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Evolution of the Scientific Agenda in China's Arctic Policy

Nikolay A. Nikolaev^{1✉}, Research Assistant

¹ Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences, ul. Profsoyuznaya, 23, Moscow, Russia

¹ nikolaev.science@inbox.ru ✉, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8624-7829>

Abstract. This article examines the process of shaping China's scientific agenda in the Arctic. In the 1990s–2000s, the Chinese academic community focused its efforts on laying the foundations of scientific activities in the Arctic, including the development of research programs, recruiting staff and expedition teams, building the infrastructure of research institutions, and improving public administration and logistics. In the mid-2000s and early 2010s, Arctic scientific research and observation became a higher priority than Antarctic activities within the framework of China's polar policy. In particular, China became actively involved in the international scientific community's activities in the Arctic, including the organisation of the 4th International Polar Year through the implementation of the Chinese Action Plan for 2007–2009. During the period under review, Beijing has sought to convert its “scientific contribution” to Arctic exploration into a resource for international political self-positioning (as a “strong polar power”) and to strengthen the case for China's application for observer status in the Arctic Council. At the same time, China is becoming actively involved in the institutionalization of international scientific organizations of non-Arctic states, such as the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences and the Pacific Arctic Group. In the 2010s, Chinese scientific activity in the Arctic expanded. Against the backdrop of the growing importance of China's new economic policy direction and the investment activity of Chinese businesses in the Arctic, the scientific aspect is gradually moving into the background. Following China's granting of observer status in the Arctic Council in May 2013, Chinese research institutes have become involved in the scientific and expert activities of the Arctic Council's working groups. At the same time, the regulatory framework for the scientific dimension of China's Arctic policy is being improved, as it is being developed as an integral part of China's policy in the polar regions and on the “four new strategic frontier”.

Keywords: *China's Arctic scientific agenda, scientific research, China's policy in the polar regions, strong polar power, International Polar Year, Arctic Council*

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Formation of China's Arctic scientific agenda in the 1990s–2000s

From the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, scientific activity remained the primary and sole focus of China's engagement in the Arctic, combined with its Antarctic activities as part of China's polar policy. The rights acquired by China as a result of its accession to the 1925 Spitsbergen Trea-

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ty served as a foundation that enabled Beijing to secure a long-term presence in the Arctic through the opening in 2004 of its first Arctic research station, Huanghe.

In 1989, the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) was established under the State Oceanic Administration (SOA). Work began on establishing a system of Arctic-focused research institutes, including through the reorganization of departments within the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences, and several other universities. The All-China Symposium on Arctic Research (1994) served as a platform for coordinating studies at the national level.

From 1991 to 1996, institutes of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), divisions of the SOA, and universities, including those in Hong Kong, established scientific collaboration with universities in northern Canada, Svalbard and Norway, Greenland (Denmark), and the North Slope Borough of Alaska (USA) in the fields of climate change, atmospheric physics, meteorology, fisheries resources, and the ecology and biology of the Arctic Ocean ¹.

The lack of transportation and logistics capabilities in China, which limited independent Arctic expeditions in the early 1990s, was temporarily addressed by the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences through the development of cooperation in academic exchanges, which involved the participation of Chinese scientists in expeditions organized by Norway, the United Kingdom, and Germany in the Arctic.

In 1992, by a decision of the Science and Technology Council of China, the Arctic Research Preparation Group (the Group) was established to lay the foundations for the Arctic scientific agenda of Beijing's polar policy. On July 24, 1993, the CAS approved the long-term plan for Arctic scientific research presented by the Group in its scientific report, "Concept and Plan for the Sector of Global Climate Change Research and Arctic Scientific Development" ². In late February 1994, to coordinate the scientific activities of researchers, the Group held the First All-China Symposium on Arctic Research, during which the "Program of Key Projects and Priority Areas for Arctic Research" was approved, along with an action plan for its implementation for 1995–1996.

Following the completion of the formulation of the Arctic scientific agenda for Beijing's polar policy, the main objectives of which were to study the impact of climate change in the Arctic and to integrate China into the emerging system of scientific cooperation, its implementation began in the mid- and late 1990s.

By the end of 1994, the Science and Technology Council of China and the Chinese Academy of Sciences organized the first Arctic scientific research team. The Group developed an action plan for the team. In January 1995, the team organized training exercises on the ice of the Songhua River to test the stability of equipment and instruments, as well as the physical readiness of the team members. In April and May of that year, the team set out on China's first Arctic research ex-

¹ «The first Chinese to conduct an Arctic expedition». People's Daily Online. URL: http://people.com.cn/item/beiji/newfiles/S306.html?utm_source=pocket_mylist (accessed 27 August 2020).

