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China on a New Model of Arctic Governance

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Abstract. In China, Arctic governance is understood as a complex geopolitical and geo-economic phenomenon related to the process of decision-making and coordination of actions aimed at managing development, environmental protection and security in the Arctic region; it is regarded as an important part of global governance. Over the years, China has accumulated practical experience in participating in Arctic governance, while simultaneously focusing on its scientific and theoretical reflection, on the basis of which Chinese scholars and experts have developed their own vision of an Arctic governance model. This took place against the backdrop of the emergence of new doctrinal guidelines on the role of China’s participation in global governance, in particular the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind” and the White Paper on China’s Arctic Policy. This, in turn, made it possible to construct a framework of theoretical argumentation for the protection of China’s national interests in the Arctic, on the basis of which China’s participation in Arctic governance developed. In the course of its participation in Arctic governance, China will inevitably face traditional mistrust towards it as a non-Arctic state; in these circumstances, and in order to strengthen its position, the country needs to develop interaction and cooperation with Russia in the Arctic region.

Keywords: *sub-Arctic state, Arctic governance model, Arctic Council, sectoral approach, Russian-Chinese cooperation*

Introduction

Arctic governance is a complex geopolitical and geo-economic phenomenon related to the decision-making process and coordination of actions aimed at managing development, environmental protection, and security in the Arctic region; it is an important component of global governance. The evolution and future prospects of the Arctic governance model are the focus of attention for Arctic states, as well as other countries with interests in the Arctic.

China, among other non-Arctic countries, has also been paying attention to theoretical reflection on this topic, which brings it closer to developing its own Arctic governance model. The motivation of Chinese scholars, experts and decision-makers stems from studying the experience of other countries, analyzing their own experience of participation in Arctic governance, and, most importantly, from the desire to theoretically justify China’s participation in Arctic affairs in the spirit of the conceptual principles of “Xi Jinping Thought” on global governance, particularly the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind”.

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The methodological framework of this work includes problem-oriented and systemic approaches, document analysis, comparative analysis, generalization, and synthesis. This, according to the author, has enabled a comprehensive analysis of the conceptual framework of China's participation in Arctic governance, the stages of its formation and geopolitical context, as well as its current status and prospects.

Arctic governance: definitions and interpretations

Western researchers have prioritized the study and conceptualization of the Arctic governance model. They note that “unlike the homogeneous use of the concept by policymakers, centered on a Westphalian or state-centered understanding of governance”, academic research on Arctic governance across disciplines is quite diverse in terms of the degree of conceptualization achieved, as well as its usefulness as an analytical tool. Four categories of theoretical approaches are distinguished (pragmatic, prescriptive, functional, and critical), which, according to Western scholars, help to ensure “differentiated use and their substantive goals: the probability of implementation; compliance with law; the efficiency and effectiveness of processes; or the re-framing of the issues at stake” (Pelaudeix, 2014).

Russian researchers have gone further in understanding the Arctic governance model, beyond the “Westphalian” theoretical framework. As early as 2011, they came to the conclusion that the Arctic transnational governance model includes three levels: state, business, and civil society (Kharlampyeva, Lagutina, 2011)

Their Western colleagues also concluded that the Arctic Council is not a “self-sufficient” institution of Arctic governance, noting that there are fundamental differences between it and various multilateral sectoral governance forums in Arctic affairs (Arctic conferences). These differences, in their view, manifest themselves in terms of continuity, formalization, political engagement, and decision-making capacity. Conferences are less integrated into the governance systems of individual states than the Arctic Council, but, on the other hand, they are open to a wider range of stakeholders to participate in discussions on the future of the Arctic, which is an important addition to the Arctic regime. According to Western scholars, one of the central issues is how to take into account the interests of China and other non-Arctic states within the existing framework of regional governance. Conferences make an additional contribution by providing arenas for non-Arctic states and non-state actors to have their voices heard, albeit not within official policy-making and decision-making processes (Steinveg, Rottem, Andreeva, 2024).

The fundamental Chinese theoretical approach to the model of Arctic governance is that it is defined as “an international commitment and/or efforts to provide public goods in order to address security, environmental and humanitarian issues in the Arctic region” (Wang, Ma, 2024). On the one hand, this approach opens up opportunities for interpretation; on the other, it positions China as one of the providers of “international public goods” in the Arctic, and no less important than the others.

