

EURASIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL
ERJ, Vol. 8, No. 1, 22-33, Winter 2026

<https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2026.1-02>

IRSTI 11.25.91

ISSN 2519-2442, KAZAKHSTAN

Research Article

**CHINA AS A NEAR-ARCTIC POWER: MULTIDIMENSIONAL
POLICY IN THE ARCTIC REGION**

Takhira KAMALJANOVA¹

¹ L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University, 010008, Kazakhstan

takhira.kamaljanova@mail.ru

ORCID: 0000-0002-6877-7129

Aidarkhan DAUYLBAYEV²

² L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University, 010008, Kazakhstan

green-day-1994@mail.ru

ORCID: 0000-0003-2740-0437

Received: 27.06.2025

Accepted: 17.01.2026

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the changing paradigm of the Chinese government's response to the Arctic region is examined, with special focus on the increasing engagement of the non-Arctic state within the region, which has initially been under the impact of Arctic nations. It analyzes the progress of China's engagement in the Arctic region, from science-based research in the late twentieth century to the formation of a structured geopolitical and geo-economic strategy in the region. The study examines various aspects of China's involvement in the Arctic, such as scientific cooperation, environmental initiatives, infrastructure projects, and investments in energy development. In particular, the "Polar Silk Road" initiative, which extends China's Belt and Road Initiative to include the Arctic's Northern Sea Route in China's vision of an alternative global trade route, receives special consideration. Moreover, this study evaluates China's political approach in terms of supporting the "near-Arctic state" stance and the pursuit of an internationalized governance pattern in the Arctic. Finally, with a holistic approach that combines politics, science, and economics, this study provides insight into China's strategic intentions in the Arctic and what such intentions may mean for the regional and global future balance.

Keywords: China, Arctic strategy, Near-Arctic state, Polar Silk Road, Ice Silk Road, Northern Sea Route, China's Arctic policy.

For citation: Kamaljanova, T., & Dauylbayev, A. (2026). China as a Near-Arctic power: Multidimensional policy in the Arctic region. *Eurasian Research Journal* 8(1), 22-33. <https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2026.1-02>

INTRODUCTION

China's rapidly growing Arctic presence is a complex and multifaceted process driven by a combination of political, economic, scientific, and environmental factors, each of which contributes to its strategy. Although China is not listed as an Arctic country, it is actively developing its Arctic presence strategy, drawing on domestic development needs and global political ambitions. This strategy encompasses economic initiatives, including energy and infrastructure projects, as well as environmental research, allowing China to operate in the region using a wide range of tools. This proactive approach is based on economic partnerships, especially in infrastructure and energy, along with ongoing commitments to scientific research and environmental cooperation, enabling China to achieve its goals in the Arctic through various strategies. The region's vast resource reserves and its growing role in global transport networks stimulate China's heightened interest in the Arctic. For Beijing, engagement in the Arctic opens possibilities to diversify energy supplies and enhance long-term energy security. A vitally important part of this strategy is the Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast, which China views as an alternative shipping corridor connecting Asia and Europe. China is increasingly considering it as an effective option for maritime trade. This route opens up prospects for reducing transit time and increasing the efficiency of transportation, which can radically change the current dynamics of world trade.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the formation and characteristics of China's Arctic policy as an intervention by a non-Arctic state in the region traditionally controlled by Arctic coastal countries. The study intends to identify and interpret the political, scientific, economic, and diplomatic processes through which China is attempting to further strengthen its position in the High North. Particular attention is paid to China's integration of the Northern Sea Route into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within the Polar Silk Road, in addition to its research and significant investment projects. The article also examines how China has shaped its image as a "near-Arctic state" by analyzing policy debates, patterns of international cooperation, and past large-scale infrastructure initiatives, and then assesses the implications of this positioning for Arctic governance.

