

CASE STUDY

The Polar Silk Road and China's role in Arctic governance

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ABSTRACT

The People's Republic of China (PRC) wants to become a key regional actor in the Arctic. PRC's underlying priority in the region is gaining access to commercial opportunities from trade and natural resources. To this end, PRC is building its domestic capacities for research and commercial development in the Arctic, increasing its involvement in multilateral forums on Arctic governance and deepening ties to Arctic nations, especially Russia.

Attitudes towards PRC among Arctic nations are diverging, but Beijing generally faces high levels of skepticism and opposition to its Arctic involvement, explicitly grounded in perceptions of PRC as a state undermining the rules-based international order and potential military build-up in the high north.

The analytical framework in this article builds on an outline authored by Exner-Pirot in 2012 (Exner-Pirot, 2012) to detail the current schools of thought within Arctic governance, and builds on it by including more recent developments in Arctic governance, incorporating the updated Arctic policies of most Arctic countries and connecting it to PRC.

This article contends that Beijing wants to change the status quo of Arctic governance and shift it towards a more accommodating approach to non-Arctic states. This article finds, based on the stated Arctic strategies of the eight Arctic states and PRC, that there are different views on Arctic governance where Arctic countries for the most part indicate an openness to a Chinese entry into the Arctic, albeit in diverging ways. This creates a complex governance scenario for PRC to navigate as it seeks to become a key Arctic player

Keywords: *Arctic; governance; geopolitics; trade; economic development; Belt and Road Initiative; Polar Silk Road*

1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is staking its claim in the Arctic at a time when the international jostling for influence in the region is intensifying, and the governance structure of the region is becoming increasingly important. The lack of comprehensive governance frameworks in the Arctic has repeatedly been pointed to as a future challenge in the region by academics, policymakers and non-governmental organizations alike. As Arctic ice continues to melt, commercial development of new trade routes and natural resources

ARTICLE INFO

Received: December 18, 2019

Accepted: February 14, 2020

Available online: April 13, 2020

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CITATION

Havnes, Heljar (2020). "The Polar Silk Road and the People's Republic of China's role in Arctic governance". *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*, 4(1): 121-138. doi: 10.24294/jipd.1166

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becomes increasingly viable. The economic potential, in turn, accelerates the international jostling for influence in the region.

There are multiple governance challenges in the Arctic that could lead to conflicts. Arctic countries are increasing military capacity-building and military presence in the Arctic on both sides of the NATO alliance.¹ Territorial disputes remain alongside diverging interpretations of international maritime law. Non-traditional security risks such as oil spills and rescue operations are likely to increase as commercial development in the region accelerates.

Academics, commentators, activists and practitioners have suggested different frameworks and outlines for Arctic governance. The analytical framework in this article builds on an outline authored by Exner-Pirot in 2012 (Exner-Pirot, 2012) to detail the current schools of thought within Arctic governance, and builds on it by including more recent developments in Arctic governance, incorporating the updated Arctic policies of most Arctic countries and connecting it to PRC. PRC's role in the Arctic is not discussed by Exner-Pirot and is seldom discussed in academic articles on Arctic governance, despite its increasing involvement in the region.

Based on a review of public statements, submissions to multilateral forums, policy papers and planning documents from PRC, this article contends that Beijing wants to change the status quo of Arctic governance. It wants to shift Arctic governance towards a more accommodating approach to non-Arctic states. Furthermore, PRC's principal interest in the Arctic seems to be, as of now, commercial development of shipping routes and natural resources. PRC is attempting to both take part in and shape Arctic governance through domestic capacity building as well as bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the region.

2. The imperative behind PRC's Arctic presence

In the 1990s and early 2000s, PRC's Arctic strategy was focused on scientific and academic efforts. These efforts evolved into staking a claim to an Arctic presence in multilateral forums on Arctic governance throughout the 2000s. The increased diplomatic efforts to take part in the governance of the Arctic coincided with an emerging scientific consensus about the region's commercial potential from shipping and energy resources due to melting ice (Buixadé Farré *et al.*, 2014; Østreng *et al.*, 2013; US Energy Information Administration, 2012; US Geological Survey, 2008). In 2017, PRC publicly began outlining its commercial strategy in the Arctic. PRC President Xi Jinping called on Russia to “cooperate in the development and utilization of the Arctic navigation channels to create a ‘Silk Road on the Ice’” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 6). In 2018, the commercial strategy was further elucidated by the Polar Silk Road (PSR) initiative, which is a component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the PRC's infrastructure, trade and investment efforts to connect the Eurasian region along the ancient Silk Road. The Arctic was officially incorporated into BRI as the PSR for the first time in PRC's Arctic policy white paper in 2018 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

Incorporating the Arctic into the BRI indicates that Beijing places a high priority on commercial