Conceptual framework for China's participation in Arctic governance

The development of China's concepts regarding Arctic governance has its own "political chronology". Its starting point can be considered the proclamation of the concept of a "community with a shared future for humanity" by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. Subsequently, in 2017, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China "put forward its conception of ecological civilization in sense of respecting nature, conforming to nature, and protecting nature, as well as the concept of global governance centered on "a community with a shared future for mankind", have been fully reflected and implemented in the white paper 'China's Arctic Policy'" (Yang, 2023).

This occurred as a result of summarizing five years of experience in Arctic governance and against the backdrop of new doctrinal guidelines. The White Paper defined China as a non-Arctic state, meaning that it does not own land or hold sovereignty in the Arctic region except for its legitimate rights and interests in accordance with relevant international law. It was emphasized that "China is a large country in the northern hemisphere, and its climate is greatly affected by the Arctic's climate system. The natural conditions of the Arctic area and their changes have a direct impact on China's climate system and ecological environment, and, in turn, on its economic interests in agriculture, forestry, fishery, marine industry and other sectors relating to the stability of China's ecosystem and the safety of agricultural production" (Yang, 2023).

Another key argument set out in the White Paper on Arctic Policy is that China is not only a stakeholder, but also the rights holder and responsibility holder of Arctic affairs:

- Politically, China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and shoulders the important mission of jointly maintaining peace and security in the Arctic;
- Economically, China is a major trader and energy consumer in the world, and the development and utilization of Arctic sea routes and resources may have a huge impact on China's energy strategy and economic development (Yang, 2023);
- In terms of rights and interests by international law, China enjoys the right to carry out corresponding activities stipulated in international treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Spitsbergen Treaty and other international law;
- From the perspective of providing public goods for Arctic governance and economic development, Chinese capital, technology, markets, knowledge and experience can play an important role; China should cooperate with Arctic countries and other relevant countries to further understand and protect the Arctic, and make efforts to achieve sustainable development in the Arctic (Yang, 2023).

Chinese researchers believe that there are three major contradictions in global governance in the Arctic: the first is the contradiction between the development and utilization of Arctic resources and the protection of the Arctic environment; the second is the contradiction between the increase of human activities in the Arctic and the relatively lagging governance mechanism; the

third contradiction is the contradiction between the interests of the Arctic states and the common interests of mankind (Yang, 2023). In their opinion, the White Paper on Arctic Policy shows that the Chinese government has taken an active role in properly handling these three contradictions.

According to some Russian researchers, the most controversial argument justifying China's participation in Arctic governance is its assertion of rights, which it makes using the provisions of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, interpreting them to mean that the Arctic and its natural resources are the "common heritage of mankind" and do not belong exclusively to the "five" coastal states. In other words, according to Chinese representatives, the exclusive use of the Arctic's natural resources and maritime shipping routes by the Arctic states is unacceptable; the Arctic states are obliged to take into account the interests of other states and, on this basis, to formulate their Arctic policy in the fields of energy and shipping (Kienko, 2018).

It is worth comparing China's approach to Arctic governance with those of other non-Arctic states, for example, non-Arctic countries with observer status in the Arctic Council. According to A. Mokretskiy (Mokretsky, 2025), a generalized comparison might look as follows (Table 1):

Table 1

Comparative analysis of similarities and differences in the Arctic strategies of five non-Arctic states

State	Main goals and objectives
China	• study, protect, utilize, and participate in the governance of the region; • defend the common interests of all states and the international community in the Arctic; • promote sustainable development of the North Pole
Japan	• research and development of new products, technologies, and improvement of existing products; • expansion of international and bilateral cooperation with Arctic and other countries; • sustainable development through the active and full-scale involvement of Japanese companies in economic activities in the Arctic; improvement of the Arctic Sea Route infrastructure; exploration and development of mineral and marine bioresources
India	• strengthening cooperation with the Arctic region; • harmonizing or aligning polar research with the "third pole" — the Himalayas; • contributing to efforts to deepen humanity's understanding of the Arctic region; • strengthening international efforts to combat climate change and protect the environment; • promoting Arctic exploration and understanding in India
Republic of Korea	• contribution to solving Arctic region problems; • expanding the horizons of Arctic diplomacy; • participation in the sustainable development of the Arctic; • improving the basis for work in the region
Singapore	• Arctic environmental protection (environmental agenda); • development of a safe Arctic region (security and development);