METHODS

This work uses a qualitative methodology that combines elements of political analysis with a systematic study of documents and a comparative assessment. The research is based on an interdisciplinary perspective and draws on theoretical knowledge in international relations, political geography, and approaches to global governance. The analysis of the development of China's Arctic strategy is based on a broad range of primary and secondary sources, including key official policy documents such as China's Arctic Policy (2018), expert assessments, and academic studies. The empirical part of the research draws on case studies of specific projects, most notably the Yamal LNG initiative and infrastructure cooperation between China, Iceland, and Russia. To place China's growing involvement in the Arctic in a clear historical context, the study uses a historical-institutionalist approach. On the other hand, geopolitical and economic forces are examined through structural-functionalist analysis and content analysis. Through this multi-method study framework, it is possible to make sense of China's efforts to increase its presence in the Arctic through diverse mechanisms and instruments, even in the absence of territorial claims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on China's activities in the Arctic has gained growing attention as the evolving global geopolitics has become conducive to increased engagement on the part of non-Arctic nations in Arctic governance. A great many scholars have explored various dimensions of China's Arctic policy, emphasizing its transformation from scientific interest to a complex geoeconomic and geopolitical strategy. According to Medvedev et al. (2020), China should be considered as an example of how it is possible to transform its activities in the Arctic region in a short period of time, moving from observer status to that of an "active player" in the region. Since the first decade of the 21st century, China has shown intense interest in Arctic resources. According to researchers, China is currently focused on three main areas to expand its influence in the Arctic: diplomatic development, energy cooperation, and infrastructure investment (Medvedev et al., 2020).

Konyshov and Kobzeva (2016) provide an objective assessment of Beijing's legal and scientific activities in the Svalbard region, considering the Svalbard Treaty, signed back in 1925, as the first fundamental legal basis for Beijing's research activities in the region. They also note that, until the 1980s, China's intervention in Arctic affairs was not observed as such; it started in the early 2000s. Rekets (2024) examines China's Arctic policy in the context of the dynamics of global power, emphasizing Beijing's desire to be considered an "Arctic state" and its development of the Polar Silk Road as a strategic continuation of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative.

Additionally, environmental factors emerge as a crucial factor related to Chinese Arctic policy. According to Trenin (2023), the Chinese polar research projects have strong domestic environmental pursuits related to climate change and environmental sustainability. In a related development, the argument posed by Medvedev et al. (2020) equally asserts that the Chinese engagement in the multilateral science endeavors in the Arctic meets the twin aims of the Chinese environmental and strategic agenda to place Beijing on the prestigious pedestal of global governance.

China's Arctic strategy prominently features infrastructure expansion and securing access to natural resources. The Yamal LNG project serves as a prime illustration of this approach. As Tulupov (2013) rightly notes, Beijing's investments in this venture, through CNPC and the Silk Road Fund, underscore its long-term goal: to guarantee stable and cost-effective access to Arctic energy, thereby reducing dependence on unstable geopolitical regions. Sun (2015) believes that China's use of Arctic shipping routes, particularly the Northern Sea Route, is driven not only by economic benefits but also by a desire to strengthen its influence in global maritime resource management.

In addition to these economic initiatives, diplomatic activity is also becoming a priority area of China's policy in the Arctic. Lei (2013) points out that China is actively shaping how it presents itself in the Arctic by introducing the idea of being an "Arctic state" into official language and policy discussions. This narrative helps China justify its growing involvement in the region, even though it does not formally belong to the group of Arctic states. Steinveg (2021) highlights that China has been particularly effective in using diplomacy and Arctic governance platforms to strengthen bilateral ties, especially with countries such as Iceland and Norway. At the same time, China takes a clear position on international law,

consistently emphasizing the role of UNCLOS as the main legal framework guiding its activities in the Arctic. Karandasheva (2019) argues that this formal compliance allows China to create the image of a participant abiding by the rules, although disagreements remain with coastal Arctic states that prefer national sovereignty to collective decision-making.

Ultimately, Keyu (2020) analyzes the joint efforts of China, South Korea, and Japan, defining these East Asian consultations as a new form of participation in Arctic governance in which non-Arctic states coordinate their policies to influence regional norms. Summarizing existing research, it is possible to come to a common opinion that China's strategy in the Arctic is not determined by short-term benefits, but rather by a comprehensive long-term perspective encompassing scientific research, environmental protection, energy interests and the formation of management principles. Beijing's involvement in the Arctic reflects a broader global trend in which emerging powers seek to influence how shared global spaces are governed, in ways that support their own strategic interests.

