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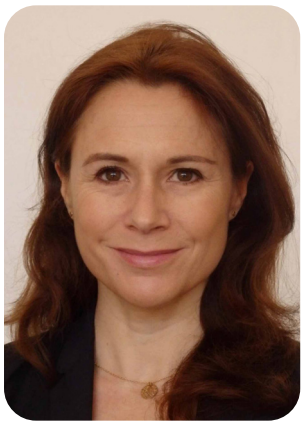

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DENG BEIXI

China in the Arctic

Expert article • 4024

The Changing Arctic Geopolitical Dynamics

In recent years, major power competition in the Arctic has intensified. Spillover from the Russia-Ukraine conflict has paralyzed the governance architecture centered on the Arctic Council, leading to institutional stagnation and diminished governance effectiveness. Climate change and environmental protection once formed the strongest common ground for Arctic cooperation, positioning the region as a testing ground for global governance and multilateral collaboration. However, lacking a cooperative foundation, Arctic governance has become fragmented, with adverse implications for global ecological security and the shared interests of humanity.

(II) China's Arctic Policy in Retrospect

China holds clear and comprehensive rights in the Arctic, as affirmed by international treaties. These include rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, as well as those conferred by the Svalbard Treaty, which grants China and other signatories equal rights to development and peaceful utilization. China has been an observer to the Arctic Council since 2013. Over the long term, China Arctic engagement remains tied to the normal functioning of the Council. Based on these rights, China's Arctic Policy White Paper released in 2018, serves as the guiding document. It explicitly states that the principles of "respect, cooperation, win-win, and sustainability" underpin China's engagement and will remain unchanged regardless of shifts in the international landscape.

China prioritizes multilateral rules on key Arctic issues. On shipping, China participates in refining the Polar Code through the International Maritime Organization. On fisheries, China signed the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean, accepting the logic of the precautionary approach, thereby avoiding the irreversible consequences of a "develop first, manage later" model. China supports the BBNJ Agreement, which will also apply to the Arctic high seas, and actively seeks to host its secretariat. China has also taken the lead in establishing multilateral cooperation platforms such as the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences (AFoPS) and the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC).

(III) An Examination of China's Arctic Interests

The Arctic represents a relatively new dimension for the growth of China's national interests, yet it remains limited within the broader national interest structure and is not a focal region in China's foreign relations. China's Arctic interests are primarily anchored in the following aspects:

Scientific Research: Sea ice retreat, glacier melting and biodiversity degradation in the Arctic affect China's environment and climate through atmospheric circulation and ocean currents, necessitating long-term observation and monitoring. China's scientific activities in the Arctic are supported by land-based hubs—the Yellow River Station in Svalbard, Norway and the China-Iceland Arctic Observatory in northern Iceland—and include annual summer research cruises in Arctic high seas.

Economy: As Arctic ice recedes, new shipping routes and mineral development potential present emerging opportunities. The Arctic shipping routes are seen as an alternative shortcut for China-Europe trade, reducing sailing distances by up to 50%. In the summer of 2025, the Istanbul Bridge completed the first direct container transport between China and Europe in just 20 days, cutting the journey by 20 to 30 days compared to traditional routes via the Suez Canal or around the Cape of Good Hope. Similarly, recoverable oil and gas reserves in the Arctic, once developed, could enhance the diversification and cost-effectiveness of China's energy imports.

Nevertheless, in terms of geographic scope, duration, and scale, China's economic activities in the Arctic remain relatively limited. Arctic states have robust legal frameworks with high thresholds, stringent standards, and intensive scrutiny. Additionally, limited profitability and environmental risks lead Chinese enterprises to adopt cautious stances.

China's cooperation with Russia amid tightening external conditions often draws attention. Russia is one of the few Arctic states with both the capability and intent to develop Arctic economic activities, and it increasingly relies on a select group of long-term partners—China among them. In practices, however, China's state-owned enterprises have exercised considerable restraint due to concerns over secondary sanctions, while more adventurous private enterprises have demonstrated stronger innovation capacity, particularly in pioneering container shipping via the Arctic passage.

Security Interests: The safety of Chinese personnel, assets, and the activities in the Arctic needs to be ensured. Accordingly, the implementation of the 2015 National Security Law provided, for the first time, legal safeguards in new domains such as outer space, deep seas, and polar regions, aiming to enhance "capabilities for secure access, scientific research, exploration, and development". Furthermore, the polar regions, as a new strategic frontier, have been incorporated into China's holistic approach to national security, becoming one of the 20 key security areas.

(IV) Conclusion

Like the vast majority of Arctic stakeholders, China's long-term interests in the region are best served by peace and stability. China respects the existing framework of Arctic multilateral mechanisms and is committed to sustaining their functions and resilience in issue-based and demand-driven areas of cooperation, such as fisheries management, search and rescue, environmental monitoring and scientific research. China views cooperation with Arctic states as the foundation for its engagement, rather than seeking to bypass or replace them. It is also willing to foster positive interactions with other Arctic stakeholders and play a constructive role in cross-regional and global issues, adopting a stance of "neither overstepping nor being absent" in Arctic affairs. Prevailing narratives of a "China threat" in international discourse amplify zero-sum logic and politicize functional cooperation. China hopes to gradually correct such misconceptions through cooperative practice. ■

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China's strategic approach to the Arctic

Expert article • 4025

It is a long-term strategic priority for China to secure its presence and influence in the Arctic. It is, however, not correct when US President Trump warns about Chinese ships circling Greenland. The Chinese already consider the island part of the American sphere of influence, and therefore no longer give it much strategic attention. For China, the Russian Arctic is in focus.

Introduction

The renewed American efforts to secure control of Greenland have not received much attention in China. There are no Chinese investments or projects in Greenland today, and, from Beijing's perspective, the so-called 'Greenland crisis' does not affect China-US strategic competition in the region. Rather, Beijing has in recent years increased the Arctic dimension of cooperation with Russia. Moscow has previously been very reluctant to let the Chinese into the Russian Arctic, but has clearly found itself in a weaker negotiating position vis-à-vis Beijing since launching the full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which has made the Russians more economically and diplomatically dependent on China. Strengthened cooperation with Russia, which enables a growing Chinese presence and activities in the Russian Arctic, which constitutes approximately half of the Arctic, can go a long way towards ensuring Chinese strategic interests in the region.

Why is the Arctic strategically important for China?

Securing China's presence and influence in the Arctic is not only about gaining access to resources and to the new sea routes opening as climate change transforms the region. It is also about ensuring China's leading role in critical innovation and emerging technologies, thereby enabling it to set global norms and standards. In China, the Arctic and, more broadly, the polar regions – together with outer space, cyberspace, and the deep sea – are characterized as 'strategic new frontiers' based on the expectation that, particularly in these frontiers, which are among the most challenging to operate in, there are opportunities to develop and test groundbreaking knowledge and new technologies. The Arctic is characterized by very harsh and rapidly changing weather conditions, so if the Chinese can get, for example, underwater drones, communication, and measurement equipment to work there, the assumption is that it can work anywhere. Thus, Chinese engagement in the Arctic is to help secure the technological advantage in the strategic competition with the US. It implies that a key priority for Beijing is to ensure access to the region for Chinese scientists, engineers, and other specialists.

China has no guaranteed Arctic access

The Chinese are, however, very aware of their weakness in an Arctic increasingly framed by strategic competition. Unlike the US and Russia, China does not have territory in the region and thus no guaranteed access. Therefore, a long-standing Chinese concern has been that the Arctic states will divide the region among themselves and prevent non-Arctic states such as China from gaining access. In many ways, the Chinese see the current American efforts to control Greenland as a continuation of what they experienced during the first Trump administration – that is, as American efforts to establish themselves in the region and prevent non-Arctic states such as China from gaining access. To promote its case, Beijing often cites the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), emphasizing that parts of the Arctic Ocean are international waters, where all states have the right to sail and conduct activities such as scientific research and resource extraction. This message is a reproduction of the main message of the first – and still only – Chinese Arctic strategy, published in January 2018, which also explicitly emphasizes that Arctic governance needs to be reformed and include non-Arctic states. As the strategic competition with the US heats up, Beijing is under no illusions that Washington will heed China's calls. Therefore, Beijing has – as mentioned above – increased its focus on the Russian Arctic, and the key question is how much space Moscow is willing to give China there.

A long-term Chinese strategic priority

Going forward, it is crucial to assess why, where, and how China engages in the region, as well as how cooperation between China and Russia evolves in the Arctic. Beijing is to keep pushing because – as stressed above – the core engine driving China's engagement in the Arctic is its determination to lead in critical innovation and emerging technologies, thereby linking the Arctic to Xi Jinping's twin goals of developing a high-quality economy and building a world-class military force by 2049. Securing its presence and influence in the Arctic is thus a long-term strategic priority for China. ■

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Strategic competition in the Arctic

Expert article • 4026

Despite internal tensions among western democracies, the Arctic can today be described as an arena for strategic competition where authoritarian states like China and Russia compete against western states, and where both "blocks" seek to protect their interests and values. This strategic competition might not necessarily be a struggle that will be "won" or "lost", but rather a lasting feature that characterizes the 21st century. In this world order, competition between states, and groups of states, is likely to remain high, where states' gaining the upper hand in the power struggle are poised to have a greater influence on the rules of the game. In this permanent situation of international competition, the degree of dominance and influence over outcomes in world politics, of the various states, is likely to change over time.

Strategic competition is nothing new in international politics. Nation states, and earlier, city states, have competed for gain and influence as long as recorded history goes back. Early, and well-known examples, are found in the writings of Thucydides and his descriptions of the Peloponnesian Wars in ancient Greece.

With today's leading politicians and scholars, often having formative years in the post-Cold War period, where the global spread of liberal values and a renewed faith in international law have dominated, some basics insights into interstate competition might partly have fallen out of memory.

Is a lawless jungle growing back?

It is fair to say that today's rule based international order is experiencing setbacks. In Europe, Russia's illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine stands out as the greatest example of this grim shift in political development. Kremlin's widespread "hybrid attacks", in the "gray area" between peace and war, are also increasingly experienced on the receiving end in the West, especially among states near the Russian border. In China's near abroad, and not the least in the South China Sea region, many will describe the situation in somewhat similar terms, as Beijing increasingly is flexing muscles, seeking to broaden its influence, sometimes by economic pressure, through fishing vessels or by "lawfare".

In this climate of new security threats, states experience that their security does not only depend on their traditional military and law enforcement capabilities. Security might also depend on robustness and vigilance, in what has traditionally been viewed as the civilian sectors. As most sectors and domains play a role in a situation of great power competition, the entire society plays a role to the degree to which western democracies will be able to protect their interest, values and norms in the future. This situation does also increasingly pertains to the future Arctic region.

While Russia represents a multifaceted security threat for great parts of Europe, less is known with respect to China's willingness to challenge the liberal and rule-based order in Europe and the Arctic. While Beijing certainly is clamping down on internal dissidents and seeks to spread its views on international law in contested regions like in the South China Sea, the Communist leadership has also experienced that hardhanded pro-Chinese external policies might hit back, creating international resistance. Hence, Chinas is probably adjusting its approaches based on experience, adhering to a softer, long-term vision of gradual or incremental, expanded influence.

The Arctic is changing

The Arctic is today undergoing rapid change. Global warming has diminished the prevalence of year-round sea ice, where large sections of previously inaccessible areas in the Arctic today are becoming navigable, especially during summer and fall. While shipping in the Arctic will remain extremely challenging, and the sea ice will freeze back every winter, much more human activity in the Arctic, both civilian and military, should be expected. As human activity generally increases, China should also be expected to become a more active player.

Beijing might on the one hand seek to increase its presence in the Arctic through legitimate activities such as scientific research, commercial shipping or investment in resource utilization. However, the West should be aware of the risk increased presence might cause with respect to dual-use capabilities. Knowledge of the natural world, such as mapping of the deep sea, ice conditions, sea currents, and operation of unmanned and manned platforms for research in this environment, could also be turned into, or facilitate for, capabilities of direct military value. This might pose a long-term threat in a situation of strategic competition. Similarly, a gradually increased diplomatic assertiveness and economic presence might also, over time, be converted into means of leverage. A potential closer Sino-Russian cooperation in the future might also alleviate China's lack of Arctic territories, giving Beijing a potential greater access to the region.

In this respect the West should protect international laws and regulations, such as the unique rights given to costal states through the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea. In addition, maintenance of cold weather operation skills and the development of new relevant dedicated platforms, such as ice breakers, should be prioritized among western states. Overall, the West needs to start thinking in longer time perspectives, not only in four-year election cycles. ■

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Northern Europe and the US-China-Russia strategic triangle

Expert article • 4027

Northern Europe and the Arctic are always shaped by world order. This essay will discuss how US-China-Russia struggle over world order shapes our reality and how we can seek agency. China as one of the largest populations, states, economies, science and technology actors in the world is at the heart of the shaping of world order, and present in Northern Europe and the Arctic.

"There is nothing as practical as a good theory" (Kurt Lewin) and – I would add – world history to understand global developments. US victory in the Cold War and Soviet dissolution led to US unipolarity, which explains many things afterwards.

US unipolarity was the basis for Circumpolar (including Russia) Arctic cooperation in the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, the Arctic Council, Barents cooperation, etc. US unipolarity allowed for EU and NATO expansion. The US provided the global public goods in trade, finance, science and technology, etc., for globalization. Globalization and export-led growth contributed to China's spectacular growth like other BRICS+ nations.

Under realist IR theory, the US would never tolerate a peer competitor as China. Under liberal theory, trade and economic growth would ensure peace, and/or lead to liberalization, even in China. Such expectations were named "The End of History" (Francis Fukuyama) or "Wandel durch Handel" but proved unfounded.

Northern Europe with open and competitive economies benefitted greatly from globalization, including business, science and technology ties to China. Denmark went the furthest with its 2008 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China. The Nordics and China also engaged in the Arctic. In 2013, China, India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore all became ordinary observers to the Arctic Council.

The 2012 Chinese state visit to Iceland led to the 2013 China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre network based at the Polar Research Institute of China, and to the 2014 China Iceland Arctic Observatory at Kárhóll in Northeast Iceland. China acceded the Svalbard Treaty in 1925, and China established the Yellow River Research Station in Ny Ålesund in 2004. These facilities are now scrutinized for dual-use or intelligence use. China sought investing in natural resources and infrastructure in the Nordic Arctic, which has been almost completely blocked. Chinese military interest in the Arctic is limited to the Pacific Arctic.

International politics today is driven by the triangle of US-China-Russia, with Europe sidelined. The US realized that globalization undermined its global predominance, the bedrock of American grand strategy since the early 1900s. President Obama "pivoted to Asia" and Presidents Trump and Biden followed with trade and technology wars to curtail Chinese development.

The Sino-US conflict curtails Sino-Northern European relations. The Arctic is now divided between the NATO Arctic and the Russian Arctic (with Chinese and BRICS+ engagement) by both Sino-US relations and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

US long-term grand strategy is clear: domination of the Western hemisphere (see Greenland) and denying any competing great power domination of Europe or East Asia. Therefore, US engaged in two world wars and the Cold War. Now, the US can pull back from Europe. What competing great power should threaten to dominate Europe, an aging, stagnant Germany, Russia stuck in Donbas? Europe and Russia will remain divided for decades.

To dominate East Asia, the US will never allow China to catch up. The US will do all to contain China's economic, scientific, and technological development. The US will never accept the three most core interests of China: continued rule by the Communist Party, economic growth, and reunification with Taiwan. China can never accept that it should remain relatively underdeveloped. There is no grand bargain to be made between the US and China. The US will never abandon Taiwan, which is so convenient to contain China. Trump is a blip on long-term grand strategy. China will never allow Russia to be defeated in Ukraine creating a two-front situation for China facing the US, regardless of what Europe thinks.

What should be (Northern) Europe's strategy towards China? Perhaps the first step is to realize that there is hardly anything Europe can do to influence the US European strategic calculation. Secondly, Europe has no influence over US strategy towards China, nor over Chinese core interests or strategy towards the US or Russia. Thirdly, ask if or how our interests compare with US or Chinese interests.

Northern Europe benefitted from globalization. How can we continue to benefit from Chinese growth, science, technology, innovation? How does strategic dual-use Chinese science and technology (aimed at the US and Taiwan) affect Europe? How can we ensure our competitiveness faced with the scale of Chinese manufacturing, science and technology? How can we benefit without excessive dependence on China? What security precautions are needed – for our own sake? ■

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Photograph by Stina Guldbrandsen/UiT.

MATTI PURANEN

China aims to control the Deep Sea

Expert article • 4028

China's four-decade economic growth has been paralleled by maritime expansion, as its commercial and security-related "overseas interests" have expanded far beyond China's borders. Today, China's earlier objective of becoming a "maritime great power" has, in many respects, become a reality. China now boasts one of the world's largest commercial and merchant maritime fleets, while Chinese companies hold considerable stakes in port infrastructure all around the world. China's shipbuilding industry is unmatched in scale; its capacity is estimated to be 200 times that of the United States. Finally, China's naval forces – the People's Liberation Army Navy – have emerged as one of the world's most powerful navies, with over 140 large surface combatants and three aircraft carriers. The PLA Navy also maintains an increasingly global presence, with operations and joint exercises in distant waters, including the Baltic Sea.

However, as we argue together with Sanna Kopra and Liisa Kauppila in an upcoming article, China's maritime expansion is increasingly looking beneath the surface, toward the deep sea – generally defined as ocean areas below 200 meters – which China sees as one of the "new strategic frontiers." Along with the polar regions, outer space and cyberspace, the new strategic frontiers are territories or domains that are opening up for exploitation following advances in technology. In addition, the new strategic frontiers are often defined as global commons or weakly governed spaces, theoretically open for the first capable mover to dominate. As a result, the new frontiers have become targets of intensifying great power competition, and China has decided to position itself at the leading edge of their utilization.

The deep sea is important due to its economic potential, not least because of vast untapped hydrocarbon resources and large deposits of minerals and rare-earths. The Chinese economy is chronically dependent on imported energy, while rare-earths are critical for numerous technologies, including renewable energy systems and advanced electronics. Although China already dominates rare-earth value chains, many of the deposits in the deep sea are located in areas beyond national jurisdiction, and their exploitation could reduce China's reliance on land-based mining operations under the jurisdiction of other states. In addition, the deep seabed holds unique biological organisms, whose genetic material is increasingly sought after and utilized in biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and other fields.

In addition to its economic value, the Chinese military sees the deep sea as a "new domain of military struggle," one that is attracting increasing great power attention. The deep sea has hitherto remained an extremely hostile environment for military operations due to intense pressure, the difficulty of communication and navigation, and many other challenges. However, advances in artificial intelligence, sensors, batteries and undersea communications are allowing the deployment of increasingly capable unmanned and autonomous submersibles, which will gradually open up the deep sea as a new domain of warfare. Some scholars affiliated with the People's Liberation Army even describe the deep sea as the decisive domain from which the surface, coastal, and air domains can be controlled.

China's strategy for establishing a comprehensive deep-sea presence consists of a combination of diplomatic, scientific, economic, and military instruments. First, China is a leading supporter of the International Seabed Authority (ISA), which oversees exploration contracts, and may eventually regulate commercial mining licenses in the international seabed. At the same time, China is pouring considerable resources into the development of relevant technologies: it already commands a fleet of over 60 research vessels that explore seabed regions around the world. Chinese research institutions are developing increasingly capable autonomous underwater vehicles, which have been conducting surveys in Arctic waters as well. Finally, China's military forces are preparing for military struggle in the deep sea by developing novel capabilities ranging from next-generation crewed nuclear-powered submarines to extra-large underwater drones (XLUUVs) and smart mines. The PLA, furthermore, may be able to draw on data collected by research vessels, some of which have surveyed regions close to US military bases, including Guam, in the Pacific.

In conclusion, China sees the deep sea as an important new strategic frontier and the next major direction of its maritime expansion. By several measures, China already leads the race to the ocean floor. It fields increasingly capable platforms and systems for the exploration and exploitation of seabed resources, while its growing diplomatic clout in international maritime governance regimes – especially within the UN system and the ISA – provides a legitimate basis its growing role. The question for other powers, particularly the United States and Europe, is therefore whether they are willing and able to follow China into the depths and shape the rules and technologies of the domain in line with their own values and interests. ■

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XU QINGCHAO

China's Arctic predicament: a transparent threat in the drawer?

Expert article • 4029

In "China's Arctic Policy" white paper published in January 2018, the word "cooperation" was remarkably mentioned 45 times. According to this policy document, "'cooperation' is an effective means for China's participation in Arctic affairs" as well as one of the four basic principles in terms of China's Arctic engagement. However, since the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out in February 2022, an increasing number of examples have proved that China's Arctic-focused cooperation with Arctic states including Russia has already come to a standstill internationally and regionally, multilaterally and bilaterally, economically and scientifically. This situation can be named as "China's Arctic predicament", which has seriously hindered the realization of China's Arctic policy goals stated in the white paper—"to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic, so as to safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic, and promote sustainable development of the Arctic."