- economic growth of the North Pole;
- human capital development in the Arctic;
- combating climate change

The geopolitical context of China's prospects for participation in Arctic governance

According to some members of the Russian expert community, the strengthening of China's presence in the Arctic and the intensification of its participation in the Arctic governance system pose potential long-term risks to Russia's interests in the Far North, as China's development of Arctic potential in the fields of the economy, transport, science and technology promises it significant advantages over potential competitors, which may include Russia in the long term (Rekets, 2024).

A second factor that China also cannot ignore is that, with the intensification of geopolitical competition and the "stigmatization" of China's actions in the Arctic by NATO, the scope for implementing and advancing China's Arctic policy could be significantly limited, and "there is great uncertainty regarding the preservation of China's rights and interests in the Arctic". In this regard, Chinese experts believe that China should promote scientific research at stations and ships, improve understanding of the natural environment and ecosystem of the Arctic, actively provide international public goods to the international community, and form and strengthen the identity of an international participant in Arctic governance (Zhào, Gōng, 2022).

In analyzing the Biden administration's Arctic strategy and the prospects for its implementation, Zhao Ningning, Associate Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations at Central China Normal University, called on China's Arctic policy-making bodies to "coordinate the participation of domestic think tanks and scholars in the Arctic Circle Forum (organized by Iceland) and the Arctic Frontiers Forum (organized by Norway), as well as other permanent forums on Arctic issues, while simultaneously conducting academic dialogues and exchanges with relevant polar research think tanks in Europe and the United States to enhance the positive perception of China's Arctic policy by the other side and to reduce public opinion interference in China's participation in Arctic affairs" (Zhào, 2022).

China concludes that the tension between trust-building efforts and skepticism will characterize China's involvement in Arctic affairs. "The future of China's involvement in the Arctic is likely to be a mixture of both cooperation and confrontation" (Wang, Ma, 2024).

However, there is still space for reasonable optimism in Chinese discourse on this subject. Even if the influence of great power relations on the Arctic is becoming increasingly significant, the "mixed motives" for international engagement in Arctic affairs can promote cooperation among all parties on specific issues, focusing on matters of common interest to Arctic and other countries. Adjustments to areas and systems of cooperation could include the development of codes of conduct for preventing armed conflict, addressing climate change, managing commercial shipping, protecting biodiversity, and integrating international scientific resources and activities (Ào, 2022).

China's vision of an Arctic governance model

The starting point for China's reasoning is that improving the effectiveness of Arctic governance requires "improving the current situation of insufficient supply of relevant international public goods". Therefore, China, as an Arctic stakeholder and a responsible major country capable of providing international public goods, should strengthen international cooperation in polar research. This includes signing international cooperation agreements with polar research institutions, funding polar research projects, and providing opportunities for scientists to conduct international scientific research cooperation. At the same time, with regard to the development and utilization of Arctic resources and Arctic waterways, China should strengthen dialogue and exchanges with Arctic countries, Arctic stakeholders, and Arctic indigenous peoples, assist Arctic countries and the international community in jointly developing and enforcing fair and reasonable international rules for the sustainable development of Arctic resources and passage through Arctic waterways, and improve the delivery of relevant public goods. Particular emphasis is placed on the need to "strive for a more inclusive, equitable, and coordinated Arctic Council" (Tán, 2023).

This brings Chinese scholars and experts to the central and most controversial thesis of the argument concerning the Arctic Council. It is well known that the Council's status as a fully-fledged international organization has been disputed for several years due to the fact that its founding provisions are set out in a ministerial declaration rather than in a legally binding international document. The Chinese viewpoint is as follows: "Some view this as a weakness; their inclination is to take steps as quickly as possible to turn the Council into a fully-fledged intergovernmental organization with a recognized legal personality. In our judgment, this line of thinking reflects a mistaken view regarding the role of the Council in addressing issues of governance in the high northern latitudes. The Arctic Council is not destined to become a body capable of making and implementing authoritative decisions on a range of issues of interest to the Arctic states and others with growing interests in Arctic affairs. Rather, the influence of the Council lies in its capacity to provide early warning regarding emerging issues, mount well-respected monitoring services, offer an informal venue to hammer out the terms of agreements regarding a variety of specific issues, and exercise convening power allowing a wide range of parties to interact with one another and explore issues of common concern on an informal basis" (Yang, 2023).