¹ Among the Arctic countries, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Canada and the United States are NATO members. Sweden and Finland, on the other hand, are not. There are also diverging alliance structures among the Asian nations vying for influence in the Arctic. Among the five Asian states with permanent seats in the Arctic Council, Japan and South Korea are NATO partners. PRC—who is viewed with skepticism by several Arctic countries—as well as Singapore and India, are not.

development in the region. Among the core domestic policy tenets of the BRI is to support regional development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2017). This focus on regional development stems from an increased emphasis among PRC leaders to spur economic development in regions that did not experience the massive level of economic growth as the coastal regions since PRC’s “Reform and Opening Up” period began in 1978 (Chen and Zheng, 2008; Cochrane *et al.*, 2019). PRC’s Heilongjiang province, the northernmost in the country, is a good example of the regional development aspect of PRC’s Arctic policy. Heilongjiang proposed its Belt and Road strategy in 2015, in accordance with the central government, aiming to become a hub for multilateral maritime trade via Russia, PRC’s premier trading partner in the Arctic (Belt and Road Portal, 2017).

Signs of PRC’s cognizance of commercial opportunities in the Arctic can also be seen through its relations with Arctic states preceding the PSR. Energy trade with Russia has been a key element of PRC’s trade and energy strategy in the Arctic. Furthermore, PRC has entered into a free trade agreement with Iceland (Government of Iceland, 2013a), seen as an “important gateway to the Arctic” by PRC (Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network, 2014) and reached an agreement to incorporate Finland into the PSR (Yang, 2018). Both of these countries have been supportive of PRC’s increased involvement in the Arctic Council (Li and Huang, 2016; Government of Iceland, 2013b).

PRC has proven especially cognizant of the potential trade opportunities in the Arctic as shipping routes open up. Trade routes between East Asia and Europe are likely to be significantly shortened when Arctic shipping becomes commercially viable due to melting ice (Østreg *et al.*, 2013; Arctic Council, 2009a; Buixadé Farré *et al.*, 2014), also making an estimated 10 percent of the world’s known conventional hydrocarbon resources exploitable in the near future (US Energy Information Administration, 2012; US Geological Survey, 2008). Shipping and energy access are closely interlinked; Arctic oil and gas is likely to be shipped from Russia and other Arctic states, making shipping and transport infrastructure necessary to enable PRC’s energy trade. There are multiple examples of this interlinkage in recent Sino-Russian energy trade agreements.²

3. PRC’s involvement in Arctic governance

3.1. The rationale for PRC’s involvement in Arctic governance

China’s increasing focus on commercial opportunities in the Arctic has grown in tandem with its efforts to contribute to the shaping of norms and rules in the region through multilateral forums. PRC sees itself as an important stakeholder in—and wants to be a part of—international Arctic governance, as outlined in its Arctic policy: “[PRC] upholds the current Arctic governance system [...], plays a constructive part in the making, interpretation, application and development of international rules regarding the Arctic” and “stands for steadily advancing international cooperation

² PRC has committed to buy three million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) annually from the Russian Yamal gas fields in 2017 (Sustainable Development Working Group, 2017). In April 2019, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and the state-owned China National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Company (CNODC) each secured a 10-percent stake in a Russian LNG project in the Arctic, the “Arctic LNG 2”, which is owned by Novatek, Russia’s second-largest LNG producer (LNG World News, 2019a; 2019b). Furthermore, Novatek and a Russian state-owned oil and gas shipping company, Sovcomflot, entered into an agreement with China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and the Silk Road Fund, a Chinese state-owned investment fund designed to spur increased investment in the BRI, to form the “Maritime Arctic Transport” joint venture to increase effectiveness and cooperation on Arctic energy trade from both Yamal and the Arctic LNG 2 project (Hellenic Shipping News, 2019).

on the Arctic” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2018, paras. 40–41). China’s political leadership has determined that developing the ability to access and exploit the Arctic is a diplomatic, economic, and security imperative. Beijing has, since at least 2014, been building its capacity to defend its interests in the Arctic region through military means (Havnes & Seland, 2019), demonstrating the high importance PRC leadership has placed on the region.

While PRC has contributed to other multilateral forums,³ the Arctic Council is the principal outlet for Beijing’s involvement in multilateral forums on Arctic issues. PRC activities in the council started in 2006. At this time, it was granted ad hoc-observer status for a series of meetings in Arctic Council working groups⁴ (Arctic Council, 2009b). Discussions about PRC ascension to Arctic Council permanent observer status, from 2006 onwards, coincided with a significant increase in PRC’s activity in the council (Arctic Council, 2007; 2009b), which then accelerated further. PRC appointed its first “Special Representative for Arctic Affairs” in 2016 (Yang, 2016). In China’s 2016 and 2018 Arctic Council observer reports, it stated that it took part in most working groups and that it took part in every Arctic Council meeting possible (Yang, 2016; Li, 2018).