CHINA'S ARCTIC POLICY: FROM SCIENTIFIC ENGAGEMENT TO GEO-ECONOMIC STRATEGY

With growing international interest in Arctic resources and vital shipping lines, China is actively developing a multifaceted strategy to strengthen its presence and influence in the region. This policy combines active diplomatic efforts with a growing presence in research and investment activities. After achieving the status of an observer in the Arctic Council in 2013, China has been promoting the concept of itself being classified as a "near-Arctic state," which in fact was initiated in order to provide legitimacy for Beijing's engagement in the region's decision-making process and to increase engagement in Arctic governance processes. In this respect, the concept of the Polar Silk Road can be considered as one of the most important instruments of Beijing's policy of becoming an essential actor in the region while gaining the support of the Arctic nations in particular.

China believes that Arctic resources should be internationalized and not limited to Arctic countries. From this perspective, it can be noted that Chinese engagement in polar scientific research started in the mid-1980s with Beijing's engagement in polar expeditions in this field. These research activities are institutionally coordinated through the China Arctic and Antarctic Administration, which functions under the framework of the State Oceanic Administration. This is determined by the dominant role of science in China's long-term Arctic policy. The first scientific successes were achieved with the establishment of the Yellow River research station on Spitsbergen in 2004, which allowed China to conduct ongoing research on climate change, polar conditions, and environmental dynamics (Rekets, 2024). By organizing and conducting joint research and expeditions with Arctic states to the polar regions, China is seeking to expand its presence in the region. Environmental considerations are the main motivating factor, as global warming and the melting of Arctic ice directly or indirectly affect China's climate, especially in its northern regions. From Beijing's strategic point of view, the Arctic is an advanced laboratory for monitoring global climate processes and ecosystem adaptation, which strengthens China's position in international cooperation in the field of environmental protection.

China's involvement in the Arctic is not new, as its historical involvement began with the ratification of the Svalbard Treaty in 1925, which established the

legal framework for scientific research in the Svalbard Archipelago (Konyshev and Kobzeva, 2016). However, the first steps toward Arctic exploration began around the 1980s, and a strategic approach involving the ongoing implementation of scientific, environmental, and economic activities emerged sometime in the early 2000s. All these activities led to the publication of a White Paper on China's Arctic Policy in 2018, outlining the priority stages of Beijing's strategic approach to the region. The White Paper outlines five key areas in which China seeks to play an active role in the Arctic: scientific research, environmental protection and climate change control, resource development, participation in Arctic governance institutions, and the promotion of peace and stability. Together, these priorities show that Beijing is trying to become an influential participant in shaping the future of the Arctic politically and economically. The document states that the progress of the Arctic requires global engagement.

It also clearly states China's respect for the sovereignty, territorial rights, and authority of the Arctic nations. The White Paper highlights China's commitment to established international rules and treaties, including UNCLOS, and its position that non-Arctic countries should have access to Arctic Sea lanes. The "Ice Silk Road" is an important component of China's Arctic strategy and part of the broader BRI. This initiative was first proposed in 2017 during discussions with Russian leaders about integrating the NSR with global shipping networks (Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, 2017). The NSR is recognized as the most efficient waterway connecting Asia and Europe, which significantly reduces travel time by about 6,500 kilometers and reduces transit time to two weeks compared to the route through the Suez Canal. This reduces transport costs, increases maritime security for transportation, and lowers greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere to a great extent aligning with China's policies. China's engagement in Arctic infrastructure and energy development will further help China achieve its long-term agenda concerning the diversification of energy and secure transportation.

Among China's major investment initiatives in the Arctic region is the Yamal LNG. These investments represent a significant achievement by China in the Arctic. Within the framework of the Yamal LNG project, a joint venture was established in which the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation and the Silk Road Foundation own a 29.9% stake (Yamal LNG project, 2017). China's participation in this project plays an important role in diversifying energy sources and reducing dependence on unstable regions such as the Persian Gulf. In addition, China's participation in the development of Russian infrastructure in the Arctic strengthens its strategic position in the Far North. Chinese firms have signed contracts for the reconstruction of the Arkhangelsk port and the construction of the Belkomur railway, which is supposed to connect the White Sea with the Komi Republic and the Urals. This railway will enable the seamless transportation of various types of goods from Siberia and the Russian Far East to Europe and will also expand the scope of trade opportunities between China and Europe. In the domestic market, the integration of northern ports such as Qingdao and Dalian into the Arctic maritime networks increases the economic potential of China's coastal infrastructure. Experts estimate that these initiatives could significantly improve China's economic performance by increasing efficiency and connectivity with both Arctic and European markets. From an environmental perspective, the northern routes allow China to reduce carbon emissions by

reducing travel time, which is also a priority for China's climate change policy. Thus, the Ice Silk Road initiative represents a comprehensive strategy aligned with China's economic ambitions, its climate goals, and its commitment to global governance.