From the perspective of the Theory of Constructivism in International Relations, the "China's Arctic predicament" is a constructed fact. One of the main factors contributing to the China's Arctic predicament is a prominent Western narrative of "China's threat in the Arctic" based on the term "strategic competition" defined by U.S. policy documents. The 2022 US National Strategy for the Arctic Region emphasized that China "seeks to increase its influence in the Arctic through an expanded slate of economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activities." The 2024 U.S. Defense Department Arctic Strategy insisted on "preserving focus on the pacing challenge of the People's Republic of China (PRC) globally." While according to the book Perception and Misperception in International Politics by Robert Jervis, several U.S. experts acknowledge that there are intentional misunderstandings regarding China's Arctic policy, out of paranoid mentality, ideological prejudice and U.S. exclusive national interests in the Arctic.

The latest intentional misunderstandings come from U.S. President Donald Trump who repeated his need to annex Greenland, part of Danish territory. Trump invoked the danger posed by a Chinese takeover of Greenland due to its key strategic location between China the United States, Russia and China, warning of the threat from imagined Chinese destroyers and submarines nearby the Ocean. Just as rebuttals from military and academic circles, Trump's claims sincerely go against the common sense regarding Chinese presence in the Arctic. Notably, China has no military presence in the Arctic region, neither any military bases, destroyers, submarines nor allies. That is why no substantive content regarding military was included in "China's Arctic Policy" white paper. Only Chinese research vessels have regular operations in the Arctic international waters for scientific purposes, under close surveillance by Arctic states such as the United States. Additionally, a policy brief titled "Cutting Through Narratives on Chinese Arctic Investments" argues that "the scale and scope of actual Chinese investments are often exaggerated in media and public debate", describing the Chinese investment projects across Arctic states from 2007 to 2025. Actually the success rate was exactly zero both in Finland and Greenland.

As discussed above, we have to say the so-called "China's threat in the Arctic" is transparent as China's incomplete Arctic capacities are unable to uphold any substantial threat to the Arctic region. It seems not hard to conclude that in nature "China's threat in the Arctic" is a rhetorical illusion based on self-centered political ambitions and uninformed speculation. In other words, China has been portrayed as a threat in the Arctic when some aggressive claims are to be proposed, and once challenging actions are taken for the benefits of exclusivity, the narrative of "China's threat in the Arctic" are put aside and neglected until new opposing-China claims appear. During this repetitive process, in the context of strategic competition among major powers in the Arctic region, China is like being placed inside a drawer, this narrative appears when the drawer is pulled out and disappears when the drawer is pulled in. To get an easy win over the Arctic, no matter what the real threat is, the narrative of "China's threat in the Arctic" has always been on call. Considering this reality, China's Arctic predicament characterized mainly by the stagnation of China-Arctic cooperation can be visualized as a transparent threat in a drawer.

Facing the increasingly severe predicament in the Arctic, China actually has little power to change as China is in a disadvantaged position in terms of development, security, civilization and governance. First, China has no institutional connections with regional or sub-regional economic organizations for significant contributions to Arctic sustainable development. Second, China has not been at the table yet when it comes to Arctic traditional security issues in particular. Third, on social and cultural transition there is a gap to fill out between Chinese knowledge and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge. Last but not least, China is far from the rule-making authority on Arctic global governance.

In conclusion, here is a paradox. On the one hand, China's Arctic capabilities are insufficient; on the other hand, the narrative of "China's threat in the Arctic" is widely-spreading. Against the background of the prolonged Russia-Ukraine conflict, these two aspects jointly determine the inevitability and long-standing of China's Arctic predicament. Then, the only remaining question is whether there is "a key other" that can help restore China-Arctic cooperation to break through China's Arctic predicament. Let's wait and see. ■

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Will transatlantic distrust bring China back to Greenland?

Expert article • 4030

China has played a central role in Donald Trump's claim over Greenland. Trump has said that the US needed Greenland for security and claimed that Chinese ships were all around Greenland. When Trump during his first presidency first proposed to buy Greenland, it was allegedly after having met with an Australian mining developer who argued that his project unlike competing projects would create a non-Chinese controlled supply of rare earth elements (REE).

While both Chinese warships and immediate game changing Chinese investment were clearly not on the table when Donald Trump in his second presidency demanded Greenland, it does not mean that there have never and will never be Chinese presence in Greenland. This article gives a quick overview of the Chinese presence there has been in Greenland, and it shows how mutual trust between Denmark, Greenland and the US has worked to control Chinese presence. In a situation of no trust across the Atlantic, Trump's fear of Chinese presence may come through.

Chinese interest in Greenland developed at a critical juncture for Greenland, and China was not uninvited. In 2009, Greenland gained sub-surface rights from Denmark. The government of Greenland saw mineral extraction as a potential way of getting more fiscal autonomy. Australian, Canadian and British mining companies which for some time had known about mining opportunities in Greenland and had exploration licenses developed prospects of potential mining projects which they would like to attract investors to. The license holders brought the project prospects to among others mining fairs in China, and when they saw a genuine interest from China, Greenlandic political leaders also actively engaged in attracting Chinese investments.

In order to develop a mine, mining developers need to develop a business case for potential investors. It needs to be possible to actually mine, ship and sell minerals, and there needs to be trust in sufficient political stability for the period it takes to return the large investment needed for developing a mine. This means that for any given known resource, there is almost always at least one geologist who will claim that a mine should be just on the verge of development. At Kringlerne in Southern Greenland, the place the Australian mining investor allegedly in contact with Donald Trump during his first presidency would like to develop a mine, there have been plans which many though would result in mines being built soon since the last half of the 19th century, but nothing has happened so far.

When China showed interest in mines in Greenland, they did like all other mining investors, they calculated the feasibility by developing plans and looking for further partners. Like all other Chinese mining companies, the mining companies showing an interest in Greenland were either state owned or semi-state owned. Many of their Chinese partners were firmly engaged in the Chinese state system, and the way to mobilize these partners was through political strategies. This implies that Chinese Arctic and mineral strategies played a role in the Chinese discussions about mining in Greenland, and it also led to worries outside the mining sector which did not know how to interpret it. It became clear that somewhere in the very large Chinese bureaucracy, there was interest in seeing Greenland as an important part of the not very well defined Silkroad on Ice. Whether and to which extent this was a coordinated effort or more a result of different parts of the Chinese bureaucracy wanting a place within the Chinese state system remained unclear. However, fear of Chinese engagement was the reason, Denmark provided finance for building much wanted airports in Greenland. Probably the American Exim bank's decision to finance further exploration of a lead and zinc mine in Northeastern Greenland was also influenced by the presence of a Chinese state-owned enterprise which had been engaged in technical advice for years. These decisions resulted in what appears to be an actually coordinated top-level Chinese decision of not engaging in new projects in Greenland.

Co-operation between Denmark and the US may have ensured that China did not get a presence in Greenland. The fear of China as an alternative, made Denmark and the US do investments in Greenland that Greenland wanted, and which they would not otherwise have done. China pulled back, because it saw the diplomatic cost of engaging in Greenland was too high. Possibly, China had also learned that discussions of Greenlandic independence though sounding potentially destabilizing were in fact not a major worry, and would not be a major opportunity for China either. North Atlantic cooperation was strong and stable. Possibly the current European engagement can show that the risk/opportunity of Greenland becoming a power vacuum is limited, but the transatlantic distrust and Trump's claim to control Greenland makes a new Chinese engagement more not less likely. ■

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China's northern energy politics

Expert article • 4031

Europe's decoupling from Russian energy has reconfigured the geopolitics of Russian fossil fuels, changing how they are produced, financed, transported, and marketed. Russian Arctic liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects have become increasingly dependent on non-Western partners, markets, and technologies, with China playing an especially important role. Within China's northern energy politics, the Arctic and Northern Europe matter in different but connected ways. In the Arctic, China's energy engagement is closely linked to Russian LNG and the Polar Silk Road (PSR), China's extension of the Belt and Road Initiative into the Arctic. In Northern Europe, the more important story is knowledge and technology: wind power, geothermal energy, clean technologies, and broader low-carbon transition.

China's northern energy politics therefore sits at the intersection of Russia's post-2022 fossil-energy reorientation, China's search for energy security and low-carbon solutions, and Northern Europe's attempt to keep useful cooperation open without deepening strategic exposure.

Russian Arctic LNG has become more politically sensitive since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Chinese energy companies and service providers have been closely involved in Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2 as shareholders, buyers, and partners across the value chain. From China's perspective, Arctic LNG can diversify energy imports, support gas-for-coal substitution, strengthen its role in LNG value chains, and give substance to the PSR. Restrictions on European markets and Western finance and technology have increased the importance of Chinese participation, while also exposing Chinese actors to sanctions risks.

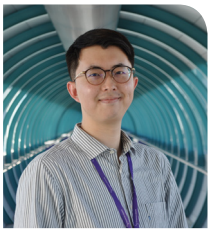
The increased importance of Chinese participation should not be overstated. Differences in market structure, infrastructure capacity, and political risk calculations, together with Beijing's caution about excessive dependence on Russian energy, mean that China cannot serve as Russia's automatic substitute. Russian Arctic gas is not merely commercial; it is embedded in wider struggles over sanctions, energy security, transport routes, technology access, and geopolitical alignment.

Arctic LNG also occupies an ambiguous place in China's energy-transition narrative. Chinese discourse has often presented it as part of this transition, but this framing requires caution. LNG may be cleaner than coal at the point of combustion, but it remains a fossil fuel. Its climate impact must be assessed through lifecycle emissions, especially methane emissions across the LNG supply chain. Treating Arctic LNG too easily as "clean" or even "green" risks creating an inflated sense of progress. Arctic LNG may support China's energy security and coal-reduction efforts in the short to medium term, but it does not remove the need for deeper energy-system transformation.

Northern Europe brings this transition dimension more clearly into view. China–Nordic energy cooperation highlights low-carbon technologies, expertise, and policy experience. Nordic countries have long served as reference points for China's search for low-carbon energy solutions: Denmark and Norway in wind energy, Iceland in geothermal energy, and Finland and the wider Nordic region in clean technologies, energy efficiency, hydrogen, smart heating, and carbon capture. These forms of engagement receive less media visibility and geopolitical scrutiny than major Russian LNG projects, but they show that China's northern energy interests extend beyond energy resource access.

This broader range of engagement complicates Northern Europe's response. The reconfiguration of Russian Arctic LNG raises concerns about supply security, sanctions compliance, and deeper Russia–China alignment. Low-carbon cooperation with China is valuable but politically sensitive, since China already plays a leading role in several transition-relevant supply chains, including critical minerals processing, batteries, and wind-energy equipment manufacturing. Rather than welcoming or resisting China's northern energy role as a whole, Northern Europe needs to assess where and how specific energy relationships create opportunities, dependence, or vulnerability.

Overall, China's northern energy politics is not a single story of opportunity or threat. It reflects a changing relationship between energy security, energy transition, and geopolitical reconfiguration. Russian Arctic LNG illustrates the uneven post-2022 reorientation of fossil-energy ties, while China–Nordic cooperation points to longer-term low-carbon transition. For Northern Europe, it is crucial to develop a nuanced understanding of China's northern energy politics and to manage China-related energy relationships selectively, preserving economic opportunities and cooperation while safeguarding against supply-chain dependence, geopolitical exposure, and broader strategic vulnerability. ■



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China and the Arctic in the shadow of the Iran war

Expert article • 4032

Will the interruption of Persian Gulf shipping reinforce the priority of the Arctic for China? Since achieving observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013, China has sought to expand its presence in the Arctic, even referring to itself as a "near-Arctic state". While clearly not a part of the region geographically, China has been eagerly exploring investment and shipping opportunities. These ventures have largely been unsuccessful with the exception of the Russian Arctic.

In 2013 China invested in LNG in Yamal in the Russian Arctic, acquiring a 20% stake in Yamal LNG (Russia's first Arctic LNG project), and later a 19.9% stake in Arctic LNG2, which is supposed to focus on the Chinese market. After sanctions made it impossible for Russia to obtain western technology for these projects, a Chinese company stepped in with turbines for gas liquefaction for Arctic LNG2. China received 22 shipments from Arctic LNG2 in 2025, despite US and EU sanctions on the project.

Three quarters of Yamal LNG went to the EU in 2025, but new sanctions the bloc imposed will require Russia to find Asian clients within the next year. According to the Centre for High North Logistics, even if all the Yamal LNG is redirected to Asia, inadequate transportation capacity and longer shipping times to Asia will mean that Russian Arctic gas exports will be cut in half.

Russia is now China's second largest supplier of LNG after Qatar, though imported LNG still occupies a relatively modest position in China's energy mix—approximately 2% of its energy demand. To avoid sanctions on companies with international exposure, China has dedicated the southern port of Beihai to receiving Russian gas from Arctic LNG2 via its shadow fleet.

Since enthusiastically announcing plans to develop the Polar Silk Route running from China through the Northern Sea Route to the European Arctic, China has gradually expanded the number of its container transits from 2 in 2020 to 14 in 2025. Most notably, in October 2025 the Chinese vessel, the Istanbul Bridge, sailed along this route to the United Kingdom for the first time, reaching the port of Felixstowe in 20 days, half the time of a Suez Canal transit. China and Russia are collaborating in the construction of ice-class container ships and training polar navigation experts to support shipping through the Northern Sea Route.

Although Putin and Xi Jinping talk about the potential for Arctic cooperation, many obstacles remain. Russia desperately needs investment in its Arctic region, but Russian officials chafe at the "Polar Silk Road" terminology—where Russia is relegated to a thruway for China's polar ambitions. China has welcomed opportunities to provide technology for the Yamal LNG projects, though sanctions have led to project delays.

Sanctions also have limited Chinese participation. New entities like the Hainan Yangpu NewNew Shipping company were created to limit sanctions to less internationally exposed Chinese companies. This company was implicated in a cable-cutting incident in the Baltic Sea along with a Russian entity, highlighting the safety risks of new players in a fragile region, as well as the potential risks of Sino-Russian collaboration in hybrid actions against western interests.

There are no signs that Russia plans to make China an equal partner in the Arctic. This is a sensitive region for Russia—home to an array of military bases, 80% percent of its gas production, and amounting to 10-15% of GDP. The Arctic is integral to Russian state identity and Russian officials were among the most skeptical of China's original bid to join the Arctic Council and claim to be a near-Arctic state. Even when faced with dwindling options, Russia intends to remain China's gatekeeper to the arctic.

The problem for China is that it lacks alternative partners in the Arctic. After joining the Arctic Council , Chinese companies energetically sought investment opportunities in the European Arctic. Many of these efforts stalled or failed, however, due to counterproductive policies and statements by PRC officials and growing concern within Europe over technological competition with China.

At the same time, the EU increasingly saw Chinese investment as an economic security threat, by 2019 terming the PRC a "systemic rival." This meant that the EU now views PRC investments in in the Arctic in critical minerals and scientific cooperation with "dual-use" potential from a security lens. Indeed, Chinese policymakers, including PLA officials, frame the polar regions—and the space and undersea technology for their exploration and development—as "new strategic frontiers."

One benefit of the "new strategic frontiers" language that PRC officials currently use in referring to the Arctic, is that it reduces China's need for Arctic partners—space and undersea technologies enable China to access the Arctic with greater autonomy, from above and below. However, Russia is loath to relinquish its role as gatekeeper to China's use of its Arctic maritime space. To the contrary, Russia is doubling down on a legal rationale for maintaining control over the Northern Sea Route. Despite grandiose plans for infrastructure development in the Russian Arctic, no ports or rail lines have been built to date and Sino-Russian Arctic exercises have been confined to the North Pacific Arctic and the Baltic Sea.

It is possible that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz increases interest in China in investing in Russian Arctic energy and shipping, though Russia may be more reluctant to provide the discounts that China has been seeking due to the high price of oil. One lesson of the war in Iran is that straits can easily be closed at high cost. The Bering Strait, only 82 km in width, is equally vulnerable in this respect, and may not provide the desired respite for Chinese shippers. ■

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PS. Elizabeth Wishnick is the author of the China's Resource Risks Substack. These views are her own.

MATTI NOJONEN

Chinese debate on the Iran war and the fate of the petrodollar

Expert article • 4033

The protracted illegal Israeli and U.S. war on Iran has instigated a heated debate within China on the fate of the petrodollar. The participants are prominent scholars from influential Chinese research institutions.

The petrodollar system originated from a 1970s U.S.-Saudi agreement that priced global oil sales in dollars in exchange for U.S. military protection and weapons sales. For Arab oil states, it provides security guarantees and lucrative dollar reserves to recycle into U.S. assets. Most importantly, it has guaranteed global demand for the U.S. currency, funded U.S. deficit spending, and reinforced dollar hegemony.

The Iran war has called into question this perpetual motion machine, threatening the dollar's position in world trade and offering China an opportunity to strengthen the CNY as a medium of global exchange. If China succeeds, it would mean the end of America's most crucial strategic asset, ending U.S. global leadership in both trade and politics. As Cao Yuanzhang from Tsinghua University notes: "Without petrodollar recycling, the monetary issuance foundation and financial foundation of the U.S. will be shaken."

One group of scholars, like Zhao Jianming from the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, argue that the protracted Iran war and the Iranian toll at the Strait of Hormuz that must be paid in CNY are shaking the petrodollar's position and future. Others, like Shen Shouhai from China University of Petroleum, sees the Iran war as more of a catalyst for the petrodollar's longer-term weakening.

The underlying reason for the Gulf states' gradual shift to the petroyuan is trade volume. China today buys four times more oil from Saudi Arabia than the U.S. Hao Nan at the Charhar Institute notes a structural mismatch: most Gulf oil flows to East Asia and China, yet the monetary and security architecture remains anchored in the Atlantic order. Meanwhile, Iran's drone swarms have destroyed most U.S. capabilities to protect its regional allies, leading states to question the petrodollar agreement—it has failed to deliver security, and the U.S. alliance itself has become a security risk.

Chinese scholars classify motivations to de-dollarize into two categories: 1. Coercive substitution: countries under heavy sanctions, such as Iran and Russia, cannot trade in USD. 2. Risk hedging: countries deliberately diversifying away from dollar dependency. For instance, the UAE—the most dollar-integrated Gulf state—is exploring options to settle oil trade in CNY, while 45% of China's oil purchases from Saudi Aramco are already settled in CNY.

Stuck at the Window of Opportunity

Zhou Xiaochuan, former Governor of the People's Bank of China, stated that the Iran war has created an unprecedented opportunity for CNY internationalization. He added that the constant "weaponization of USD" has eroded trust in the dollar, making it time to internationalize the CNY as an alternative. Yet Zhou and most scholars emphasize the domestic obstacles and global hurdles that hinder this process.

Scholars identify three main structural obstacles. First, strict capital account controls prevent the free movement of capital, limiting CNY's role as a global investment and reserve asset. Second, Beijing constrains CNY's convertibility and value, preventing it from becoming a true reserve currency. Third, China's bond and equity markets lack the depth, transparency, and legal predictability of U.S. markets. As one scholar put it, global markets do not trust the petroyuan, but treat it as a "currency of strategic necessity"—a hedging option.

Scholars agree that we will not see any rapid downfall of the petrodollar, but rather a natural "pluralization" of preferred currencies of exchange – a process in which CNY will have a major or important role.

As part of CNY internationalization, scholars highlight the usage of new Chinese cross-border payment systems. CIPS (2015) is the primary platform for CNY clearing but still relies on SWIFT for messaging. mBridge (2024) is a blockchain-based rapid transaction mechanism. Digital CNY (e-CNY), launched in 2025, is in multiple trial phases. BRICS Pay (2024) was created to counter possible U.S. sanctions and has drawn broad interest from emerging economies.

The question is not whether the petrodollar will weaken—that is inevitable. The real questions are different, and answers remain elusive: When will global markets begin to trust the CNY? Do these new cross-border systems hold the key? As Zhao Jianming notes, the current Iran war, in scale and intensity, will profoundly change the world: the geopolitical security structure will undergo reorganization, while the erosion of the petrodollar directly affects the sustainability of U.S. fiscal policy, opening the prelude to great power competition in international capital flows. ■

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PS. Mr. Nojonen's article Sino-Russian Relations, the Ukraine War and Trump as a Challenge: The Eventual Test of 'No-Limits Friendship' can be freely downloaded from the following site: https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-032-11892-9

SYBILLE REINKE DE BUITRAGO

China as risk for Arctic security and regional order?

Expert article • 4034

In times of renewed geopolitical competition and spheres-of-influence thinking, it is worth to (re-)assess the risk China may represent to Arctic security and regional order. The PRC has approached the Arctic as space to expand influence, pursuing growing activities of economic, research and development (R&D), political, and military nature. As non-coastal state, China holds no sovereign rights, yet applies its self-declaration of near-Arctic state to shape the region. Climate change is also enabling new access to the Arctic, its resources and shorter transport routes. Despite significant navigation challenges, and resources mostly being within Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) territories, the Arctic's physical changes feed expectations for economic gain and political influence, which in turn contribute to tension. Key Arctic coastal states[1] have reacted in various ways to safeguard their interests. Thus, China-related and geopolitical developments are increasingly putting pressure on the region.

