

Cheryl White

Chinese Positioning in the Melting Arctic

Cooperative Partner or Silent Challenger?



About the Article

This article emphasizes the duality of China's position—as both an economic partner and a potential disruptor to the status quo—while addressing the underlying uncertainties about its long-term intentions in the Arctic.

About the Author

Cheryl White has lived in China for 16 years and has a background in international relations, as well as environmental and sustainability policy. She currently works as a research assistant on energy policy in the German parliament.

The Arctic, long the domain of ice and isolation, is transforming into a stage for geopolitical posturing (Badina & Pankratov, 2022). Warming nearly four times faster than the global average, the melting Arctic has unlocked new trade routes, untapped energy reserves, and fresh geopolitical tensions. As the ice thaws, the waters heat up—politically and economically: the Arctic region, if available to international shipping routes, could realize the connectivity of maritime trade routes between Asia, Europe and North America. (Wang et al., 2018) At the forefront of this evolving drama is China, a self-styled „near-Arctic state,“ . As one of the 13 non-arctic states participating as an observer on the arctic council since 2013, China’s position here reflects the communicated interests of the Arctic Council itself, which aims to “enhanced cooperation in the circum-polar North...and promote cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States” (International Cooperation in the Arctic, n.d.) leveraging its Polar Silk Road strategy to position itself as an indispensable player in this high-stakes region. China’s 2018 „Polar Silk Road” strategy, an extension of its Belt and Road Initiative (later termed Global Development Initiative (Wu, 2023) , is not quite a trade blueprint. It’s a carefully crafted narrative of cooperative ambition, with promises of sustainable development and scientific research. By pledging to “participate in the protection and utilization of the Antarctic,“ China has secured its observer status on the Arctic Council since 2013, emphasizing collaboration and support for global governance and international rule of law. Similar to the Global Development Initiative, however, the offer of development and collaboration is used to to capitalize on a region’s vast potential for natural resources. The Arctic region has .

Make no mistake—this isn’t purely altruistic. For Beijing, the Arctic represents connectivity. The prospect of slashing trade route times between Asia, Europe, and North America by as much as 50% isn’t just a logistical win; it’s a strategic coup. Reduced costs for Chinese exports could reshape global trade, elevating China’s maritime dominance and diminishing reliance on volatile chokepoints

like the Strait of Malacca. So far, China’s ambitions in the region remain mostly non-aggressive. The narrative around China’s position in the arctic seems to be “‘framed as a potential alternative governance framework to the regional status quo centered around the Arctic Council” (Eiterjord, 2023). China projects a narrative that it should take an active role in the Arctic to “coordinate conflicts “, “explore the Arctic climate governance model” and invest in research to “strive to be at the forefront of climate governance” (Chen, 2023). China’s narrative positions itself as a cooperative partner while subtly challenging the Arctic Council’s governance (Eiterjord, 2023). By framing its role as one of a global climate custodian and scientific leader, China sidesteps territorial claims while carving out influence. This narrative allows Beijing to hedge against legal scrutiny, portraying itself as a benefactor of Arctic stability rather than a competitor for dominance. Critics, however, remain unconvinced. Cassotte et al. and Stünkel argue that China’ “assertive behaviour towards the Arctic environmental ocean” is non-congruent with the reality of trade and investor realities, meaning that China should not be considered as a significant threat to for Arctic security (Cassotta et al., 2015). China’s recent trade battles with Norway and the slow advance with investments into critical port infrastructure (Braw, 2025) suggest that the strategy is long term and the quest for resources and trade superiority will not bow to international rule of law. In other words, China’s bark in the Arctic may be louder than its bite—for now. But that doesn’t mean the risks are nonexistent. History shows that regions with burgeoning trade routes and resource wealth rarely remain free of conflict. As thawing ice uncovers oil reserves and valuable underwater minerals, disputes over sovereignty and governance will intensify. The Arctic Council’s cooperative framework, while robust, is not immune to fragmentation if national interests clash. So, is China a friend or a foe in the Arctic? The answer, as with most geopolitical quandaries, is both. Beijing’s Polar Silk Road offers immense opportunities for economic and scientific collaboration, but it also serves as a calculated move to reshape Arctic governance in its favor. As the ice retreats,

the world must decide whether China's growing presence in the Arctic is a stabilizing force or the first ripples of a deeper geopolitical storm. The Arctic is no longer a frozen frontier—it's a global crossroads. While tensions between most actors remain low, the potential remains high for intensified geographic disputes as climate change frees the Arctic trading routes. And in this new race for influence, China is moving steadily, strategically, and, perhaps, unstopably forward.

References

- Badina, S., & Pankratov, A. (2022). Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change on the Russian Arctic Economy (including the Energy Industry). *Energies*, 15(8), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en15082849>
- Braw, E. (2025, February 11). A Fight Is Brewing Over Chinese Money in Norway. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/06/china-norway-nato-port/>
- Cassotta, S., Hossain, K., Ren, J., & Goodsite, M. E. (2015). Climate Change and China as a Global Emerging Regulatory Sea Power in the Arctic Ocean: Is China a Threat for Arctic Ocean Security? *Beijing Law Review*, 06(03), 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2015.63020>
- Chen, C. (n.d.). The role of China within Arctic climate governance. Retrieved January 27, 2025, from <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2023/2023-commentaries/510-the-role-of-china-within-arctic-climate-governance>
- Eiterjord, T. (2023, November 23). What the 14th Five-Year Plan says about China's Arctic Interests. The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/14th-five-year-plan-chinas-arctic-interests/>
- Humpert, M. (2011, September 15). The Future of the Northern Sea Route—A “Golden Waterway” or a Niche Trade Route. The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-northern-sea-route-golden-waterway-niche/>
- International cooperation in the Arctic. (n.d.). Arctic Council. Retrieved January 27, 2025, from <https://arctic-council.org/explore/work/cooperation/>
- Wu, L. (2023, July 11). China's Transition From the Belt and Road to the Global Development Initiative. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/chinas-switch-from-the-belt-and-road-to-the-global-development-initiative/>

Greetings from
our contributors

friedrich 30

**We
represent
interests**



Founded in 2009, we have ever since been operating for our clients in Germany and beyond.

friedrich30 represents security and diplomatic interests around the world, including in countries with challenging political and security conditions.

**Our company has four
business areas:**

- I. Political Lobbying
- II. Business Development
- III. Multi-track Diplomacy
- IV. Security & Protection from Economic Damage



Our Network – friedrich30 team members include former policemen, high-ranking intelligence officers, diplomats, government officials and IT-experts.



Locations – With offices in Berlin, Brussels and Mainz, our operating range covers Germany, the EU as well as selected countries around the world.



Contact us – info@friedrich30.com

We especially enjoy collaborating with motivated students and supporting think tanks in their important work at the focal point of policy and research!

friedrich30.com