



Selective Revisionism at the Poles: Assessing China's Dual Identity in Arctic Governance

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About the Author

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¹ This paper was written during the period when the scholar was a Research Intern at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

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Abstract

China's growing engagement in the Arctic has sparked debate over whether it is performing as a status quoist actor which is operating within the established institutions and legal norms or as a revisionist power actively seeking to reshape Arctic governance to serve its national interest. This paper explores China's diplomacy, investments, and strategic behaviour up to 2025 in the Arctic to assess the extent to which China upholds or challenges the Arctic regional status quo. Drawing on international relations theory, a review of literature, policy documents and data on Chinese Arctic activities the paper finds a nuanced picture. On one hand, China has largely worked within the existing framework — China has obtained the observer status of the Arctic Council accepting the Arctic states' rules, participates in treaties like the Central Arctic fisheries moratorium, and emphasises the respect for sovereignty and international law. On the other hand, Chinese actions and discourses suggest revisionist leanings — China declares itself a "Near-Arctic State", advocates the affairs of the Arctic "extends to all mankind," and pursues initiatives like the Polar Silk Road to broaden its influence. Quantitative indicators, from shipping volumes on Arctic routes to numbers of projects and ice-breakers funded by China, illustrate Beijing's expanding Arctic footprint. The findings indicate that China is neither a pure status quoist power nor an outright revisionist actor in the Arctic. Rather China is a selective challenger. Beijing avoided direct confrontations and abided by the core legal regimes while simultaneously seeking to subtly reform institutions and norms to secure a greater voice in the Arctic governance. This balanced strategy has significant implications for global governance beyond the Arctic, suggesting that what established, norm-shaping status-quo powers perceive as 'disruptive revisionism' on China's part may be mitigated by accommodating rising powers within regional regimes. This paper contributes to understanding how China's Arctic behaviour aligns with theoretical expectations and offers insights into managing great-power interest in the rapidly changing Arctic geo-political landscape.

Keywords: Arctic governance, great power competition, China's Arctic strategy, Polar Silk Road, selective challenger

Introduction

The loss of ice in the Arctic's frozen expanse has translated into geo-political gains for many global powers. With the warming up of the frozen Arctic ice because of climate change, the Arctic is becoming a strategic space as the scientists expect an ice-free Arctic summer by 2040. As the ice cover reduces, new routes for transportation and access to resources would open up. The Arctic's growing strategic importance has drawn global attention including from states far from the polar circle. Among these states, the People's Republic of China has emerged as a prominent player in the Arctic affairs. China's active involvement in the Arctic economics and governance and its self-description as a "Near-Arctic State" have prompted a debate: Is China acting as a status quoist player that upholds and works within the existing Arctic legal regimes and institutions? Or is China acting as a revisionist actor intent on reshaping the Arctic governance structure to accommodate its own interests? This question is not merely academic. It carries implications for global governance, the future of the Arctic and balance of power in a region that is opening to navigation and resource extraction.

This paper addresses the question: "To what extent is China a status quoist player as opposed to a revisionist actor in the Arctic institutions and legal regimes, and what evidence supports either characterisation?". The inquiry into this question is situated in the international relations theory of status-quo versus revisionist powers and uses the Arctic as a case study of China's behaviour in a regional governance complex. The Arctic's institutional landscape which includes the Arctic Council, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Polar Code, and various treaties provides a testing ground for China's willingness to accept established rules or push for new rules.

China gained Arctic Council observer status in 2013. Since then, the Chinese Arctic activities have expanded from scientific research expeditions to investments in energy and infrastructure, and involvement in multilateral agreements. Meanwhile, the Chinese officials continue to articulate the dual narratives of emphasising both respect for Arctic-state sovereignty and a view of the Arctic as global commons beyond the exclusive control of any states or organisations.

Understanding China's Arctic strategy is crucial for several reasons:

1. The Arctic has been traditionally governed by the eight Arctic countries (the "Arctic 8"). A strong principle of the Arctic 8 is that the non-Arctic states should respect the sovereign rights of these countries. If China adheres to this principle of respecting the status quo, it would affirm the strength and inclusiveness of existing governance regimes. If instead China seeks to revise the rules by advocating new governance frameworks or ignoring the established norms, this could signal the emerging challenges in the regional order of the Arctic and even foreshadow how China might approach the other global commons.
2. China's behaviour in the Arctic can shed light on China's broader policy and course of actions as a rising power. While the extent of the rise of China as a global power is a subject beyond the scope of this paper, there is no opposition to the incremental rise of China over the past few decades as a major global player. Scholars have long debated whether the rise of China will support or upset the international order. The Arctic as a relatively new arena for the global powers' interaction provides us a contemporary case study of China's ambitions in practice.
3. China's Arctic engagement intersects with geopolitical, legal, and environmental dimensions of global governance. It involves major-power relations notably with Russia and the United States. China's involvement also raises questions about the sufficiency of current legal regimes like the UNCLOS in polar waters, Arctic Council rules, etc., and has consequences for environmental stewardship in a climate-sensitive region. Thus, assessing China's role is crucial for policymakers in Arctic states and beyond who seek to manage cooperation or competition in the High North.

By providing a comprehensive examination of China's Arctic involvement, this study aims to contribute both to the practical discussions of the Arctic policy and the theoretical debates in international relations. The question of status-quo versus revisionist behaviour is not black-and-white; it requires careful analysis of *how* China is participating in the Arctic and *to what end*. Duality is at the heart of understanding China's role in the 21st century as its Arctic policies embody elements of both accommodation and ambition. Accordingly, the paper also advances a broader conceptual frame that links Chinese historical views of order and

contemporary global-South leadership claims to Beijing's cautious, incremental contestation of Arctic regimes.

Framing China's Arctic Engagement: Scholarly Perspectives

The Arctic has become a critical theatre for understanding how rising powers engage with international regimes they did not create. International relations as a discipline has a long-standing conceptual binary of dividing states — status quo versus revisionist powers. This binary, albeit insufficient, provides us a crucial lens to understand China's Arctic conduct. Traditionally, status-quo states are those that support the existing orders, respecting its rules, institutions and distribution of benefits. But revisionist powers would seek to reshape these in its own favour. A “classical power-transition theory” would argue that a rising power, like China, will lean towards revisionism as they grow stronger and push for greater influence to assert themselves more (Organski 1958). Yet, as Schweller and others have argued, this binary is more nuanced and will be discussed in the following chapters (Schweller 2015). Moreover, revisionist states can pursue their goals through peaceful institutional reforms. Status-quo actors may use force to defend a system which they favour. In this case, the Arctic theatre provides us with a compelling test case of China's approach to governance in an environmentally sensitive, strategically important and institutionally fragmented region now more than ever before.

China's growing involvement in the Arctic from the mid-2000s onward in terms of science research activity, infrastructure development, and multilateral diplomatic efforts has elicited intense scholarly debate. On one side are the scholars who regard China as a status quo actor. Alastair Iain Johnston refuted early assumptions that painted China as a revisionist state, emphasising its integration into global institutions (Johnston 2003). In the Arctic arena, this interpretation is substantiated by China's compliance with international law, including UNCLOS and the Polar Code, and its acceptance of the observer limitations established by the Arctic Council since 2013. China's embrace of environmental governance, signing of the 2018 Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, and continued rhetorical affirmation of the well-being of all humanity suggest that it is playing within established parameters. An open-access 2024 study by Wang and Ma hypothesises that China has sent “costly signals” of its benign intentions — investing in climate science and renewable energy resources, not hydrocarbons, to facilitate cooperation and supplant distrust (Wang and Ma 2024).