China's scientific and research activities in the Arctic

Scientific research is becoming increasingly important, being a key component of China's long-term engagement in this strategically important region. In fact, scientific research is the most important foundation of Chinese policy in the Arctic. The establishment of permanent research bases, regular polar expeditions, and participation in international events are integral parts of scientific cooperation. An important event in this context was the opening in 2004 of China's first national Arctic research center, Yellow River Station, located on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard (Trenin, 2023). This research station, operating in Ny Alesund, is a modern integrated platform for scientific research in the fields of meteorology, glaciology, oceanography, and paleo-oceanography.

The Yellow River Station is designed for continuous monitoring of meteorological phenomena, glacial processes, and environmental conditions in order to understand the Arctic's response to climate change. Its advanced laboratories allow Chinese scientists to conduct experiments and obtain important data on the physical and biological dynamics of the region. The significant financial and organizational resources allocated by China for the operation of the station indicate its purposeful strategy aimed at ensuring a permanent, high-quality and effective research presence in the Arctic. It is important to highlight that one of the significant technological developments in relation to this station is the use of the "Arktika" specialized underwater robotic system, which can function at a maximum depth of 100 meters. This technology has greatly increased China's capabilities in studying marine ecosystems and sub-ice processes around Svalbard.

Moreover, it is claimed that every year China allocates about USD 700.000 to maintain this station, thus underlining the long-term character of China's scientific engagement there. Outside of Svalbard, China's Arctic research infrastructure development keeps moving forward. Thus, in 2018, China and Iceland initiated the China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory (CIAO), based in the Karhóll region of Iceland, with the aim of jointly carrying out research in the fields of climate change and satellite observation systems (China-Iceland Arctic Science, 2018). China's engagement in Arctic research is further characterized by regular scientific expeditions in the polar regions. Since 1999, China has conducted thirteen Arctic research missions, covering scientific fields such as oceanology, climatology, biology, and ecosystem research. These expeditions were carried out with the support of the Chinese research icebreaker Xuelong (Snow Dragon), a vessel built in 1993 at the Kherson shipyard of Ukraine according to a Soviet design. This has enabled the Chinese research team to venture into the deep Arctic regions.

The Chinese government launched another icebreaker, Xuelong-2 in 2019, in Shanghai as an improved version of its predecessor. This has increased the ability of the Chinese to conduct scientific research in the polar regions. The icebreakers are owned by the Polar Research Institute of China. The icebreakers are used in the Arctic and Antarctica (Rekets, 2024). There has been interest in having icebreakers based on nuclear power. This further enhances the ability to

conduct research in the polar region. The Academy of Military Sciences of the People's Liberation Army of China announced plans to create nuclear icebreakers for scientific purposes in 2018. Around the same period, the Chinese National Nuclear Corporation requested proposals for a multipurpose icebreaker with a nuclear installation developed by Maritime Nuclear Power Development (Vladimirskaia, 2018). If this development is implemented, China will become the second country in the world after Russia to operate nuclear icebreakers. China's growing scale of research programs in the Arctic also demonstrates its commitment to international scientific partnerships.

China has participated in major international research projects, such as the Fourth International Polar Year (2007-2008) and continues to cooperate with organizations such as the International Arctic Scientific Committee. Via participation in such platforms, Chinese scientists take part in collective research endeavors with global collaboration on climate change, the ability of Arctic ecosystems to resist change, as well as the socioeconomic after effects of changes in the environment in the High North (Medvedev et al., 2020). The Chinese involvement in such research endeavors not only improves the scientific knowledge of the Chinese in the field of the Arctic but has also increased the Chinese integration with the international research community. Furthermore, China perceives scientific activity in the Arctic as an instrument of regional diplomacy. Collaborative research projects serve to strengthen China's presence in the region and to support its involvement in the development of international norms and standards governing Arctic activities. China maintains that its research endeavors are directed at addressing global challenges such as climate change and highlights the broader significance of Arctic science for humanity.

