremely cautious, relying on the tools of "soft power," primarily "scientific diplomacy," thereby seeking to neutralize the concerns of the Arctic states regarding its plans to participate in the management and future development of the Arctic. At the same time, the analysis of the fundamental documents of the People's Republic of China on Arctic issues reveals fundamental differences in the interests of China and other Arctic states in relation to the future international legal status of this region. This may indicate the presence of a

University Higher School of Economics. 2021. P. 34. (In Russian). URL: https://www.hse.ru/data/2024/03/01/2082494569/%D0%90%D1%80%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F_%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4.pdf (accessed: 10.04.2024).

potential conflict that can reveal itself in the distant future, when Beijing considers that sufficiently favorable conditions have been created for its more active and, possibly, offensive role in shaping the Arctic management system.

Russia is currently going through difficult times. Against the background of the confrontation with the West and the unprecedented sanctions pressure exerted by it, the partnership with China is undoubtedly very

valuable for the Russian Federation to solve both foreign policy tasks and achieve the goals of the development of the Arctic zone of the country. At the same time, it seems important to conscientiously approach the organization of Russian-Chinese cooperation, forestalling Beijing from increasing its influence on the processes associated with decision-making and determining the vector of further development of Russian Arctic policy.

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