

A Crowded North: NATO Considerations for China's Arctic Ambition

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Captured in the 2018 National Defense strategy, the “reemergence of long-term, strategic competition,” has reentered the public dialogue as the preeminent national security concern.¹ Within the U.S. Defense enterprise, the assertion drives a perspective on potential competitors and their impacts on U.S. and Allied strategic objectives. One of the competitors, China and its Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and subsequent plan in the Arctic, the Polar Silk Road (PSR), potentially threatens the security of the U.S. and its preeminent alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Captured in a 2010 strategic concept, NATO’s core tasks include: safeguarding the freedom and security of all its members by political and military means; promoting a community committed to the principles of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law; and preserving and promoting the transatlantic link to maintain Euro-Atlantic security.² The document also defines its approach to security as the collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security mandates.³ The document directs NATO to discuss issues of territorial integrity and political independence.⁴ Finally, the alliance calls on the continued modernization and transformation efforts to maintain NATO as an effective body.⁵ Despite NATO’s collective defense treaty, China could exploit the Alliance’s gaps through bilateral economic agreements, engaging those pro-NATO, but non-members in Europe, and executing calculated actions that would fail to garner the unanimous thirty-member vote required for an official response.

Concerningly, China has a history of operating with significant disregard for global legal frameworks vis-à-vis military coercion in the South China Sea (SCS) and predatory lending practices in Africa.⁶ China’s behavior merits examination using factor analysis to understand the implications of China’s expansion into NATO’s area of responsibility (AOR). As a self-declared “near-Arctic State,” China continues to increase its political, economic, and physical influence in the Arctic Region; its activities directly impact the eight Arctic nations, five of which are NATO members: Canada, the United States, Iceland, Norway, and Denmark.⁷

Examination of China’s influence and methods in the SCS, Africa, and in the Arctic within the Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME) framework provides valuable examples and indicators as to future Chinese actions in the Arctic. The analysis suggests that China may exploit its bi-lateral relationships with NATO Alliance members purposefully or

¹ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

inadvertently undermine NATO security interests in the region. China may also look to fill seams between both NATO members and enhanced partners (Finland and Sweden), using economic and diplomatic influence to shape their relationship with NATO. More broadly, China's increased presence in the Arctic Region can generally be viewed as an extension of actions in other geographical domains and may indicate the effects the PSR may have on NATO's security.

Belt and Road Initiative Background

China's economic growth has fueled its global expansion. Since the early 1990s, China's increasingly deep purse has allowed it to impress its national goals on the world and achieve an increasing level of influence as it expands outward. China unveiled its BRI in 2013, as a grand plan to connect trade partners from Asia, Africa, and Europe, and expand opportunities for Chinese influence and exports.⁸ The plan seeks to establish two routes, an overland route through the heart of Asia and a maritime route that follows established sea transportation routes. China's ambitious plan includes transportation node development, telecommunication improvements, and energy investments to entice host nation governments to sign trade agreements that enable increased Chinese trade throughput. A key portion of the maritime route moves north from the Chinese mainland and into the Arctic Ocean along a route referred to as the North Sea Route (NSR). The NSR follows the Russian coastline around the Scandinavian countries and into the North Sea. As China expands its BRI initiative, it has identified the North Sea route as key to its plan and titled it the "Polar Silk Road" Relevant to NATO and America's European allies, one of China's stated purposes for the PSR is to increase its participation in the policies and governance of the Arctic region.⁹

China's Diplomatic and Information Actions in the South China Sea, Africa, and the Arctic

China has invested considerable time and resources to ensure the diplomatic and informational underpinnings of the BRI are successful, with the intention of creating a foundation for future objectives. Specifically, China seeks to engage at formal diplomatic levels to foster beneficial relationships and reduce negative perceptions that may hinder BRI objectives.¹⁰ From the onset of the BRI initiative, China has actively engaged governments around the world to promote its objectives using informational mechanisms, including social media, YouTube, television, radio, etc., and formal diplomatic venues like the United Nations, all with an aim at controlling the global narrative.¹¹

Their process started domestically in the SCS; China passed domestic laws validating the legitimacy of its SCS claims, including Taiwan.¹² Often referenced as the nine-dash line, the laws include vague geographic delineations, including, among others, the Spratly and Pratas islands.¹³ Worth noting, the same islands have also been claimed, to varying degrees, by Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines.¹⁴ A 2016 Tribunal for the Law of the Sea ruled China's nine-dash line lacked historical precedent.¹⁵ China's departure from widely accepted practice is made even more complicated by its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an agreement that defined maritime boundaries they now dispute.¹⁶ The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) aggressive behavior in the SCS has undermined the legal approach. China highlighted its half-billion-dollar support to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to counter the negative perceptions and promote a more benign image.¹⁷ Despite their philanthropy, the sentiment in the SCS still

appears to paint China as an expansionist power concerned with achieving hegemony “at any cost.”¹⁸ The narrative casting China as a villain, however, has not stopped China from attempting to recharacterize its efforts as both legitimate and well-intentioned, an effort they have pursued diligently throughout Africa.¹⁹