China's economic and infrastructure activities in the Arctic

These days, China's Arctic strategy has expanded into a comprehensive long-term policy that seeks to protect Chinese economic interests, expand its influence, and secure access to resources in the Arctic region, which is of rapidly growing international importance. In particular, at the core of this policy lies the development of the Northern Sea Route. A key example of this is its participation in the Yamal LNG project in 2013, a significant chapter in the history of China's Arctic involvement. During this period, the China National Petroleum Corporation acquired a 20% stake in the project; however, this progress was followed by significant financial and technological collaboration. After some period, there was an investment by the Silk Road Fund, which acquired a 9.9% stake in the project and granted a loan to develop port facilities. Currently, the Sabetta port in the Yamal Peninsula is one of the most significant bases that help export liquefied gas to both Europe and Asian regions (Medvedev, 2020). As an example, this is an important indicator that shows China's contribution to Arctic gas chains, otherwise, China's engagement in Arctic infrastructure development can be seen as not limited to the energy sector. China's firms are involved in the modernization of the Arkhangelsk Sea Port and the construction of the Belkomur Railway Line. The construction of these lines will ensure efficient transportation of cargo between Siberia and the Far East of Russia and Europe, so this construction will increase access between the Asia-Euro region via the Arctic.

In 2019, COSCO Shipping, the Silk Road Fund, and several Russian companies established the joint venture "Marine Arctic Transport." This venture was cre-

ated to ensure year-round cargo transportation between the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Medvedev, 2020). It also plays a role in organizing logistics and transport operations between Asia and Western Europe.

The Arctic is a critical component in China's wider Belt and Road Initiative. Accordingly, China considers NSR an "Ice Silk Road" because it will extend already existing international trade routes in a more northern direction. In 2017, during a meeting between the leaders of China and Russia, an agreement was reached to develop the "Ice Silk Road," opening new prospects for trade and logistics along the NSR (Rekets, 2024). China sees this project as an opportunity to reduce transportation costs, increase delivery speeds, and create more environmentally friendly transportation conditions by shortening the route. China actively promotes the idea of integrating the Arctic route into the international transportation network, emphasizing that the Arctic is a zone of global significance, not just for Arctic countries. It should be emphasized that this approach by China differs from the approaches of Arctic countries, which protect their sovereignty over sea passages.

An important component of China's cooperation with Arctic countries, and particularly with Russia, is the joint development of natural resources. As some researchers note, resource development is the other area of the Chinese Arctic policy that has gained prominence in collaboration with Russia. The region's potential for hydrocarbons and minerals has not gone unnoticed by the Chinese government: in addition to the Yamal LNG project, investment in the Arctic LNG 2 project is enormous, estimated at approximately USD 25.5 billion, of which the Chinese portion would amount to approximately USD 5.1 billion. It should be noted that the goal of the Arctic LNG 2 project (located on the Gydan Peninsula) is to develop a continuous supply chain of liquefied natural gas to Asia, which will ultimately ensure China's energy security (Rekets, 2024).

In spite of this, the cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic region surged in response to the sanctions imposed on Russia by the Western world in 2014 and 2022. These sanctions made it difficult for Russia to access capital market funding and technology from the Western world, making China an indispensable source of assistance and support in developing the Arctic region. For this reason, the alignment between the two nations was strengthened. China has provided Russia with significant support, both technologically and financially, through investments in various areas of Arctic development, including energy and logistics. Such support could positively impact the further development of the region's infrastructure.

Economic gain is the main driving factor behind China's Arctic policy. China seeks not only to develop Arctic resources, but also to expand its infrastructure along the entire northern route. The development of the ports of Qingdao, Tianjin, and Dalian, which play an important role in receiving cargo, increases China's trade potential in the context of expanding Arctic shipping (Sun, 2015). The commercialization of Arctic routes contributes to the development of China's port economy and allows it to strengthen its position in the global transportation infrastructure.

