

Dragon on Ice: China's Geostrategic Interests in the Arctic

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The Arctic is a key battleground in the great power competition, with China challenging US and Russian dominance. Claiming “near-Arctic state” status, China seeks access to resources and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) through its Polar Silk Road. Its investments in Arctic infrastructure face resistance, particularly from Western nations. Meanwhile, the involvement of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in scientific research has raised security concerns. As the Arctic Council weakens, China aims to reshape regional governance, securing its influence in a shifting multipolar world order.

The great power competition unfolding in the Arctic is a complex and dynamic geopolitical chess game. China has emerged as a key player alongside traditional Arctic powers, specifically the United States and Russia. From China's perspective, the Arctic is not merely a source of valuable resources or a region experiencing dramatic environmental change; rather, it is a crucial theater for asserting its growing global influence, shaping the future of Arctic governance, and managing the intricate web of relationships with other major actors, thereby rendering the region as one of the New Strategic Frontiers.



Map of Arctic Circle (source: CIA World Fact Book)

China's Arctic policy is a carefully calibrated strategy that balances its economic needs, security concerns, and ambition for global recognition and leadership. Despite being geographically distant from the Arctic Circle, China has declared itself a "near-Arctic state." This claim, although met with [skepticism](#) by former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, serves a crucial purpose: it legitimizes China's involvement in Arctic affairs. China argues that the cascading effects of climate change in the Arctic—particularly the accelerating melting of ice and the rising global sea levels—have far-reaching consequences. Even distant nations like China, where major coastal cities such as Shanghai and Tianjin face the threat of being potentially submerged, are impacted. By positioning itself as a responsible stakeholder with a vested interest in the region's stability, sustainable development, and climate change mitigation, China justifies its expanding presence in Arctic affairs. Thus, it advocates for broader international participation and a more inclusive approach to Arctic governance, allowing it to engage in discussions without appearing as an outsider or opportunist. However, in doing so, China subtly challenges the existing governance framework, controlled mainly by the Arctic Council and its member states.

The Arctic Council is a highly effective international forum composed of the eight states located above the Arctic Circle: the U.S.A., Russia, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, and Sweden. In addition to these member states, the Arctic Council includes observer states and representatives of indigenous peoples in the Arctic. Five of these states—the U.S.A., Russia, Canada, Norway, and Denmark—are littoral members of the Arctic Ocean and are thus referred to as the A5. One of these states, Russia, comprises 53% of the Arctic and is notably different from the other Arctic Council members. Consequently, the remaining seven Arctic Council members are collectively known as the A7.

Despite the differences between Russia and the A7, the Arctic Council was historically one of the more effective international forums, operating on consensus and explicitly barring discussions of military affairs. However, the longstanding principle of "high latitude, low tensions" came to an end in 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. In response, the A7 decided that under such circumstances, business as usual could not continue, and effectively suspended Russia from the council.

A key aspect of the great power rivalry in the region is the competition for access to the Arctic's abundant natural resources. According to the [United States Geological Survey](#), the Arctic is believed to hold vast, largely untapped reserves of oil, natural gas, and critical minerals such as rare earth elements, titanium, and lithium. As climate change melts the Arctic ice, these resources are becoming increasingly accessible. Given its rapidly growing economy and voracious demand for energy and raw materials, China views securing access to these resources as a strategic imperative.

Although China and Russia have formed a pragmatic partnership in the Arctic—partly driven by shared concerns about US global dominance—their ambitions could eventually clash. Despite challenges from Western sanctions and geopolitical pressures, China remains committed to securing access to Arctic resources. Its involvement in large-scale projects like the [Yamal LNG project](#), which extracts and then liquefies gas from Russia's Arctic Yamal

Peninsula, underscores its determination to become an Arctic player. However, projects like [LNG 2](#), which takes gas from a Russian Arctic area adjacent to the Yamal Peninsula, have been stalled due to Western sanctions. Nonetheless, China seems determined to help LNG 2 proceed [covertly](#).

China's approach to securing resources is often marked by a long-term perspective. It is willing to invest in projects that may not yield immediate returns but are crucial for future resource access and long-term energy security. Another important element of the Arctic competition is control over critical infrastructure. As sea ice retreats, new shipping routes like the Northern Sea Route (NSR) are opening, transforming the region into a vital hub for maritime trade, potentially depriving the Suez Canal.