Scientific output and collaborations are what give countries a seat on the table in Arctic Council working groups. China’s efforts to lead in Arctic science is reflected in a steady increase of publications since 2006. According to a 2016 study of scientific publications on Arctic issues, China was “by far the nation with the highest relative growth (260 per cent increase)” from 2006 until 2016 (Aksnes *et al.*, 2016, p. 14). The increased academic capacities and scientific output on Arctic issues add weight to PRC’s claim for a role in the Arctic. PRC uses increasing scientific output and international science collaborations to gain access to—and recognition as a legitimate stakeholder in—the Arctic, as observed by Bertelsen, Xing and Gregersen (2014).

Beyond the scientific output, PRC has prioritized building up domestic capacities to maintain a physical presence in the Arctic. PRC has had such an Arctic presence since the 1990s, when it began sending research vessels to the region. The research vessel Xue Long, PRC’s first icebreaker, was acquired in 1993 and has carried out nine Arctic voyages since then (Polar Research Institute of China, 2019). Arctic expeditions are key features of China’s international science efforts. Since 1999, China has led international research expeditions to the region (China Internet Information Center, 2010), with expedition frequency having reached once a year in 2018 (Chinese Academy of Sciences, 2017). Its second icebreaker, Xue Long 2, entered into service in 2019 (Aker Arctic, 2019).

PRC is not likely to be technically nor legally able to extract Arctic energy resources unilaterally when they become exploitable, and will likely require reliance on other countries’ expertise and commercial rights. According to the now-defunct PRC State Oceanic Administration,⁵ the technology needed to exploit the natural resources in the Arctic is “dominated by large multinational oil and gas companies and oilfield technology companies, and are mainly concentrated in the Arctic

³ A 2017 Arctic paper published by the Ocean University of China stated that China had “shifted from a rule follower to a rule maker” in the Arctic (Soukas, 2018, para. 9). China has contributed to UN deliberations on carbon emissions in the Arctic (International Maritime Organization, 2013) and Arctic shipping regulations (International Maritime Organization, 2015) and joined a legally binding fisheries treaty (European Commission, 2019).

⁴ Working groups are subdivisions of the Arctic Council.

⁵ The State Oceanic Administration (SOA) was replaced during a government restructuring process in March 2018, placing its responsibilities under the auspices of the newly formed Ministry of Natural Resources (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

countries” and that there is “a large gap compared with the Arctic countries in terms of relevant scientific and technological capabilities and facilities” (Liu *et al.*, 2014), underscoring the lack of PRC’s capacities for unilateral resource exploration in the Arctic. PRC does, however, have the capacity to send its own ships through the Arctic as melting ice is gradually making Arctic shipping routes commercially viable. In October 2018, a Chinese cargo ship owned and operated by China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) docked in the Netherlands after making its maiden voyage through the Northeast Passage (NEP)⁶ (China COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited, 2018).

4. Possible barriers of entry to Arctic governance involvement: International skepticism towards PRC

PRC’s conduct in the South China Sea (SCS) and its increasing maritime military capabilities have caused alarm among both Arctic and non-Arctic states. In SCS, PRC is perceived to contradict the application of the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on maritime features over which it claims sovereignty.⁷ Furthermore, maritime defense capabilities have been a priority for PRC at least since 2012 when, during the 18th Communist Party Congress, then-President Hu Jintao stated that PRC should enhance its capacity to “resolutely safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests” and to make China a “maritime power” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, 2012, para. 99).⁸

PRC’s stated intention to become a key player in the Arctic, combined with an increasing threat perception connected to its maritime capacity buildup and perceived contradiction with international maritime law in SCS, has led to clear and publicly stated skepticism from at least four Arctic states regarding PRC’s entry into the Arctic: Sweden,⁹ Denmark,¹⁰ the US¹¹ and Norway.¹² Japan, who

⁶ The Northeast Passage is generally used to the sea route through the Arctic connecting Europe to East Asia. The Northwest Route is generally used to describe traveling in the opposite direction, crossing the North American Arctic waters westward from Europe.

⁷ This was evidenced by a 2016 arbitration case between the Philippines and PRC. The ruling, in short, states that none of the contested maritime territories in SCS are islands and that PRC’s claims over the nine-dash line, the area PRC claims in SCS, has no legal basis (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2015). PRC refused to participate or abide by the ruling (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2014).

⁸ Furthering this argument, a 2015 PRC defense policy paper declared that the “traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests” (Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 2015, para. 7). This goal was reiterated by President Xi Jinping in 2018, stating that “the task of building a powerful navy has never been as urgent as it is today” (Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2019; CCTV Video News Agency, 2018).

