

CHINA'S INTERESTS AND GOALS IN THE ARCTIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

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A study of China's interests and goals in the Arctic finds that this is the one area of the world where China remains at a disadvantage, despite its emergence as a global power and its economic and scientific interests in the region. Many Western experts see China as pursuing an Arctic policy that supports its grand strategy to shape the international order in such a way that China's interests as a global power are accommodated. This involves expanding Chinese military and economic capabilities, advancing Chinese interests incrementally, and defending Chinese sovereignty, while avoiding confrontation. The commitment of the Chinese government to expanding its icebreaker capability, China's Arctic diplomacy, and the involvement of Chinese companies in resource deals in Greenland, Iceland, and elsewhere in the region are also steps in this direction, but the road ahead is far from clear and China has yet to release an Arctic strategy.

Some of China's interests in the Arctic overlap with its Asian security agenda, including its aim to improve energy security by diversifying sources of supply and supply routes. Access to Russia's Arctic resources, for example, would help China overcome its "Malacca dilemma"; that is, its fear that opponents or hostile forces could block its access to needed energy supplies through that narrow choke point. Nonetheless, the United States is an Arctic coastal state and necessarily has more diverse, strategic, and domestic interests at play in the Arctic than does China. Since the end of the Cold War the United States has sought to redefine its interests in the Arctic, and China's growing interest in the region comes at a time of flux in the U.S. understanding of its own role there. Economic opportunities, the impact of climate change, and shifts in great power relations have all served to motivate a greater commitment of U.S. resources to develop infrastructure and icebreaker capabilities, and maintain, if not expand, military forces in the region.

China's actions in the Arctic in the short term have the greatest impact on U.S. global priorities, including the economic and political stability of Europe, freedom of navigation, and strategic concerns in other areas, such as the role of Russia in Europe and of China in the South China Sea.

The Arctic itself is both a contributor to climate change and its victim, creating a particular burden for Arctic states and non-Arctic stakeholders, who thus far have focused more on short-term and medium-term issues, such as boundary demarcation and resource exploration, than on the region's future. Although climate change has enabled economic cooperation to develop in the Arctic, the use of obtained fossil fuel resources then contribute to adverse trends in the region, such as rising sea water and changes in weather patterns, with negative consequences for other countries outside the region as well as within the Arctic itself. A more comprehensive approach to Arctic governance that can better anticipate and address long-term challenges is needed; but, for this to occur, major stakeholders have to agree on the nature of these challenges and the steps needed to address them. Given China's need for resources to maintain its economic growth trajectory, the most elusive form of Sino-American cooperation concerning the Arctic may yet be over the urgency of addressing climate change.

This Letort Paper examines the geopolitical implications of China's growing involvement in the Arctic for U.S. interests. First, the evolution of U.S. Arctic strategy, including its political and military components, is discussed. Next, China's interests and goals in the Arctic are addressed. A third section examines the Arctic in China's relations with Canada, Russia, and the Nordic states. This Letort Paper then evaluates the consequences of China's expanding Arctic presence for U.S. security interests and concludes with policy recommendations.

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