Date	Milestone in CAO Fisheries Agreement	China's Role and Actions	Source
July 16, 2015	Oslo Declaration – Arctic Five agree to invite others for fisheries talks	China (with EU, JP, KR, IS) invited to negotiations.	Oslo Declaration 2015 initiated broader talks.
Dec 2015 – Apr 2017	Series of negotiation meetings (Washington, Nunavut, Tromsø, Tórshavn, Reykjavik)	China attends all rounds as equal stakeholder (first time in Arctic treaty talks). Focused on scientific research provisions.	Negotiation record: China present at DC (Dec 2015, Apr 2016) and all subsequent meetings.
Nov 30, 2017	Final negotiation in Washington – Agreement concluded on key terms	China supports final compromise (16-year moratorium). Signs onto science cooperation clause.	US-led talks; China agreed to draft text in principle.
Oct 3, 2018	Agreement signed in Ilulissat, Greenland	China signs alongside 9 other parties.	Agreement named “CAOFA”; China a signatory.
2019–2020	National approvals/ratifications by parties	China's approval delayed – internal review ongoing.	Most others ratified by 2020; China held off (domestic procedure).
May 9, 2021	China approves/ratifies the Agreement (last of 10)	State Council approved CAOFA; instrument deposited in Ottawa.	China was final signatory to ratify, enabling entry into force.
June 25, 2021	Agreement entered into force (30 days after China's ratification)	China participates in Joint Fisheries Science Program under Agreement.	CAOFA in force: 16-year ban + joint research begins.

Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement – Timeline and China's Role

Yet, progressively larger amounts of scholarly literature argue that such a cooperative approach hides more profound revisionist agendas. Brady identified a “dual narrative” in China's Arctic policy — cooperative in appearance but inwardly strategic — highlighting the need for long-term resource security and geopolitical influence (Brady 2015). Chinese discourse has also progressively turned into criticism of Arctic governance mechanisms as exclusionary and not sufficiently oriented toward non-Arctic stakeholders. Such presentation

de facto promotes a future role for China beyond passive participation, elevating it to the status of an architect of Arctic governance. Interestingly, Chinese government calls for the “Polar Silk Road” since 2018, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, reflect a commitment to incorporating the Arctic into China's overall global economic strategy, including a drive for the reinterpretation of shipping and access to the region-related norms — especially as relating to the Northern Sea Route.

A third interpretive strand asserts that China's position in the Arctic resists easy classification, with a dialectical or mixed approach. Authors like Su and Lanteigne argue that China has “talks with two voices” — one to Arctic allies, and another against domestic strategic audiences (Lanteigne 2020). Medcalf (2024) describes China's behaviour as reformist, insofar as China complies with core legal principles (sovereignty, UNCLOS), but at the same time tries to change practice over time (Medcalf 2024). Alexeeva and Lasserre, Velikaya and Konyshchev, and the 2024 “Polar Contradictions” report in Geopolitics all support this argument, arguing that China's policy is to preserve fundamental elements of the status quo while promoting more expansive decision-making frameworks (Alexeeva & Lasserre 2015; Konyshchev 2023; Lamazhapov 2024). The 2018 White Paper on China's Arctic Policy summarises this ambivalence: it pledges to protect Arctic sovereignty and the environment, but asserts that Arctic challenges “transcend their regional nature” and labels China as a “Near-Arctic State” — a self-defined category not recognised by Arctic Council regulation but used to justify China’s increasing engagement.

Year	Speaker/ Document	Representative Rhetoric (Keyword Phrases)	Source
2010	Rear Adm. Yin Zhuo (PLA Navy)	“The Arctic belongs to all the people around the world... no nation has sovereignty over it.” (Arctic as common heritage)	Yin’s remarks (March 2010) widely quoted in media.
2013	Chinese MFA Officials (on Observer status)	Emphasised that Arctic affairs concern “the interests of all countries...all humanity.” (Implied global commons view)	(Context: China granted Arctic Council observer in 2013, pledged to work for “all mankind’s benefit.”)
2018	China’s Arctic Policy White Paper	“...to safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic...”; advocates a “shared future for mankind”	State Council Information Office, Jan 2018.

		in the Arctic.	
2021	Chinese Delegate at Arctic forums	Framed Arctic as “new strategic frontier” but underlined need to protect “global public interests”. Used terms like “Polar Silk Road for all to share.”	(Reported in international forums; aligns with China’s 14th Five-Year Plan references to Arctic cooperation for humankind.)
2024	Pentagon on China’s stance (quote)	“The PRC seeks to promote the Arctic as a ‘global commons’... claims [it’s] a ‘shared future for mankind’ due to Arctic’s global significance.”	DoD Arctic Strategy 2024 summary of China’s position.

Chinese Arctic Policy Rhetoric – Keywords Over Time

China's actions — like the opening of the Yellow River research station in Svalbard (2004), deepening bilateral collaboration with Russia and Nordic nations, and building its polar-capable ship fleet illustrate this pragmatic dualism. So too does its growing proportion of shipping through the NSR and investments in Russia's Arctic oil and gas ventures. They strengthen China's presence and create leverage which in the long run can shape norms or standards, even though it lacks formal decision-making authority.

In summary, academic analysis classifies China not as a pure defender of the status quo or a full revisionist, but as a selective revisionist actor. It supports existing governance when it defends China's rights and legitimacy, but supports changes in areas where existing norms constrain its ambitions. Therefore, the Arctic is a prime example of China's overall approach to global governance: cautious, flexible, and strategically engaged, seeking to gradually and peacefully transform the existing order rather than provoke overt disruption. The following section applies this analytical framework to assess China's particular behaviour across legal, environmental, economic, and strategic dimensions in the Arctic, using both qualitative and empirical evidence to ascertain whether it is appearing largely as a systemic defender or a subtle challenger of the Arctic status quo.

Taken together, these strands invite a broader ordering lens; one that situates China’s Arctic behaviour within its historical conceptions of hierarchy and global-South leadership, and that

treats Beijing's stance as a form of cautious contestation rather than a simple status quo/revisionist binary

Situating China's Arctic Approach: Tradition, Leadership and Strategic Caution

This background section adds another analytical layer to the discussion of China's Arctic behaviour. The status quo versus revisionist framing remains a useful point of departure, yet some additional lenses help to situate Beijing's choices in a wider intellectual and strategic context. The aim here is to complement them with a reading that foregrounds historical concepts of order, contemporary claims to Global South leadership, and a pattern of cautious contestation that seeks room for manoeuvre without precipitating rupture.

A first lens draws on elements of China's political thought. Classical ideas associated with *tianxia* (天下) placed emphasis on legitimate authority and relational hierarchy rather than on a society of formally equal sovereigns. In some accounts, order flows from a morally authoritative centre, and harmony is sustained through propriety and reciprocity. Modern China formally endorses sovereign equality and operates within a Westphalian legal order. Even so, scholars often note that certain motifs of harmony, tribute and relational hierarchy appear in contemporary rhetoric and practice (Callahan 2008). The present argument does not claim a direct line from imperial doctrine to policy, and any causal claims must be advanced cautiously. It does, however, suggest that Chinese officials may be more comfortable with authority that is performed through recognition and shared benefit than with overt balancing. This can help explain the careful curation of legitimacy in Arctic fora, the preference for scientific contribution, and the search for consensus before assertion.

A second lens concerns identity and leadership. Beijing frequently presents itself as a voice for the Global South (Wang 2024). Official statements invoke shared anti-colonial histories, win-win development and inclusive growth. In that narrative, China's interests align with those of developing states that seek greater participation in rule-making. Transposed to the Arctic, this idiom manifests in the language of common interests, global climate interdependence and the claim that distant societies are nonetheless stakeholders in polar governance (Liu 2022). Read charitably, this positions China as an advocate for wider inclusion within existing legal frameworks. Read more critically, it can also serve to legitimise a larger role for Chinese firms and agencies in emerging Arctic value chains. The

evidence is mixed and varies by case, which is why a degree of analytical hesitancy is warranted.

A third lens is strategic method. Across documents and practice, China appears to pursue what might be termed cautious contestation. The 2018 Arctic White Paper emphasises scientific research, environmental protection and respect for sovereignty (China's Arctic Policy 2018). Chinese participation in the Central Arctic Ocean fisheries arrangements and in Arctic Council working groups projects a cooperative profile (China's Arctic Policy 2018). At the same time, capabilities that create future options are quietly assembled. These include a modest but growing ice-capable fleet, polar observation assets, deeper commercial links in Russian Arctic energy, and policy entrepreneurship around the Polar Silk Road. None of these steps amount to overt revisionism. They are better read as incremental moves that expand autonomy and bargaining power while avoiding clear red lines that would mobilise counter-coalitions.