² China's first expedition to the North Pole. People's Daily Online (In Chin.). URL: http://people.com.cn/item/beiji/newfiles/S307.html?utm_source=pocket_mylist (accessed 27 August 2020).

pedition from a base on Cornwallis Island (Canada), crossing the Beaufort Sea and travelling beyond the Arctic Circle. The expedition's findings were recognized by participants at the 2nd session of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), laying the foundation for China's accession to the organization in 1996³. According to official information from Beijing, this further stimulated the deepening of China's Arctic research⁴.

In 1993, China acquired an icebreaker from Ukraine, later known as the Xuelong. It was a multipurpose icebreaker and supply vessel of the Vitus Bering type, Projects 10620 and 10621, with a 9.3 MW diesel-electric engine⁵. Following the Xuelong's first expedition to Antarctica in 1994–1995, the vessel underwent modernization, which continued in subsequent years. In particular, it was adapted for deep-sea research, the crew was expanded, and it was equipped with a deep-sea submersible and a landing pad for the AW169 multi-purpose medium helicopter⁶. In July and August 1999, the first Arctic scientific research expedition took place on the icebreaker Xuelong, covering a 14,100-nautical-mile route to study biodiversity, geology, flora and fauna, and atmospheric air in the Arctic Ocean⁷.

In 1994, the National Antarctic Commission of the People's Republic of China was transformed into the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA), expanding its responsibilities to include formulating all national and strategic plans for implementing China's Arctic and Antarctic scientific research and observation policies. Furthermore, the CAA system also included the PRIC, responsible for conducting scientific research expeditions and operations in polar latitudes, in particular after the completion of the Huanghe Arctic Station in 2004. Thus, prior to the 2018 government reforms, the CAA became the primary operator of China's scientific activities in the Arctic and Antarctic.

China's ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1996, on the one hand, marked the recognition of its central importance in the Arctic Ocean, and on the other, demonstrated a policy of double standards when comparing its application in the waters of the South China Sea disputed by Beijing.

From the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, China was actively engaged in the development of extra-regional institutions for international scientific dialogue and cooperation in polar research. Thus, with the active participation of Chinese scientists, the Pacific Arctic Group was established in 1999 under the IASC. It specializes in scientific research in the Bering Strait and adjacent waters of

³ Ibid.

⁴ "China's Arctic Policy" White paper (In Chin.). 2018. URL: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/37884/Document/1618193/1618193.htm> (accessed 07 February 2020).

⁵ Specifications: displacement – 21,250 tons, hull length – 167 m, width – 22.6 m, draft – 9 m, maximum autonomous cruising range – 12,000 nautical miles, maximum speed – 17.8 knots. Service life – at least 15 years.

⁶ Information about Icebreaker "Xuelong". Website of Polar Research Institute of China (In Chin.). 23 November 2016. URL: <https://www.pric.org.cn/detail/content.aspx?id=ced74186-b947-4338-a787-aa9da1237ff5> (accessed 27 August 2020).

⁷ China sends 3rd Arctic scientific expedition of 122 people to explore the Arctic. Website of Government of China (In Chin.). 07 November 2008. URL: http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2008-07/11/content_1042539.htm (accessed 27 August 2020).

the Arctic and Pacific Oceans, with its own structure and secretariat. In 2004, the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences was founded as a platform for developing cooperation between research institutes in China, Japan, South Korea, India, Malaysia, and Thailand engaged in Arctic and Antarctic studies. In March 2005, China hosted the IASC Arctic Science Week Summit in Kunming, where, at Beijing's initiative, the results of the organization's activities over the past 10 years were presented. At the same time, the IASC joined the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee (NySMAC). Founded in 1994, the committee is an association of scientific institutions implementing long-term research plans and having a temporary or permanent presence in Ny-Ålesund, Norway. Its goal is to ensure interaction and coordination among researchers and their monitoring and research work in this region of the Svalbard archipelago. The association currently includes 18 member institutions and four observers.

In order to participate in the 4th International Polar Year (2007–2008) (IPY), launched by the International Council for Science and the World Meteorological Organization in early 2007 to promote the study and observation of climate change in the Arctic and Antarctic, the Chinese government established the IPY National Executive Committee, which developed a Chinese action plan for 2007–2009, including an Arctic scientific research program. According to Chen Linzeng, Deputy Director of the SOA, this program aimed to study the impact of climate change on the Pacific Ocean and China, including through the development of international cooperation⁸. Between March 2007 and February 2009, 249 research projects involving 1,207 people were carried out under the plan⁹. According to Xu Shaoshi, former Minister of Land and Natural Resources of China (2007–2013), the successes in expanding international cooperation and the advancement of scientific research to a new level marked China's transformation from a “major polar research power” to a “strong polar research power”¹⁰.