This interpretation of the Arctic Council's role allows China to minimize its status as an observer state rather than a full member. On the other hand, it opens up the possibility of participating in Arctic governance at various levels and in a wide variety of formats.

In this regard, Chinese scientists and experts recommend strengthening constructive dialogue with Arctic nations and other stakeholders, and improving various cooperation mechanisms in which non-Arctic nations can participate on the basis of international law, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and to promote international cooperation in the fields of Arctic scientific research, environmental protection, shipping and sustainable development. In particular, it is recommended to "effectively use the power of discourse on multilateral platforms,

shape the image of a responsible major country and gradually dispel the outside world's doubts regarding China's participation in Arctic affairs" (Lǐ, 2019).

The key to successful participation in Arctic governance is the development of interaction and cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic, and there is complete consensus on this among Chinese specialists and experts. They call for strengthening coordination between the two sides in various working groups of the Arctic Council, exploring the formulation of medium- and long-term plans for Arctic cooperation, enhancing the level and predictability of institutional mechanisms for Arctic development, and stimulating the internal driving force for pragmatic cooperation. They believe that China and Russia are the largest priority partners for Arctic development cooperation and are engaged in fruitful cooperation in climate change studies, scientific research, waterway development and use, energy development, infrastructure construction, and other aspects (Lǐ, 2019).

China places particular emphasis on participating in a wide range of sectoral bodies involved in Arctic governance. For example, in order to participate more effectively in the establishment, implementation and improvement of international regimes for the management of Arctic fishery resources, China is encouraged to expand its scientific research in the central Arctic Ocean, accumulate and share knowledge on fishery resources; make more active use of non-state actors; strengthen and establish regional organizations or agreements on fisheries management (Táng, Xià, 2022).

The same applies to energy cooperation in the Arctic. In order to maximize the shared value of Arctic energy development between China and Russia, it is necessary to establish a comprehensive, multidimensional, and closely interconnected legal protection system for Arctic energy development by combining international conventions, regional agreements, bilateral energy development agreements, and specialized domestic legal systems (Cài, Zhūdān, 2021).

Apparently, the prospects for China's participation in the Arctic governance system are linked to intensifying work in the above-mentioned areas, including engagement in Arctic Council working groups and various sectoral bodies of Arctic governance involving state and non-state actors.

Conclusion

China has been accumulating practical experience in Arctic governance for some time, while simultaneously focusing on its scientific and theoretical analysis. This took place against the backdrop of the emergence of new doctrinal frameworks regarding China's role in global governance, in particular the concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind" and the White Paper on China's Arctic Policy.

This, in turn, made it possible to develop a framework of theoretical arguments for the protection of China's national interests in the Arctic, which underpinned China's participation in Arctic governance. The geopolitical context of China's participation in Arctic governance, as perceived in

China, is defined by the tension between efforts to build trust and traditional skepticism regarding China as a non-Arctic state. Therefore, China's future involvement in Arctic affairs is likely to be shaped by dialectic of cooperation and confrontation. China understands that, in these circumstances, it needs to develop interaction and cooperation with Russia in the Arctic region in order to strengthen its position.

The views of Chinese scholars and experts on the Arctic governance model are close to those of Russian specialists, who believe that the Arctic governance model is based on a three-tiered model, including government, business, and civil society institutions. There is also a common understanding that the Arctic Council is not a "self-sufficient" Arctic governance body, but rather a platform for coordinating joint activities across various sectors of regional Arctic governance, within which China seeks to act as a provider of "international public goods in the Arctic".

The prospects for China's participation in the Arctic governance system are linked to the intensification of work in various areas, including membership in Arctic Council working groups and various sectoral bodies of Arctic governance involving state and non-state actors.

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