⁹ The Swedish Defense Research Agency, a part of the Ministry of Defense, has warned that Chinese investments in Swedish satellite technology could have military uses in the Arctic (Wicklén *et al.*, 2019).

¹⁰ Denmark has expressed concern over PRC’s plans for investments in the Danish-controlled Arctic island of Greenland (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019; Andersson *et al.*, 2018).

¹¹ In a recent report, the United States Coast Guard labels PRC and Russia as threats to the US and its allies’ interests in the Arctic. The report presents the two countries’ challenging “the rules-based international order around the globe” and causing “concern of similar infringement to the continued peaceful stability of the Arctic region,” especially drawing parallels to Chinese conduct in the SCS and East China Sea (ECS) (US Coast Guard, 2019, p. 4). US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently stated that the Arctic has “become an arena of global power and competition,” echoing the parallels to PRC’s actions in its regional waters: “(PRC’s) pattern of aggressive behavior elsewhere will inform how it treats the Arctic” (Sengupta, 2019, para. 8). The US recently published its updated Arctic policy, building on these points and stating that PRC and Russia “[are] pursuing activities and capabilities in the Arctic that may present risks to the homeland,” and that these risks may constrain the United States Department of Defense’s “ability to flow forces globally, and more broadly to affect US strategic objectives related to competition with [PRC] and Russia in the Indo-Pacific and Europe,” going so far as to state that PRC and Russia causes the Arctic to be “vulnerable to ‘strategic spillover’ from tensions, competition, or conflict arising in [...] other regions” (US Department of Defense, 2019, p. 6).

¹² Norway’s Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide supported the remarks from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, laid out in footnote 6, regarding PRC in the Arctic (Tømmerbakke, 2019).

is a permanent observing member of the Arctic Council, has stated concerns along similar lines.¹³ Russia, while remaining a potential strategic partner of PRC in the Arctic, reportedly views PRC with suspicion (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019). In a recent white paper, an analyst from the United States European Command (USEUCOM) Strategy Division & Russia Strategic Initiative states that mutual Sino-Russian skepticism in the Arctic can, and should, be used by the United States to “counter what appears to be a growing alignment of Chinese and Russian strategic interests” (Werchan, 2019, pp. 135–137), underscoring the view that Chinese and Russian interests in the Arctic may diverge and conflict.

The commercial strategy underpinning Beijing's motivations to involve itself in Arctic governance carries with it some risk. In a recent BRI study, the World Bank warns that without “deep policy reforms that increase transparency, improve debt sustainability, and mitigate environmental, social, and corruption risks,” BRI projects could lead to worsening debt sustainability levels and exacerbate environmental damage for participating countries (World Bank, 2019a; 2019b, para. 1). While PRC has not made public any spending figures connected to the PSR, it can be reasonably expected that its stake in Arctic trade and energy development requires high degrees of investment. As outlined earlier in this paper, PRC needs to build domestic capacities in Arctic shipping and energy exploration, two capital-heavy industries, in order to exploit the resources and shipping lanes that are gradually approaching commercial viability. In addition, plans to develop Heilongjiang as an Arctic trade hub (Belt and Road Portal, 2017), a proposed trans-Arctic underwater telecoms cable with Finland (Yang, 2018) and mining and infrastructure investments in Greenland (Andersson *et al.*, 2018) are all parts of PRC's Arctic strategy and are likely to require significant investments. Furthermore, the Arctic component of the BRI has been met with suspicion from Arctic states. In its recently published Arctic strategy, the United States Department of Defense states that “there is a risk that [PRC's] predatory economic behavior globally may be repeated in the Arctic” (US Department of Defense, 2019, p. 6), referencing PRC-funded development projects in other parts of the world that have left recipients with unsustainable debt levels.¹⁴ Such suspicion increases the risk for PRC when investing in Arctic commercial development.

PRC's investment and trade agreements have provided it with key entry points into Arctic affairs through its commercial partners, but risk being impacted by a decreased spending- and risk-appetite among PRC decision-makers. Concerns about BRI funding, based on PRC's tendency of overinvesting and possible overextension of public finances, has been raised by observers in part because of the decentralized Chinese governance system (Wong, 2018). PRC's response to concerns over the lack of sustainability of projects and accusations of corruption has been to scale down the rhetoric and tighten oversight over investments (Bloomberg News, 2019). Statistics from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), which tracks PRC's outbound investment, indicate a fall in BRI investments since a peak in 2017 (Scissors, 2018). The changes and reductions in BRI investment may reduce spending and involvement of PRC in the Arctic through PSR, a crucial avenue for PRC to gain influence and legitimacy in the region.

¹³ When discussing PRC ships entering the Arctic through the Bering Strait, the Polar Silk Road and PRC's legal stance on the Arctic as presented in its 2018 Arctic policy, the analysis of the Ministry of Defense of Japan is the following: “Focus will be on whether or not such activities would have any relation to the PLA Navy's future advancements into the Arctic Ocean” (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2018, p. 192).