Beijing's efforts for Arctic influence represent a comprehensive approach that combines economic, R&D, political and military activities. Framing the Arctic as global commons, Beijing claims the right to draw benefits from the region,[2] constructing an appearance of legitimacy for its Arctic pursuit. Economic activities include bilateral cooperation with Arctic states; regional large-scale investments in projects, infrastructure, logistics hubs, and land purchases, making China a key investor in the region. The building of polar infrastructure, deepwater ports, polar-class ships, and ground-based satellite stations also raise intelligence and military risks. Plans for a China Center for Cooperation on Development of Special Economic Zones in BRICS Countries may give Beijing an additional edge over others. Linked are R&D activities to expand Arctic-specific technology and expertise, including Arctic scientific expeditions with a home-built icebreaker. The clear fostering of dual-use science for potential military use raises security concerns for the region and beyond.

Political and military activities underline China's Arctic quest. The goal of becoming a maritime and polar power[3] and the Arctic's definition as new strategic frontier are to be implemented by the Five-Year Plans,[4] by improving situational assessments and shaping norms and maritime law and order. As member of the Arctic Council (AC), Beijing can take part in working groups. On the military side, China would be able to push its interests and project military force via a modernized military, anti-access/area-denial capabilities, a blue-water navy, dual-use means, space and cyber capabilities, including potential spoofing and deception of military GPS assets, as well as with a proven aggressive approach in contested waters. Of further importance is the expanding Sino-Russian strategic cooperation, which encompasses advanced military technology, joint nuclear-capable long-range bomber flights near Alaska, and Coast Guard patrols in the Arctic Sea.

Arctic states, notably Canada, the U.S. and Norway, have reacted to China's activities out of concern for national security and sovereignty as well as Arctic stability. Strategy papers on the Arctic, national security and defence have been updated; surveillance increased; military presence and capacity expanded; threat detection and response capabilities improved. Of growing concern are grey-zone activities below the threshold of actual conflict. Some Arctic states have also pushed back to China's economic expansion. China's 2026 draft 15th Five-Year Plan emphasizes scaling up and intensifying Arctic activities, particularly regarding resources, security and autonomous systems.[5]

China's continuous expansion of regional and geopolitical influence – with a strong Arctic foothold and as key Arctic stakeholder with economic dependents – raises the stakes for (hybrid) conflict in the region. Rapidly developing AI technology and its inclusion in essential tools/processes add risk to economic, R&D, political and military matters. As non-Arctic state, China is shaping a region partly against sovereign-rights holding states, and possibly undermining coastal states' rights and the regional order. With existing regulatory bodies lacking the means to deal with security issues, potential (hybrid / grey-zone) conflict cannot be addressed; consequently, the AC could benefit from greater institutionalization and the inclusion of a security mandate. Further needs concern mechanisms for coordination on Arctic security developments, improved early warning and military transparency, and arbitration means. Yet, the reality is also that China will have to be integrated in Arctic security frameworks – in a manner that fosters and steers cooperative behavior and Arctic stability. ■

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[1] Arctic states (Canada, Denmark – via Greenland, Norway, Russia, U.S.) hold svereign rights according to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
[2] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. 2018. China's Arctic policy. (January). http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm; State Council. 2015. China's Military Strategy. PRC. http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm
[3] Ibid.
[4] State Council. 2026. Draft Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan. https://english.www.gov.cn. Accessed March 12, 2026; State Council. 2021. 14th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035 of the People's Republic of China. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-03/13/content_5592681.htm (translation: https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/china-14th-five-year-plan/, Center for Security and Emerging Technology).
[5] State Council. 2026.

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China in a fractured Arctic

Expert article • 4035

For years, the High North was often imagined as a region where science, environmental protection and practical cooperation could remain insulated from great-power rivalry. Arctic exceptionalism is over — if it ever fully existed. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine broke this assumption. Arctic Council cooperation is weakened; Finland and Sweden have joined NATO; Western-Russian research ties have largely collapsed; and areas such as Greenland, the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap, and the Barents region are again discussed as strategic spaces. Rather than a protected zone of cooperation, the Arctic now reveals how climate change, military geography, and geopolitical rivalry reinforce one another. This matters especially for China, whose 2018 Arctic policy was written for a much more cooperative Arctic.

China's 2018 Arctic policy was remarkable for coming as a surprise. At a time when the Belt and Road Initiative was already intensely debated in Europe, Beijing extended its connectivity thinking into the High North through the idea of a Polar Silk Road. China had already built a long polar research presence through expeditions, the Yellow River Station in Svalbard, and the Snow Dragon icebreakers. Yet the 2018 policy translated this presence into strategic language. By calling itself a "near-Arctic state", Beijing signaled that the Arctic was no longer a distant region, but part of China's thinking about science, resources, shipping, energy security, and alternative sea routes. For a trading power exposed to chokepoints from Malacca to Suez and the Gulf, even an uncertain Arctic route has strategic value as an option. The document softened this claim with the vocabulary of respect, cooperation, win-win outcomes, sustainability, and rules-based governance. That reassurance worked best in a cooperative Arctic. In a fractured Arctic, the same language now sounds incomplete.

China's relationship with Russia is central to this shift. China's 2018 policy itself treated peace and stability as the precondition for Arctic activity. In a fractured Arctic, Beijing's closeness to Moscow is therefore harder to reconcile with its own reassurance language. Since Russia's war against Ukraine, both countries have moved closer in Arctic diplomacy, shipping and coast guard cooperation, including activity near the Bering Sea, while energy and infrastructure projects remain selective and uneven. The "no limits" partnership has limits in the High North. China would benefit most from a Northern Sea Route that gradually functions like other global sea lanes. Russia wants the route open enough to attract Chinese cargo, but controlled enough to generate revenue, enforce regulation and preserve strategic leverage.

Recent container transits may look spectacular, but they should not be confused with an Arctic Suez Canal. Even COSCO Shipping has remained cautious rather than turning the Northern Sea Route into a regular corridor. Ice, insurance, sanctions, Russian regulation and limited infrastructure still matter. Even if Arctic shipping becomes more feasible, its political attractiveness for Europe remains uncertain: a Polar Silk Road would bring Chinese commercial presence closer to Northern Europe through a Russian-controlled route. For Nordic, Baltic and EU actors, this is not merely logistics, but strategic exposure. Recent Russian efforts to train Chinese seafarers for polar navigation show that practical cooperation is advancing, while the route remains commercially uncertain and politically controlled.

Russian military thinking increasingly treats the Baltic Sea and the Arctic as connected theatres following Finland and Sweden's NATO membership. The end of Northern Dimension cooperation with Russia removed an earlier bridge between the EU, Norway, Iceland, Russia, the Baltic Sea, Northwest Russia and the Arctic. The Baltic states should therefore not treat Arctic policy as a Nordic speciality. They are not Arctic states, but they are exposed to a more militarised and China-Russia-connected High North.

If Europe sees the Arctic mainly as a social and environmental space while others treat it as strategic geography, it risks marginalising itself. With research ties to Russia largely broken, Europe has reason to keep Arctic climate science open, including with China, where cooperation is transparent and low-risk. Selective engagement means openness where climate science, environmental monitoring and maritime safety benefit; screening where infrastructure, data and dual-use activities create risk; and stronger Nordic-Baltic-EU coordination. For Europe, the challenge is that China increasingly treats the Arctic like space, cyberspace and the deep sea: a new frontier where civilian research and infrastructure can also serve strategic functions. ■

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China's Arctic push and the search for regional stability

Expert article • 4036

The Arctic has become one of the world's most contested strategic frontiers over the past decade as melting ice opens new shipping lanes and exposes vast untapped reserves of energy and critical minerals. Relations between Russia and its seven Arctic counterparts have deteriorated over the conflict in Ukraine, destabilising a region once defined more by cooperation than confrontation. In this increasingly crowded and contested environment, China's growing presence has emerged as one the most consequential factors shaping the Arctic's future. What is driving China's interest in the region, and should other regional stakeholders be cautious of it?

Chinese ambitions in the Arctic are not new. The country refers to itself as a "near-Arctic state" and originally outlined its interests in the region through its 2018 Arctic Policy White Paper. Its declared objectives are access to new shipping routes, scientific research, and participation in the development of Arctic resources, particularly energy. In principle, these do not clash with the interests of European and American stakeholders in the region. However, Chinese activities in the Arctic have made NATO allies in the Arctic and beyond increasingly nervous.

The source of this anxiety is largely linked to China's partnership with Russia and its privileged access to the latter's vast Arctic resources. The cornerstone of this partnership has historically been the development of liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in the Russian Arctic with ventures such as Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2. This collaboration has enabled Russia to expand its energy exports and diversify its markets, while China benefits from a stable supply of energy to fuel its economic growth.

The partnership extends to the construction of ports, terminals, and other infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), facilitating shipping traffic and trade between the two nations. Both Beijing and Moscow recognise the strategic and commercial potential of the NSR that China incorporated into its "Polar Silk Road" (PSR) initiative. The prospect of using the NSR as an alternative shipping lane to access European markets is becoming more attractive as pressure mounts on traditional routes such as the Strait of Hormuz or the Strait of Malacca. This reliance on the latter for China, coined as the 'Malacca Dilemma' by former President Hu Jintao, makes the NSR a tempting potential alternative. Beyond energy and transport, China and Russia have also engaged in scientific collaboration with joint research initiatives and exchanges of polar scientists.

At the same time, we should not overstate the closeness of China and Russia in the Arctic. Their cooperation to date remains largely transactional and focused on areas of direct mutual benefit, mostly commercial. Russia continues to guard against allowing China significant influence in its Arctic territories, despite the rhetoric surrounding the PSR. For instance, Chinese vessels using the NSR are subjected to the same access control regime as any other country, while Moscow demonstrated reluctance to grant China access to sensitive technologies such as nuclear icebreakers.

China has sought to engage with all Arctic stakeholders, including Nordic countries and Canada, but with mixed results. China's ambitions are still constrained by its non-Arctic status and by scepticism from both Russia and NATO Arctic states, who are wary of potential dual-use infrastructure and military applications. Despite these pushbacks, China's interests in the Arctic are set to grow further. Besides energy supplies and trade opportunities, the Arctic also contains important but mostly untapped reserves of rare earths (particularly in Greenland), the extraction and processing of which is dominated by China.

In this context, European and American stakeholders of the Arctic should acknowledge two things. First, China's engagement in the region is here to stay. As other third parties such as the U.A.E. or India aim to expand their reach to the Arctic, the argument against a Chinese presence becomes hard to sustain. Second, selective engagement with Beijing could prevent Russia becoming China's sole Arctic partner and reduce the risk of a Sino-Russian bloc dominating the region. Encouraging China's participation in multilateral frameworks and promoting transparency may therefore serve Western interests better than outright exclusion.

Although its push for influence challenges the status quo, Beijing also has a strong interest in preserving regional stability. Economic connectivity, access to Arctic markets, and the viability of the NSR all depend on a peaceful and predictable environment. Arctic states for their part will have to balance strategic competition with pragmatic engagement if they want to maintain the security of the High North for the 21st century. ■

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JULIE YU-WEN CHEN

Securitization of China-Nordic relations

Expert article • 4037

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, the Nordic countries recognized the new government relatively quickly compared with other Western states, such as the United States of America (USA). Although each Nordic country maintains its own distinct relationship with China, Nordic–PRC relations can generally be characterized as relatively functional and marked by fewer frictions than China's relations with major powers such as the USA.

From China's perspective, even though the Nordic countries are less politically and economically significant than larger states such as Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), or the USA, they are nonetheless of both practical and symbolic importance. China seeks to ensure that its core domestic and foreign policy interests are acknowledged and respected in the Nordic region. Moreover, as some Nordic countries are members of the European Union (EU) and other influential international organizations, China expects that, when necessary, its interests and positions can be channeled and amplified through Nordic participation in these forums.

The pragmatic and relatively welcoming approach adopted by the Nordic countries toward the PRC has, however, shifted in recent years due to a range of geopolitical developments at the European and international levels, which need not be repeated here. Broadly speaking, an increasing number of issues and potential areas of cooperation have come to be viewed through a security lens. While there are sound reasons for this shift, it nevertheless raises questions about the extent to which relations should be securitized, as well as the potential costs and benefits of such an approach.

These securitization measures have emerged across various domains, including educational cooperation, technological collaboration, and investment. They are largely responses to a series of "wake-up calls" articulated by other EU and US actors at both the European and international levels. In this context, the Nordic countries are gradually coming to terms with a more challenging China than they had previously anticipated.

Although China under Xi Jinping has become more authoritarian and more assertive in the international arena, China has, in many respects, remained fundamentally the same. Its political system and modes of governance have been in place since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and many of its contemporary characteristics can be traced even further back to its long historical and civilizational traditions. Thus, despite China's dramatic economic and technological advances, and notwithstanding Xi Jinping's comparatively draconian style of rule, the underlying nature of the Chinese state has not changed as profoundly as is often assumed. At its core, the Chinese civilizational state is grounded in a long-standing tradition of culture, governance, and identity that predates the PRC. This tradition has consistently prioritized unity, stability, and cultural continuity over other values that tend to be emphasized in Western political cultures.

While the core nature of China has remained relatively consistent, the Nordic countries have struggled to develop a sustained and nuanced understanding of the Chinese state. In the early period following the PRC's founding, the Nordic countries' swift recognition of the new regime, combined with the disillusionment of some Nordic elites with their own societies, contributed to an idealized perception of China as an imagined utopia. This early romanticization hindered a more sober and accurate understanding of the PRC.

In the subsequent era, China's growing economic power encouraged Nordic countries to view China primarily through the lens of opportunity and prosperity, often sidelining serious engagement with its political system and modes of governance. More recently, this economically driven perspective has been replaced by a steep learning curve focused on China's potential risks to Nordic security and to Western liberal values. Across these different periods, Nordic interpretations of China have consistently been filtered through Nordic or broader Western priorities and motivations, rather than being grounded in a sustained analysis of China on its own terms.

The current wave of securitization can be understood as a rapid effort to grasp the political nature, intentions, and ambitions of the Chinese state. Yet excessive securitization risks reducing a vast and complex country to a homogeneous entity, obscuring important regional, institutional, and social nuances.

The recent budget cuts to Asian and China-related studies in the Nordic countries are a worrying trend. Rather than retrenching, Nordic societies should invest more in educating their citizens about China. The Finnish case of Ähtäri Zoo's acceptance of two giant pandas illustrates this well: it was not a diplomatic failure but a case in which non-state actors engaged with China on overly simplistic terms, without fully considering the broader economic, political, and diplomatic implications.

Careful diplomacy on both the Finnish and Chinese sides ultimately prevented the issue from escalating, demonstrating the effectiveness of expert-level China specialists. However, reliance on a small group of experts is insufficient, underscoring the need for broader and more specialized education to ensure that future generations can engage with China knowledgeably and responsibly. ■

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Photograph taken by Ma Kang.

FRÉDÉRIC LASSERRE

Is China rising in the Arctic?

Expert article • 4038

Western States and public opinions increasingly fear China's growing Arctic influence, viewing its "near-Arctic state" discourse as a pretext for securing strategic, military, and resource advantages. Concerns center on China's alleged collection of military intelligence, critical mineral investments, development of a dominant position in Arctic shipping and deepening alignment with Russia, which reportedly would threaten NATO security and regional sovereignty.

Development of interest from China

China has expressed a sustained interest in Arctic affairs since 2007, when it applied for observer status at the Arctic Council and Chinese analysts began publishing dozens of reports and papers on Arctic governance, resources and navigation. China was admitted as an observer in 2013 after it agreed to subscribe to the Nuuk Criteria, ie recognizing Arctic state sovereignty and the prevalence of UNCLOS rules. China published its Arctic Policy in 2018 with a view to responding to the criticism China's goals in the region were not clearly expressed, but this document displays several ambiguities that fueled fear of ultimate goals China was nurturing in the Arctic, notably the concept of "near-Arctic State" and associated rights in Beijing's views ; the mention that China would respect UNCLOS and national regulations but had navigation rights ;the document insisting on the necessary respect China would provide for Arctic States but that these should also provide to Chinese interests in the area.

Several Chinese mining and transportation projects blossomed across the Arctic, with Russia quickly rising to prominence among China's preferred partner. The Chinese shipping company Cosco initiated a transit journey in 2013 to assess profitability and was followed by several transits along the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The Chinese icebreaker Xuelong carried out several voyages to the Russian and Canadian Arctic areas and China undertook the construction of several icebreakers – it now operates 4 plus one light icebreaker; all being operated by research organizations. Chinese companies expressed a keen interest in the port of Kirkenes in Norway; in the Kirkenes-Rovaniemi projected railway; in the projected Belkomur railway in Russia linking Perm with Arkhangelsk and Indiga. Chinese companies also developed a solid business relation with Russian partners in the development of Siberian gas fields: China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) holds 20% and the Silk Road Fund 9.9% of Yamal LNG, while CNOOC and CNODC (subsidiary of CNPC) each acquired a 10% stake in Arctic LNG 2 in 2019. In 2014, China and Russia signed a 30-year gas deal worth $400 billion which made the construction of the sub-Arctic gas pipeline Power of Siberia 1 feasible – the tube was completed in 2019.

Russia and China launched the Ice Silk Road concept in 2017, which combines the development of the Arctic with China's Belt and Road Initiative. An MoU was signed between China and Russia in 2022 framing out a deeper economic cooperation on Arctic development, and notably a pledge to develop the NSR. This MoU was followed in March 2023 by a pledge to establish a joint body to promote traffic along the NSR, and in October 2025 by yet another agreement to further develop commercial shipping along the NSR. Russia's Federal Security Bureau and China's Coast Guard also signed an MoU to cooperate on maritime law enforcement in 2023. Subsequently, Russian and Chinese naval vessels conducted joint patrols near the Aleutian Islands off Alaska and in 2024 in Siberian waters.

Indeed, Chinese shipping company NewNew Shipping Line and Russia's Atomflot announced the construction of five Arc7 ice-class container ships. In September 2025, another Chinese company, Haijie/Sea Legend launched a « regular but seasonal » container line between China and Europe along the NSR.

A really special relationship ?

Russia's relationship with China in the Arctic proves not as smooth and open as media report. If indeed economic cooperation led to agreements on Chinese investments in gas extraction, in the projected development of the NSR, Russia clings to the idea Russian sovereignty is paramount and flatly rejected a Chinese proposal to use its icebreakers to escort commercial convoys along the NSR. Conversely, China did significantly increase its imports of Russian oil and gas after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, taking advantage of much lower prices Russia had to offer in the frame of Western sanctions, but proved very reluctant to invest in the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline designed to export its vast volumes of Siberian gas it no longer sells to Europe – an MoU was signed in September 2025 but the terms can still be adjusted, especially in the context of the war between the US, Israel and Iran begun in March 2026. So far, China has also refrained from investing in the giant Vostok Oil project in the Taymyr peninsula and in coal projects in the same area, despite invitations from Moscow.

In the shipping business, indeed China became Russia's largest foreign partner in the development of transit shipping, but this is largely because sanctions drove several foreign companies away. Chinese State-owned company Cosco withdrew from the scene in 2022 and the two active Chinese companies, NewNew Shipping and Haijie, account for about 15 transits per year. Though they pledged to further develop their activities, this traffic remains very marginal and far short of Moscow's ambitions for the NSR. Besides, China proved very reluctant to invest in infrastructures to uphold the development of marine transportation along the NSR. China does not demonstrate any commercial interest for the Northwest Passage.

The fading away of China's economic attraction

As far as natural resources extraction is concerned, few projects with a significant Chinese involvement proved successful. There is a nickel mine in northern Quebec owned by Jilin Jien. In Greenland, among the four mining projects that involved Chinese companies (rare earths in Kvanefjeld ; iron ore at Isua ; copper at Wegener Halvø, zinc at Citronen), all are either stalled or closed, and iron mining projects in northern Quebec have also been shelved in the past years, as have all project involving Chinese companies in the past ten years. Chinese companies willing to bid for contracts to modernize airports in Greenland were blocked and withdrew in 2019 from these public markets. In Alaska, China Investment Corp. (CIC) owns only 10% of the huge Red Dog zinc mine. The re-development of the Sydvaranger iron mine in northern Norway never materialized so far and neither the development of the port of Kirkenes, the shelved Kirkenes-Rovaniemi railway or the Perm-Indiga railway. In Iceland, the exploration for oil in the Dreki area led to nothing. Finland had nurtured high hopes with a partnership with China, with high hopes to become the Arctic Gateway to China's Belt and Road Initiative but was disappointed and halted economic cooperation in 2022. The deepening political tensions between Western States and China, the image of an increasingly authoritarian regime in Beijing; the suspicion that Chinese vessels were involved in the cutting of gas pipes and communication cables on several occasions in 2022, 2023 and 2024, and the disenchantment about the very limited economic achievements of the cooperation led to several Nordic States stepping back from their initial keen interest in China's economic proposals.