Thus, between 1990 and 2008, China achieved a certain degree of independence in conducting scientific research and observations in the Arctic. Achievements in this area were summarized in July 2009 by Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, Hu Zhenyue, who stated that China had succeeded in laying the foundation for an Arctic observation and monitoring system, forming a “highly qualified team of specialists in the field of studying high-latitude atmospheric air, climate change processes, ecology, and the Arctic marine environment”, and successfully organizing three comprehensive Arctic expeditions in 1999, 2003, and 2008¹¹. The renewed focus on Arctic research has also led to an increase in publishing activity in China. According to available esti-

⁸ China sends 3rd Arctic scientific expedition of 122 people to explore the Arctic. Website of Government of China (In Chin.). 07 November 2008. URL: http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2008-07/11/content_1042539.htm (accessed 27 August 2020).

⁹ State Oceanic Administration: China's action plan for the 4th International Polar Year has been successfully implemented. Website of Government of China (In Chin.). URL: http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2011-04/08/content_1840104.htm (accessed 27 August 2020).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hu Zhengyue. China's view on Arctic Affairs. “Clerical Help” (In Chin.). URL: <https://www.wenmi.com/article/pysj5d003s8l.html> (accessed 15 February 2021).

mates, between 1988 and 2008, 680 scientific articles on Arctic topics were published, of which 49.0% were in the field of climatology, 23.0% on biodiversity, 10.0% on the environment, 10.0% on innovative technologies, and 8.0% on the languages and history of the Arctic's indigenous peoples¹². However, the Arctic vector of scientific research was established under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and, until 2018, was coordinated solely by the CAS.

China's Arctic scientific agenda as part of its polar policy (mid-2000s – early 2010s)

Since the late 2000s, China has been actively involved in institutionalizing scientific research cooperation among extra-regional Asian actors, including through the Asian Polar Science Forum. Within the Pacific Arctic Group, Chinese scientists are implementing a number of joint projects with colleagues from Russia, Japan, South Korea, Canada, and the United States. It is worth noting the active long-term cooperation within the framework of the Pacific Arctic Ecosystem Climate Observation project¹³.

The advancement of China's self-positioning as a "strong polar power" was the result of the activities of the "Komsomol" under the leadership of Minister of Land and Resources of the PRC, Xu Shaoshi, (2007–2013) and Premier of the State Council of the PRC, Wen Jiabao, (2003–2013). One of the first to voice this idea in December 2005 was Yang Huigeng, Deputy Director of the PRIC (2001–2008), who called for a transition from "a major to a strong polar research power"¹⁴. Xu Shaoshi made a similar statement in April 2011¹⁵.

The update to China's foreign policy strategy, which began following the change of leadership in March 2013, as well as the approval of the PRC's application for observer status in the Arctic Council in May of the same year, contributed to a refinement of the definition: "a strong polar research power" was replaced by "a strong polar power". This led to a shift in the emphasis of China's self-positioning in the Arctic from reliance on scientific achievements to emphasizing its international political status in Arctic affairs. Summarizing the evolution of the idea of a "strong polar power", the following can be noted:

- The concept of a "strong polar research power" was the result of official discourse within China and a self-positioning approach put forward by representatives of the "Komsomol" — high-ranking Chinese officials who regulated Beijing's polar policy.

¹² Alexeeva, Frédéric Lasserre. China and the Arctic. China's Arctic Engagement. Following the Polar Silk Road to Greenland and Russia. Selected Articles from the Arctic Yearbook. Ed. by J. Barnes, H. Exner-Pirot, L. Heininen, P.W. Lackenbauer. Akureyri, Iceland. 2021. P. 2. URL: <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NAADSN-engage3-ChinaAY-JB-EXP-LH-PWL-upload-rev.pdf> (accessed 12 May 2021).

¹³ Overview and Agenda Review. Pacific Arctic Group 2020 Spring Meeting. March 30, 2020. URL: <https://pag.arcticportal.org/documents/category/54-pag-march-2020?download=728%3A01overview-and-agenda-reviewbill-williams202003> (accessed 07 August 2020).

¹⁴ Interview with Dr. Yang Huigen, deputy director of the China Polar Research Centre, on China's global expedition. Dalian Evening News (In Chin.). 05 December 2005. URL: <https://news.sina.com.cn/s/2005-12-05/00437617786s.shtml> (accessed 27 August 2020).

¹⁵ Bureau of Oceanography: China Action Plan for the Fourth International Polar Year concludes successfully. Website of Central Government of PRC (In Chin.). 08 April 2011. URL: http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2011-04/08/content_1840104.htm (accessed 27 August 2020).

- The concept of a “strong polar power” is an important component of China’s maritime strategy and naval development plans until 2050.