These strands converge on a central question that cannot be answered in the abstract. Is China seeking to internationalise Arctic governance in the name of broader participation, or does it primarily pursue selective advantages under an inclusive banner? Official language points to the former. Beijing regularly affirms UNCLOS, the IMO Polar Code and Arctic-state sovereignty, while arguing that non-Arctic interests are implicated through climate, shipping and science. Practice, however, shows a more variegated picture. Where access and voice are available through existing institutions, China tends to reinforce them. Where procedural constraints bind too tightly, Beijing looks for functional workarounds such as bilateral platforms, Track-II networks or project-based cooperation (Fravel et al. 2021). In this sense, internationalisation and selectivity are not mutually exclusive. They can be sequential or parallel strategies, contingent on the receptivity of incumbents and on the distribution of material opportunities.

The balance of power context matters as well. Since 2022, the Arctic policy space has been shaped by sanctions on Russia, the partial pause and subsequent re-scoping of the Arctic Council's activities, and the re-routing of energy trade. These shifts have created pockets of openness and closure. They have increased the relative weight of Russian bilateral channels, where Chinese actors can find entry through energy and logistics, while narrowing some multilateral avenues in Western-led settings. It is plausible that such conditions encourage a

more geo-economic posture, although current evidence suggests that Beijing remains attentive to the reputational costs of overt politicisation.

Taken together, these lenses offer a background explanation for the pattern that appears across the empirical sections of the paper. China's Arctic engagement is not easily reduced to a single category. It blends deference to core legal principles with efforts to widen participation, it pairs developmental rhetoric with strategic positioning, and it couples cooperation with option-building. The result is a form of adaptive behaviour that relies on institutional compliance for access while probing for areas where practice can be nudged in more accommodating directions. Whether this will converge on a more inclusive order or on a tighter web of bilateral dependencies remains an open question.

For the purpose of this study, the value of this additional layer is practical. It encourages us to read institutional, legal and economic episodes with an eye to the interplay between legitimacy seeking and capability building. It also disciplines strong claims. Where data show cooperation, we should ask whether manoeuvrability is being quietly expanded. Where we see pushback, we should ask whether reputational costs are recalibrating behaviour rather than forcing abandonment of long-term aims. In short, the lenses of tradition, identity and cautious contestation help interpret how Beijing navigates Arctic governance in ways that are consistent with the evidence presented in the remainder of the article.

Analysis

The empirical patterns below should therefore be read through this reframed lens, asking where China's cautious contestation in the form of expanding manoeuvrability without overtly rupturing the order becomes visible across institutions, law, and geo-economics.

China's Engagement with Arctic Institutions: Working Within or Around the System?

One of the clearest ways of judging the status quoist or revisionist tendencies of a state is to look at how they engage with the existing institutions. In the Arctic there are various multilateral forums and observer networks with the Arctic Council being the premier institution. Here we assess China's approach to these bodies and any moves to create or favour alternative arrangements.

China pursued formal engagement in the Arctic Council as its influence in the region grew. In 2013, after years of diplomatic engagement, China was granted observer status into the Arctic Council, along with a modest group of other Asian countries. This is usually given as an example of China's desire to become a part of the existing Arctic governance framework. To gain observer status, China had to sign on to the Council's founding document (the Ottawa Declaration) and acknowledge Arctic states' sovereignty and the law of the sea as governing the affairs in the Arctic Ocean. Indeed Russia, which was initially wary of Chinese participation, only retreated from opposition to China's application for observer status after being reassured that China accepted these principles (Greenwood and Luo 2022). This suggests that at least in public, China positioned itself as a status-quo actor willing to "play by the rules" set by the Arctic states. Since 2013, China has been an active participant in Arctic Council working group sessions, scientific programs, and observer activities (Arctic Council 2023). It often points to its contributions to climate science and indigenous welfare projects under Council auspices as proof that it is a constructive partner (Devyatkin 2023). Notably, China's scientific engagement was a key reason Arctic states supported its admission as an observer — implying that Beijing framed its role as a benign contributor to shared knowledge, consistent with the Council's collaborative ethos.

But as an observer, China has no voting rights or decision-making authority in the Council. In the long run, there are indications that China has become uneasy with this secondary status. Chinese officials and scholars have expressed frustrations that observers are supposed to "stay silent" in meetings and can be left out of some discussions (Guo 2012). As Brookings analysis suggests, "China supports existing Arctic governance mechanisms publicly but complains about them privately". Official Chinese writings diplomatically in a gentle tone observe that the region's significance "transcends its original inter-Arctic States" — a coded way of implying that non-Arctic interests like China should have a voice (Doshi et al. 2021: 02). Meanwhile, some Chinese scholars once worried that the Arctic 8 would tie the Arctic Council into a more binding organisation or even establish an exclusive 'Arctic alliance' that would shut China out. In response, China has exercised what scholars call "identity diplomacy" (Doshi et al. 2021) — claiming identities like "Near-Arctic State" to justify its involvement. In Council meetings, China has typically played the observer role, but between them it has floated suggestions like expanding the Council or establishing more inclusive frameworks — though these are descriptive rather than specific.

Finding itself somewhat constrained within the formal framework of the Arctic Council, China has actively turned to informal and alternative platforms, particularly Track-II and regional forums, to assert its presence and shape Arctic discourse. Track-II forums are informal, non-governmental dialogues between experts, academics, and former officials to discuss and influence international issues and policy.

It has become a prominent participant in events such as the Arctic Circle Assembly (large annual conference in Iceland) and academic workshops, often sending high-profile delegations to share its views and build international networks. Additionally, China has initiated its own Arctic forums, notably the *China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposium* and the *China-Nordic Arctic Research Center* (established in 2013 in Shanghai), fostering research and policy collaboration with Arctic nations like Iceland, Norway, and Finland. In recent years, it has also developed a bilateral *China-Russia Arctic Forum*, indicating a deeper strategic partnership.

These Chinese efforts reflect a calculated parallel strategy: rather than directly challenging the Arctic Council — an act that might appear aggressive and revisionist — China supplements the existing governance structure through more favourable parallel mechanisms. This approach reveals a *mild revisionist trait*, subtly trying to supplement the existing institutional order with mechanisms favourable to China's ambitions. Concurrently, China has propagated broader narratives such as the "Polar Silk Road" and a "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" in the Arctic — conceptual frameworks aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative that, while not institutional, aim to shape international norms and portray China as a central actor in Arctic economic development (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018).

A telling episode for China's institutional stance occurred after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. China's reaction to the 2022 Arctic Council crisis precipitated by the following geopolitical rift and subsequent suspension of Council proceedings by the seven Western members (A7) under Russian leadership disclosed its multilateral approach to institutions under strain. Between Russia, its strategic ally, and the Western coalition, China adopted a revisionist-biased line in defence of inclusivity by suspending its activities and Beijing saw "no point" in an Arctic Council without Russia that would be a hollow institution (Dagaev 2025). Although such a strategy may be viewed as defending the status quo by

espousing the participation of all the Council's founding members, it actually positioned China in opposition to the de facto Western-run operation of the Council. This was interpreted by observers as a warning that China would not legitimise a *West plus observers minus Russia* paradigm. As limited Council operations resumed in Russia's absence in early 2023, China's initiatives were reported to be drawing less attention as a consequence of Western mistrust (Cunningham 2024). While Russia toyed with the concept of a “parallel Arctic forum” involving non-Western states, including China, although China made no public support for the same, during this time, the incident conjured the possibility of institutional restructuring in Arctic governance on a geopolitical basis with China playing a leadership role in the new configuration (Sukhankin and Lackenbauer n.d.). While Beijing continues in principle to be an observer and welcomed Norway's 2023 chairmanship with cautious optimism, it also asserted its preference for balanced relations with all the Arctic states. This suggests China's choice for inclusive multilateralism — in accordance with the status quo — but leaves the door ajar for shifting direction to a more revisionist track should new institutions render it a greater voice.

In summary, China's engagement with the Arctic institutions shows a pattern of conditional status-quo behaviour. China has actively worked within the framework of the Arctic Council and other related bodies as long as these do not obstruct the core Chinese interests. When the Arctic Council was jeopardised (post-2022) in a way that could marginalise certain states, China did not passively accept a truncated status quo; it took a stance that can be seen as protecting its vision of a fair order (everyone at the table) or, conversely, as undercutting the US-led partial order. Additionally China hedges against being sidelined in the affairs of the Arctic through alternative forums and bilateral diplomacy. China, therefore, has taken a pragmatic strategy: operate within the system when advantageous, work around it when necessary. This approach in international relations aligns with how a rising power might seek to both integrate and subtly reshape the institutional framework within which it operates.