Conclusion

Chinese companies have invested in the Arctic region and some of these projects are economically significant for their host countries. Most business investments have been completed in Russia. China has also been very active in signing agreements with Moscow to cement economic and political cooperation. But this cooperation is not without limits, as China proves reluctant to invest in costly gas projects from Russia, and as Russia remains suspicious about China's desire to expand its maritime activities in the Arctic.

The scale and scope of actual Chinese investments are often exaggerated in media and public debate. Many projects have either been blocked or stalled. Contrary to what is often mentioned, China did not invest in Russian ports to promote shipping along the Northern Sea Route.

Contradictory analyses circulate about China's policy about the Arctic. Some observers stress the fact President Xi Jinping has expressed his desire at home to make China a "polar great power," a phrase generally missing from official documents published in English. Others hint at the fact China now refrains from mentioning the concept of « near-Arctic States » as a way to appease potential tensions. Whatever China's intentions, the fact is Beijing remains interested in the Arctic area, with most of its attention focused on Russia, after suffering several economic setbacks with Canada and Nordic States. ■

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China is a minor player in the European Arctic

Expert article • 4039

China in the Arctic is arguably one of the stories in international politics with the largest discrepancy between the narrative and the reality of a rising power's influence in a region. For almost two decades now, international media, observers and various government reports have continuously portrayed China as a major player in Arctic affairs. While some have predicted that China's entry into the Arctic will lead to a shipping bonanza along the Northern Sea Route through the Arctic Ocean, others have voiced their concerns about how a growing Chinese footprint creates instability, great power rivalry, and a scramble for resources in the region. The reality, however, is that China has a peripheral role in the Arctic.

China is a player in the Arctic. It is a signatory state to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, it runs a research station at Svalbard, it is an observing member of the Arctic Council, it issued an official Arctic strategy in 2018, and its research vessels sail the Arctic Ocean on a regular basis. Nonetheless, compared to the five Arctic littorals, Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark and Norway, China remains a minor player. China's investments in the region are rather modest, the number of Chinese ships sailing the Northern Sea Route through the Arctic Ocean is still very small, and its military footprint in the region is almost non-existent.

The main reason for China's limited influence in the Arctic is geopolitics. China is a superpower and a rival to the United States at the global stage, but its influence and the nature of its rivalry with the US nevertheless varies from one region to another, depending on the power structure and geography in each region. The failure to understand how geopolitics shape power dynamics in various geographic regions is probably a major reason why many tend to exaggerate China's influence in the Arctic.

Geopolitics inform China's role in the Arctic in a number of ways

First, the Arctic is in the geographic periphery of the US-China rivalry. It is important, however, to distinguish between the American Arctic and the European Arctic. The former, with Alaska, the Russian Far East and the Bering Strait at its core, is closer to China, and the large US military presence in Alaska makes it an important flank in the main theatre of the US-China rivalry in the Western Pacific. This is why China on numerous occasions in recent years has deployed naval vessels close to US territorial waters off Alaska, and together with Russia, China staged a joint bomber exercise near Alaska in 2024.

Second, since China is not an Arctic nation, it depends on close cooperation with one or more Arctic states to establish a presence in the European Arctic. Yet, with seven of the eight Arctic countries being members of NATO, China is largely dependent on Russia as its door-opener to the Arctic. China has made investments in all Arctic nations, but due to the US-China rivalry and NATO putting China on its agenda a few years back, there is now a deeper skepticism towards Chinese investments and technologies among the Arctic NATO members, and particularly with regard to dual-use technologies and investments in resources and critical infrastructure.

Third, the Northern Sea Route has less commercial value as China's transportation link to Europe than often asserted. The shortest way to Europe from China's main shipping ports in the southern part of the country is to sail the old route through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean ports of Pireus in Greece and Trieste in Italy, and not through the Arctic Ocean. The Northern Sea Route is also less predictable in terms of timing, and more expensive in terms of insurances, icebreaker fees, and the cost of building specialized vessels. In fact, when the growing security threat in the Red Sea area in recent years has forced major shipping companies to look for alternative routes, they have sailed around Africa and not looked at the Arctic Ocean as a preferred sea route.

Fourth, the Arctic has limited value for China in terms of its naval interests. Various sources have suggested that China has ambitions to sail its SSBNs (submarine capable of deploying submarine-launched ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads) into the Arctic Ocean, either to come closer to target the US mainland, or simply as a diversification strategy. However, it would be very difficult for any Chinese submarine to operate in the Arctic Ocean without Russian support, and in order to operate undetected, it would need to sail from Russian ports in the Arctic. It is highly questionable if Moscow is happy with such an arrangement, as it would increase US pressure against Russia's own strategic assets in the region. In addition, Moreover, with its new third-generation intercontinental-range submarine-launched ballistic missile, the JL-3, China has no need to sail into the Arctic Ocean; it can reach the US mainland from submarines submerged in the South China Sea.

However, China has an interest in the Arctic region in terms of space and potentially also as a location for missile warning systems. Yet, Arctic NATO members are limiting Chinese access to ground satellite monitoring stations on their territories, due to concerns that Beijing might use these stations to collect dual-use data. In May this year, Norwegian authorities arrested a Chinese citizen in May this year, on espionage allegation in connection with a purported effort to set up a receiver to collect sensitive satellite data from Andøya Spaceport in northern Norway. This episode is not only a proof of Chinese interests in downloads from satellites in polar orbits, but also of local awareness of this particular topic or security risk.

In sum, China is definitely a player in the Arctic, but still a relatively minor one. China's influence on Arctic security is limited, and without any military bases or any other form of permanent military presence in the region, China does not represent a security threat to Greenland or other parts of the European Arctic. Russia is a door-opener for China in terms of investments, access to resources, and as a facilitator for commercial use of the Arctic Ocean as a shipping route. But Russia may actually be a gatekeeper in terms of a Chinese military presence, and in particular in the European Arctic due to the location of Russia's main strategic asset, the Northern Fleet. ■

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China's policy towards Baltic Europe

Expert article • 4040

China's maritime activity is subordinated to the country's strategic objectives. This stems from the adopted economic policy assumptions, and secondarily from political ones. In this concept, the Baltic Sea is treated as an important sea body, but currently it is not considered strategically significant. This is primarily a consequence of the suspension of the Polar Silk Road (PSR) project, which has resulted in this basin being treated solely as a shipping route. A route with maritime transshipment hubs ensuring uninterrupted trade in goods. This situation should be considered a temporary solution, and the factors that will reshape the Baltic Sea in Beijing's policy will be the situation in the Arctic region and the level of implementation of the Russian concept of the Trans-Siberian Transport Corridor and Great Nord Sea Route (GNSR). It is, in fact, an investment that contributes to the economic development of the Russian Arctic and Far East and expands transit opportunities through the Arctic-Indian Ocean connection. The Polar Silk Road concept and China's Arctic policy itself should be viewed as a potential for deepening the economic dependence of the Russian Federation and making Siberian investments dependent on the scope of economic cooperation with Beijing. Less prominent, but equally important, strategic goals include potentially gaining access to the exploitation of inanimate resources and economic and political influence in the Arctic, as well as influencing Russia's energy export policy through the Indo-Pacific. The operation of the Trans-Siberian connections, and in particular the Saint Petersburg-Arkhangelsk section, limits the possibility of controlling Russian economic processes, as it is a project connecting the country with European transport systems via the Baltic Sea Motorways. These conditions mean that the Baltic Sea will continue to be perceived by the Chinese authorities in a strictly geopolitical, rather than regional, context. The importance of individual countries in the transport system ensuring exports to the European Union will play a key role in Baltic policy. The Federal Republic of Germany will establish its status as the most important partner, utilizing elements of the Motorways of the Sea system (the Rostock and Sasnitz terminals) and the transport system connecting them to the Duisburg AG Logistics Centre. Poland's role as a transit country (Stryków Logistics Centre and container terminals in Gdańsk and Gdynia) will increase due to its connections with continental Europe, the Nordic countries, and the United Kingdom. However, the scale of the use of Russian ports in the eastern Baltic Sea, in particular, will be a political game. The Chinese authorities will emphasize their alternative role, thus limiting Russian plans to use Russian transport systems and ports as transshipment and distribution points for Chinese exports. The issue of the rules for Chinese shippers' use of the Northern Sea Route and GNSR will likely also be addressed, which will sanction the Polar Silk Road's status.

In light of these conditions, it should be emphasized that China's use of the Baltic Sea for shipping complements its land-based transportation systems. However, incorporating Baltic routes into a system of "efficient, safe and effective transport routes" poses a political challenge. These include both the economic necessity of integrating Russian imports and internal transport into the China-Europe transport system, as well as the political and economic significance of the planned Arctic-Indian Ocean link. Arctic activity, including the return to the PSR, will become a tool for influencing Russia to limit the importance of these instruments. These actions will likely modify the role of Baltic Europe in Chinese policy. China's strategic interest will be political stability, limited to the uninterrupted operation of the Eurasian transportation system. For this reason, any expansion of the American presence and the mere increase in its political influence in the region will be viewed as a challenge to China's export policy. This factor means that Beijing will also support Russian actions aimed at legitimizing that country's influence in the region and playing a significant role in the navigation control system. It should therefore be assumed that the region's role in Chinese policy will remain a result of achieving two political goals: relations with the Russian Federation and expanding cooperation with Germany and Poland. With respect to Russia, the goal will be to achieve independent organization and management of shipping through the Arctic basins and to achieve economic dominance in this country, allowing for the imposition of a formula for conducting cargo transport via intra-Russian land routes. With respect to the Baltic states, the goal will remain to ensure the uninterrupted operation of land transport systems due to political factors and to gradually expand the scale of use of transshipment hubs to create political and economic ties between these countries. A new objective, dependent on the functioning of the Russian "shadow fleet", will be to establish relations with the Kingdom of Denmark regarding Baltic shipping. In this context, the state of Danish-American relations may be used. ■

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China in Northern Europe and the Arctic: infrastructure, mobility, and emerging futures

Expert article • 4041

Introduction

Over the past two decades, China has emerged as an increasingly significant actor in Northern Europe and the Arctic. Once considered geographically distant from the High North, China now presents itself as a legitimate stakeholder in Arctic affairs, specifically through scientific research, infrastructure development, shipping, and regional governance. The publication of China's 2018 Arctic Policy White Paper, which described the country as a "near-Arctic state," marked a major turning point in projecting Beijing's northern ambitions. Through initiatives linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the "Polar Silk Road", China has sought to expand infrastructure across the Arctic and Northern Europe while positioning itself within an emerging northern future.

At the same time, Northern Europe and the Arctic have undergone profound political, environmental, and infrastructural transformation. Climate change has accelerated the melting of Arctic sea ice, increasing interest in shipping routes, resource extraction, and new logistical corridors. Meanwhile, deteriorating relations between Russia and the West following the invasion of Ukraine have intensified concerns surrounding Arctic security, including fears of Sino-Russian collaboration, infrastructural vulnerabilities, and geopolitical dependency. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has further reshaped Arctic political relations and weakened earlier assumptions of "Arctic exceptionalism," which imagined Arctic cooperation as insulated from broader geopolitical tensions.

This paper discusses China's role in Northern Europe and the Arctic through the interconnected lenses of infrastructure, geopolitics, and cultural flows. It argues that the Arctic is increasingly emerging as an infrastructural borderland where climate change, trade, tourism, and competing future imaginaries converge. In this context, Chinese involvement in northern infrastructure and connectivity should be seen not simply as reshaping geopolitical relations, but also transforming patterns of mobility, cultural imaginings, and understandings of what the Arctic is – and what it might become – in the future.

China's Arctic Turn and the Polar Silk Road

China's growing Arctic engagement initially emerged through scientific cooperation and polar research before expanding into broader political and economic ambitions. Beginning in the early 2000s, China invested heavily in Arctic scientific programmes, icebreaker capabilities, and polar research infrastructure, including the Yellow River Station in Svalbard. In this context, Beijing has consistently framed its Arctic involvement as cooperative, peaceful, and science-driven, emphasising climate research, environmental protection, and sustainable development.

A major milestone came in 2013 when China obtained observer status in the Arctic Council. Although observer states lack formal decision-making power, the position provided China with greater institutional legitimacy within Arctic governance. The subsequent 2018 Arctic Policy White Paper further consolidated this role by formally integrating the Arctic into the Belt and Road Initiative, specifically through the concept of the "Polar Silk Road".

Recent scholarship interprets China's Arctic engagement as a gradual shift from scientific participation toward broader political, economic, and infrastructural ambitions. At the same time, there are significant disagreements regarding the nature and implications of China's Arctic presence. For example, Chinese policymakers frequently describe the Arctic as part of a shared global commons shaped by climate change, connectivity, and narratives of international cooperation. Here Arctic infrastructure and shipping routes are presented as opportunities to reduce transport times between Asia and Europe while diversifying global trade networks and strengthening China-Russia cooperation, especially along the Northern Sea Route.

However, many Western and Nordic perspectives interpret China's Arctic engagement through the lens of strategic competition, infrastructural dependency, and geopolitical influence. Critical scholarship highlights tensions between China's cooperative rhetoric and the material realities of commercial expansion, logistics development, and emerging infrastructural corridors. As discussed below, debates surrounding infrastructure and the Polar Silk Road reveal not only competing economic visions of Arctic connectivity, but also broader struggles over the future political, cultural, and geopolitical character of the Arctic itself.

Northern Europe as an Infrastructure Frontier

Northern Europe and the Arctic have increasingly become sites of infrastructural connectivity and imagination. Across the region, ports, railways, digital cables, energy systems, logistics corridors, and shipping routes are reshaping how states and corporations envision future mobility and development in the High North. China's involvement in these landscapes has increased dramatically over the past decade, becoming deeply entangled with questions of sovereignty, environmental change, and competing visions of Arctic futures.

This can be seen most clearly in the development of the Polar Silk Road, China's vision for integrating northern shipping routes, infrastructure corridors, resource extraction, and logistical networks into the broader Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese firms and investors have shown growing interest in transport corridors, ports, mining, telecommunications infrastructure, and energy projects across the Nordic, Russian, and broader Circumpolar region. Well-known examples include the Yamal LNG project in the Russian Arctic, Chinese interests in rare earth and mining projects in Greenland, and growing engagement in telecommunications and satellite infrastructure. Together, these projects position the Arctic not as a remote periphery but as an emerging corridor of global trade, energy extraction, and geopolitical connectivity.

Roads, railways, ports, and logistics systems are never simply neutral technical objects: they function as political technologies that reorganise territory, mobility, and cultural imagination. This applies strongly to the Arctic, where Chinese involvement in mining, telecommunications, shipping, and digital infrastructure generates concerns surrounding sovereignty, infrastructural dependency, and control over emerging northern corridors.

One of the clearest examples is the proposed Arctic Railway linking northern Finland to Kirkenes in northern Norway. Initially promoted as part of broader Eurasian connectivity, the project promised major investment in deep-port infrastructure in Kirkenes, new logistical corridors connecting Northern Europe with Asian markets, and the possibility of integrating Arctic maritime routes with continental rail networks stretching across Eurasia. Supporters framed the railway as a transformative development opportunity for the European High North, capable of increasing trade flows, reducing shipping times between Asia and Europe via the Northern Sea Route, and positioning Kirkenes as a strategic Arctic logistics hub linking sea, rail, and energy infrastructures. However, the project also generated controversy surrounding Sámi land rights, environmental concerns, economic viability, and fears of strategic dependency before eventually stalling.

Infrastructure projects do more than move goods and people: their anticipation reshape social and ecological relations long before many projects are ever realised. The proposed Arctic Railway is not simply an economic or logistical proposal, but a speculative geopolitical project through which competing actors shape mobility, trade, sovereignty, and northern development. Even in suspension, such projects generate new political imaginaries, anxieties, and anticipatory futures that continue to influence local planning, environmental politics, and regional senses of possibility. In this sense, China's Arctic engagement reveals how infrastructure operates simultaneously as material construction, political strategy, and a way of imagining and producing future Arctic worlds.

Tourism, Worlding, and Arctic Imaginaries

Tourism has emerged as an increasingly important dimension of China's northern engagement. Beyond shipping routes and resource extraction, Arctic tourism imaginaries increasingly position the High North as a space of adventure, ecological purity, and future connectivity. In recent years, Chinese tourism has expanded rapidly across Northern Europe and the Arctic. Chinese visitors travel extensively to destinations including northern Norway, Iceland, Finland, Greenland, and the Russian Arctic, often through organised package tours centred on Northern Lights tourism, polar landscapes, Indigenous culture, winter experiences, and wildlife encounters. Iceland alone has seen dramatic growth in Chinese tourism since the 2010s, while northern Norway experiences significant numbers of Chinese visitors connected to Arctic branding and winter tourism economies. At the same time, Chinese tourism companies, investors, and state actors increasingly promote Arctic travel as part of broader narratives surrounding the Polar Silk Road, northern connectivity, and China's identity as a "near-Arctic state."

In Kirkenes, a border town in northern Norway, Chinese tourism became closely entangled with wider imaginaries surrounding the Polar Silk Road and anticipated Chinese investment. Prior to COVID-19, thousands of Chinese tourists visited Kirkenes annually as part of organised Arctic tours linking Northern Lights tourism, Sámi cultural experiences, and "King Crab Safaris," where visitors travelled by snowmobile and boat to consume the invasive king crab that now symbolises the region.

Yet tourism here extends beyond economic activity alone. Local actors increasingly connected Chinese tourism with broader expectations surrounding ports, railways, shipping corridors, and future Chinese investment. Even as projects such as the proposed Arctic Railway stalled, their anticipation continued to shape local planning, speculation, and senses of possibility. Tourism therefore became embedded within wider infrastructural imaginaries through which Arctic futures were anticipated, narrated, and politically negotiated. In this sense, tourism itself becomes a form of speculation through which imagined Arctic futures acquire material and political force. Arctic tourism thus forms part of a broader process through which the Arctic is narrated, anticipated, and reimagined through infrastructure, mobility, and cultural flows.

Interestingly, these Arctic imaginaries are not confined to Northern Europe but also feed back into China itself. Along the Sino-Russian border, the Polar Silk Road has become intertwined with efforts to reimagine China's northern borderlands as culturally and ecologically connected to the Circumpolar North. In this context, ethnic minority settlements, museums, and tourism infrastructure have been redeveloped around themes of "Chinese Siberia", reindeer herding culture, northern wilderness, and Arctic identity.

Rather than simply projecting outward into the Arctic, these processes also reshape understandings of China's own northern frontiers and borderlands. Arctic imaginaries increasingly circulate through museums, tourism campaigns, heritage exhibitions, social media, and transnational exchanges between Ewenki, Sámi, and Siberian Indigenous groups, producing new forms of cultural connection, identification, and anticipation across the Polar Silk Road. In this sense, infrastructure operates not only through material corridors and logistics systems, but also through heritage-making, tourism imaginaries, and forms of cultural diplomacy that symbolically connect China's northern borderlands to wider Circumpolar futures.

Conclusion

China's growing role in Northern Europe and the Arctic reflects wider transformations in the global political, economic, environmental, and cultural order. Through scientific cooperation, infrastructure investment, shipping ambitions, tourism development, and Arctic diplomacy, China has sought to position itself as an increasingly important actor in the future development of the High North. At the same time, this engagement has become increasingly contested amid rising geopolitical tensions, climate change, and shifting security dynamics.

This review has argued that China's Arctic presence cannot be understood solely through the frameworks of economics, resource extraction, or strategic rivalry. Rather, Northern Europe and the Arctic are increasingly emerging as infrastructural borderlands where environmental transformation, mobility, tourism imaginaries, and cultural flows intersect. Infrastructure projects are not merely technical developments but central components in the production of new forms of Arctic connectivity and imagined northern futures.

Seen in this light, the Arctic is no longer imagined simply as a remote frontier, but as a space of circulation in which infrastructure, tourism, heritage, media, and geopolitical ambition become deeply intertwined. China's northern engagement therefore demonstrates how infrastructure operates simultaneously as material construction, political strategy, and future-making imagination through which competing actors seek to shape mobility, connectivity, and the future political and cultural worlds of the Arctic itself. ■

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China in Northern Europe and the Arctic: economic cooperation and strategic concerns

Expert article • 4042

China's economic presence in Europe has changed considerably over the past decade. Earlier Chinese activities were often linked to infrastructure projects, acquisitions, and the broader ambitions of the Belt and Road Initiative. Today, however, Chinese engagement is increasingly connected to Europe's green transition, especially electric vehicles (EVs), batteries, renewable energy technologies, and critical raw materials. This transformation has also altered the geography of Chinese investments in Europe: while Southern and Central and Eastern Europe initially attracted attention because of transport infrastructure and manufacturing projects, Northern Europe has become important for different reasons, including technological capabilities, innovation ecosystems, stable regulatory environments, and access to the Arctic region.