¹⁴ The term “debt-trap diplomacy” has been used to criticize Chinese development loans to countries with high debt levels, such as in Sri Lanka where the government was unable to repay a Chinese loan to build a port and transferred control of the port to a Chinese operator (Chellaney, 2017). The usefulness and accuracy of the term have been disputed (Freeman, 2017; Rajah *et al.*, 2019).

Given PRC's willingness and capabilities to take part in Arctic governance, keeping in mind the risk concerning the BRI and potential skepticism towards PRC's actions among key Arctic stakeholders, the following sections will outline the potential paths for Arctic governance and detail PRC's potential role in, and stance on, them.

5. Possible arctic governance structures and PRC's role in them

The most significant discussion in the future of Arctic governance came out of a foreign minister's meeting among the five littoral Arctic states: Russia, the US, Canada, Norway and Denmark in 2008. The result of the meeting, held in the city of Ilulissat in Greenland, was the Ilulissat Declaration, which stated unequivocally that there is "no need to develop a new comprehensive legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean" (Ilulissat Declaration, 2008). This statement birthed the so-called "Ilulissat Approach" to Arctic governance, which will be discussed below.

Academics, commentators, activists and practitioners have suggested different frameworks and outlines for Arctic governance both before and after the Ilulissat meeting. This article builds on an outline authored by Exner-Pirot in 2012 (Exner-Pirot, 2012) to detail the current schools of thought within Arctic governance, and builds on it by adding recent developments and connecting it to PRC. The different schools of thought are outlined in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Different governance approaches

Type of Approach	Ilulissat Approach	Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach	Piecemeal Approach
Main Features	Existing frameworks are sufficient to govern the Arctic New frameworks are not needed; implementation of existing ones is key	Existing frameworks are insufficient to govern the Arctic Arctic states and their unilateral, bilateral or sub-regional agreements take primacy over international agreements	Existing frameworks are insufficient to govern the Arctic Different issues should be handled in different international forums through broad, inclusive discussions; creating a patchwork of agreements to govern the Arctic
Compatibility with PRC's Arctic strategy	Incompatible	Compatible, on the condition that BRI/PSR investments can be maintained	Compatible
Compatibility with Arctic countries' Arctic strategies	the United States, Denmark	Norway, the United States, Russia	Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Canada

Note: Author's own, adapted from Exner-Pirot (2012)

5.1. Ilulissat Approach

The Ilulissat Approach is based on the assumption that existing legal frameworks, UNCLOS being principal among them, is sufficient to govern the Arctic (Ilulissat Declaration, 2008). The underlying assumption that there is “no need to develop a new comprehensive legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean” still remains, and this approach is arguably the closest to the reality in the Arctic today (Ilulissat Declaration, 2008, para. 4). The governance strategy under this approach would rather concern the implementation of existing rules rather than the creation of new ones, as argued by former Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and the Legal Counsel of the United Nations Hans Corell (Corell, 2007; 2016).

5.1.1. China's stance

The current legal and multilateral framework that governs the Arctic is geared strongly towards Arctic nations, which are the principal decisionmakers within multilateral forums and among themselves. PRC has shown a willingness to stake a claim in the Arctic, and would likely want to change the current system towards one that gives more decision-making power and influence to non-Arctic states, especially for commercial development in the region. This stance can be read from PRC's Arctic policy, which stipulates that “all States should [...] respect the rights and freedom of non-Arctic States to carry out activities in this region in accordance with the law, and respect the overall interests of the international community in the Arctic” and that non-Arctic states should “take part in cooperation on climate change, scientific research, environmental protection, shipping route development, resource utilization and cultural activities” (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018, paras. 17–18). Another challenge for PRC if UNCLOS remains the overarching governance framework for the Arctic, which is the core element of the “Ilulissat Approach”, is that it could lead to legal challenges to PRC's claims, with parallels and precedent being drawn from PRC's own legal interpretations and actions in SCS.

5.1.2. Arctic countries supporting the Ilulissat Approach

Denmark is the only one of the five signatories of the Ilulissat Declaration that expresses a clear commitment only to the “Ilulissat Approach” at the time of writing. The US stance, which aligns both with the Ilulissat Approach and the “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach”, is discussed in section 5.2 below.

Denmark's official Arctic policy from 2011, “Kingdom of Denmark Strategy for the Arctic 2011–2020”, expresses interests in line with the “Ilulissat Approach”, stating that “international law and established forums of cooperation provide a sound basis for conflict resolution and constructive cooperation in the development of the Arctic” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2011, p. 13), clearly rejecting the need for new frameworks. Denmark updated its Arctic policy in 2016, adding a higher education strategy but remaining committed to the 2011 document's assessments on Arctic governance (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2016).