Adherence to Legal Regimes: Respecting or Redefining the Rules?

Another crucial aspect of China's Arctic conduct is its approach to international legal regimes governing the Arctic. The United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the central pillar which covers maritime rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic Ocean. There are sector specific agreements as well. The Polar Code is for shipping while the Svalbard Treaty

recognises Norway's sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago. A status quo state would be expected to respect these laws and norms, whereas a revisionist state might challenge or reinterpret them.

China often proclaims its adherence to UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) as an underlying framework for Arctic governance, asserting in its White Paper that both the UN Charter and UNCLOS are the "core governance mechanisms of the Arctic" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018). Such a stance puts China on the side of the existing international legal order, a clear status-quo stance, while also acquiring rights like freedom of navigation and scientific research in Arctic high seas and continental shelf areas. Crucially, this stance is directly opposite to any Arctic exceptionalism or sole Arctic state governance, maintaining the universality of legal concepts. China's interpretation reconciled with the Ilulissat Declaration (2008), where the Arctic 5 reaffirmed UNCLOS as the basis of Arctic Ocean law and rejected the need for a new treaty; China has not objected to this declaration, instead reserving that UNCLOS already safeguards its rights without the need for further regimes that could exclude non-Arctic states (Arctic Ocean Conference 2008).

China's adherence to UNCLOS is, however, not without doubt its behavior in other maritime domains, namely the South China Sea, has raised questions. China ignored a 2016 UNCLOS tribunal decision there, causing some Arctic commentators to wonder if China's professed legalism would hold up if its Arctic interests were ever directly confronted (Kuo 2024). But in the Arctic, China has until now respected international norms: for instance, its research icebreaker Xuelong has passed along the Northern Sea Route in accordance with both Russian regulations and UNCLOS (Sun 2018). Chinese official statements frequently reiterate freedom of navigation in the Arctic Ocean and the idea that the central Arctic Ocean (beyond exclusive economic zones) is high seas for the benefit of all. This again is consistent with the status quo legal stance and indeed implicitly pushes back against any would-be revisionism by Arctic states to control those high seas.



Chinese research vessel *Xuě Lóng* sets sail for 31st Antarctic voyage

A hallmark of revisionist state behaviour would be if China tried to make territorial claims or assert special rights in the Arctic. China has not done so. It has no legal basis for such claims and it has respected that. When China claimed itself as the “Near-Arctic State”, it naturally caused some irritation in Washington and Moscow. Such a category does not exist in international law and US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in May 2019 in Finland reiterated there are only “Arctic states and non-Arctic states” and no third category exists. China clarified it is only emphasising geographical proximity and interest in the region and is not claiming to be an Arctic state. In legal terms, China acknowledges it holds no sovereignty in the Arctic.

China’s interest in the Arctic resources like oil, gas, and minerals have been pursued by partnerships with the Arctic states. This, for example, is done by buying equity in projects and not by claiming rights to these resources unilaterally. This aligns with status-quo expectations.

One interesting area to watch is the potential future governance of the central Arctic Ocean seabed, the area beyond national shelves. If the ice melts enough, mining of the seabed could become possible in future decades. This would fall under the International Seabed Authority regime (another UNCLOS-based institution). China, as a major mining nation, might

eventually seek licenses there. So far, this is speculative, but China's insistence that the Arctic is partly a global common heritage indicates it will assert its rights when the time comes.

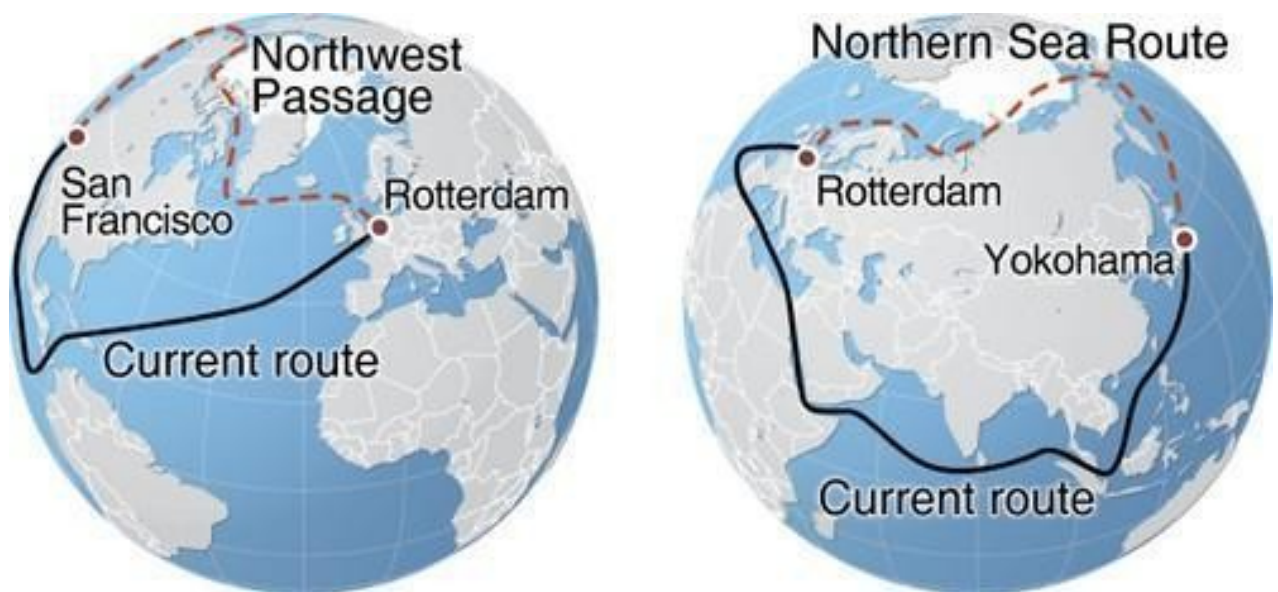
China acceded to the 1920 Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Treaty relatively late, as the Republic of China was a signatory in the 1920s, a status later passed on to the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Svalbard Treaty grants equal rights to all signatories to engage in commercial and research activities on Svalbard, albeit within the framework of Norwegian sovereignty. China has taken advantage of this treaty by opening the Yellow River Station in Svalbard for the purposes of scientific research (Tang 2024). It has complied with Norwegian laws and maintained good relations in Svalbard. There have been no reports of Chinese resistance to Norway's sovereignty in that area, unlike Russia, which sometimes complains about Norwegian restrictions as a breach of the treaty. China's behaviour in Svalbard, which de facto respects a hundred-year-old legal framework, betrays a status quo approach to this particular Arctic legal agreement.

The Polar Code (effective 2017) is a part of the international maritime law that requires ships operating in the Arctic to abide by stricter safety and environmental standards. Through the International Maritime Organization, China was involved in its negotiations. Chinese shipping companies and its icebreaker fleet abide by the Polar Code when operating in the Arctic. China's polar vessels like the research icebreakers *Xuě Lóng 1* and 2 meet these set standards ("China's First Home-Built Icebreaker: Carving a Polar Niche" 2018). This compliance shows China working within new multilateral rules that it had a hand in developing which demonstrates behaviour consistent with supporting emerging institutions rather than flouting them.

China has a largely cautious, status-quo orientation in regards to potential military behavior in the Arctic. The Arctic Council excludes military security from its mandate and an informal 'Arctic exceptionalism' (the belief that the Arctic is a uniquely cooperative zone, insulated from wider great-power conflict) discourages militarisation. China has maintained a minimal military footprint in the Arctic. But it has no Arctic bases nor it has stationed any military forces there. A few isolated naval activities, such as the 2015 appearance of Chinese naval vessels in the Bering Sea during a US presidential visit, and a 2017 warship visit to Finland and the Baltic Sea for exercises with Russia, were presented as routine or goodwill missions and fell within the bounds of international law. These non-provocative, limited actions

indicate a reluctance to take actions that might alarm the Arctic states. Despite discussion about potential future Arctic competition in Chinese strategic literature, China for now has preferred to operate within accepted norms.