Compared to other parts of Europe, Chinese investments in Northern Europe remain relatively limited in volume. Nevertheless, they are often concentrated in sensitive sectors. Nordic countries have attracted Chinese interest in clean technologies, battery value chains, digital infrastructure, maritime industries, and Arctic-related projects. Consequently, governments have become increasingly cautious regarding economic dependencies and security risks. Chinese activities are therefore assessed not only through an economic lens but also through geopolitical and national security considerations.

One of the most important areas of Chinese involvement is the EV sector. Europe's green transition has increased demand for batteries, related materials and technologies. Chinese battery producers and suppliers have become deeply embedded in global EV supply chains, making cooperation economically attractive for many European countries. In Northern Europe, access to critical minerals and low-carbon energy has created favourable conditions for battery-related investments and industrial partnerships. Finland, for example, has attracted attention because of its nickel and cobalt resources and refining capacities, while Sweden has aimed to position itself as a leader in sustainable battery production and green industrial transformation. The Swedish automotive sector also illustrates the complexity of Europe's economic relationship with China: Volvo Cars remains closely linked to the Chinese Geely Group, while European battery producers such as Northvolt have relied heavily on Asian, including Chinese, supply chains and technologies.

At the same time, the experience of other European regions has highlighted the risks connected to excessive dependence on Chinese suppliers and technologies. Policymakers increasingly worry that Europe could replace its earlier dependence on Russian energy with new dependencies in strategically important green industries. Concerns related to subsidies, unfair competition, and supply-chain vulnerabilities have therefore become central elements of the European debate on Chinese EV and battery investments. For Northern European economies, cooperation with Chinese firms may bring capital, jobs, technological know-how, and integration into global industrial networks, but it also raises concerns about technological dependence and external influence in critical industries.

The Arctic dimension further increases the importance of Northern Europe. China has repeatedly described itself as a "near-Arctic state" and has shown interest in Arctic shipping routes, energy projects, scientific cooperation, and critical raw materials. Chinese companies, including COSCO, have explored the commercial potential of Arctic maritime routes and related logistics projects, although many earlier infrastructure plans involving Chinese actors did not materialise. In Norway, discussions surrounding the potential development of Kirkenes as a future Arctic logistics hub attracted particular attention. Supporters argued that cooperation with China could strengthen regional development and connectivity, while critics emphasised the security implications of Chinese involvement in infrastructure located close to sensitive Arctic and military regions.

Russia's war against Ukraine has further intensified these concerns. Security considerations have become more prominent, and governments have become increasingly cautious regarding external influence in critical sectors. Similar concerns have also shaped Nordic debates surrounding Huawei and 5G networks. As a consequence, many Northern European states have tightened investment screening mechanisms and adopted a more restrictive approach toward Chinese participation in strategically important projects.

Despite growing caution, economic cooperation between China and Northern Europe is unlikely to disappear, as both sides continue to share strong interests in several innovative and strategically important sectors. The key challenge for Northern European countries will therefore be how to benefit from economic cooperation with China while simultaneously reducing strategic vulnerabilities and maintaining technological and political autonomy. ■

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China in Northern Europe and the Arctic

Expert article • 4043

China in the Nordic countries: mutual dependency

In the 1990s, the Nordic companies Ericsson, Nokia, Statoil, and Wärtsilä were among the first to invest in China and participate in the transformation of the Chinese economy. For some 30 years, trade between the regions also developed in a relatively balanced way. In 2010, Chinese companies started investing in Northern Europe with Geely's acquisition of Volvo Cars in Sweden, followed by China Bluestar's acquisition of the Norwegian silicone group Elkem in 2011. Then came the era of China's new "wolf warrior diplomacy". Tensions arose about human rights, and five years of diplomatic crisis and economic sanctions against Norway followed the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize selection.

But the real turning point was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and related China-Russia alignment. The direct negative impact on the region's security led to Finland and Sweden joining NATO in 2023-2024. The Nordic countries strengthened their foreign direct investment control mechanisms and de-risking measures. Examples are 5G bans on Huawei and ZTE, Sweden's rejection of Chinese investment in the electric battery sector, and reduced dependence on Chinese supply chains. China, however, remains the Nordic countries' main trading partner in Asia and a key export market in areas including energy and minerals, agricultural products and seafood, medical products, industrial machinery, chemicals, and pulp and paper. Nordic companies also still have a strong presence in China and work with Chinese competitors on high-tech innovations in the maritime sector and areas such as green transition, digital economy, artificial intelligence and new energies like wind power.

China in the Baltics: great disenchantment

In 2012, the Baltic republics joined China's partnership with 16 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (the "16+1" format). The aim was to open new export markets and secure funding for major infrastructure projects. In Latvia, it would support development of the port of Riga and connections to the China-Europe rail corridor. The results were disappointing in terms of both Chinese exports and investments, with significant tensions also arising regarding human rights. In 2021, Lithuania decided to host a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius, a decision that earned it strong US support and severe economic retaliation from China. In 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic republics withdrew from the China-CEE partnership. Russia is an existential threat to the Baltic States, and Sino-Russian alignment makes cooperation difficult despite new diplomatic efforts.

China's Arctic Policy and Polar Silk Road: impasse

China inaugurated its Yellow River Station in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard in 2004 and was granted permanent observer status with the Arctic Council in 2013. In 2018, China described itself as a "quasi-Arctic state" in 2018 and began promoting the "Polar Silk Road", the maritime trade route connecting China to Europe along the Northern Sea Route. It could halve shipping time between China and Europe and greatly facilitate trade, particularly with Northern Europe. But the PSR's development depends entirely on Russia, which controls shipping along its Arctic coastline. Russia is collaborating with China in energy and resources but has no interest in a successful China-Europe maritime trade route.

The number of ships making the crossing increased steadily until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which radically changed the situation. The successful 2025 voyage of the China-linked container ship "Istanbul Bridge" from the port of Ningbo in China to the British port of Felixstowe in 20 days via the Arctic route (it would take 40 days via the Suez Canal), masks a strategic impasse and a long pause in cooperation with Finland and Norway on potential logistics hubs such as Kirkenes and Helsinki along the new maritime corridor.

China in Greenland: a long-term strategy but limited presence

Over the past decade, China has launched several investment projects in Greenland in the mining sector (coal, iron, copper, zinc, rare earth elements), transport infrastructure (Finnish airports), and telecommunications (an undersea cable and satellite station in Nuuk). In 2016, Huawei Marine contributed to the extension of the Greenland Connect North undersea cable, and the Greenlandic government signed a scientific cooperation agreement with China. But in 2021, Greenland's Parliament banned uranium mining, thus preventing China from investing in the Kvanefjeld rare earth mining project. Most other projects were also abandoned following intervention by Denmark and/or US pressure. As of 2026, China's presence in Greenland is very limited, including some mining, scientific research, and, undoubtedly, the gathering of information. China is patient but lacks the means to act. ■

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China in Northern Europe and the Arctic

Expert article • 4044

The Arctic region is not high on China's strategic agenda. China has a long-standing record of engagement in Arctic scientific research, institutional cooperation, resource extraction and navigation. As a global power, China establishes an economic, political and security-driven strategic foothold in all the world's regions. This approach allows China to influence regional agendas to further its interests and acquire the knowledge and network to swiftly increase or decrease its engagement in future should its interests change.

For the past two decades, China has worked hard to establish an Arctic profile as a benevolent power that not only promotes its own interests. Beijing also claims to pursue the common interests of states and societies. China has plugged into regional needs for funding for climate and environmental research, allowing it to position itself as an Arctic player with legitimate regional interests. Seemingly benevolent policies such as opening research stations and participating in negotiating a ban on commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean have been used to strengthen China's strategic interests in becoming an insider of regional activities and negotiations. Its position has allowed China to learn how to operate under extreme environmental Arctic conditions, test dual-use equipment such as uncrewed underwater vehicles and sonar systems, conduct dual-use surveillance and acquire knowhow from other Arctic nations.

China's region-wide engagement has been pursued alongside a comprehensive military, economic and scientific strategic partnership with Russia. Despite the war in Ukraine, Russia has not scaled down its commitment to develop its Arctic region from the Barents Sea to the Bering Strait. The Northern Sea Route connects Russia to China, encouraging the two countries to cooperate on developing the energy and shipping potential of Russia's Arctic coastline. The route also facilitates expanding military-strategic collaboration to benefit their economies while posing a hard power threat to the United States and its allies.

China is a critical enabler of Russia's force posture across the Arctic, contributing the financial and technological muscle that allows Russia to establish a credible deterrent against NATO allies and partners. In the Bering Sea part of the Arctic, China and Russia conduct joint operations, such as joint strategic bomber patrols and joint China Coast Guard and Russian Border Service patrols, in and near US and Canadian waters and airspace. Beijing and Moscow have also established base-sharing arrangements below the Bering Sea entrance to the Arctic at the Sea of Okhotsk.

In the Barents Sea part of the Arctic in the European High North, Beijing prefers that Russia poses a hard power threat to the US and its NATO allies rather than establishing a military presence of its own, which would require major resources and attention. China is engaged in plenty of other hotspots that are more immediate concerns for its own markets, such as the Taiwan Straits, the Korean Peninsula, the South and East China Seas, Central and South Asia, and the South Pacific. Consequently, Russia-China cooperation in the European Arctic is mainly dual-use. For example, in September 2025 China-controlled container line Sea Legend launched the first direct shipping path via the Northern Sea Route. The container route is commercial but will allow China the option to conduct intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations and transport military cargo across the Arctic. Russia's state corporation Rosatom and China's NewNew Shipping are also building five ice-class container ships for year-round operation on the Northern Sea Route from 2030. This project exemplifies the mounting hybrid challenges stemming from the two countries' economic and strategic cooperation.

In addition to cooperating on shipping along the Northern Sea Route, Russia and China are building an extensive seabed-to-space sensor network. This will challenge the ability of US and allied submarines to remain undetected.

Furthermore, China's presence is slowly spreading across the Arctic as it strengthens its military cooperation with Russia. In September 2024, China participated in Russia's Ocean 2024 naval exercise with four warships and the fifteen aircraft, and the two countries held the joint naval and air exercise Northern/Interaction-2024 (or North-Joint 2024) during which the Chinese military participated in operations at the Bering Sea end of the Arctic and in the Sea of Japan. Such Russia-China exercises have focused on anti-submarine warfare , air defense, anti-uncrewed aerial system operations, and anti-sea drone warfare.

While working closely with Russia to secure its economic and strategic interests in the Arctic, China acquires capabilities and establishes a foothold so that it can operate independently across the region and build a military presence in case its priorities change. At present, Beijing operates three heavy domestically built icebreakers. ■

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China in Northern Europe and the Arctic

Expert article • 4045

Northern Europe has re-emerged as a key geopolitical focal point in the rivalry between the West and Russia, with the Arctic forming a central sub-region. During the Cold War, the Arctic played a major role in nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, the region lost much of its strategic significance and was viewed as an exceptional "area of peace and dialogue" between Russia and the West. This changed as great-power competition intensified, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Arctic's military and economic importance to Russia, together with the NATO accessions of Finland and Sweden, has further increased the strategic significance of Northern Europe and the Arctic.

One of the most important geopolitical developments in the region has been the emergence of China as a new Arctic actor. As a global power, China has sought to expand its political and economic influence in the North. Beijing argues that non-Arctic states possess legitimate interests in the region, and the country has described itself as a "near-Arctic state" in efforts to normalise its role in shaping regional rules and institutions.

China's official rhetoric has emphasised scientific cooperation, climate research, sustainability, and indigenous issues, but its Arctic interests are primarily economic and strategic. Beijing is particularly interested in energy resources, critical minerals, fisheries, future shipping routes, and space assets. In 2018, China linked Arctic sea routes to the Belt and Road Initiative through the concept of a "Polar Silk Road."

Arctic shipping routes could improve China's energy security, diversify trade routes, reduce dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints, and shorten transport distances to Europe. However, the Northern Sea Route is unlikely to become a major global trade corridor because of harsh conditions and limited infrastructure. Chinese companies have experimented with Arctic transit shipping for years, but regular container traffic remains limited. Nevertheless, Beijing continues to encourage firms to participate in Arctic infrastructure projects and commercial trial voyages.

In the Nordic Arctic, Chinese actors have explored investments in energy, mining, ports, scientific infrastructure, digital connectivity, and subsea cables. Many projects have been delayed, restricted, or cancelled because of growing political and security concerns.

Greenland has become a particularly important case, as Chinese ambitions related to mining and infrastructure have repeatedly raised security concerns in the United States and Denmark. In Finland, Chinese-linked actors explored acquiring the airport in Kemijärvi, but the project was blocked because of concerns raised by the Finnish Defence Forces. The Arctic Connect subsea cable project between the Finnish company Cinia and potential Chinese telecommunications partners has also been halted.

China's regional presence is most visible in the Russian Arctic. Beijing has invested heavily in Russian Arctic energy projects, particularly liquefied natural gas production in the Yamal region. These investments support China's energy security while helping Russia mitigate the effects of Western sanctions. Russia's war against Ukraine has accelerated Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation. Russia needs Chinese capital, technology, shipping demand, and political support, while China seeks energy resources, Arctic operating experience, alternative trade routes, and influence over future regional governance.

China has also become an increasingly important enabler of Russia's war effort. Chinese companies have supplied Russia with critical technologies and components supporting its defence-industrial base. China has also become a key buyer of Russian energy exports, providing Moscow with vital revenue while European markets reduce dependence on Russian oil and gas.

In the Arctic context, this relationship is especially significant because Arctic energy projects and Northern Sea Route infrastructure are central to Russia's long-term economic and strategic planning. As Russia becomes more dependent on China for Arctic development, Beijing gains greater leverage over strategically important Arctic infrastructure, energy production, and transport corridors.

Although China does not currently maintain a permanent military presence in the Arctic, growing Sino-Russian cooperation has important strategic implications. The most likely trajectory is not a rapid Chinese military build-up, but rather a gradual expansion of commercial, scientific, technological, shipping, and resource-related activities that may acquire strategic significance over time.

For Northern European states, the central challenge is to balance economic cooperation with security concerns and avoid strategic dependency, as China is likely to become an increasingly important and influential Arctic actor. ■

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China in the Arctic and Northern Europe

Expert article • 4046

Over the past decade, the Arctic has emerged as a growing dimension of China's international affairs. This development reflects two broader trends in global politics. First, the warming of the Arctic, defined here as the land and maritime areas located above the Arctic Circle at approximately 66°33′ north latitude, have created perceptions that the region is becoming more accessible, including for the exploitation of natural resources and the use of shorter maritime routes. Second, the international system has witnessed the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a major global power driven by its extraordinary accumulation of wealth. The Chinese Communist Party, which governs the PRC, has used this economic strength to expand China's influence well beyond its neighborhood, including into the Arctic, while also signaling its ambition to transform the country into a Polar Great Power. These aspirations were articulated in 2018 when the PRC released its official Arctic White Paper. In this document, China describes itself as a near Arctic state and an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs, while outlining four policy objectives: understanding the Arctic, protecting the Arctic, developing the Arctic, and participating in Arctic governance.

The PRC began its Arctic scientific engagement in the mid-1990s by joining the International Arctic Science Committee and launching its first official Arctic scientific expedition in 1999. Today, China operates two research stations in the region, one on Svalbard (Norway) and another in Iceland. Beijing also operates five research vessels with icebreaking capabilities, reflecting its long-term commitment to Arctic exploration. As of May 2026, Chinese scientists have completed 15 Arctic expeditions. These missions focus on disciplines such as climate studies, oceanography, marine biology, and sea ice formation. Recently, China has enhanced its capabilities with technologies including domestically constructed manned and unmanned underwater vehicles, low-orbit satellites, buoys and meteorological stations enabling more precise data collection. The goal is to build an integrated Arctic multi-dimensional scientific observation and monitoring network.

The PRC's engagement with the Arctic has implications for several dimensions of its national security. For example, as a country vulnerable to the effects of global environmental change, understanding developments in the Arctic and their impact on the Chinese mainland carries important consequences for China's ecological security. In addition, given the resource potential of the Arctic region, some in the PRC view the Arctic as a potential future resource supply base for China that could strengthen the PRC's economic security. Chinese state-owned enterprises have already invested in LNG projects in the Russian Arctic and shown interest in the mineral potential of Greenland. Similarly, Arctic shipping routes are viewed positively as possible shortcuts between China and the markets in Western Europe, contributing to the development of the Polar Silk Road.

At the same time, through Arctic scientific and economic engagement, the PRC gains valuable knowledge in developing advanced technologies. The Arctic serves as a site for testing technologies under extreme conditions, including various types of underwater vehicles. This has important implications for China's technological security as the country pursues greater technological self-reliance. It is also important to note that given the Arctic's unique environmental features, the data collected during Chinese Arctic scientific expeditions have dual use applications and can potentially be utilized by the PRC government for defense purposes. This should not be surprising considering the military-civil fusion strategy currently being implemented in China.

According to the PRC's Arctic White Paper, the Arctic region is seen as a global space in which extra-regional states have certain rights and privileges under international law such as navigation and scientific research. Chinese officials have previously stated that China will not overstep its role as a non-Arctic state in the region, yet, at the same time they have indicated that China will not be absent from regional affairs. In its bilateral relations with Arctic states, Russia emerged as China's principal Arctic partner. The two countries regularly discuss Arctic cooperation during high level meetings. China has invested in Russian Arctic LNG projects while Russia is now more open to Chinese involvement in the development of the Northern Sea Route. In 2024, the Chinese Coast Guard conducted joint patrols with the Russian Coast Guard in waters above the Arctic Circle in the Russian Far East. By contrast, the PRC's relations with the US are affected by the unfolding great power competition between the two nations. China sees the American return to the Arctic as a reflection of Washington's Cold War mentality to suppress China.

For a long time, the Nordic states largely perceived the PRC as a partner in areas such as scientific research, maritime safety, data sharing, and technological cooperation. In recent years, however, perceptions of China in the Nordic region have shifted considerably due to tightening political control in China, Beijing's assertive diplomacy, geopolitical competition with the US, and the expansion of Sino-Russian relations following Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a result, China is now increasingly viewed as an intelligence threat which is negatively impacting Chinese Arctic scientific and commercial activities. Several proposed projects in the Nordic region have consequently been suspended or cancelled. For example, in 2024, reports emerged that several Chinese companies were interested in investing in the northern Norwegian port of Kirkenes. Ultimately, the Norwegian government intervened and blocked potential Chinese investment in the port. Going forward, it appears unlikely that we will see large scale Chinese investments in Arctic infrastructure or critical minerals in the Nordic region as cooperation with China will be restricted to areas related to environmental governance. ■

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DAVID SCOTT

China's 'Polar Silk Road': mixed fortunes

Expert article • 4047

The Chinese state media started 2026 asserting that "the 'Polar Silk Road' which China advocates building jointly with all parties, is becoming a widely welcomed international public good" (Global Times, January 12, 2026). In reality, China's Polar Silk Road scheme, launched in 2014, has progressed yet also fallen back. Indeed, at the annual China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre conference, held at Tromso in February 2026, Chinese participants did not mention the 'Polar Silk Road', and suggested that the Arctic was not among China's foreign-policy priorities.

China's support for Russia is a noticeable feature in Arctic deliberations. China-Russia naval exercises in the Baltic in 2017 were an uncomfortable occurrence for other Baltic actors, while Chinese support to Russia in its aggression against Ukraine particularly further concern Norway, Finland and Estonia – which all border Russia.

Cyberspace threats from China feed into mistrust perceptions. Norway formally raised China's troubling cyber activities in December 2025, as did Estonia's Internal Security Service's Annual Review released in April 2026. China was labeled a "threat" in Norway's first National Security Strategy, published in May 2025. In February 2026 China was again labeled a threat in the annual threat assessment reports released by Norway's Police Security Service and the Norwegian Intelligence Service.

Chinese shipping has been problematic at times. In October 2023, there was speculation that the New Polar Bear, a Chinese container vessel, on its way to St. Petersburg from Arctic waters, had destroyed a gas pipeline linking Finland and Estonia. Speculation was renewed in the Yi Peng 3 incident in November 2024 over cables being cut from Helsinki to Germany.

Consequently, European countries across the Far North have pulled back from involvement in China's Polar Silk Road. Discussions between Kirkenes' port manager Terje Jorgensen and the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) were blocked by the Norwegian government in September 2024. Estonia withdrew from China's Belt and Road (BRI) initiative in November 2022, as well as (like Lithuania and Latvia) leaving the China and Central Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) forum in 2022. Finland never actually joined the BRI or China-CEEC forum. Whereas the 2019 China-Finland Joint Action Plan envisioned deepening Arctic cooperation in law, research and marine technology, their Joint Action Plan signed in November 2024 had no mentions of Arctic cooperation.