5.2. Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach

Within the existing framework, or lack thereof, Arctic states maintain primacy and flexibility to take unilateral, bilateral or sub-regional action—meaning multilateral agreements that do not encompass all Arctic countries—in the region. Within this approach, “the Arctic states will pay

only lip service to their recent promises to strengthen multilateral cooperation, while continuing to emphasize national or bilateral initiatives to strengthen environmental legislation or resolve conflicts” (Exner-Pirot, 2012). A multitude of agreements and disputes have been settled through bilateral or sub-regional channels in the Arctic.¹⁵ Furthermore, unilateral action could be expected to take primacy in Arctic policy development going forward under this approach (Exner-Pirot, 2012).

5.2.1. China’s stance

As evidenced by both the BRI in general and the PSR specifically, PRC prefers bilateral negotiations and still plans to continue strengthening bilateral ties with Arctic nations to increase its commercial foothold in the region. The “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach” would suit PRC if it remains able to retain good relations and leverage over Arctic nations through commercial ties and investments. If the BRI, and outward PRC investments in general, were to be scaled down due to financial constraints or risk-related concerns over the BRI, it may thus negatively impact PRC within this approach.

5.2.2. Arctic countries supporting the Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach

Norway, the United States and Russia have all been key proponents of bilateral agreements in the Arctic.

Norway’s updated Arctic policy, published in 2017, underscores the importance of adherence to international law but opens up for agreements to manage Arctic resources both among Arctic and non-Arctic states (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2017). In a foreign policy address to Norway’s Parliament, the Norwegian foreign minister presented the Norway-Russia Arctic fisheries agreements as a model for Arctic development and explicitly supporting the inclusion of non-Arctic states in Arctic affairs (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). However, these policy statements could also be interpreted as aligning with the “Piecemeal Approach”, which seeks to create a patchwork of agreements to govern the Arctic through broad, inclusive agreements on specific issues and is discussed in the following section.

Russia’s official Arctic policy contains no specific reference to Arctic governance approaches beyond vague support for international law: “The realization of national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic is provided by institutions of the state power together with institutions of the civil society in strict conformity with the legislation of the Russian Federation and its international treaties” (ARCTIS Knowledge Hub, 2008, para. 5). Russian actions, however, signal a degree of conformity with the “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach”, as outlined by the bilateral and multilateral treaties it has signed on to in the Arctic including the above-mentioned “Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean” (Wahlén, 2018) and the legally binding “Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement” that coordinates international search and

¹⁵ Norway and Russia have agreed to jointly run a bilateral Arctic fisheries management body, the Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission, which was established in 1976 (JointFish, 2019). The US and Canada regulate bilateral cooperation regarding the Northwest Passage, the sea route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through the joint US-Canadian border in the Arctic through the 1988 Arctic Cooperation Agreement (United Nations Treaty Series, 1988). In addition, the US has bilateral fisheries agreements with Canada and Russia (Northern Pacific Halibut Act of 1982, 1982; US Department of State, 2019). An example of a multilateral framework is the “Nordic Defence Cooperation” (NORDEFECO), a defense collaboration organization between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, which encompasses Arctic security (The Government Offices of Sweden, 2019).

rescue coverage and response in the Arctic (Buixadé Farré *et al.*, 2014).¹⁶

Academic analyses of Russian thinking in the Arctic underscore the view that Russia adheres to the “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach”. In a discussion about Russia’s Arctic modernization policy, Rowe argues that “the resources and attention devoted to this modernisation, some of which could be used to pursue solely national interest and some of which is necessary to support a more open, more cooperative Arctic (e.g., search and rescue capacity), have also become subject to competing representations within other Arctic countries (for example, debating whether Russia’s actions represent Arctic militarisation or capacity building, not unlike other countries’ efforts, in preparation for a more open Arctic)” (Rowe, 2018, p. 96). In an earlier article by Rowe and Blakkisrud, Russia’s Arctic strategy is presented as wanting to “be seen as modern and at the forefront of international law, taking the lead where they can” (Rowe and Blakkisrud, 2014, p. 79). The uncertainties inherent in Russia’s public Arctic policy, combined with the rationale behind the modernization and Russia’s wish to be perceived as a constructive and leading partner in Arctic governance, indicates that Russia wants to balance unilateral actions to secure its national interest and bilateral, sub-regional or multilateral agreements that gain its Arctic interests, in line with the “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach”.