As for the so-called “four new strategic frontiers”, these are primarily the priorities and national interests identified by Beijing in the sphere of security and global leadership. Within these “four new strategic frontiers”, Beijing positions the Arctic as an area of global governance, uniting the other three areas: the seabed, the outer space, and the internet. This can be illustrated by the implementation of China’s BeiDou (Big Dipper) satellite navigation system project. The inclusion of the Arctic in these frontiers and China’s growing activity demonstrate that Beijing prioritizes the Arctic region.

Economic globalization in the Arctic, driven by the accelerated melting of permafrost, is facilitating the development of China’s economic activity in the Arctic. The architecture of Arctic economic cooperation is currently under development, with informal institutions such as the Arctic Circle Forum, the International Arctic Forum “Arctic: Territory of Dialogue”, and, to some extent, the Arctic Economic Council as an institutional component of the Arctic Council, beginning to play a significant role. The “strategic frontiers” outlined by Beijing define the outlines of China’s overall policy in the Arctic and Antarctic and are likely to be supplemented by economic objectives.

China’s scientific activity in the Arctic in the 2010s

In the late 2000s, there was a shift in the priorities of China’s scientific activities in the Arctic. While from the late 1980s to 2006, China’s Arctic scientific activity was focused on achieving success in the study and development of Arctic spaces and transforming these into a means of demonstrating China’s contribution to Arctic affairs and securing a special status, since the late 2000s, Beijing has reoriented its activities toward implementing a maritime strategy.

In June 2011, Li Keqiang, First Vice-Premier of the State Council of the PRC (2008–2013), stated that Chinese scientific activity in the polar regions is an important part of China’s global maritime strategy, while simultaneously playing a defining conceptual role in ensuring sustainable development. In his speech, Li Keqiang also noted that Chinese scientific activity in the polar regions plays a key role in the implementation of the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2016), which includes the following ¹⁶:

- strengthening potential and modernizing the material and technical base for conducting comprehensive scientific research;
- deepening polar strategic and scientific research;
- protecting China’s interests in the polar regions.

As noted by Yan Jiang, Deputy Director of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), Li Keqiang’s speech emphasizes, above all, the priority of China’s Arctic policy (Yang, 2014).

¹⁶ Vice Premier Li Keqiang gives important instructions on my polar expedition // Website of Central Government of PRC (In Chin.). 21.06.2011. URL: http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2011-06/21/content_1889790.htm (accessed 04 February 2021).

However, this does not signify a scaling back of China's scientific activities in the Arctic, but rather the conversion of the research findings achieved into the basis for the development of an independent Arctic foreign policy direction. At present, China's scientific activities in the Arctic comprise two main areas, namely:

- organization of field expeditions by Chinese scientists in the Arctic. There is a trend towards specialization in the scientific work of Chinese scientists. Thus, some of them monitor and assess climate change, temperature and atmospheric conditions at Chinese stations in Spitsbergen, Iceland and in Chinese provinces, whilst others conduct annual Arctic expeditions on icebreaker-class vessels Xuelong or Xuelong-2;
- construction of research stations, observatories, laboratories and ice-class vessels. In this regard, Beijing is actively engaged in providing financial and institutional support for the construction of new research stations (Huanghe) and icebreaker-class vessels (Xuelong-2), supporting the development of equipment and technologies, and providing political and diplomatic support for the participation of Chinese scientific institutions in international organizations, scientific events, and collaborations¹⁷.

The organization of Arctic expeditions by the PRIC remains a key element of China's independent scientific activities in the Arctic; alongside scientific diplomacy, these are regarded as one of the main instruments of China's scientific policy in the Arctic. At present, China is in fact the only non-Arctic state that independently conducts Arctic expeditions on a regular basis, accompanied by its own icebreakers.

Integration of Chinese research institutions into the architecture of Arctic scientific cooperation

In the 2010s, Beijing significantly expanded its scientific objectives and priorities in order to strengthen its scientific presence in the Arctic. The White Paper of the PRC notes that one of the five main goals of China's Arctic policy is to understand the Arctic for the benefit of humanity and create favorable conditions and governance mechanisms for the region. Priorities include enhancing capabilities and improving the level of scientific research, continuously deepening understanding and knowledge of the Arctic, and studying the objective laws of climate change¹⁸. The 13th Five-Year Development Plan of the PRC emphasizes that the main priority in the Arctic and Antarctic for the period 2016–2020 is the exploration of marine spaces¹⁹. Currently, China's priority areas of scientific activity in the Arctic are:

¹⁷ White paper: China's BeiDou Navigation Satellite System in the New Era. (In Chin.). Website of the State Council of PRC (In Chin.). 04 November 2022. URL: <https://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/34120/Document/1480602/1480602.htm> (accessed 04 February 2020).