China has refrained from proposing any radically new governance or legal framework for the Arctic. This signals a reformist rather than a revisionist intent. Although early Chinese academics did muse about an “Arctic treaty system” akin to Antarctica’s, Beijing did not actively pursue this idea following the Ilulissat Declaration and after engaging with the Arctic states. Instead, China’s 2018 White Paper endorsed the jurisdiction of Arctic states under existing international law and stressed the protection of non-Arctic states’ rights to navigation and research. China seeks to ensure that the current legal order is not monopolised in practice by any Arctic state. A practical example is China’s consistent call for internationally regulated Arctic high seas fisheries, which led to its inclusion in the Central Arctic Fisheries Agreement; thus, achieving influence through cooperation and lobbying rather than confrontation.



Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage Compared with Currently used Shipping Routes

The regions of potential legal dispute for China in the Arctic are primarily related to delineating the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along the Russian coast and the Northwest Passage (NWP) through Canada's Arctic archipelago. Although Russia and Canada have

declared the two as internal waters in parts (although it allows transit with a permit and an icebreaker fee), the United States and other countries claim that they are international straits. China has not made a specific challenge to these claims, probably because it has cooperative relations with both countries and does not currently have the ability to monopolise these passes. Nevertheless, China's general support for freedom of navigation implies agreement with the international strait characterisation — particularly of the NSR (Martins 2023). Chinese academics have argued that excessive tariffs or monopolisation of Arctic passes would be contrary to international maritime tradition. While China currently complies with Russia's NSR rules out of necessity, it may be able to challenge any restriction on access in the future under the auspices of UNCLOS to protect principles of global commons.

Overall, China's behaviour is in line with status-quo legal norms, basing its activities in the Arctic on international law instead of attempting to change them. Where it wants to project influence, it does so by interpretation and arguing for expansive applications of law, a sign of an emerging power that would prefer to work within the existing system while protecting against exclusion — consistent with status-quo behaviour with a subtle revisionist inclination.

Economic and Scientific Engagement: Investments, Shipping, and Soft Power

Economic investment and scientific cooperation has been China's most consistent and visible footprint in the Arctic. China effectively uses these as tools to firmly integrate itself within the existing governance framework and to strategically embed itself as an indispensable stakeholder in the long run. China's participation in the Arctic has been guided by Chinese interests and involvement in extraction of natural resources and infrastructure development. A flagship example is China's 20% stake in Russia's Yamal LNG project, with state-backed Chinese companies like CNPC providing considerable financing. Following Western sanctions on Russia after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Sino-Russian partnership deepened (Reuters 2025). China reinforced Russia's sovereign control over its resources and simultaneously expanded its economic footprint. China has since then invested in mining in Greenland and Canada (Simon 2025), and port and railways projects in Nordic countries like Iceland and Finland (Holz et al. 2022). These Chinese activities indicate status quo behaviour as most of these deals were negotiated through legal market channels and not through coercion. Still, some projects, like a failed attempt to buy land in Iceland and or Svalbard under ambiguous civilian pretences, raised concerns about strategic misuse (BBC

2011). This reflects the blurred lines between legitimate investments and potential dual-use intentions. But the Chinese state has respected decisions to block such deals.

Project / Asset (Year)	China Investment (US\$)	Russia Investment (US\$)	US Investment (US\$)	Norway Investment (US\$)
Yamal LNG (Russia, ~2013–2017)	~\$12 bn financing + 29.9% equity stake (CNPC 20%, SRF 9.9%)	~\$13 bn (50.1% Novatek + Russian loans)	– (no direct investment)	– (no direct investment)
Arctic LNG 2 (Russia, 2019)	~20% equity (CNPC 10%, CNOOC 10%)	~\$15 bn (60% Novatek share)	–	–
Vostok Oil (Russia, 2020s)	(Invited; no confirmed stake as of 2024)	~\$170 bn total plan (Rosneft)	–	–
Polar Silk Road Infrastructure	(Joint development with Russia)	(Joint development with China)	–	–
Alaska LNG (USA, proposed 2017)	(Sinopec/Bank of China explored \$43 bn deal)	–	– (would rely on private/China funds)	–
North Slope Oil (Alaska) (2019–)	–	–	~\$8 bn (Willow project by ConocoPhillips)	–
Snohvit LNG (Norway, onstream 2007)	–	–	–	~\$7 bn (Equinor-led)
Johan Castberg Oil (Norway, dev.)	–	–	–	~\$6 bn (Equinor)

Investments in Arctic Infrastructure & Energy Projects – China vs. Russia, US, Norway

China's presence in Russia's Arctic picked up pace even faster after 2022, following fresh Western sanctions on Russia after the Russian-Ukrainian war. Between January 2022 and

mid-2023, over 230 Chinese firms registered to operate in Russia's Arctic — a staggering 87% rise. By mid-2023, there were 359 active Chinese-owned entities in Russia's Arctic, in energy and mining sectors. Although this expansion is invited by Russia, thus status quo on the surface, it puts China in a dominant position in plugging gaps left by Western firms. Experts warn this could someday mean structural leverage in Arctic supply chains, although China is not eager to breach sanctions or provoke secondary sanctions. For instance, China's oil majors pulled out of the Arctic LNG 2 project in late 2023 to steer clear of such risks (HuffPost Editorial 2025). Its action, therefore, although opportunistic and aggressive, remains legally and diplomatically cautious.

Year	Infrastructure/Presence Milestone	Location	Notes and Significance
1993	Acquired Icebreaker Xue Long (“Snow Dragon”)	– (built in Ukraine)	Enabled China’s polar expeditions; refitted for research.
1999	1st Arctic Expedition (Xue Long to high Arctic)	Chukchi & Bering Seas	Marked China’s entry into Arctic research.
2004	Established Yellow River Station (research base)	Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard (Norway)	China’s first Arctic research station; monitors Arctic ecology/climate.
2012	Xue Long transited Northeast Passage (N. Sea Route)	Along Russian Arctic coast	First Chinese ship to sail Arctic sea route to Europe.
2013	COSCO Yong Sheng voyage via NSR to Europe	Dalian → Rotterdam (via NSR)	First Chinese commercial cargo transit of Arctic route, cutting transit time.
2013	Launched China–Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC)	Shanghai & Nordics	Permanent forum for Arctic science cooperation.
2016	Began “Polar Silk Road” planning with Russia	Beijing/Moscow	Concept to integrate Arctic shipping into BRI; MOU 2017.
2018	Opened China-Iceland Arctic Observatory	Karholl, Iceland	Joint research facility (aurora, climate); China’s second Arctic

			station.
2018	Yamal LNG project start – China as stakeholder	Yamal Peninsula, Russia	CNPC/Silk Road Fund ownership ~30%; Chinese ships carry LNG to Asia.
2019	Commissioned Icebreaker Xue Long 2 (built in China)	Launched from Shanghai	Advanced two-way icebreaker, expands China's Arctic reach.
2021	Polar Observation Satellite launch (BNU-1)	Sun-synchronous orbit	China's first Arctic observation satellite (by Beijing Normal University) to monitor sea ice.
2023	13th Arctic Expedition (Xuelong 2 reached North Pole)	Central Arctic Ocean	First Chinese venture to North Pole region, enhancing data for climate impact on China.

Chinese Infrastructure & Presence in the Arctic – Timeline Map Data

A central component of China's Arctic policy is the Polar Silk Road, a component of its larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to integrate Arctic shipping and infrastructure into global connectivity networks. Initiatives such as the proposed deep-water port in Arkhangelsk and the Belkomur railway connection are examples of this objective, although they present many logistical challenges. Furthermore, China has expressed a keen interest in the expansion of the port of Kirkenes in Norway and has a research station in Iceland. These initiatives, conducted through agreements and without overreach, demonstrate no immediate intention of revisionism; however, the long-term implications may lead to the establishment of a China-dominated Arctic logistics network. This incremental but calculated interconnection of nodes is strategic: if China's shipping firm COSCO controls Northern Sea Route traffic or if its corporations become dominant port operators, it may eventually gain influence over operational norms, even without formal political control.

The Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs along Russia's Arctic coast, is a case of China's operational Arctic strategy. Chinese shipping on the NSR grew steadily throughout the 2010s and accelerated after 2022 due to energy trade with Russia (Humpert 2011). Chinese demand accounted for over 95% of all transit cargo on the NSR in 2023, a drastic measure of dependence and influence. China coordinates the traffic with Russia's Rosatom, follows

Russian icebreaker protocol, and respects routing and fee systems. While Western countries dispute Russia's control over the NSR, China has chosen to play by Russia's rules, again cementing the status quo. But this close adherence places China in a position to shape future NSR governance if Russia ever decides to internationalise parts of the regime. For now, China plays by the rules, but it is also becoming essential to NSR viability, something that could be wielded as soft leverage in the future.

Year	Total Voyages on NSR (all flags)	Russian-Flagged Voyages (share)	Chinese- Flagged Voyages (share)	Other Flags (share)
2018	3,227 trips (414 ships)	~85% of voyages (Russian domestic fleet)	~5% of voyages (COSCO ~8 transit trips)	~10% (Nordic, etc. flags)
2019	3,300+ trips (est.)	~80% (Russian)	~10% (COSCO ~14 transit trips)	~10% (other foreign)
2021	3,227 trips (414 ships)	~85% (Russian – majority of 414 ships)	~0.4% of voyages (14 COSCO voyages ≈30% of transits)	~15% (mostly other transit voyages)
2022	2,994 trips (314 ships)	278 ships (≈88%); ~90% of voyages Russian	0 ships (0% – no Chinese transits in 2022)	36 ships (12%) – e.g. Cyprus, Bahamas flags

Volume of Arctic Shipping Traffic by Flag State (Northern Sea Route)

China's activities in the Northwest Passage (NWP), which Canada claims as its internal waters, have been more limited (Tsuruoka 2017). To date, only one significant voyage — the 2017 *Xuě Lóng* icebreaker voyage — have occurred, and that was with the approval of

Canadian authorities (Fife & Chase 2017). China’s accommodation of Canadian jurisdiction is most likely because of the route’s limited economic significance and the geopolitical sensitivities surrounding it. This caution is in contrast to action in the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and is an expression of China’s caution based on strategic viability and the degrees of acceptance among Arctic nations.

At the scientific level, China uses polar research to enhance its legitimacy in the Arctic while building operational capability. As of 2025, China had conducted over ten Arctic expeditions using its *Xuě Lóng* icebreakers, focusing on climate, oceanography, and polar ice science. These expeditions are framed as contributions to global science and climate awareness — an image China greatly emphasises in its White Paper as part of its “responsible great power” image. Through institutions like the Polar Research Institute of China, Beijing collaborates with Nordic and Russian scientific institutions and has research stations in Svalbard (Norway), Iceland, and even space observation programs with Finland and Sweden. These activities demonstrate soft power while quietly building the technical and operational capabilities for long-term Arctic engagement.

Most importantly, Chinese participation in scientific endeavours, as typified by cooperation and information exchange, also has strategic purposes. Chinese policymakers readily acknowledge that polar expeditions give “navigational experience” and are a way to “cultivating China’s Arctic identity”. (Dean and Lackenbauer 2020) These are classic dual-purpose outcomes: the same information used in environmental modelling can at the same time enable easier future logistics planning or inform future investments in infrastructure. This subtle application of capability violates no norms and is, in fact, welcomed by Arctic allies — though it surreptitiously positions China for more independent action in the future. In directly investing in understanding permafrost melt, pollution transport, and renewable energy in the Arctic, China effectively pre-empts the notion that Chinese interests are purely extractive.

Year	China – Scientific Expeditions (count)	United States – Arctic Research Expeditions	Russia – Arctic Research
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		(count)	Expeditions (count)
1999	1 (1st Chinese Arctic expedition)	0 (no dedicated USCG icebreaker mission)	~5 (estimated Russian scientific expeditions)
2003	1 (2nd expedition)	1 (USCGC Healy begins annual Arctic ops)	~5
2008	1 (3rd expedition)	1	~8
2010	1 (4th expedition)	1	~10
2012	1 (5th expedition)	1	~10
2014	1 (6th expedition)	1	~12
2016	1 (7th expedition)en.people.cn	1	~15
2017	1 (8th expedition)(China's Arctic activity rising)	1	~15
2018	1 (9th expedition) – Xuelong reached North Pole region	1	~15
2019	1 (10th expedition)	1	~18
2020	1 (11th expedition)	0 (USCG Healy mission aborted)	~20
2021	1 (12th expedition)	1	~20+
2022	0 (no new expedition)	1	~20+
2023	1 (13th expedition) – reached North Pole	1	~20+

China's Arctic Scientific Expeditions vs. Arctic States (By Year)

Cumulatively, China's economic and scientific activities have dramatically expanded its Arctic influence. It is, in 2025, the leading importer of Arctic LNG, a leading financier of Arctic infrastructure, and a leading participant in Arctic science (Humpert 2011). These positions give China informal but real influence, especially in bilateral relations. Western

governments have noticed this involvement. NATO and national Arctic strategies increasingly mention China as an actor to watch. But trade statistics indicate that most Arctic economies are not economically heavily reliant on China: the five Nordic Arctic economies, for example, sell only around 4% of their exports to China, as opposed to much higher percentages to Europe and the US. This indicates that, economically at least, China's leverage is still limited, and fears of dominance are premature.

But China's influence is politically meaningful. Countries such as Norway and Iceland have moved to re-establish diplomatic relations with China after previous strains (for example, Norway's Nobel Peace Prize-related 2010–2016 freeze), partly because of a need for Chinese investment and tourism (Bryant 2025). Norway even actively encouraged China's observer application to the Arctic Council after reconciliation. These examples show how China translates economic engagement into political goodwill, solidifying its status quo position through consensual and transactional diplomacy.

In evaluating whether China's engagement in the Arctic is a status quo or revisionist approach, the economic and scientific dimensions offer a complex picture. The majority of China's efforts are cooperative, based on legal frameworks, and implemented through bilateral or multilateral frameworks. China has not tried to unilaterally revise legal or institutional frameworks, and when Arctic nations reject Chinese proposals, as was the case with Canada and Denmark, China upholds such decisions without retaliatory measures. Nevertheless, China's concurrent effort to develop autonomous capabilities indicates a long-term design to diminish reliance and augment influence. This dual-track approach enables China to benefit from the present order while positioning itself in secret for a future where it may be in an even more central position if the status quo were to be reversed. Therefore, while China's economic and scientific engagement in the Arctic is currently in compliance with the status quo, it contains the potential for strategic revisionism — not through overt confrontation, but through deeper entrenchment.

Strategic and Military Dimensions: Capability Building and Security Alignments

Where China's engagement in the Arctic is largely driven by economic investment and

scientific cooperation, there is a deeper strategic dimension taking shape quietly. Rather than a revisionist power which might disrupt existing security arrangements, China has worked generally within the Arctic's de facto norm of demilitarisation. There is no special security organisation in the Arctic, with Russia maintaining a strong military footprint and NATO's presence in the region. Having been excluded from Arctic defence organisations like NATO or NORAD, China has chosen instead to focus on building dual-use operational capabilities, suggesting a long-term strategy of preparation that does not openly disrupt the status quo.

A key component of this capacity-building is China's growing icebreaker fleet. While not military ships, icebreakers are essential to maintaining year-round presence in polar waters. From only one ship, constructed in Ukraine (*Xuě Lóng*), since the 1990s, China now has commissioned its first domestically built vessel (*Xuě Lóng 2*) in 2019 and, by 2025, a third icebreaker operated by Sun Yat-sen University (Konrad 2024). A fourth, possibly nuclear-powered, icebreaker is reportedly on the agenda. Compared to Russia's dominant fleet of over 50 icebreakers (nuclear-powered included), China's capacity is modest but growing. The 2024 simultaneous dispatch of three Chinese icebreakers to the Arctic was historic and widely noted, including by Russian media, which observed that “the Arctic is becoming Chinese”. Exaggeration, perhaps, but it highlighted China's growing independent operating capability, a departure from previous Russian escort dependency. This expansion is within legal frameworks and for China's scientific expeditionary needs, but it also quietly enhances China's regional strategic autonomy.