This leaves the Polar Silk Road as ever more a China-Russia venture, with China providing the industrial-trade push and Russia the infrastructure expertise for clearing its Arctic waters of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). One telling statistic was that between January 2022 and June 2023, the number of Chinese-owned companies registered in the Russian-controlled Arctic surged by 87 percent compared to the previous two years, reaching a total of 234 firms. On the security front, Russia's Federal Security Service and the China Coast Guard Bureau signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2023 to cooperate on maritime law enforcement in the Arctic.

China is thus still able to push on with long-range transportation along the NSR. In 2025, Chinese operators completed 14 container ship voyages along the NSR to Russian ports, compared with 11 voyages in 2024 and 7 in 2023. Conversely, American (Maersk) and European (MSC) companies have stepped back from container shipping along the NSR. In October 2025, the first transit commercial voyage from China to Western Europe was recorded, the inauguration of the "China–Europe Arctic Express" by the container ship Istanbul Bridge which went from Ningbo-Zhoushan (the world's busiest tonnage port) to Felixstowe, UK. Its journey time of 20 days was up to half the time of alternative sea routes via the Suez Canal. Overall, traffic on the NSR also set a record in 2025, with 103 transits carrying about 3.2 million tons of cargo.

That said, Arctic container traffic is much smaller, at first sight still extremely modest in comparison to global trade flows. World-wise, ships move more than 11 billion tons of goods every year, including around 180 million standard containers. The Asia–Europe corridor via the Suez Canal handles over 13,000 ships annually; the NSR, by contrast, just over one hundred transits of all types in 2025. Arctic containers remain deeply marginal – far below 0.1 percent of global container flows. Mega-hubs like Shanghai, Singapore, Rotterdam or Antwerp each handle tens of millions of containers a year; the NSR's 400,000 tons of containers barely register beside that.

Looking past the 'current' modest capacity of the Polar Silk Road, the potential is there for China and its Polar Silk Road, for China's 'future' Arctic presence and options. The Far North and the Baltics should beware? ■

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China's reviving Polar Silk Road, with Russia

Expert article • 4048

In October 2025, using the northern sea route (NSR), the containership Istanbul Bridge sailed from Ningbo-Zhoushan Port to the UK port of Felixstowe in just 20 days.[1] Although the Istanbul Bridge flies the flag of Liberian[2], a flag of convenience, it is lauded by China State media as "the first ship on China-Europe Arctic route".[3] This symbolic voyage marks a return of China's Polar Silk Road (PSR), which has evolved to focus on using shipping route and energy cooperation with the Russian Federation.

The 'Polar Silk Road' was officially announced by China's 2018 Arctic Policy White Paper in Part IV, Section 3.1 'Utilizing Arctic Resources in a Lawful and Rational Manner'.[4] Although China has strong interest in developing and using Arctic shipping routes, fearing Western sanctions, especially the U.S. secondary sanctions[5], Chinese investment and Chinese flagged vessels hold back along the PSR after the outbreak of Ukraine War for a while.[6] Nevertheless, the interest is not waning away. Rather, China is adapting to new reality. This is evidenced by the establishment of NewNew Shipping Line (in 2022, aiming to provide a regular container service only between Russian and Chinese ports, using the NSR.[7] In the forseeable future, the PSR will continue to grow between China and Russia. There are two reasons for that.

The first reason is the overwhelming Western sanctions on Russia, especially since the 2022 Ukraine War. The EU has introduced a total 18 packages of sanctions against more than 2,500 Russian individuals and entities.[8] Meanwhile, the United States is using powerful primary sanctions and secondary sanctions[9] against Russia[10]. Russian oil and gas industry, the main source of income for the Russian Federation, needs to find a new market. Russia, left with limited choice[11], has become China's largest crude oil provider since 2023.[12] It also accepts Renminbi for Russia-China oil and gas trade.[13]

The second reason is intensified U.S. – China competition. Given the U.S. is an Arctic State, while Canada, Norway, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Sweden and Iceland are all members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),[14] China's move in these parts of the Arctic got a cold shoulder. In fact, most Chinese investment in non-Russian Arctic have stalled or failed.[15]

A reviving PSR is consolidating a geopolitically divided Arctic, with Russia and China in the same camp. This perhaps also reflects the current world order. ■

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[1] See for example, Laura Paddison, This sea route has been dismissed as too treacherous, China's taking the risk, CNN, 3 October 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/10/03/climate/china-arctic-shipping-northern-sea-route

[2] Lawson Brigham, Arctic Voyage of the Containership Istanbul Bridge and the IMO Polar Code, Arctic Today, 3 November 2025, https://www.arctictoday.com/arctic-voyage-of-the-containership-istanbul-bridge-and-the-imo-polar-code/

[3] "First ship on China-Europe Arctic route docks in Britain", Xinhua, 14 October 2025, https://english.news.cn/20251014/db56a0785f0e46aab5fde7c5ca043d5b/c.html

[4] State Council of People's Republic of China, China's Arctic Policy White Paper, 26 January 2018.

[5] For example, COSCO Shipping Tanker (Dalian) Co., Ltd. was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in September 2019 for alleged involvement in transporting Iranian oil. The sanctions were removed on January 31, 2020, thanks to China-U.S. Economic and Trade Agreement signed on 15 January 2020. See Cai, note 95 above, p.427.

[6] See for example, Joshua Minchin and Cichen Shen, Threat of sanctions is holding back the northern sea route, Lloyd's List 9 July 2024, https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1149837/Threat-of-sanctions-is-holding-back-the-northern-sea-route

[7] Malte Humpert, China-Russia Announce Plans for Five Ice-Capable Containerships for Year-Round Arctic Service, High North News, 15 October 2024, https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-russia-announce-plans-five-ice-capable-containerships-year-round-arctic-service

[8] Consolidated text: Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP of 17 March 2014 concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. See also Council of the European Union, EU sanctions against Russia explained, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia-explained/

[9] "Sanctions may be primary or secondary in relation to the sanctions target. Secondary sanctions are used to maintain or put additional pressure on the sanctions target by penalizing third parties that engage with the primary sanctions target in activities that could undermine or evade the purpose of the primary sanctions." Sarah Krulikowski, Economic Sanctions: An Overview, Executive Briefings on Trade, March 2024, U.S. International Trade Commission. See also, Charlotte Beaucillon, ' Secondary Sanctions' What's in a Name? in Cedric Ryngaert, Tom Ruys and Felipe Rodríguez Silvestre (eds), Cambridge Handbook of Secondary Sanctions and International Law (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 13-36.

[10] See U.S. Department of State, Ukraine and Russia Sanctions, https://www.state.gov/division-for-counter-threat-finance-and-sanctions/ukraine-and-russia-sanctions

[11] 90% of the EU oil imports from Russia are covered by the EU oil ban. Further, G7+Australia and the EU has set up an Oil Price Cap Coalition. This would put sanction measures (e.g., port access and insurance service) on vessels who participate in shipments of Russian-origin crude oil and petroleum products to other countries, if prices exceed the caps. The price cap was originally set up as US$60 per barrel on 5 December 2022. At the time of writing in July 2025, it is US$ 47.6 per barrel. See Statement of the G7 and Australia on a price cap for seaborne Russian-origin crude oil, 2 December 2022.

[12] China-Russian Energy Cooperation a bright future, China Energy News, 20 May 2024, https://paper.people. com.cn/zgnyb/html/2024-05/20/content_26059800.htm (in Chinese).

[13] China-Russia energy deals now settled in yuan, rubble: official, Global Times, 23 April 2023 https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289651.shtml

[14] Canada, Denmark, Norway and Iceland are NATO founding members since 1949, while Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. See NATO Member Countries, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm

[15] Hilde-Gunn Bye, Report: Most Chinese Investments in the Arctic have not fully materialized, High North News, 25 June 2025, https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/report-most-chinese-investments-arctic-have-not-fully-materialized

ERDEM LAMAZHAPOV

Is the Polar Silk Road still in the freezer?

Expert article • 4049

During Vladimir Putin's latest visit to Beijing in May, the Arctic was once again on the agenda. Although Putin yet again failed to secure a Chinese commitment to the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline, the joint statement did mention that Russia and China would "consistently promote practical cooperation in order to increase cargo flow along the Northern Sea Route." This reference to Arctic shipping was a reminder of China's Polar Silk Road initiative, which made a lot of noise a few years ago but is rarely heard from China's official circles nowadays.

When the Polar Silk Road initiative was launched, it was hailed as China's strategic foray into the Arctic, and as a bid to reshape the future of Arctic shipping and economic development. The US Department of Defense's 2024 Arctic Strategy even describes the Polar Silk Road as a tool for Beijing "to gain a footing in the Arctic by pursuing investments in infrastructure and natural resources, including in the territory of NATO Allies."

It is now nine years since China's State Council, in June 2017, announced a desire to develop a "blue economic passage…leading up to Europe via the Arctic Ocean" as part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. That vision soon became known as the Polar Silk Road, literally, the "Silk Road on Ice"). The term itself was coined by Xi Jinping in July 2017 during a meeting with then–Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow. Xi declared that China and Russia "must carry out cooperation on Arctic waterways, jointly build the 'Polar Silk Road', and implement relevant connectivity projects."

For Moscow, this was the result of years of work to attract Chinese investment to the Russian Arctic. Ever since Russia endorsed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015, Russian officials have pushed to bring the Arctic and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) into the BRI framework. That same year, the Arctic was explicitly referenced in a bilateral communiqué as an area for "joint development and utilization of the Northern Sea Route" and Arctic shipping. The Silk Road Fund went on to acquire a 9.9 percent stake in Novatek's Yamal LNG project in 2015 and extended it a long term credit, which was a significant boon in light of Western financial sanctions after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Yet from the Chinese perspective, the Polar Silk Road was always more than a piggy bank for Russian Arctic plans. Beijing conceived it as a broader, international extension of the BRI, aimed at connecting Asian and European markets via an Arctic sea corridor.

These divergent goals and expectations became visible in practice. China's state owned shipping giant COSCO began experimental voyages along the Northeast Passage in 2013 and, in the years that followed, used the route to connect China and Western Europe. COSCO's focus was on linking Chinese ports with European ones, not Russian Arctic ports. After Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this tentative international transit effectively stopped. COSCO halted Arctic sailings and has not resumed them yet, even on routes where it uses ice-capable ships, such as pulp shipments from Finland to China.

Smaller Chinese players have filled this vacuum. Hainan Yangpu NewNew Shipping has opened container routes between Russian ports and China via the NSR. New Polar Shipping has carved out a niche in the Russia–China trade and has even concluded a cooperation agreement with Rosatom, the Russian state enterprise that manages the Northern Sea Route and the nuclear icebreaker fleet. In August 2025, another Chinese firm, Haijie (Sealegend) Shipping, announced a new "Arctic express" route and connected Ningbo with Felixstowe. That voyage represented the first international transit through the Northern Sea Route between two non Russian ports since 2022.

On the political level, Moscow and Beijing have tried to give this cooperation a more formal framework. A joint body on the Northern Sea Route has been created as a sub commission under the Russia–China Commission for the Preparation of Regular Meetings between the Heads of Government. The two countries have even approved a roadmap to expand shipping and establish what they describe as a "sustainable transport corridor," including advanced logistics solutions and capital projects along the route. Despite this, the cooperation between the two countries on the Northern Sea Route remains rather superficial.

The Polar Silk Road has provided a flexible label under which China and Russia can cooperate where their interests overlap, while maintaining considerable autonomy. Russia was never entirely comfortable with the Northern Sea Route being absorbed into a Chinese Belt and Road geography, and has not used the term Polar Silk Road. Likewise, it has not been heard from high-level Chinese authorities in a while. Notably, the Polar Silk Road did not appear in the outline of the 15th Five Year Plan presented this March. This label remains most useful for lower-level Chinese officials and journalists, as well as Western think tank experts covering China's Arctic activities.

All this suggests that, while the Polar Silk Road has not completely fallen into obscurity, it is no longer considered a core component of Chinese economic planning. Compared to other flagship BRI corridors, which rely on large scale, Chinese financed infrastructure, built and often operated by Chinese firms, the Polar Silk Road has always been secondary and experimental. Even if this label is not used under current circumstances, Chinese interest in Arctic shipping will certainly not disappear. Under the right conditions, China might yet defrost the Polar Silk Road. ■

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China is getting ready for the melting of the Arctic Ocean

Expert article • 4050

U.S. President Donald Trump has sought to justify his efforts to acquire Greenland by claiming that a significant number of Russian and Chinese ships are constantly patrolling the waters around what is the world's largest island and an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. However, this is not true; over the past decade, all attempts by Chinese stakeholders to invest in infrastructure projects in Greenland have been blocked. Many other development projects involving Chinese investors elsewhere in the Nordic region have met the same fate, and especially since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the Nordic countries have viewed Chinese investments with increasing caution. In Greenland, Chinese investors are involved only in the Kvanefjeld mining project, which is currently on hold due to environmental concerns raised by the authorities.

This state of affairs does not, of course, mean that China would not be interested in the Arctic. On the contrary, China has made significant investments to prepare for the future use of the new sea routes and to exploit natural resources in the Arctic Ocean, where sea ice is inevitably declining and shrinking as climate change is progressing at an accelerated rate. Chinese universities, state-owned enterprises, and entities close to the People's Liberation Army are conducting research and developing ice-class vessels and other high-level maritime technology to increase their understanding of the underwater dynamics of the Arctic Ocean and beyond. In the short term, China's goal is to launch a regular commercial sea route between major ports in China and Central Europe via the Northeast Passage. In the longer term, China is undoubtedly also preparing for a military presence in the Arctic Ocean: in the event of a conflict, the northern latitudes would offer a route not only for bombers and nuclear warheads, but also for underwater drones and submarines all the way from China to the US west coast.

Although China portrays itself as a "near-Arctic state", it obviously does not belong to the five Arctic Ocean coastal states or eight Arctic states having land areas north of the Arctic Circle. Thus, its Arctic economic activities are tied to cooperation with local northern actors. Yet, China currently has very few Arctic partners willing to cooperate. For Russia, whose economy has suffered from Western sanctions since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, Chinese investors are of key interest, especially when it comes to the export of liquefied natural gas from the Yamal Peninsula to China and elsewhere in Asia. Russia also hopes that China will contribute to the infrastructure development supporting the future regular use of the Northeast Passage. So far, there have been no significant Chinese investments in ports, railways, or other logistics in the Russian Arctic.

For the time being, it thus seems that China is not prepared to support Russia's war economy at any cost, but it rather seeks to continue balancing between East and West—after all, Europe and the United States are important trading partners for China. From China's perspective, Russia is an unpredictable partner, and the two countries are separated by deep historical mistrust. Although Arctic cooperation with the Russians undoubtedly benefits China, it is building the know-how and technological capabilities to operate independently in northern waters without Russian icebreakers or other support. In the high seas of the Central Arctic Ocean, Chinese vessels can sail and conduct research activities freely under the freedoms of navigation defined by the international law of the sea. This freedom does not apply to the exploitation of deep-sea minerals, which is why the coastal states of the Arctic Ocean are currently vying to justify their right to expand their continental shelves and thus claim ownership of the seabed's treasures. China can be expected to oppose these efforts: it is in China's interest to designate as large a portion of the Arctic Ocean as possible as an international zone and a shared heritage of humankind.

Contrary to President Trump's claims, China's presence in the Arctic region has thus far been fairly limited. It is currently building expertise and technology primarily for the future needs— getting ready for a time when the Arctic Ocean will be completely ice-free during the summer, and the so-called Transpolar Sea Route in the high seas near the North Pole will open up for use. This could happen as early as the next decade or closer to the mid-century, but China has time to wait. ■

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China's expanding Arctic capabilities

Expert article • 4051

In the early 1990s, China was in urgent need of an icebreaker to facilitate its scientific research operations in the polar regions. Considering that building such a vessel on its own was both time-consuming and costly, in 1993 China decided to acquire an icebreaking cargo and supply ship from the Kherson Shipyard in Ukraine, which was originally designed for the Russian Arctic, and convert it into the country's first icebreaking research support ship, named Xue Long (Snow Dragon). After major modifications, Xue Long was the primary vessel for China's polar research and expedition logistics support until 2019, equipped with an icebreaking capability of up to 1.1 metres, as well as advanced systems for navigation and weather observation, a data processing centre, and seven laboratories. In the summers between 1999 and 2019, Xue Long conducted ten expeditions to the Arctic region, navigated all three major Arctic sea routes (the Northeast Passage, the Transpolar Sea Route, and the Northwest Passage), and carried out comprehensive research on the Arctic sea ice, the atmosphere, marine ecosystems, and seafloor topography. The acquisition of Xue Long not only provided China with immediate, large-scale polar operational capabilities, but also served as a technical blueprint for its subsequent domestic icebreaker construction, transforming the country from a limited presence to a significant power in the Arctic.

Following the acquisition of the Ukrainian icebreaker, China proceeded in 2016 with the construction of its first domestically built icebreaker, Xue Long 2, with design support from Aker Arctic, a world-leading icebreaker design firm based in Finland. The special features of Xue Long 2 include a moon pool in the hull designed for deploying delicate research equipment in ice-covered waters. Additionally, Aker Arctic endowed the vessel with a distinctive capability to break ice up to 1.5 metres thick at speeds of two to three knots in both ahead and astern directions. This capability enables Xue Long 2 to not only operate over a broader area for scientific research, but also overcome seasonal constraints and conduct polar expeditions outside the summer months, leading Aker Arctic to describe the ship as "the world's most advanced polar research vessel" at the time. Since its commissioning in 2019, Xue Long 2 has sailed through the Arctic Ocean five times by 2025, accomplishing a landmark achievement in 2023 when it reached the North Pole as the first Chinese vessel to do so under its own power.

As China further enlarged its fleet of icebreakers with new vessels, such as Zhong Shan Da Xue Ji Di (acquired from Russia in 2018), Ji Di, and Tan Suo-3 (both domestically built in 2024), its Arctic research activities have increasingly evolved into a multi-vessel system with specialised divisions of labour among different ships. For example, in September 2025, China accomplished the largest Arctic scientific expedition in its history with the joint participation of four vessels. Among them, Xue Long 2 served as the icebreaking escort vessel and carried out collaborative three-dimensional observations of the Arctic atmosphere, sea ice, and ocean with Ji Di.

In addition to conducting regular marine scientific expeditions in the Arctic, China has also established a comprehensive Arctic satellite monitoring network since 2019. This system enables all-weather, multi-dimensional observation of critical Arctic parameters regardless of polar night or cloud cover. It primarily monitors sea ice dynamics, such as thickness, concentration, and sea ice deformation, and also provides real-time navigation support by tracking ice-lead systems and icebergs along the Northern Sea Route.

Moreover, China has sought to establish a digital corridor across the Arctic that would significantly reduce data latency between Asia and Europe, and has therefore provided technical support and investment for Arctic fibre-optic cable projects, including Arctic Connect with Finland and Russia. As it was suspended following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China pivoted its expertise in manufacturing resilient armoured cables for extreme high-latitude conditions to Russia's Polar Express initiative, which aims to construct a high-speed fibre-optic cable system along the Northern Sea Route linking Murmansk and Vladivostok.

As a result, the past three decades of China's Arctic engagement feature comprehensive technological and infrastructural developments spanning the Arctic Ocean, space, and subsea domains. This integrated capacity has strengthened its role in Arctic scientific research, shipping route accessibility, and emerging areas of digital and communications infrastructure. Despite not being a geographically Arctic state, China has still established itself as an influential participant in both scientific and strategic dimensions of Arctic affairs. ■

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The Arctic, Nordic Europe and the Chinese dilemma

Expert article • 4052

The Far North, traditionally associated with peace and ice, has turned into one of the hottest chessboards in the global economy. Although China is thousands of kilometers from the North Pole, Beijing officially declares itself a "near-Arctic state." The "Polar Silk Road" it has drawn is already changing the trajectory of the Nordic regions' factories, ports, and everyday commodity prices. Today, Nordic Europe faces an extremely difficult puzzle: how to restructure its economic relations with the Asian giant and how much will the average consumer have to pay for it?

Currently, an intense struggle is taking place in the North for control of new shipping routes. Melting Arctic glaciers rapidly open the Northern Sea Route. It cuts the journey from Asia to Nordic European ports to a record 18–20 days, compared to the 40-day voyage through the Suez Canal. Chinese shipping companies are not waiting for the future. The Asian company Sea Legend's ship Istanbul Bridge made the first direct voyage from China to UK via the Arctic in just 20 days. Last navigation season, Chinese ice-class ships made a record number of container voyages on this route, and the amount of cargo reached 400,000 tons – a 2.6-fold increase compared to previous years. As traditional routes in the south become vulnerable due to geopolitical conflicts, Beijing aims to become an architect of the new geography of world trade.

This development is possible only because China has already penetrated deep into the Arctic economy. Over the past decade, Chinese capital has purposefully invested billions of euros in major Russian Arctic energy projects, such as the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) production complex, where Chinese state-owned enterprises own nearly 30% of the shares. At the same time, Beijing has actively sought to acquire partial control of infrastructure and land plots in the transport hubs of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, turning the polar region into an important trading bridgehead for its industry.