The US was a signatory to the Ilulissat Declaration, but has at the same time shown an inclination towards the “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach”. The US is therefore identified as aligning with both approaches in Table 1. US actions in the Arctic remains focused on bilateral agreements. However, the US has joined legally binding treaties on search and rescue operations and fisheries management. Policy documents give some indication of US viewpoints on Arctic governance. In its 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region, which is less substantive than the majority of other countries’ respective Arctic policy papers, US interests in international cooperation on the Arctic is described as “seek[ing] to strengthen partnerships through existing multilateral fora and legal frameworks dedicated to common Arctic issues,” while also “pursu[ing] new arrangements for cooperating on issues of mutual interest or concern and addressing unique and unprecedented challenges, as appropriate” (The White House, 2013, pp. 8–9). The 2013 Arctic policy indicates compatibility with all three governance approaches.

In later years, however, the United States’ strong reluctance to include non-Arctic states, especially PRC, makes US adherence to the “Piecemeal Approach” incompatible with its stated strategies. In its 2019 Arctic Defense strategy document, the United States Department of Defense underlines the tradition of Arctic nations to “isolate the region from wider geopolitical conflicts” and regional cooperation, while indicating a strong skepticism towards PRC’s entry into Arctic governance (US Department of Defense, 2019, p. 4). This reluctance towards any non-Arctic states’ participation in Arctic governance indicates a strong opposition to the “Piecemeal Approach”, which is a more inclusive approach to Arctic governance. PRC is mentioned specifically, describing Beijing’s attempts to “alter arctic governance through economic leverage” in the following way:

“Despite having no territorial claims in the region, China is seeking a role in Arctic governance. [...] Despite China’s claim of being a “Near Arctic State,” the United States does not recognize any such status.” (US Department of Defense, 2019, pp. 4–5)

¹⁶ All eight Arctic countries are signatories: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States.

Furthermore, the report posits that PRC's presence in the Arctic could be considered a military threat to the US. The US prefers to deal solely with Arctic nations in the region's governance and has strongly indicated its opposition to PRC involvement in the region. The Department of Defense's Arctic policy states that China and Russia are "pursuing activities and capabilities in the Arctic that may present risks to the homeland" and that these risks may constrain the United States Department of Defense's "ability to flow forces globally, and more broadly to affect US strategic objectives related to competition with China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific and Europe," identifying PRC and Russia as making the Arctic "vulnerable to 'strategic spillover' from tensions, competition, or conflict arising in [...] other regions" (US Department of Defense, 2019, p. 6).

5.3. Piecemeal Approach

As a middle-ground option between the status quo-like "Ilulissat Approach" and the "Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach" is the "Piecemeal Approach". The latter approach focuses on making issue-specific regulatory agreements. Young argues that it is the "most pragmatic" approach to Arctic governance and that it is far better to have "a messy process that yields effective governance with respect to some important issues [...] than have a] more comprehensive and orderly process that fails to achieve success across the board" (Young, 2009, p. 441). The approach, in short, would entail different issues being handled in different existing international forums, creating a patchwork of agreements to govern the Arctic through broad, inclusive agreements on specific issues. Young also argues that indigenous peoples, subnational governments and relevant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should play a part in developing the patchwork (Young, 2009).

5.3.1. China's stance

This approach would suit PRC. It could play on both its strengths and interests. It would allow PRC, as an external party in the Arctic, to pick and choose where to make political and legal commitments. It would likely try to involve itself on shipping, science, energy and conservation issues, but avoid territorial disputes or legal domains where it itself could be challenged on its SCS activities.

The level of involvement of NGOs and indigenous people groups within this framework could cause PRC alarm. PRC is traditionally skeptical of NGOs impacting national policies (Yin, 2009). As for ethnic minorities or indigenous peoples of PRC, it is rare for them to be involved in the country's foreign policy. However, in 2013, the indigenous Evenki reindeer herders of PRC took part in collaborations with the Arctic Council (Arctic Council, 2013; Conservation of Flora and Fauna, 2013), indicating PRC's openness to discuss indigenous peoples' and minorities' rights to gain another avenue of involvement in the Arctic.

5.3.2. Arctic countries supporting the Piecemeal Approach

Sweden, Finland and Iceland, the Arctic countries who were not included in the Ilulissat meeting in 2008 have expressed interests indicating opposition to the "Ilulissat Approach" and the "Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach" due to their omission from Arctic governance discussions. The three countries all indicate preferences in line with a "Piecemeal Approach" in their respective Arctic policies. Canada, a signatory of the Ilulissat Declaration, updated its Arctic strategy in 2019, moving from an alignment to the "Ilulissat Approach" to the "Piecemeal Approach".

In Sweden's 2011 Arctic policy, it stated that it does not support the five Arctic coastal states' agreements on Arctic governance without Sweden's involvement, underscoring the importance of "Finland, Iceland and Sweden to be able to participate in decision-making in cases where they have legitimate interests and that the status of the Arctic Council is maintained" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2011, p. 22).