¹⁸ White paper: China's Arctic Policy. Website of the State Council of PRC (In Chin.). 26 January 2018. URL: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/37884/Document/1618193/1618193.htm> (accessed 07 February 2020).

¹⁹ The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China (2016-2020). Website of National Development and Reform Commission (In Chin.). 2016. URL: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content_5054992.htm (accessed 04 February 2020).

- research into Arctic ecology, including in-depth studies of the environment, climate change and atmospheric air, and the development of the foundations for scientific research into the region's fauna, chemistry, living organisms and geology;
- continuous strengthening of research in the social sciences, including international politics, economics, international law and the legislation of Arctic states, history, culture and the rules governing traditional economic activities in the Arctic;
- increasing research funding, including support for and improvement of Arctic research facilities, and enhancing the quality and capacity of research;
- improving policies on training personnel and researchers specializing in the Arctic through the publication of scientific and educational materials, raising public awareness of the Arctic, establishing new specialist training centers, and supporting Chinese universities and research institutions engaged in the education and training of specialists in Arctic issues;
- promoting the development of international scientific cooperation in the Arctic by establishing an international network to monitor the state of the Arctic ecosystem, and supporting cooperation platforms and projects launched by the International Arctic Science Committee; promoting cooperation and the exchange of experience between the academic communities of China and the Arctic states; supporting initiatives by Chinese universities and research institutions to launch thematic networks within the University of the Arctic²⁰.

After China was granted permanent observer status in the Arctic Council in May 2013, Chinese research institutes intensified their efforts to develop interaction with the Arctic Council working groups. Among Chinese universities, Harbin University of Technology (HUT) has been the most active in this area²¹. Currently, one of HUT's main areas of international activity is active participation in the work of the University of the Arctic and the development of cooperation with Russian universities to implement joint Arctic-focused projects. Considering HUT's research activities between 2013 and 2020, the university is already participating in four thematic networks of the University of the Arctic: "Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and Potentially Hazardous Chemicals in the Asian Arctic", "Natural Disasters", "Science Diplomacy", and "The Arctic in Asia and Asia in the Arctic". HUT also organizes the annual International Arctic Summer School at the university, as well as the International Competition for Innovative Design and Construction of Ice and Snow Sculptures. On February 26, 2020, HUT launched its own thematic network, "Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and Potentially Hazardous Chemicals in the Asian Arctic", which focuses on addressing sustainable development issues in the Asian part of the Russian Arctic and the near-

²⁰ The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China (2016-2020). Website of National Development and Reform Commission (In Chin.). 2016. URL: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content_5054992.htm (accessed 04 February 2020).

²¹ About us. Website of Harbin Institute of Technology (In Chin.). URL: <http://www.hit.edu.cn/11279/list.htm> (accessed 07 February 2020).

Arctic region of China²². According to the schedule of events, the Harbin Forum on the Arctic Environment and Ecosystem is planned to be held as part of the thematic network²³. Most of the Chinese universities and research institutions that are members of the University of the Arctic participate in the thematic network “Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and Potentially Hazardous Chemicals in the Asian Arctic”. In particular, the Ocean University of China, the Polar Research Institute of China, the HUT, the Chinese Academy of Environmental Sciences and Dalian Maritime University are actively involved.

China's scientific activities in the Arctic in the 2020s *Changing priorities in China's Arctic agenda*

In the context of new geopolitical realities and the transition of China's economy to “new normal”, Beijing is forced to reorder its Arctic agenda and reduce Chinese economic activity in relation to the “Arctic Seven”. The agenda has shifted its focus to increasing China's participation and “discursive power” in the Arctic, while the issue of expanding its economic presence, including promoting the Ice Silk Road (ISR) initiative, is being relegated to the background. This shift is also confirmed by China's participation in international Arctic events in the early 2020s, where Beijing has increasingly raised concerns about increasing the “discursive power” of non-Arctic states in the Arctic.

In 2022–2023, there is a trend toward China moving away from promoting the ISR agenda at Arctic Circle events in favor of a new Chinese agenda to strengthen the “discursive power” of China and other non-Arctic states in Arctic affairs. For example, at the October 2022 Arctic Circle Assembly, China, along with Japan, Iceland, Norway, and Canada, held sessions on developing Chinese Arctic cooperation formats and exploring the role of Arctic Council observer states in regional governance. In his remarks, Gao Feng, Special Representative of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Arctic Affairs, also did not address the issue of the ISR, but indicated that China will continue to cooperate with both Russia and the G7 in developing polar shipping²⁴. This statement confirms the consistency of China's policy in the Arctic, which is aimed at developing cooperation with all eight Arctic states.

In March 2023, China organized three in-person sessions at the Arctic Circle Forum in Tokyo, focusing on scientific and international legal issues of regional governance in the Arctic, as well as the place and role of Asian non-Arctic states within it. At the 2023 Assembly, joint sessions with Norway and Iceland were also focused on regional governance issues.