The true asymmetry of this integration is best seen in the vaunted Nordic Green Deal. Sweden, Finland, and Norway have invested billions of euros to become the heart of European electric car batteries and renewable energy. However, the paradox of a clean future is that its production is technically impossible without China, which controls more than 80 percent of the world's rare earth metal processing capacity. For comparison, the Swedish company Northvolt, which built giant battery factories in the North, must import most of its purified active materials from Asia, because industrial processing plants simply do not exist in Europe. To build a wind farm in the Baltic Sea or assemble an electric car in Scandinavia, essential components must come from Chinese hands. Even digital technology giants like Ericsson or Nokia still rely on a global production base in the East.

This structural dependence forces the region to model future scenarios. If the EU chose the strictest path – complete economic decoupling – regional industry would experience a sudden shock. If the supply of Chinese raw materials were cut off, production costs in the Nordic countries would increase by about 15–20% in the short term. For consumers, this would mean a new wave of inflation, and ambitious climate goals would simply be frozen, as alternative technologies would become financially unaffordable.

For this reason, the so-called de-risking model is gaining popularity. Nordic countries are actively looking for alternatives in Asia and trying to invest in local extraction – such as the rare earth deposits discovered in the Kiruna region of Sweden or in the Greenland ice. However, economists remind us that building new processing plants in Europe takes a decade and requires huge state subsidies. Production will become safer, but it will lose its price advantage on the global market, and taxpayers will ultimately pay the bill for this transformation.

On the other hand, there is a pragmatic stabilization scenario, supported by the logistics sector. If the region keeps its doors open to China's ice-strengthened container ships, Arctic routes will allow Nordic exporters to earn significantly more and reach Asian consumers more quickly. However, choosing this path means that short-term gains would leave the region directly dependent on Beijing's economic fluctuations and the conditions it dictates in the Far North.

Ultimately, the region is faced with a fundamental choice, with no easy answer. China and its Arctic ambitions have become an integral part of industrial and logistics ecosystem. Any sudden pull on the rope would be a severe blow to local businesses. Future prosperity will depend on whether governments manage to find a middle ground: to create sufficient safeguards for the local market and critical infrastructure, but not to completely close the door to global trade and the efficiency of the Arctic routes, which have guaranteed the region's economic success for decades. ■

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China-Nordic Arctic cooperation

Expert article • 4053

In recent years, the Arctic has become increasingly entangled in global geopolitical competition, and the regional situation has been deteriorating. Nevertheless, climate change, environmental protection and sustainable development remain of vital importance. For all stakeholders, identifying converging interests in the changing Arctic order and advancing Arctic governance through cooperation remains an important task.

1. The Shifting Arctic Order

The Arctic faces rising uncertainty and securitization. Currently, the Arctic faces challenges from at least three aspects. First, the confrontation between the U.S.-led West and Russia is unlikely to be resolved in the short term. Although both sides claim that enhancing military capabilities is aimed at addressing security threats from each other, such actions have further intensified mutual accusations and unease, triggering additional military responses. Second, the dominant issues of Arctic governance have undergone a fundamental transformation. The shift from 'low politics' to 'high politics' makes constructive cooperation far more difficult. Third, the foundation for cooperation among Western countries has also been shaken due to several policy initiatives during Trump's second term (such as the Greenland issue and tariff frictions). The cooperative atmosphere has become tense. These three challenges have collectively driven the continuous rise of uncertainty and securitization in the region.

Arctic governance has fallen into a predicament. For more than two decades after the Cold War, peace and cooperation remained the overriding theme of the Arctic. However, current security concerns in the region have eroded the foundation of mutual trust and the cooperative atmosphere among states, dealing a severe blow to regional governance. As the core platform for Arctic governance, the Arctic Council has not yet fully resumed its work. Other mechanisms have also been disrupted to varying degrees. Even the United States, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Canada (Arctic 7) have deepened cooperation, with Russia kept outside. At the same time, Russia has proactively pursued cooperation with other stakeholders. The Arctic is likely to witness the gradual formation of parallel governance mechanisms dominated by the U.S.-led West and Russia, respectively, trapping regional governance in a lasting deadlock.

2. Arctic Governance as an Opportunity for China–Nordic Cooperation

Arctic governance calls for genuine multilateralism. At present, the Arctic governance system is confronted with severe fragmentation and exclusivity. On the one hand, the Arctic 7 have strengthened internal coordination, effectively excluding Russia. On the other hand, Russia has sought to bypass established platforms and build new mechanisms. Both approaches fall into the quagmire of exclusive multilateralism, which only embraces like-minded partners while shutting out geopolitical rivals. Nevertheless, non-traditional security challenges in the Arctic are distinctly cross-border in nature. Exclusive cooperation arrangements fail to generate effective collective action at scale. Instead, they may exacerbate the tragedy of the commons due to the absence of key governance participants.

China and the Nordic states share common concerns in Arctic governance. Nordic states pay close attention to issues including climate change, environmental protection, ecosystem health, sustainable development, green economic transition, the well-being and living conditions of Arctic residents, as well as scientific research and knowledge-based development. China's Arctic policy aims to deepen scientific research, protect the fragile ecosystem, address climate challenges, and pursue sustainable resource use while respecting the sovereignty and rights of Arctic states. It is evident that the two sides have substantial overlaps in the value orientation and action pathways of Arctic governance. Such a foundation of common interests creates realistic conditions for deepening China-Nordic cooperation.

Proposal for China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation. Against the backdrop of complex and volatile geopolitics in the Arctic, China and the Nordic states should work together to promote Arctic governance. As major actors within the Arctic Circle, the Nordic states should play a more pivotal and constructive role in Arctic affairs. As a responsible major global power and an important Arctic stakeholder, China should also actively participate in Arctic governance. Both sides ought to transcend geopolitical disturbances and explore a co-governance path that is guided by science, aimed at sustainable development, and underpinned by dialogue. The two sides may take low-sensitive areas as a breakthrough, and prioritize functional cooperation on climate change response, environmental protection, green shipping standards, biodiversity conservation and regional sustainable development, so as to gradually accumulate mutual trust and consolidate the foundation for long-term cooperation. ■

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Warming up again? China & the Nordic-Baltics

Expert article • 4054

Are the Nordic-Baltic countries (NB8) on the cusp of opening a new chapter in their complicated relationship with the People's Republic of China? Since the end of the Cold War, relations have oscillated markedly. From clashes over human rights and sanctions in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre to an enthusiastic cultivation of strategic partnerships during the "Golden Era" in the 2000 and 2010s – and back again to hardened mutual perceptions when the US-China great power rivalry started to intensify in the late 2010s. As the Trump administration is now disrupting the liberal order, abandoning its European allies and pursuing a commercial détente with China, the NB8 appear increasingly willing to adopt a more pragmatic approach towards Beijing.

During the 2018-24 period of intense US-China rivalry, the NB8 generally viewed China not merely as a security threat, but as a systemic challenger to the liberal rules-based international order. They went further than most other European countries in their de-risking strategies – especially with respect to 5G and critical infrastructure – and they also adopted a vocal stance on human rights issues, with their joint 2021 declaration on Chinese human rights abuses in the Xinjiang province being a case in point. While close ties to Washington and a self-image as staunch supporters of liberal democracy shaped their China-critical position, several NB8 countries had also experienced their own protracted bilateral disputes with Beijing, including Norway (following the awarding of the Nobel Prize to a Chinese dissident in 2010), Sweden (after the abduction of a Swedish citizen in 2016), Denmark (linked to the Tibet investigative commission during 2017-20) and Lithuania (because of the permission in Vilnius for a "Taiwanese" representative office in 2021). Compounding these tensions, China's extensive support for Russia's war in Ukraine (2022-) has been widely seen across the NB8 as undermining their core security interests.

Early signs of a more pragmatic turn were already observable in 2023, when the Biden administration resumed high-level diplomatic reengagement with the Chinese government. One example was the renewal in August 2023 – after years of stalled negotiations – of the Danish-Chinese strategic partnership program, albeit in a far slimmer and scaled-down version. Moreover, both Finland and Norway sent their head-of-states to Beijing in 2024, followed last year by the foreign ministers of Denmark, Estonia, Norway and Sweden as well as Finland's prime minister and Iceland's president. While these NB8 visitors have all publicly insisted on raising unresolved disputes and disagreements with their Chinese counterparts, they have also highlighted the importance of political dialogue with Beijing, the opportunities for economic cooperation and China's pivotal role in global affairs. The clearest shift towards pragmatism, however, has emerged in Lithuania. The new prime minister Inga Ruginiene has described the dispute over the labeling of the Taiwanese representative office as "a mistake" and signaled openness to traveling to Beijing to normalize diplomatic relations, which are currently downgraded to chargé d'affairs.

Meanwhile, beyond symbolic gestures such as visa-free travel arrangements, the Chinese government has done little to address the underlying concerns that – apart from the US-China rivalry – prompted the NB8 to distance themselves from Beijing in the first place. China remains a critical enabler of Russia's war in Ukraine, continues with its military intimidation of Taiwan, tightens its authoritarian control over Hongkong, reinforces its export-led growth model and expands its capacity for geoeconomic coercion. Rather than concessions, Beijing seems confident that its growing dominance in critical technologies and global supply chains – particularly those linked to the green transition – will gradually encourage the NB8 to accommodate themselves. Chinese green tech, including electric vehicles, solar panels and batteries for storage of renewable energy, is already making significant inroads into the Nordic-Baltic region, while several Nordics countries are stepping up their bilateral cooperation with China in areas such as green shipping and geothermal energy.

Even so, skepticism towards China is deeply entrenched across the NB8, notably within the intelligence communities, whose annual reports continue to highlight China as a security threat. And although China has generally receded into the background following Trump's return to the White House, media coverage of China in the NB8 countries remains largely negative. Thus, although Washington's MAGA posture has prompted the NB8 to reassess their approach to China, the current warming of bilateral relations is unlikely to herald a new "golden era". ■

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Denmark's China policy: lingering between idealism and pragmatism

Expert article • 4055

For decades, Denmark has followed a doctrine of Super-Atlanticisim (as is appropriately called by Dr Hans Mouritzen), seeing its relationship with the US as a special one. Or as the Danish Prime Minister in the past seven years Mette Frederiksen dictates: "There should not be a single A4 sheet of paper between the US and Europe (read:Denmark)." For over 150 years, Denmark has held onto a strong identity of a small, open, and democratic country that punches over its weight in international affairs.

Those are two important reasons why, since the first Trump term from 2018, Denmark's policy towards China has turned from pursuing a comprehensive strategic partnership to stronger criticism of China's authoritarian rule and derisking from Chinese elements in the value chains. When Trump in his second term showed that his demand of Greenland was serious, Denmark's dream of a special relationship with the US was shattered. But that does not mean Denmark is turning towards China. While some other Western leaders have streamed to Beijing to talk about trade and a stable international order in 2026, Denmark remains in lingering between what it calls democratic idealism and pragmatic realism.

From value-based to pragmatic idealism

Under Mette Frederiksen's first term (2019-2022), Denmark followed a value-based foreign policy. It involved strong support of Ukraine in the country's fight against Russia, support of Taiwan against potential authoritarian rule by mainland China, close relations with other democratic countries, and using aid to promote democracy in developing countries. At the same time, it also involved a loyal following of the US, close relations with Israel, restriction on immigration, and distancing itself from authoritarian countries especially China.

After the government changed from a single center-left party to also include center and center-right parties in 2022, the new foreign minister (and former prime minister) Lars Løkke Rasmussen launched a new Foreign and Security Policy Strategy in summer 2023 from value-based to pragmatic idealism. In its preface, Rasmussen writes: "We must not be naïve. Countries act according to their own interests, not according to what would be good for Denmark."

What that means for Denmark's China policy, should be a more balanced approach than the earlier distancing and critiques. One that would include more engagement and normal business while recognizing that "China wants more elbow room" and that Denmark should defend itself against unfair economic competition from China through cooperation in the EU.

However, in practice, rather than a fine, active balancing act that we see in many middle powers in Asia between the US and China, and between politics and economy, Denmark's current China policy has so far more resembled lingering: still driven by a strong ideology and undecided about how to embrace the new realities.

Security suspicions and market competition

As a symbol of renewed engagement between China and Denmark under the new government in 2022 with Lars Løkke Rasmussen as Foreign Minister, the two countries launched a Green Joint Work Programme 2023-2026 to deepen cooperation on climate, energy, environment, and agriculture. However, various hurdles already stand in the way. Since Denmark's rejected Huawei's bid for the country's 5G network in 2019, security suspicions of China have spread to other products, including operation systems in electric vehicles (EVs), security cameras, medical devices, and air friers.

The security suspicions derive largely from the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS)'s risk assessment. It has over the years warned against threats from China, and in its latest annual Intelligence Outlook published in December 2025, China is seen to aim to assert regional dominance in Asia, force reunification with Taiwan, strengthen its position relative to the US, reduce Western influence in international affairs, deepen its partnership with Russia, and seek economic and technological self-sufficiency. China's effort to transfer technology from the West through legitimate and illicit means is considered the greatest threat to Danish research, innovation, and technology. All those reasons make China a significant security risk to Denmark in the eyes of the Danish intelligence.

Therefore, although the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Danish National Bank consider China irreplaceable for the Danish economy because of its market, innovations, and position in the supply chains, the predominant China policy is de-risking.

Moreover, the Danish windmill giant Vestas is feeling the pressure of Chinese competition. While Vestas still leads in the global overall installed capacity, Chinese companies are catching up quickly in new installations. When the Danish government reached an agreement on subsidizing offshore windfarms in June 2025, Danish land-based windfarm developers started to consider buying Chinese produced windmills. That led to questions in the media about the quality of Chinese windmills, the risks of relying on China for supply of energy, and the security risk of allowing China a backdoor into Denmark's critical infrastructure.

Then against the backdrop of COP30 in Brazil in November 2025, a major story broke out in Danish media that Danish aid to China in the past transferred wind technology in an effort to help China become green, which is believed to help China compete against Danish producers today. The Danish model of development cooperation is thereby fundamentally questioned if the developing country partner can potentially become an economic or geopolitical competitor in the future.

Sailing in a new direction?

Against the background of security suspicion, fear of competition, and ideological concerns in Denmark about China, it was extraordinary that Danish Minister for Industry, Business and Financial Affairs, Morten Bødskov, visited China in January 2026 and renewed a bilateral framework agreement on green maritime technology and shipbuilding. China's shipbuilding capacity and Danish green shipping solutions are described as a perfect match for green transition in global shipping. It remains to be seen whether the agreement can be fully implemented now that the Danish shipping giant Mærsk took over temporary operation of the Balboa terminal at the Panama Canal despite Chinese government opposition, after Panama nullified the operation rights of the Hong Kong company CK Hutchison.

As Denmark negotiates and welcomes a new government after the general election in March 2026, where Lars Løkke Rasmussen plays a crucial role, a slight change in Denmark's China policy is possible. Pragmatism may become more prominent, whether in the form of cooperating with China or defending Denmark's commercial interests. At the same time, many Danish politicians and elites still believe in the liberal world order led by the West, and they are reminiscent of a world led by a more normal US and waiting for its return. ■

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China's role on the Arctic Council: potential for research cooperation

Expert article • 4056

Achieving observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 was a milestone for China. More than a decade later, it is worth examining how China's role as an observer in the Arctic Council has evolved.[1]

China is a fairly new player in the Arctic, compared with the Arctic states. A signatory to the Svalbard Treaty in 1925, China initiated research activity in the region in the 1990s. It formally joined the International Arctic Science Committee in 1996, and the Polar Research Institute of China opened a research station in Ny-Ålesund on Svalbard in 2004. Following observer status in the Arctic Council, the Polar Silk Road was included in the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017. Importantly, China's Arctic policy, White Paper, was published in January 2018, which laid out the country's interests in the Arctic. The White Paper presents environmental protection and climate change in the Arctic among the main drivers of China's engagement with the Arctic.

China's Arctic scientific research and expertise have been central to its efforts to obtain observer status in the Arctic Council. As a key producer of knowledge, the Council's main functions include identifying Arctic issues as well as climate and environmental challenges with global implications. China has been active in Arctic research, focusing primarily on scientific expeditions and climate studies. Growing awareness of climate risks and of China's domestic vulnerability to climate change has led to increased research climate research in general.

China's engagement in the Arctic places strong emphasis on climate research, particularly on understanding how climate change in the Arctic affects weather and climate systems in China. This includes examining how temperature changes in the Arctic may influence precipitation patterns and increase the frequency of extreme weather events. Such developments could, in turn, have significant consequences for agriculture and people's livelihoods in China. Annual reports from the China Meteorological Administration conclude that China is becoming warmer, that climate change is progressing faster than the global average, and that annual precipitation is increasing.

Observers' most important role is participation in working groups of the Arctic Council. China's observer reports to the Arctic Council over several chairship periods illustrate the country's engagement which includes nominating experts who have contributed to working groups. China stated early that it has ambitions for increased participation through further nomination of experts, and it established a pool of experts that will engage with the working groups. Chinese experts participate in all six working groups of the arctic Council with experts from renowned universities that has strong climate science tradition. The observer reports also state clearly that China aims to further promote exchanges and cooperation with working groups of the Council.

Chinese experts' participation in the Arctic Council's working groups is significant for several reasons. First, it gives them an opportunity to contribute their expertise to the Council's scientific processes. Second, these experts are affiliated with institutes and universities linked to the ministries responsible for environmental and climate policy. Their involvement in the working groups therefore also has the potential to contribute knowledge and insights to inform decision-making in China and is helpful for the domestic promotion of Arctic issues. At the same time, there is still scope for greater Chinese participation in the Arctic Council's working groups.

Third, cooperation between China and the Nordic countries on climate and environmental issues has the potential to generate important synergies.

For instance, Norway's long-standing cooperation with China on energy, climate, and environmental issues provides a strong basis for further Arctic collaboration. Over the past decade, joint projects have strengthened China's expertise on mercury emissions, which could support Arctic Council work on mercury and link China's domestic efforts with Arctic challenges.

In sum, on China's role on the Arctic Council, it has not assumed a leadership role among the observers but is rather maintaining a low profile. The country has nominated its own experts and contributed to expert groups when relevant. Importantly, China brings important research from the Arctic back to China. Environmental challenges in the Arctic are closely linked with China's key domestic policies and priorities on environment and climate change. ■

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[1] The text draws on China on the Arctic Council: Another venue for Sino–Russian cooperation? In Stensdal, Iselin and Gørild Heggelund 2024. (eds) 2024. China-Russia Relations in the Arctic: Friends in the Cold? Palgrave Macmillan.

ISELIN STENSDAL

The politization of Chinese Arctic science & implications for the Nordic countries

Expert article • 4057

Science in the Arctic has become increasingly politized. This trend is particularly evident when it comes to Chinese research and science. With the politization comes consequences for the Nordic Arctic countries, one of which is uncertainties: What can we make of the research Chinese scientists are conducting in the Arctic, and what are the implications for Arctic counties?

In the 2018 White Paper that presented China's official Arctic Policy the two first goals are to understand the Arctic and to protect the Arctic. The two other goals are to develop the Arctic, and to participate in Arctic governance. Understanding the Arctic is pursued through research and scientific exploration of the Arctic climate, as explained in the Whit Paper: 'China will improve the capacity and capability in scientific research on the Arctic, pursue a deeper understanding and knowledge of the Arctic science, and explore the natural laws behind its changes and development, so as to create favorable conditions for mankind to better protect, develop, and govern the Arctic.' The second goal of Arctic protection also relates to science. To protect Arctic ecosystems and climate, science is needed.

The Chinese state itself uses Arctic science and China's research history as a legitimizer for its Chinese interests and presence in the White Paper. Here China's 1996 membership to the International Arctic Science Committee, and that scientific cruises with the research vessel Xue Long (Snow Dragon) began in 1999 is referenced. Furthermore, that the Polar Research Institute of China opened the Arctic Yellow River Station in Ny-Ålesund on Svalbard more than twenty years ago, in 2004, is also included in the White Paper to illustrate that China's interests for the Arctic is not something new.

Another aspect of science politization is the increased attention to dual and multipurpose use of infrastructure and technology. Already in 2014, the Norwegian government declined an offer from the Chinese research side to pay for most of the construction of a third radar on Svalbard. The radar was proposed to EISCAT (European Incoherent Scatter Scientific Association), a scientific organization that conducts space research, to which China is a member. The Norwegian Ministry of Education did not state security concerns as the reason, but it is likely that this was part of the evaluation. In addition to a research facility in Ny-Ålesund, the second Chinese research facility in the Nordic Arctic is the China-Icelandic Arctic Science Observatory (CIAO)in Kárhóll on northern Iceland. The commencement ceremony of construction was held in 2014 to much fanfare, and CIAO was opened in 2018. However, CIAO has since suffered economic plights, and the bilateral Arctic cooperation, what then Icelandic president Grimson called a cornerstone of the bilateral relations in 2012, has soured. There have also been warnings about covet operations under the guise of research in Icelandic debates.