Iceland shares the concern about being omitted from Arctic governance decisions. In its 2010 Arctic policy, Iceland states that the five coastal states "have made an attempt to establish a consultative forum for Arctic issues without the participation of Iceland, Finland or Sweden or representatives of indigenous peoples" and asserts that individual Arctic Council members "must be prevented from joining forces to exclude other Member States from important decisions, which would undermine the Arctic Council and other Arctic States, including Iceland" (Government of Iceland, 2010, pp. 5–6). The strong condemnations from both Sweden and Iceland against the five Arctic coastal states making agreements on Arctic governance without broader consultation indicate an aversion towards the "Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach". Furthermore, it indicates an affinity towards the broader, more inclusive "Piecemeal Approach".

Finland expresses Arctic interests in line with the "Piecemeal Approach" in its official 2013 Arctic policy. This policy states that the current governance structure "is fragmented and may thus lead to ambiguities regarding liability for damages," while suggesting for "the enforcement of UNCLOS [...] supplemented by sector-based regulation with due regard to specific characteristics of the Arctic region concerning the use of living natural resources, environmental protection or maritime safety" (Prime Minister's Office of Finland, 2013, p. 44). This enforcement mechanism mirrors the "Piecemeal Approach" focus on making issue-specific regulatory agreements.

Canada's Arctic policy shifted significantly in 2019. The new policy stated clear openness to non-Arctic states getting involved in Arctic governance and support for different multilateral governance frameworks to replace a policy with clear alignment with the "Ilulissat Approach".¹⁷ Canada's "Arctic Policy Framework" in 2019 identifies enhancing bilateral cooperation with Arctic and key non-Arctic states and actors as a step towards "assuming global leadership" on Arctic issues (Government of Canada, 2019). Furthermore, the updated policy highlights support for a wide range of governance mechanisms in the Arctic. It references the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, the Arctic Economic Council, the International Maritime Organization and other UN organizations. It highlights legal frameworks beyond UNCLOS. These positions align with the "Piecemeal Approach", as they support a wide and varied set of governance mechanisms in the Arctic and express a clear openness to non-Arctic states increasing their involvement in Arctic governance and development.

¹⁷ Prior to the publication of Canada's "Arctic Policy Framework" in 2019 (Government of Canada, 2019), Canada's foreign policy adhered closely to the "Ilulissat Approach". The Canadian government's 2009 "Northern Strategy" policy document offered no alternative governance models and expressed a remaining commitment to the Ilulissat Declaration (Government of Canada, 2009). Another key source on Canada's Arctic strategy, the 2010 "Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy", underscored the primacy of UNCLOS and the preeminence of Arctic states in regional decision-making, stating that "Canada does not accept the premise that the Arctic requires a fundamentally new governance structure or legal framework. Nor does Canada accept that the Arctic nation states are unable to appropriately manage the North as it undergoes fundamental change" (Government of Canada, 2010, p. 9).

6. Conclusion

PRC is staking its claim in the Arctic, arguing that the region's potential for commercial exploitation of energy resources and trade routes should be made available for non-Arctic states. The incorporation of PSR into the BRI signals that PRC places significant importance on the Arctic region. PRC sees itself as an important stakeholder in—and wants to be a part of—international Arctic governance, as outlined in its official Arctic policy. However, there are risks to PRC's Arctic involvement. The BRI—and by extension the PSR—could be impacted by a possible reduction in scale and risk appetite from PRC's leadership, driven by financial concerns. PRC's conduct in SCS and its increasing maritime military capabilities cause concerns among Arctic stakeholders.

As international interest in the Arctic increases and commercial resources are becoming available, calls for discussions on the future of Arctic governance is increasing as well. This article has outlined three main approaches to Arctic governance: 1) the “Ilulissat Approach”, which posits that existing governance frameworks, such as UNCLOS, are sufficient to govern the Arctic and that new frameworks are not needed and rather the implementation of existing ones are key; 2) the “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach”, where Arctic nations will use unilateral, bilateral or sub-regional channels to assert their interests in the Arctic; and 3) the “Piecemeal Approach”, with different issues being handled in different existing international forums, creating a patchwork of agreements to govern the Arctic.

For PRC, the “Unilateral, Bilateral and Sub-Regional Approach” would be ideal if PRC can maintain its leverage over Arctic countries with its high levels of investment outlined in the BRI and PSR and in bilateral plans with Arctic countries. However, the “Piecemeal Approach” would be a less risk-prone approach, where PRC has the chance of gaining legitimacy in the Arctic through international agreements and commitments to sustainably develop the Arctic, notwithstanding the levels of investment. This approach also has support from a majority of Arctic states, including key PRC allies.

This article finds, based on the stated Arctic strategies of the eight Arctic states and PRC, that there are different views on Arctic governance where Arctic countries for the most part indicate an openness to approaches compatible with a Chinese entry into the Arctic, albeit in diverging ways. This creates a complex governance scenario for PRC to navigate as it seeks to become a key Arctic player.

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