²² Eight new Thematic Networks established in 2020. UArctic. April 2, 2020. URL: <https://education.uarctic.org/news/2020/4/eight-new-thematic-networks-established-in-2020> (accessed 04 July 2020).

²³ Thematic Network on POPs and Chemicals of Emerging Concern in the Asian Arctic. Thematic Networks of UArctic. URL: <https://www.uarctic.org/organization/thematic-networks/pops-and-chemicals-of-emerging-concern-in-the-asian-arctic/> (accessed 04 July 2020).

²⁴ “China and the Arctic: Engaging After the Global Pandemic”. Arctic Circle's Channel on Youtube. 28 October, 2022. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTtSOPKJ55A&list=PLIOa77tmNMvQ7s_PBb_CvYfpg7IubafC1W&index=41 (accessed 15 November 2022).

Thus, while the topic of the ISR was a primary focus of China's pre-COVID-19 agenda at Arctic Circle events, the post-pandemic agenda has seen a renewed focus on issues concerning "China's participation in Arctic governance". While launching the trans-Arctic ISR route remains impossible due to natural reasons (the route is covered by multi-year ice), launching the North American route is hampered by Ottawa's protest following the unauthorized crossing of the North-West Passage by the icebreaker Xuelong in 2017 and the escalating US-China tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. Canadian expert discourse continues to be dominated by the view that deepening Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic and growing US-China tensions have an equally negative impact on Canada and the entire region ²⁵.

In the US National Arctic Strategy of October 2022, Washington reiterated its concern over China's growing economic, political, diplomatic, scientific and military activity in the region, and also expressed concern over its ambitions to play a greater role in Arctic governance ²⁶.

In the first half of the 2020s, as an analysis of the joint statements between Russia and China from March 2023 and May 2024 shows, Beijing began to raise issues concerning the enhancement of the "discursive power" of non-Arctic states in resolving Arctic affairs more frequently, rather than infrastructure issues, as had previously been the case ²⁷. Russia is currently Beijing's only partner in the Arctic, amid a growing trend of the Arctic Seven withdrawing from interaction with China under pressure from Donald Trump's policies. Trump's election to a second presidential term is strengthening anti-Chinese narratives in US Arctic activities. The situation regarding Greenland is developing as a consequence of efforts to contain China in the Arctic. US President's attempts to "buy" Greenland and Canada are contributing to the growing role of the Arctic factor in international affairs. Given the lack of interest of the Arctic Eight in the development of the ISR and the intensification of US Arctic policy aimed at containing China, it will be difficult for Beijing to advance the creation of the "Arctic Community of Shared Destiny" mechanism in the second half of the 2020s ²⁸. This is also considering that none of China's self-positioning approaches has received recognition from either the Arctic Eight or non-Arctic states.

Russia has its own long-term plans for the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). This was once again confirmed in October 2023 and March 2025 by Russian President Vladimir

²⁵ NAADSN 2019–2022. North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network. May 2023. URL: <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NAADSNreport2019-22.pdf> (accessed 10 August 2023).

²⁶ National Strategy for the Arctic Region. The White House. Washington. October 2022. P. 6. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/National-Strategy-for-the-Arctic-Region.pdf> (accessed 18 December 2022).

²⁷ Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development. Website of the President of the Russian Federation. March 21, 2023. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5920> (accessed 02 November 2023); Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era in the Context of the 75th Anniversary of China-Russia Diplomatic Relations. Website of the President of the Russian Federation. May 16, 2024. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/6132> (accessed 05 April 2025).

²⁸ China Increasing Interest in Strategic Arctic Region. Website of the U.S. Department of Defense. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3986308/china-increasing-interest-in-strategic-arctic-region/> (accessed 05 April 2025).

Putin, who proposed the idea of developing the Trans-Arctic Transport Corridor²⁹. The development of the NSR could play a decisive role in the formation of the Greater Eurasian Partnership in the future, while China's vision for the development of the ISR is much smaller in scale. Currently, Russian-Chinese cooperation is conducted exclusively on a practical level: China can contribute to the revitalization of international shipping and an increase in cargo traffic through the Russian Northern Sea Route. The likely resumption of Arctic cooperation between Russia and the United States³⁰ will mean stabilization of the international political situation in the Arctic and the continuation of the Arctic Council's work, thereby strengthening the exclusive nature of Arctic cooperation.

China's research on increasing its "Arctic discursive power"

The idea of the need to increase Beijing's "Arctic discursive power" emerged in the early 2010s amid public debate about the benefits of China's observer status in the Arctic Council. On May 22, 2013, Chinese commentator Yan Zheng stated in an interview that China, having become an observer in the Arctic Council, had not acquired the "discursive power" to influence Arctic affairs³¹. In this regard, according to Yan Zheng, China needs to enhance its "discursive power" in the Arctic through the use of economic instruments.