In the realm of military alignments, China has no formal role in the management of Arctic security. Its most conspicuous partnerships have been with Russia, including joint naval exercises off the Bering Sea and symbolic manoeuvres off Alaska in 2021 and 2022, which elicited US Coast Guard responses (Seyler and Martinez 2023). These twin demonstrations of presence have increased Western apprehensions regarding an emerging Sino-Russian axis in the High North. Nevertheless, China has moved cautiously to avoid projecting this cooperation as a challenge to the Western-dominated order, avoiding an explicit declaration of a formal military alliance. In addition, Russia itself has established limits to the alliance. Although it is receptive to Chinese investment, Moscow is cautious of its Arctic military dominance and has rejected China's “near-Arctic state” status, reserving Arctic management to remain in the hands of Arctic nations. This serves to underscore that the Sino-Russian alliance is deep in energy and diplomacy, but limited and restrained in defence.

China has also engaged in multilateral Arctic security through lesser-known forums like the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, where it is an observer and has participated in tabletop exercises for search and rescue operations (Nilsen 2023). It is, however, not invited to participate in more stringent security discussions, such as U.S.–Russia Arctic deconfliction and NATO's strategic presence in the Arctic. This has steered China's strategy: it does not engage in direct confrontation but rather constructs *dual-use capabilities* — ice-hardened ships, Arctic satellite coverage through its BeiDou system, and advanced technologies like unmanned ice stations and underwater gliders. While these are presented as scientific instruments, they have prospective military uses. Chinese military analyses acknowledge the increasing “great power game” over shared global spaces like the Arctic, and while China has avoided militarising the Arctic, its strategic rationale suggests awareness that future rivalries may require it.

Geopolitically, Chinese Arctic policy takes into account its positioning relative to the United States. Since 2018, US strategic documents have increasingly positioned China as a problem in the Arctic. In his 2019 address, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explicitly rebuffed China's positioning as a “near-Arctic state” and cautioned against Beijing's ambitions. More recently, the US Arctic policies in 2022 have listed China along with Russia as threats to the prevailing regional rules-based order. In reaction to those events, China has eschewed raising the rhetoric and instead chosen to emphasise cooperation in climate science and logistics over direct adversarial action. This restrained response shores up China's image as a status quo player, wanting to preserve access to the Arctic without contributing to its securitisation.

However, some of China's technological efforts portend longer-term strategic positioning. BeiDou satellite coverage across the Arctic offers a GPS alternative in polar latitudes, enhancing China's operational autonomy (High North News 2019). Testing of unmanned ice stations and gliders for deployment also adds to China's situational awareness and maritime data gathering. These instruments, while nominally civilian, can augment naval situational planning or undersea monitoring, consistent with the wider pattern of dual-use development. These steps are classic great power behaviour — projecting influence and capacity in the existing order, while quietly hedging for potential future change. Briefly, China's strategic posture in the Arctic remains largely status-quo oriented. It has refrained from military provocation, made no claims to territory, and remains committed to informal arms control norms, such as supporting the Arctic as a nuclear-free zone. But under the veneer of cooperation lies a more advanced set of capabilities — icebreakers, scientific platforms,

satellite infrastructure — that provide the wherewithal for strategic autonomy should the geopolitical environment change. China is not seeking to overturn the Arctic order today, but it is assiduously ensuring that it will not be caught behind the curve if the balance of power were to shift. China’s military strategy is therefore a reflection of its broader Arctic engagement: avoid confrontation, maximise influence within the existing order, and quietly build capabilities for potential future leverage (Xinhua 2018).

Non-Arctic Country	Notable Arctic Cooperation Forum/Initiative	Year Established	Partners (Arctic States)	Source/Notes
China	China–Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC) – research network	2013	Nordics (NO, DK, SE, FI, IS)	Founded in Shanghai, promotes joint research.
	China–Iceland Joint Aurora Observatory (Kárhóll, Iceland)	2018	Iceland	Research facility for aurora and climate.
	Polar Silk Road cooperation with Russia	2017	Russia	Agreed to integrate NSR into Belt & Road.
	China–Finland Arctic Research Center (MoU)	2018	Finland	Joint space-weather observing center. (Project stalled by 2022).
Japan	Trilateral Asian Arctic Dialogue (with China & S. Korea)	2015	(China, S. Korea) + Arctic hosts	High-level dialogue on Arctic policy.
	Japan–Norway Arctic Science Collaboration	2017	Norway	(MOU on polar research, e.g. oceanography).
South Korea	Arctic Partnership	2016	Arctic Council	Government-led

	Week (annual forum in Busan)		states (all invited)	conference on Arctic cooperation.
	Korea–Norway Polar Research MOU	2010	Norway	Cooperation leading to joint projects (e.g. ocean, climate).
India	Observer research MOUs (e.g. with Norway)	2014	Norway, others	India's Himadri Station in Svalbard (est. 2008).
Singapore	Arctic shipping & climate workshops (with Norway, Arctic Council)	2015	Various (co-hosts Arctic seminars)	Focus on governance and shipping best-practices.

Bilateral Arctic Cooperation Initiatives – China vs. Other Non-Arctic States

Environmental and Governance Norms: Global Commons or Arctic States' Preserve?

China's approach to environmental and governance norms in the Arctic is a balanced combination of adherence to existing international regimes and unobtrusive, reformist ambitions. By framing Arctic climate change as an international issue, China presents itself as a responsible player committed to international cooperation, environmental stewardship, and climatic science advancement (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018). At the same time, this is a strategic tool, legitimising China's growing interest in Arctic governance subtly challenging the prevailing assumption that only the traditionally Arctic nations should offer leadership for the future development of the Arctic.

Arctic Change	Observed/Projected Impact on China	Source/Example
Rapid Arctic warming	Shifts in jet stream and polar vortex	Chinese officials: Arctic

($\approx 3 - 4 \times$ global rate)	bring more frequent cold-air surges and heat extremes in China.	warming drives extreme weather events in China. July 2023 heat in N. China exceeded 50°C (Arctic influence noted).
Sea-ice loss in Arctic Ocean	Colder, snowier winters in East Asia (e.g. NE China +20% heavy snow); disrupted spring weather patterns.	Studies link low Arctic sea ice to harsher Eurasian winters. 2018 Chinese winter storms tied to Arctic Oscillation anomalies (sea-ice effect).
Arctic summer warming & ice melt	Altered summer monsoon rainfall in China (spatial shifts, intensity changes).	“Arctic climate affects precipitation in China” – less Arctic ice → more moisture and rainfall variability in East Asia.
Greenland ice sheet melt	Rising sea levels threatening China’s low-lying coasts (sea level up several mm/year partly from Arctic melt).	China’s coastal cities face higher flood risk as polar ice melt accelerates (global sea level rose ~20 cm since 1900). (IPCC reports; Arctic contribution ~30%.)

Climate Impacts on China from Arctic Warming

China's 2018 White Paper draws attention to how Arctic warming drives global climate and weather patterns, including over China proper, and necessitates multifaceted effort to confront the crisis. China has cooperated with Arctic Council working groups on pollution and on biodiversity and remains a staunch upholder of the Paris Agreement. When the United States took the climate back under the Trump presidency, China rallied around climate norms and re-enforced its profile as an upholder of the status quo. But this position also gives credence to China's case for more active non-Arctic state engagement in Arctic affairs. By portraying climate change as an international issue of concern, China argues that non-Arctic states, and it includes itself in this designation, have interests at stake in the governance of the Arctic.

Chinese leaders and scholars generally reference the Arctic ecosystems and high seas as the global commons, borrowing from models of deep-sea or space governance. While China does not come as close as to recommending an Antarctic treaty model for the Arctic, China calls for common governance under current legal structures such as UNCLOS. This legalism of a strategic nature permits China to nip regional exclusivity in the bud without going as far as refusing sovereignty or insisting on a new regime, which is in accord with a reformist rather than avowed revisionist approach.

China's environmental behaviour is a balancing act as well. Championing sustainability, it has substantially invested in Arctic fossil fuel ventures — most notably in Russia's oil and LNG sectors. China's Russian hydrocarbon buys in 2023–24 financed continued Arctic resource extraction, which was criticised by environmentalists. China, however, frames these investments as responsible development equal to that of Arctic states like the US or Norway. Furthermore, it has recently turned to cleaner ventures like green technology key minerals and renewable energy projects within the Arctic — highlighting a transition toward global sustainability norms and enhancing its cooperative image.