A third aspect of science politization relates to great power rivalry and increased geopolitical tensions. The Arctic is a suited place for China to test its cutting-edge technology or to further its existing lead on technology. China is already leading in many renewable energy technologies, that other countries, including the Nordic Arctic ones are dependent on, or at least cannot compete on in terms of price. Arctic science can also be relevant to China's third goal in the White Paper, to develop resources. Mapping the ocean floor can for example indicate where there is future potential for deep sea mining. Tracking fish stocks not only reveals how the ocean is changing, but could also potentially be used for identifying commercially viable fish stocks. Remote sensing of the Arctic environment can also be used to feed into China's big data machinery, and AI development. It is of course not unique to China to try to exploit the possibilities available, most countries do. What sets China apart from other countries though, is its position as the only possible contender to the US.

Science is in its nature international, but this is currently under pressure. We are beginning to the negative implications of lack of shared data with Arctic climatic data. The data flow from Russia has been restrained since 2022, and with Trump 2.0, US climate data is also not being shared as before. In managing risk and insecurities, the Nordic countries must find the delicate balance between protecting assets from foreign interference, and allowing foreign scientists access. As small states we do not benefit from isolating ourselves, and excluding parts of the world. Rather, we must find ways to live with the uncertainties the current world order poses, including how to continue beneficial research cooperation. ■

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Science as influence: China in the Baltic Sea region and the Arctic

Expert article • 4058

China's strategic objective in the Baltic Sea region is to steadily enhance its economic, technological and infrastructural presence, with a view to establishing long-term political influence in the regions of Northern and Central-Eastern Europe. This region is of strategic importance to Beijing due to the development of transport routes, access to port infrastructure, technological cooperation, and links with the Arctic dimension of China's policy, including the Polar Silk Road concept.

One of the key instruments for achieving this goal for China is scientific research cooperation. In the Baltic Sea region, this represents a significant soft power instrument, serving to build China's long-term political, technological and economic presence in Northern and Central-Eastern Europe. China's strategic initiatives, including academic projects, researcher exchanges, and investments in scientific infrastructure, are aimed at projecting a positive image of a responsible, innovative nation. This commitment is demonstrated by its efforts to address pressing global challenges, such as climate change and technological development. Concurrently, scientific collaboration enables Beijing to influence narratives aligned with China's interests and objectives, thereby strengthening its influence among expert communities and establishing a network of relationships that support its long-term strategic goals in the region.

Despite the differing approaches to governance and economic development between the Baltic Sea states and China, mutual cultural and academic contacts continue to thrive. These include the exchange of experiences, while also contributing to the positive image of the country and strengthening its international reputation. Chinese embassies and Confucius Institutes, which are typically located at universities, play a pivotal role in this regard. Their primary functions include the gathering of information and the establishment of contacts with the political and economic elite. Additionally, they are responsible for identifying market opportunities, including potential investment prospects. For instance, in 2015, the China-Latvia Center for Academic Cooperation was set up as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, Chinese embassies are initiating cooperation in academic and cultural spheres. The primary objective is to create a positive image of China or neutralise information that is critical of it. To a certain extent, there is a degree of overlap between Chinese communication strategies aimed at discrediting NATO and the EU, and Russian information strategies.

In recent years, there has been a notable decline in China's popularity among the Baltic Sea states. Some of them reported cases of Chinese espionage as a potential threat. In Lithuania, the intelligence and security services have indicated an escalation in the aggressive nature of Chinese intelligence and security activities. In Estonia, concerns have been raised about the possibility of so-called scientific espionage by Chinese institutions implementing scientific and cultural projects. Accusations were particularly directed at Confucius Institutes regarding the Chinese authorities' involvement in academic discourse. It was stated that these Institutes are instruments of Chinese soft power, but they also serve to justify China's actions regarding human rights violations in Tibet and its desire to incorporate Taiwan into the People's Republic of China. In light of these circumstances, it is challenging to envision the prospect of autonomous research and universal access to information within the Chinese state's hierarchical structure. This is particularly evident in institutions and educational systems in less developed countries, where resources for research and education are limited, and there is a greater likelihood of pressure from China.

Furthermore, Russia's increasing isolation after 2022 has created new opportunities for China to increase its presence in the Baltic Sea and Arctic regions, and the broader northern Euro-Atlantic space. The decline in scientific collaboration between Russia and Western countries has resulted in a gradual restructuring of research networks, data flows and technological partnerships. In this context, China has begun to play an increasingly important role as an alternative scientific and economic partner for Russia, particularly in the areas of polar research, Arctic infrastructure, and the development of the Northern Sea Route. Russia is actively seeking to expand cooperation with countries of the global South, viewing them as a potential source of investment, technology, and legitimization of its presence in the Arctic. Consequently, scientific cooperation is becoming part of a broader process of geopolitical reconfiguration of the polar region and the construction of alternative cooperation networks outside of Western structures.

Concurrently, scientific and research endeavours are progressively acquiring strategic and security dimensions. The development of satellite infrastructure, environmental research, and observation systems is dual-use, combining civilian and military applications. In this context, China's presence in the Baltic Sea and Arctic region can be interpreted not only as a manifestation of interest in climate change or research cooperation, but also as a long-term strategy for building political, technological, and economic influence. In contrast to the Russian approach of leveraging scientific cooperation as a means of exerting political influence and its shadow diplomacy, China's strategy appears to be more focused on a gradual and systematic expansion of its infrastructural and technological presence. This means that science and research cooperation are becoming a crucial instrument of geopolitical competition and shaping a new balance of power in the Baltic Sea and Arctic region. ■

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China's Arctic science between cooperation and legitimacy

Expert article • 4059

China's self-declaration as a "near-Arctic" state fueled skepticism among Arctic and non-Arctic States regarding Chinese strategic interests in the Arctic region. While in the early 2000s, academic and public debates largely focused on the security implications of China's growing presence in the Arctic, more recent analyses converge in assessing China's actual investment in the region as relatively limited. Instead, China's most consistent growth has been in its scientific presence.

Since its first Arctic expedition in 1999, on board the icebreaker Xuelong purchased from Ukraine, China has considerably improved its polar capabilities. Since 2016, China has conducted yearly research expeditions often lasting nearly two months and involving scores of scientists. Over time, the domestically built second icebreaker Xue Long 2, and other vessels joined the polar-capable fleet. The 15th Arctic Research expedition (2025) represents China's largest expedition, including the deployments of both icebreakers Xue Long and Xuelong 2, and three other ships: Tan Suo San Hao, Zhong Shan Da Xue Ji Di, and Shenhai-1. Notably, China also deployed the Jiaolong manned submersible, which performed a deep-sea dive beneath the polar ice and completed the world's first coordinated crewed-uncrewed submersible operation in the Arctic. Beyond the headlines, these developments reveal how rapidly China has expanded its Arctic scientific and technological capabilities in recent decades.

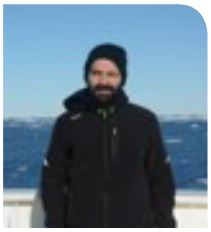
Such an improvement is no coincidence. Strategic and long-term planning is a hallmark of China's leadership and its Arctic interests. An analysis of the Arctic's engagement in recent Five-Year Plans (FYP) shows that science and technological development have become central pillars of the national agenda, highlighting the deep interdependence between scientific capacity-building and China's evolving governance objectives in the Arctic.

The XII FYP (2011-2015) called for enhancing the Arctic maritime capabilities, a goal realized through the construction of Xuelong 2. This was followed by the XIII FYP (2016-2020), which focused on "actively expand the space for marine economic development". By the XIV FYP (2021-2025), the strategy shifted towards "strong participation in the oceans' global governance" and the development of "blue partnerships". Furthermore, the plan advocated for extensive involvement in the formulation and implementation of international maritime governance mechanisms to promote a "maritime community with a shared future". This implies deepening a pragmatic cooperation with coastal countries regarding the monitoring and protection of the marine environment, scientific research and search and rescue and participating in pragmatic cooperation and building the 'Polar Silk Road'.

The trajectory spans from building physical infrastructure and participating in governance mechanisms to developing an indigenous and autonomous scientific system. The objectives set in previous FYPs have been achieved, positioning China as a relevant actor in Arctic science, as reflected in the surge of Chinese publications between 2000 and 2024, which focused particularly on the Central Arctic Ocean and the Gakkel Ridge.

The Arctic is an area of interest rather than a top priority for China's leadership, and scientific research remains crucial for several reasons. Monitoring Arctic environmental shifts is vital for understanding how global climate change affects China's own food security and places its terrestrial, coastal, and marine ecosystems at risk. Furthermore, China's deeper engagement has facilitated cooperation within international platforms such as the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC) and the Sustaining Arctic Observing Network (SAON), alongside regional initiatives like the China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre (CNARC). Ultimately, scientific research serves as a tool for China to gain regional access and recognition as a legitimate stakeholder in Arctic affairs. Active participation in emerging governance mechanisms, such as the Joint Program of Scientific Research and Monitoring (JPSRM) of the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA), allows for deeper Chinese influence that extends beyond its work in Arctic Council Working Groups. As a signatory of the Agreement, which enforces a "science-first" moratorium on fishing, China is demonstrating its increased technological reach, and its participation confirms a gradual shift in China's role from a rule-taker to a rule-maker in the Arctic.

Future investments in Chinese science are expected to expand into cutting-edge fields such as next-generation AI, quantum information, integrated circuits, neuroscience, and biotechnology. These technologies will increasingly enhance China's ability to collect and process complex polar data. By developing a multidimensional observation platform embedded within a multilevel, science-based governance architecture, China is positioning itself for a more prominent role in the region. Currently, China occupies a delicate position: while it continues to strengthen ties with Russia, particularly in the energy sector, it remains unwilling to jeopardize its relations with European and North American stakeholders, who are essential for scientific cooperation and broader interests. In an era increasingly defined by distrust and geopolitical confrontation, Arctic science must remain a primary channel for dialogue. Ultimately, maintaining credible environmental monitoring and data transparency is not just a scientific necessity, but a strategic imperative to preserve channels of trust and ensure that international cooperation remains a resilient, long-term mechanism in the High North. ■



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Silenced across borders

Expert article • 4060

Filming in classrooms. Threatening emails. Surveillance at demonstrations and online. Strategic visa denial. Targeting family members. These are examples of actions reported by Chinese students studying in European and North American universities. While Chinese espionage is often associated with industry and technology, a less visible but increasingly significant form of Chinese surveillance takes place within Western universities, targeting Chinese students and academics.

The phenomenon is part of what is known as transnational repression, which refers to both physical and digital tactics used by governments to control and silence their citizens beyond borders. In the Chinese context, as defined by Amnesty International (2024), transnational academic repression refers to "Chinese authorities' actions to silence, control or deter dissent and criticism by overseas Chinese students and others, in violation of their human rights". According to the UK-China Transparency report (2025), the main driver behind these practices is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) desire to control narratives around politically sensitive issues, such as China's territorial claims and the political system, by preventing Chinese citizens from criticising the regime even beyond its borders.

Students have always been a force of political change making them a source of concern for authoritarian governments. There are over a million Chinese students studying abroad which presents a significant challenge from the perspective of the Chinese government. Exposure to different political systems, values, and open democratic debate may encourage students to question the Chinese system and openly criticise it.

To tackle this challenge, China systemically monitors and intimidates its own citizens abroad. In the academic context, transnational repression is often non-physical and takes place online through digital surveillance, hacking and intimidation. The impact on students is profound. Many report living in fear, self-censoring and minimising classroom participation due to concerns that their views may be reported to authorities. Some students avoid participating in political discussions on topics such as the Tiananmen massacre and deliberately distance themselves from other Chinese students out of fear of being spied on. This is not an unfounded concern as Chinese students have told about being asked to report of seminar and classroom discussions to their local embassies. This not only fosters mistrust among students but can also lead to social isolation and exclusion.

Another troubling aspect of transnational repression is the pressure placed on students' families in China to discourage political engagement abroad. Human rights organisations have reported cases in which family members of Chinese students were urged to intervene when students participated in protests or criticised the Chinese government. Some family members have even been arrested. As a result, students' self-censorship becomes not only a personal choice, but also a protective measure.

Transnational repression is not unique to the academic world, nor is it limited to China. According to a Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (Supo) report, authoritarian regimes spy and control their citizens living abroad, and aim to pressure, bribe and blackmail them into providing information on people whom they consider a threat to the homeland, such as the political opposition, ethnic communities and separatist groups. While the Supo report does not directly discuss academic repression by China, it recognises that subject experts and people who actively engage in public discussions, are of interest to the CCP as they may have access to information that is of value to China and also ability to influence decision-making.

Transnational repression not only represents a threat to Chinese students but also to academic freedom and democracy more broadly. What makes transnational academic repression particularly worrying is that universities and other academic institutions are founded on principles of free speech, open debate and intellectual independence. If students feel unable to speak freely, these core values are undermined. Western universities are, however, often reluctant to interfere because of their financial reliance on Chinese student fees. This creates a tension between economic interests and the protection of academic freedom – and students are often the ones who pay the price.

It is the responsibility of universities, and also national governments, to ensure that all students feel part of the academic community where they can participate without fear of surveillance or intimidation. Transnational repression as a phenomenon should be better recognised and addressed not only as an issue that impacts students but also democratic institutions more broadly. ■

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CÉCILE PELAUDEIX

It is time for a Northern-European-Canadian community

Expert article • 4061

President Xi Jinping's stated ambition to establish the People's Republic of China (China) as a global leader, a military power, and a major polar power carries significant implications for the Arctic region and Nordic countries, in particular with respect to both economic and strategic dimensions. But these implications in a world shifting towards the rule of force rather than the rule of law cannot be dealt with the same logic of thought that has so far prevailed: it requires a new way of thinking the Arctic and to bring along a political community capable of responding to the current challenges: a Northern-European-Canadian Community.

Despite an apparent slowdown of activities in the Arctic, China is still present and has ambitions to impose its political and economic model of governance. The 2018 launch of the Polar Silk Road — formally incorporating the Arctic into Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative — provided an institutional framework through which China deepened its regional influence. While Chinese investment activity has since contracted across several sectors and many contracts have been cancelled, Beijing continues to pursue its Arctic interests through multiple vectors (access to oil and gas, projects of port control, land acquisition, dual-use facilities...).

Of particular concern is the intensification of Sino-Russian cooperation in the region, whereas China has not condemned the invasion of Ukraine and is providing logistical support to Russia in the war. In 2019, the two countries elevated their bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership and signed in 2023 a MoU on the application of maritime law which opens for extensive cooperation between their coast guards. Joint air and naval military exercises across the Bering Strait have taken place. But the bilateral cooperation has limits and the rivalry remains latent, and it is just as worrying for stability in the region. Indeed, the strategic visions of China and Russia are not compatible: both countries want to be a leading world power, but bolstered by its current status as a regional Arctic power, Russia considers the region as its own backyard.

If the US is still concerned by 'deterring China', it is refocusing its efforts on the American continent and is destabilizing Europe. De facto, the US cannot be considered as the reliable ally it used to be, as evidence by a triple reversal across (1) its disengagement from its commitment to support defence in Europe, (2) the weaponisation of the economy through erratic threats of tariff increases, and (3) a political offensive characterised by an attempt of annexation of Greenland, a sharp rhetoric against the EU and a support to European far-right movements.

The concept of Arctic exceptionalism, flawed from the outset, prevents from asking the right question — namely that of the appropriate institutional format of response to Russia's hostility, to growing dependence on China, and to the United States new positioning. The circumpolar dimension no longer makes sense in the current context, in which both Russia and the United States have become unpredictable and hostile actors. The functioning of the Arctic Council has been hampered since 2014 and the forum is at a complete standstill since 2022. Furthermore, its mandate explicitly excludes security matters.

It is a Northern-European-Canadian community that we must think now to discuss issues of economic and defense and security. Such an intergovernmental forum would gather the Nordic countries, from Finland to Iceland, the Baltic states, since Baltic and Arctic security are now strategically interconnected, EU member states, the United Kingdom, but also Canada. The Nordic countries have built an identity that forms the basis of strong cooperation, particularly in defense with Nordefco. The UK is directly affected by the projection of power in the North Atlantic. Canada recently engaged in reducing its dependence on the US and on China which controls 90% of the rare earth elements market, and is deepening its ties with Europe. While not an EU institution, the Northern-European-Canadian Community could function as a wider European political space around the EU.

The question of the impacts of China in the Arctic region can no longer be considered independently of an international context that has hardened and where expansionism seems to be a right that the great powers grant themselves. International law could dangerously become a law of spheres of influence, as theorized by Carl Schmitt in the 1930s. Similarly, the future of the Arctic cannot be thought of within the limits of the Arctic circle. It is a Northern-European-Canadian Community which needs to gather now, to commonly support the democratic values to which the Nordic countries, the Baltic states, the EU, the UK and Canada are deeply attached but which are alarmingly threatened today. ■

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Finland's external economic relations with the global superpowers

Expert article • 4062

There are three superpowers in the global economy: China, the European Union, and the United States. Measured by purchasing power parity, these three together account for half of the world economy. Particularly noteworthy is China's rapid rise as an economic superpower during this century. Two decades ago, China represented nine percent of the world economy. Last year, its share had already risen to 20 percent. When adjusted for purchasing power, China became the world's largest economy already ten years ago.

China's rapid economic growth is also reflected in Finland's foreign trade. In 2005, the value of trade between our two countries amounted to €4.4 billion. Last year, it had already increased to €10.5 billion. It should, however, be noted that Finland's trade with the United States has grown at almost the same pace.

The most striking difference is that, among countries outside Europe, China is Finland's most important source of imports, whereas the United States is our most important export market. Overall, in 2025 the United States was still a larger trading partner for Finland than China, but the ranking between the two countries may change during this decade following the tariffs imposed by the United States on the EU. Nevertheless, Finnish customs statistics for January–February of this year do not yet indicate any decline in our trade with the United States — quite the contrary — our trade with the United States continues to grow.

However, when examining Finland's foreign trade with the superpowers, the European Union should not be overlooked. In 2025, nearly 60 percent of Finland's foreign trade took place with another EU member state. In other words, the European Union is by far a larger trading partner for Finland than China and the United States combined. This fact is often forgotten both by our political decision-makers and by the citizens who elect them.

Finland's Foreign Trade with China and the United States

	China			USA	
	2005	2025		2005	2025
Finland's exports	€ 1.6 bn (2.1 %)	€ 3.4 bn (4.5 %)		€ 3.1 bn (4.1 %)	€ 7.7 bn (10.4 %)
Finland's imports	€ 2.8 bn (3.7 %)	€ 7.1 bn (9.4 %)		€ 2.0 bn (2.6 %)	€ 4.1 bn (5.5 %)

Source: Finnish Customs.

The structure of Finland's foreign trade with China and the United States may come as a surprise. Many still think that Finland imports raw materials from China and exports products with a higher degree of processing. In reality, the situation is exactly the opposite. Machinery and equipment account for more than half of Finland's imports from China. Correspondingly, pulp is Finland's most significant export product to China, accounting for one-third of exports.

Many may also be surprised that Finland's second most important import product from the United States is energy, which can be classified as a raw material. In 2025, energy accounted for one-quarter of Finland's total imports from the United States. American oil covered nearly 10 percent of Finland's total oil imports last year. The corresponding shares for coal and gases were nearly 30 percent and more than 40 percent, respectively. In turn, the export of cruise ships to the United States is extremely important for Finland. Without cruise ship exports, Finland's exports to the United States would have declined by approximately 15 percent in 2025.

In terms of corporate investment, the United States is many times more important to Finland than China, both as a source and as a destination of investment. Nor do I believe this situation is likely to change in the foreseeable future. Even here, however, it should not be forgotten that the majority (60–70 percent) of Finnish corporate investments are either directed to or originate from the European Union.

The situation regarding foreign tourism to Finland is almost identical. Last year, Americans recorded nearly one million overnight stays in Finland, which is double the number recorded by Chinese visitors. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that EU citizens accounted for well over half of all foreign overnight stays in Finland.

The European Union forms the foundation of Finland's external economic relations, which is why the future of the European Union is the cornerstone of our prosperity. At the same time, among countries outside Europe, China is Finland's most important supplier and the United States our most important export market. However, the escalation of the trade war between the superpowers may directly and indirectly erode the foundations of Finland's foreign trade and, consequently, our prosperity. Since Finland cannot influence the decisions made by the leadership of China and the United States, our focus should remain on the overall development of the European Union and on the Union's new trade agreements.

The central message of this text is the following: Despite the immense economic power wielded by China and the United States on the global stage, for us Europeans the success of the European Union is nothing less than a vital necessity. China and the United States may represent vast economic opportunities, yet for Europeans a strong, prosperous, and well-functioning European Union is indispensable to our future. For this very reason, every European must be prepared to "do their part" to ensure that the European Union continues to stand as a guarantor of prosperity, stability, and democratic values for all who cherish freedom, openness, and the rule of law. ■

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