According to leading Russian scholar I.L. Prokhorenko, the Chinese concept of "discursive power" is broadly understood as control over discourse at regional and global levels, enabling the organization of the world order (Prokhorenko, 2023). Chinese discourse attempts to adapt China's foreign policy identity as part of a strategy to enhance Beijing's "discursive power" in Arctic affairs (Nikolaev, 2024). In relation to the Arctic, China seeks to create a "discursive reality" in which the formation of Arctic "rules of the game" would correspond to its interests or at least take them into account to some extent (Nikolaev, 2024).

In the mid-2010s, Qingdao researcher Sun Kai called on the Chinese academic community to conduct comprehensive research and analysis on increasing and strengthening China's "discursive power" in Arctic affairs (Sun Kai, 2016). Sun Kai also called for linking China's self-positioning in the Arctic as a "near-Arctic state" and an "important stakeholder" with the objectives of enhancing the PRC's "Arctic discursive power" (Sun Kai, 2016).

Chinese researcher Zhang Jiajia spoke of the need to increase China's "Arctic discursive power" to overcome international and domestic limitations in the Arctic (Zhang, 2018a; Zhang,

²⁹ International Forum "One Belt, One Road". The Russian President addressed the opening ceremony of the Third International Forum "One Belt, One Road". URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72528> (accessed 19 October 2023); International Forum "The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue". Vladimir Putin addressed the plenary session of the VI International Arctic Forum "The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue". URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76554> (accessed 09 April 2025).

³⁰ Natalia Drozdak and Alberto Nardelli, US, Russia Mull Cooperation on Arctic Trade Routes, Exploration. Bloomberg. February 26, 2025. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-02-26/us-russia-mull-cooperation-on-arctic-trade-routes-exploration> (accessed 05 April 2025).

³¹ Expert: China can use economic means to fight for 'Arctic' power. China Economic Net (In Chin.). 22.05.2013. URL: http://cen.ce.cn/more/201305/22/t20130522_683132.shtml (accessed 10 April 2025).

2018b). As Zhang Jiajia notes, the need to enhance China's "Arctic discursive power" stems from its desire to "escape the US's Arctic narrative trap" and to create a favorable international environment in the Arctic, as well as a positive image of China in Arctic public opinion, thereby effectively advancing its agenda and interests³². A number of Chinese researchers are exploring "innovative ways" to strengthen the "Arctic discursive power" of the State Council of China in order to effectively implement and protect its national interests in the Arctic (Zhao Ningning, 2018).

Xiao Yan, an associate professor at Beijing International Studies University, argued for enhancing China's "normative discursive power" within the Arctic Council. According to Xiao Yan, the Arctic Council, as a leading intergovernmental forum, possesses "normative discursive power" capable of "exerting a significant influence on Arctic governance" (Xiao, 2020). As he notes, the Arctic Council's "normative discursive power" consists of the ability to:

- define and align the interests of Arctic states, propose and adopt international political decisions, and uphold adopted international agreements and documents;
- exert a decisive influence on the Arctic decision-making mechanism and the development of the Arctic legal regime.

The idea of China's "Arctic discursive power" is beginning to acquire a comprehensive character, becoming interlinked with various areas of Chinese policy. Zhang Weipeng, a researcher at the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Center, put forward the idea of "comprehensive discursive power in all areas of international cooperation in the Arctic" as a "Chinese proposal" (Zhang Weipeng, 2024).

Russian researchers have highlighted the relevance of conducting a separate study on the issue of China's "Arctic discursive power" (Denisov, Zuenko, 2022). This brief overview of scientific and expert approaches to enhancing China's "Arctic discursive power" serves as a prologue to a separate manuscript currently under development on this topical subject, which addresses the question of the future direction of Chinese policy in the Arctic.

The results of Russian-Chinese scientific cooperation in the Arctic constitute a separate topic for study. As Academician V.E. Petrovskiy rightly notes, within the framework of Chinese scientific discourse, there are requests to strengthen joint Russian-Chinese research into the strategic situation in the Arctic (Petrovskiy, 2024). Against the backdrop of the resumption of US-China confrontation in the Arctic, this appears to be necessary for China to a certain extent. As E.G. Ushakova notes, in 2016, Russian-Chinese scientific cooperation in the Arctic achieved a breakthrough, but there are still prospects for further development (Ushakova, 2021).

³² Zhang Jiajia. Narrative Traps and the Enhancement of China's Arctic Discourse. China Social Science Net — China Social Science News. (In Chin.). 13 March 2025. URL: https://www.cssn.cn/skgz/bwyc/202503/t20250313_5857518.shtml (accessed 04 April 2025).