Over the past 10 years, China has invested over US\$90 billion in Arctic projects, the majority of which are in the extraction of energy and mineral resources

(Tulupov, 2013). For example, China's direct cumulative investment in the extractive sector of Greenland's economy, primarily in uranium and iron ore development and mining projects as of 2017, amounted to US\$1.7 billion, which corresponded to 12% of the autonomous region's GDP.

China's diplomatic and political strategy in the Arctic

China maintains an active diplomatic approach in order to secure its position in Arctic governance. One of these is securing observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013, as outlined in the Kiruna Declaration (Tulupov, 2013). This status allowed China to participate in discussions on Arctic development issues and directly express its position. Observer status, unlike the powers of member states, does not grant the right to participate in decision-making, but it does open opportunities for diplomatic influence. Beijing considers its role as a contribution to "peaceful cooperation" and "collective efforts" on matters like climate change, environmental protection, and sustainable development.

The conceptual foundation of China's Arctic policy is its positioning as a "near-Arctic state." This term was first used by Chinese scholar Lu Junyuan in 2010 (Lei, 2021). Since then, this term has become established, implying that although China is not part of the Arctic states, it nonetheless has a right to participate in Arctic affairs, based on China's proximity to the Arctic region and China's economic interests, predominantly in relation to natural resources. China's argument relies on the close relationship between the ecological state of the Arctic and the impact on China's economy, including agriculture and fisheries, which are dependent on global climate processes.

China's Arctic policy is based on the White Paper "China's Arctic Policy." China also advocates for the internationalization of Arctic governance based on the principle of shared responsibility. China's position in relation to the Arctic is that the region is a "common heritage of mankind" that should remain accessible to all countries, including non-Arctic states. Beijing insists on the importance of recognizing the interests of all states, regardless of their geographic location, in Arctic governance, which serves as the basis for its diplomatic initiatives. These positions by China have created anxiety for Arctic nations including Canada and Russia, which feel that issues related to sovereignty, security and management of Arctic resources must remain in the hands of the coastal states (Karandasheva, 2019).

To strengthen its diplomatic strategy, China is establishing strong bilateral relations with smaller Arctic states, particularly Iceland and Norway. This encompasses trade and investment, as well as joint scientific projects. The China-Iceland Free Trade Agreement that was signed in 2013 is one such example that ensured that the Nordic states voted for China's status as an observer at the Arctic Council (Steinveg, 2021). Such cooperation allows Beijing to strengthen its position and gain access to Arctic projects through diplomatic channels and economic partnerships.

In 2016, China joined a new format the China-Republic of Korea-Japan High-Level Consultations on Arctic Issues aimed at coordinating the approaches of these states to the implementation of their Arctic strategies and defining the legal regime for the Arctic. The results of work in this format are highly valued by Chinese scholars, who believe that "cooperation between the three countries

in the Arctic has gone beyond purely scientific research and encompassed various areas of Arctic relations, including the development of a global governance platform” (Keyu, 2020).

Therefore, in the future, China is expected to strengthen its influence in the Arctic Council, expand partnerships with Arctic countries, and support long-term scientific and economic projects. It’s possible that China’s active involvement in Arctic affairs could lead to a shift in the balance of power in the region and further discord between states that define themselves as Arctic and non-Arctic, respectively. However, China insists that it will adhere to the values of cooperative, sustainable, and peaceful development in relation to the Arctic region.

CONCLUSION

The Arctic policy of China marks a major departure for the country’s foreign policy, uprooting it from the position of a peripheral witness to become an active participant in the geopolitics surrounding the high latitudes. One can say that the Polar Silk Road is part and parcel of the Belt and Road Initiative and reflects the aspiration to integrate Arctic transport infrastructure into the world’s network. Although the Chinese do not actively question the sovereignty claims of Arctic states, the globalization approach to the governance of the Arctic triggers new discussions regarding the principles for the Arctic regime to be governed. Ultimately, ensuring that the rising power enhances the sustainability and stability of the Arctic regime will require active communication among the stakeholders.

In the near future, China will continue to strengthen its position in the Arctic Council by establishing close diplomatic relations with Arctic states. Experts estimate that China’s continued active participation in Arctic affairs could lead to a transformation of the balance of power in the region and potentially increase tensions between Arctic and non-Arctic states. At the same time, China’s commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the region gives grounds for hope for its participation in peaceful cooperation and sustainable development in the Arctic region.

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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