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Can China Become a Major Arctic Player?

By Francois Perreault

Synopsis

Little is known about China's ambitions in the circumpolar north. However, as it increasingly asserts itself as a global power, it seems determined to take an active part in the Arctic's regional affairs.

Commentary

THOUGH A NON-ARCTIC state, China is harbouring ambitions to be a major player in the circumpolar north. As it does not have geographical or historical ties to the region, it has no legal basis to contest existing sovereignty claims or to make any Arctic claims of its own. Still, as the ice gets thinner in the north cap, China seems to be seeking a larger role in determining the future political and legal structure of the Arctic Ocean.

China characterises the Arctic region as one that possesses a “shared heritage of humankind”, suggesting that it could oppose some of the Arctic states’ sovereignty claims. With the ice melting, China also believes that international laws will need to adapt to the new environmental reality. Some influential Chinese academics have suggested that the region has significant military value and that China should make its own sovereignty claims in order to internationalise the region.

Coastal states wary of China

Since 2008, China has officially asked to become a permanent observer on the Arctic Council, which is an exclusive regional forum comprising eight member states, viz Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. Created in 1996, the regional institution aims to promote cooperation and collaboration on Arctic issues.

There are currently six non-Arctic observer states – France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom. China was denied entry in 2009 and has since only been granted an ad-hoc observer status. This most likely reflects the wariness of the five coastal states (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States) towards China’s Arctic ambitions.

In 2008, the coastal states signed the Ilulissat Declaration to signal to the world that by virtue of their sovereignty, sovereignty rights and jurisdiction in large areas of the Arctic Ocean, they are uniquely positioned to address the evolving contemporary issues of the Arctic. The Declaration was an explicit statement to the international community that there was no need for a comprehensive Arctic Treaty on the lines of what exist in the Antarctic, and that the Arctic region should not be internationalised.

The ministers of foreign affairs of the eight member states will again decide on a new Chinese request for permanent observer status in May 2013. As it stands, China will definitely need to convince the five littoral states of its benign intentions. It would also be in China's interest to clarify its Arctic policy and to state its position regarding the Arctic states' sovereignty claims. Some specific ones would be Canada's and Russia's respective claims over the Northwest Passage (NWP) and the Northern Sea Route (NSR), and the littoral states' right to extend their continental shelf territorial claim up to 150 miles (230 kms) beyond their Exclusive Economic Zone.

Resources & new shipping routes

China's desire to become a major Arctic player might be motivated by the existence of important, untapped energy resources in the region. According to estimates, the Arctic has close to 30% of the world's undiscovered gas, 13% of the world's undiscovered oil, 9% of the world's coal, and vast amounts of other minerals such as nickel, copper, tungsten, lead, zinc, gold, silver and diamonds.

These are certainly impressive estimates, but under international law, close to 90% of these resources should fall within the sovereignty rights of the coastal states. Outside powers, such as China, will need to develop trade deals with the littoral states in order to tap into the resources. Consequently, there will be no international "gold rush" type of feverish migration to the North Pole.

China might also be motivated by the fact that the Arctic Ocean is slowly opening up to navigation during summer months. The key word here is slowly, as the NWP and the NSR have not yet been consistently opened, and they will perhaps not be opened for the entire summer months until 2060.

Nevertheless, the prospect of new and sometimes shorter shipping routes have attracted greater interest from other Asian countries. Like China, Japan and South Korea have also asked to become permanent observers on the Arctic Council.

Currently, China has an important decade-old Arctic research programme. It has the world's largest non-nuclear icebreaker – the Xuelong - and a permanent land-based facility for oceanic and climatological research in Ny-Alesund, Svalbard. It is also constructing a new Chinese-built icebreaker that should be operational in 2013.

China is not the only non-Arctic country with a major polar science programme, but it is the only one that has major power ambitions for the 21st century. Consequently, its scientific and economic interests should be seen in this context, especially since it has started to be more assertive about its own perspective of an international Arctic.

Will China accept a passive role?

The fact that China has started calling the Arctic an international territory probably means that it sees the Arctic Ocean as very significant in the economic, environmental, political and military spheres. It clearly does not want to sit on the sidelines while the five coastal states decide by themselves the future political and legal structure of the Arctic Ocean.

Nevertheless, while China might want a larger role in the Arctic, the four NATO states and Russia might not want China to meddle in what they clearly see as their own backyard. Just like China's sovereignty claims over Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the South China Sea, Canada's claim over the NWP, Russia's claim over the NSR and the five coastal states' current and future claims over their extended continental shelf, are certainly not open for debate or even to an "outsider" interpretation of the claims.

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