Conclusion

The intensification of China's scientific activities in the Arctic is driven by goals that were set out from the late 1980s through the 1990s and further developed in the 2000s, namely:

- gaining access to scientific knowledge and data on the state of the Arctic;
- integrating China into international Arctic scientific cooperation, established since 1991;
- establishing interaction with Arctic international scientific organizations, scientific institutes, and institutions of Arctic states in the area of joint research, exchange of experience, best practices, and information;
- demonstrating China's contribution to the scientific development of Arctic spaces, which could be used as a basis for formulating and defining China's role in the Arctic.

From the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, Beijing took a number of practical steps aimed at shaping the scientific agenda of China's polar policy, encompassing the Arctic. The work of the China Science and Technology Council Group on shaping China's Arctic scientific agenda, which began in 1992, was completed by early 1994 with the approval of key documents — the long-term plan for scientific research in the Arctic and the "Program of Key Projects and Priority Areas for Scientific Study of the Arctic". The results of the Group's first Arctic expedition to the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, organized in 1995, secured the admission of the SOA to the IASC.

The acquisition of the icebreaker *Xuelong* from Ukraine in 1994 increased the mobility of expeditions conducted by the PRIC in Antarctica, as well as in line with the scientific agenda and in the new Arctic direction. Until 2019, the icebreaker remained the only vessel available for such expeditions. The first Arctic expedition on the icebreaker *Xuelong* in 1999 not only marked a qualitatively new milestone for Chinese research, but also confirmed the long-term nature of Beijing's scientific interests in the Arctic.

Formal international recognition in the late 2000s of China's contribution to the development of international scientific cooperation in the Arctic enabled China to increase its presence in extra-regional formats of scientific dialogue and Arctic-focused cooperation. The development of bilateral academic cooperation with institutions and universities in Northern Europe, the US and Canada has allowed China to gain access to scientific knowledge about the Arctic, which, in turn, has facilitated the involvement of Chinese scientists in the emerging international Arctic scientific cooperation. It is also noteworthy that, according to Chinese scientists who were at the forefront of the emergence of Arctic-focused scientific research, the formation of China's Arctic scientific agenda was influenced by cooperation with institutes and universities in Western countries³³, which are currently pursuing a collective policy to contain it.

The activity of Chinese scientists ensured China's participation in the Pacific Arctic Group of the IASC (1999) and the Asian Polar Science Forum (2004). Beijing's organization of the IASC Arctic

³³ Dialogue with Menghua Bit, the First Person to Conduct Arctic Research in China: Life and Death in a Moment | 'Top 100 People', Issue 16 (In Chin.). URL: https://www.sohu.com/a/336959860_100160903 (accessed 27 August 2020).

Science Week Summit in 2005 and China's participation in the 4th International Polar Year (2007–2008) secured a leading position among non-Arctic states in East Asia, clearly emphasizing China's contribution to the development of scientific cooperation, which is so essential for obtaining permanent observer status in the Arctic Council.

China's contribution to Arctic scientific exploration, recognized by the Arctic states, has, at least partially, reinforced China's case for observer status in the Arctic Council (AC). It is important to note that in this regard, China sought to follow the example of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and France, which, due to the recognized scientific contributions of generations of discoverers and polar explorers, secured undisputed observer positions in the AC.

However, as the experience of Chinese research institutes' participation in AC working groups shows, the effectiveness of this approach is far from sufficient. This once again confirms the fact that China became an observer largely for political and economic reasons, with scientific activity being only one of the tools used to obtain this status.

During the period under review, Beijing made unsuccessful attempts to advance its new international political positioning in the Arctic and Antarctic. In the 2000s, this process began with calls from officials to transition from the status of a "major polar research power" to a "strong polar research power". Then, in the early 2010s, with the change in the country's party and state leadership and the adjustment of priorities ("new strategic frontiers"), a new approach to self-positioning was established based on the idea of a "strong polar power", linked to the implementation of China's naval construction plans until 2050.

Following the reform of government agencies in 2018, a certain degree of "administrative dualism" persists within the framework of China's management of scientific activities in the Arctic: the SAA of the PRC coordinates the construction of research stations, the drafting of policy documents, the organization of expeditions and the development of international scientific ties, while the Chinese Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC promote the development of an independent system of research institutes and "think tanks" dedicated solely to providing information and analytical support for China's Arctic policy. For example, the Ice Silk Road (ISR) and the "Arctic Community of Shared Destiny" initiatives are the result of the activities of scientific institutes and "think tanks" specializing in the implementation of special state grants on Arctic issues.

China's scientific activities in the Arctic will remain part of Beijing's overall policy in the polar regions. This is evidenced by the fact that they are regulated by general government bodies and the regulatory framework.

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