The theme of status quo vs. revisionism is centred on governance. China acknowledges the sovereign rights of the Arctic states in their territories and exclusive economic zones but argues that high seas and seabed beyond national jurisdiction need to be governed internationally. China's argument was presented at the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement talks, where China fought relentlessly to be counted among the Arctic states. The resulting multilateral framework is now used by China as a precedent for inclusive governance to justify its argument for stakeholder-based participation in global commons issues.

Moreover, China has taken steps to involve indigenous peoples of the Arctic, whose representatives have been invited to its forums and whose cultural exchanges have been encouraged — on the principles of the Arctic Council and not as being neocolonial. Although tensions in the future could emerge if Chinese investment injures indigenous interests, these are currently mostly hypothetical. In general, China's Arctic environmental policy and governance is one of strategic adaptation: adapting to existing rules while gradually redefining norms of participation. Instead of overturning the legal order, China seeks to expand who gets to contribute to it — steering Arctic governance towards even greater internationalisation without precipitating conflict.

Discussion

From an analytical standpoint, China's Arctic trajectory remains more constrained opportunity-seeking than outright destabilising revisionism; at least for now. The weight of evidence in this paper suggests a rising power that is probing the margins of an order it did not design, rather than attempting to overturn it wholesale. China's strategy is opportunistic and asymmetrical: it leverages law, science and infrastructure to accumulate options and voice, but does so in ways that still rely on, and benefit from, existing institutions and legal frameworks. That makes the Arctic less a rehearsal for immediate confrontation than a laboratory for revisionism from within, where China tests how far it can stretch norms without breaking them. At the same time, this very pattern means that shifts in threat perception—on either the Chinese or Western side — could quickly harden positions. In that sense, the author sees China's current Arctic behaviour as a *low-intensity stress test* of global governance: reassuring in its procedural compliance, but revealing how fragile inclusivity and trust could become if exclusion, securitisation or great-power rivalry deepen.

China's behaviour in the Arctic illustrates a dualistic and multifaceted policy that balances compliance to the current status quo and reform aspirations. At an immediate level, China has shown high consistency with the current institutions and international norms, as indicated by its attainment of observer status in the Arctic Council and cooperation in scientific and environmental affairs. Scholars like Alastair Iain Johnston contend that such behaviour is a reflection of China's overall approach within international institutions — marked by cooperative engagement whenever the system guarantees stability and rewards. In the Arctic, where China's military strength is weak, engagement in the current scheme has ensured consistent progress: gaining freedom of navigation, access to scientific research, and the formation of economic alliances, all under the current status quo.

This strategic patience is the basis of the logic of power-transition theory, which states that rising powers first comply with normative institutions as they gain influence. China's compliance with the UNCLOS regime, its acceptance of multilateral climate goals, and provision of scientific public goods are all in keeping with this vision. China's actions, in the view of Wang and Ma (2024), also can be seen as “costly signals” to reduce distrust and facilitate its rise without confrontation. China, therefore, does not conform to the classic

definition of a revisionist; it accepts underlying principles of the Arctic order while gradually adjusting practice to improve its position.

Yet behind this incremental strategy lies a distinctly reformist agenda. China's narrative — emphasising that the Arctic is of interest to “all mankind” — seeks to challenge the exclusivity embodied in Arctic governance. Its efforts to promote the Polar Silk Road and alignment with global commons rhetoric are examples of hopes to change more and more who gets to be involved in decision-making in the Arctic. Rather than rejecting current institutions outright, China promotes a more inclusive model of governance. Scholars, thus, describe China as “revisionist-in-practice, status quo-in-principle”, promoting change not by revolution but by conversation and reinterpretation of legal structures (Womack 2015; Liu 2021; Shariatnia 2024; Hopewell 2025).

This dualism conforms to Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategies: first, establishing norms and legitimacy, and second, seeking internal change. It also mirrors China's grand strategy towards institutions like the IMF and World Bank—first seeking influence and then establishing alternative institutions (like the AIIB) while keeping the original institutions intact. In the Arctic region, China's limited official influence in the Council requires it to engage through bilateral negotiations, scientific diplomacy, and infrastructure investment.

The Sino-Russian Arctic dynamic is yet more nuanced. Russia, ironically, an Arctic state, acts geopolitically revisionist (for example, militarising the region, threatening withdrawal from the Arctic Council) but justifies Arctic governance status quo, insisting on Arctic-state primacy. China is multilateral in tone but seeks greater voice. As analysts put it, Russia is a proponent of the status quo [in governance], and China wants to remake the governance structure to have more influence (Kaczmarek 2018; Legarda 2025). But Russia's reserve regarding sharing power in Arctic forums gives China's ambitions a dampening blow. In the event of Russia proposing a new China-aligned Arctic institution, China might well be hesitant unless it promises extended legitimacy and tangible influence — reiterating Beijing's preference for gradual evolution over abrupt rupture.

The implications for international relations theory are significant. China's Arctic outreach confirms a departure from rigid status quo/revisionist binary oppositions. It is selective revisionism or adaptive status quoism, embracing dominant rules when convenient while encouraging governance arrangements towards greater inclusivity. On a realist analysis, as

China's material power grows — more icebreakers, enhanced Arctic mapping, enhanced trade links — it can negotiate more assertively for influence (for example, quotas, development rights). But liberal institutionalists would argue China's extensive participation in scientific and environmental cooperation could soften any future assertiveness.

Domestic politics also shape this dualism. Under Xi Jinping, China's foreign policy abroad has become more assertive but its Arctic policy cautious. Rhetoric such as the near-Arctic state and Polar Silk Road promise ambition, but Chinese policy is cautious — perhaps a test case for how it would act in other areas of governance such as cyberspace or outer space.

In the future, China's Arctic stance could proceed along one or more of a number of lines. Should cooperative efforts in the Arctic resurge, China would deepen its stake through stepwise engagement. If institutions such as the Arctic Council fail, China might accede or help construct alternative gatherings — particularly if these offer enhanced voice. During conflict or crisis, China might move to an expanded, assertive stance in support of protecting access, running contrary to Western or Russian expectations.

In environmental issues, China is likely to resist overly restrictive policies put forward by Arctic states if these threaten its shipping or economic interests, positioning itself as a defender of broader access. Taken together, this suggests that, on normative grounds, China *could* move in a more revisionist direction if it perceives growing risks of exclusion, even if current behaviour remains largely constrained by existing rules.

For Arctic stakeholders, the most important finding is to engage, not alienate. Over-alarmism, portraying China as a threat alone, threatens to encourage a closer alliance with Russia and other types of governance. Underestimating its ambitions can result in underestimated vulnerabilities. An effective strategy is to engage China in collaborative activities (for example, climate research and indigenous development) while keeping it transparent and protecting key areas (for example, strategic infrastructure).

Patrik Andersson and others suggest bolstering existing institutions, for example, the Arctic Council, as the best hedge. A rules-based order, which encompasses China in a positive manner, renders revisionism less desirable. So far, China's compliance with Arctic law and institutions supports this.

Finally, China's behaviour in the Arctic is a stark demonstration of the doctrine of institutional revisionism — changed by engagement, not disruption. This is consistent with a growing body of international relations literature stating that rising powers like China are more likely to revise from within, particularly when direct conflict would be prohibitively costly. The Arctic is therefore a core case to learn about trends in global governance. China has moved from being an outside observer of the Arctic to increasingly shaping outcomes — by consensus, not coercion.

Thus, China's Arctic engagement reflects a blend of compliance and quiet ambition, acting within existing rules while gradually expanding its influence. If managed well, China's rise could strengthen Arctic governance; if not, it risks turning the Arctic into a new arena of great-power rivalry.

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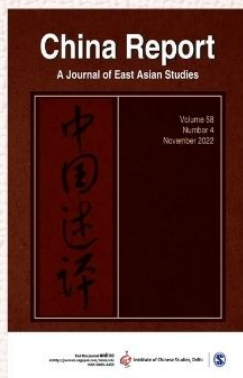


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