China has expressed a strong interest in the NSR, which offers a significantly shorter route between Asia and Europe than the Suez Canal. The NSR is a key component of China's ambitious Polar Silk Road, which seeks to connect Asia and Europe while strengthening global trade. Gaining influence over this crucial shipping route would provide substantial economic benefits and increase China's geopolitical power. To secure its position in the Arctic, China has proposed investments in Arctic and near-Arctic port facilities like [Arkhangelsk, Russia](#), as well as transportation infrastructure such as Russia's [Arctic Express](#) No. 1, and [nuclear](#) and [non-nuclear](#) icebreaker technology. While these projects face scrutiny and resistance from some Arctic states, they underscore China's strategic intent to establish a foothold in this emerging maritime corridor and could also enable it to project naval power in the Arctic while securing vital trade routes.

The competition for influence in the Arctic also involves international partnerships. China's approach often emphasizes economic incentives, offering attractive investment opportunities to Arctic states, such as its attempts to [develop railroads](#) in the Scandinavian Arctic. China's efforts, however, have met resistance, especially from Arctic states closely aligned with the United States and wary of China's growing assertiveness. The Nordic states—particularly Sweden and Norway—have been at the forefront of this pushback. The United States has sought to limit China's influence in the Arctic, pressuring allies to reject Chinese investments such as its attempts to [mine](#) in Greenland and implicitly encouraging them to voice concerns about China's intentions, as seen in the case of Chinese investment in the Kirkenes Port.

As the Arctic's strategic importance grows, competition for partnerships will likely intensify and competition for its resources and influence will escalate. Greenland, for example, [denied](#) China's request to modernize its airport infrastructure, ultimately turning to Denmark instead. This competition has occasionally created headlines, such as when President Trump expressed his [desire](#) to annex Greenland, indicative of the great power competition in the Arctic; Greenland's numerous rare earth elements are vital for American national security.

The great power competition in the Arctic also extends into science and technology. China expresses its commitment to scientific research in numerous ways, including substantial investments in its icebreaker fleet, which already [surpasses](#) that of the United States in number, and could challenge Russia's icebreaker monopoly along the NSR. Chinese research vessel expeditions—including those that have conducted research off the US coast to explore

the potential of deep-sea mining—demonstrate its interest in Arctic exploration. China's Arctic research facilities in Norway, Iceland, and Sweden also reflect its commitment to expand its scientific presence.

Although ostensibly focused on climate change and other useful science, China's scientific research activities may also have military applications. The vast data gathered by Chinese research vessels, monitoring stations, and underwater sensors can improve navigation in ice-covered Arctic waters, [track submarine movements](#), and develop advanced radar systems that can track objects at long distances. This dual-use nature of scientific research underscores the interconnectedness of China's Arctic economic, strategic, and scientific interests—an approach rooted in civil-military fusion. The fact that some Arctic research programs are run by groups affiliated with the [PLA](#) further proves the dual-use nature of their research. China's research also provides valuable information about the Arctic's ecosystem, resource potential, and environmental changes, all critical for safely navigating its waters and exploiting its resources. Furthermore, Chinese scientific work in [Norway](#) on the ionosphere could improve missile detection capabilities, while its research on sea salinity sampling could also help enhance submarine stealth operations.

The Arctic Council, the primary forum for Arctic governance and cooperation, faces increasing challenges in maintaining its relevance and effectiveness as geopolitical tensions rise. Russia's suspension from the Council and its subsequent response—cutting off funding—illustrates this complexity. These evolving dynamics will not only affect the fate of the Arctic's resources, environment, and indigenous cultures but will also have broader geopolitical implications. The future of the great power competition in the Arctic thus remains uncertain.

While NATO and Russia have traditionally dominated the region, China's rapid economic growth, expanding military capabilities, and increasing assertiveness have made it a significant force in the Arctic. The evolving interaction between these powers will shape the Arctic's future as each seeks to maximize influence, secure strategic and economic interests, and advance its regional vision. From China's perspective, it is a rising global power with legitimate and growing interests in the Arctic. It is determined to play a prominent role in shaping the region's future and contributing to a new, multipolar world order where China plays a leading role. The competition in the Arctic between China and the United States has already begun, but it will likely accelerate once the Northern Sea Route picks up in the next decade.

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