Frequent prominent bilateral diplomatic engagements with countries in Africa established a discourse by which China promulgates its message of non-interference and promotes the benefits of economic cooperation.²⁰ China’s approach is largely characterized by the pursuit of business before ethics and has, in some cases, resulted in material support to abusive governance.²¹ Simultaneous with China’s diplomatic engagements, the state has been reaching out to broader national audiences to manage its image abroad. Chinese efforts have aimed at courting government leaders to lay the groundwork for long-term relations. China has facilitated the education of “hundreds of African elites,” often coming from the families of officials or powerful businesses.²² Professional training offered in Beijing has included seminars on China’s government structure, cadre management, civil servant relations, tax collection, and media relations. One university alone, Ningbo Polytechnic, has hosted trainees from forty-eight African states.²³

Outreach efforts have further bolstered the CCP’s involvement in foreign infrastructure development. China has heavily invested in Africa’s telecommunication networks and companies, owning a 20% stake in South Africa’s second-largest media company.²⁴ It remains to be seen if China will use the access to shape its information campaign in the region; however, a significant stake in a telecommunication network will at a minimum provide it the opportunity. Many of the initiatives fall under the umbrella of China’s Confucius Institute, with approximately three hundred offices worldwide that facilitate education on Chinese language and culture.²⁵ Western governments have accused the offices of promoting Chinese ideology and political values at the expense of objectivity.²⁶

As part of the BRI, China’s strategic aims in the Arctic make use of policies and approaches already at work in the SCS and Africa. Meanwhile, Chinese diplomats have promoted inroads with Russian companies fostering an understanding necessary for subsequent economic engagement.²⁷ Similar in function to the UN bodies that drafted UNCLOS, the Arctic Council also plays a critical role in defining acceptable behavior in the high north. In 2013, The Arctic Council approved China’s “observer” status, a position that affords them no formal power, but one that provides it a means to wield its economic and political influence. Additionally, a 2018 CCP white paper on China’s Arctic policy asserts that China is a “near-Arctic” state, and events in the Arctic directly impact the country.²⁸ Examined collectively, the diplomatic maneuvers suggest a measured and deliberate approach to reduce negative perceptions and engage diplomatically with the Arctic’s current decision-makers.²⁹

The nature of China’s diplomatic and information activities in the SCS, Africa, and the Arctic are all unique—often dramatically.³⁰ With ice melting sooner, and for longer periods, the Arctic has great promise as a shipping lane. Furthermore, the promise of large energy reserves makes the region attractive to the world as global energy demands continue to rise. China’s diplomatic and informational engagements in the Arctic are intended to foster a benign image, undermining the reputation of a regional bully (vis-a-vis SCS) and establish conditions by which China can secure its presence for future exploitation.

China's Actions in the South China Sea, Africa, and the Arctic within the Military Instrument of National Power

China's utilization of the military instrument of national power in support of its BRI remains immature compared to its diplomacy, information, and economics instruments. However, China's use of its military remains a key component to achieving national objectives and supporting its BRI. In the last thirty years, China has focused its efforts and capabilities on becoming a global maritime power.³¹ Chinese activity in the SCS, Africa, and the Arctic demonstrates its ability to use its military when necessary to achieve its strategic goals.

In the SCS, China is focused on the physical aspects of the area to maintain Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) instrumental to oceanic trade routes and vital energy imports to sustain its economy and complete its BRI. The SCS, as an enclosed geographic space shared between China, Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei, provides the perfect conditions for regional competition, as well as global competition since a major world shipping route passes through the Malacca Strait. China's efforts to deter competitors in the SCS involve a series of defensive and offensive activities. Within the SCS lay dozens of small islands and reefs claimed by multiple littoral nations. While most littoral nations have increased their military or dual-purpose infrastructure on the islands, China has far outpaced the others. For example, China has added 5.6 kilometers of landmass to the Mischief Reef, complete with a military-grade airstrip, communication centers, and a harbor, all within the Filipino exclusive economic zone.³² In the Spratly Islands alone, China has reclaimed 3,200 acres of land compared to just 120 acres total for all other claimants combined.³³ The examples are just a few instances of China building a landmass and adding military capabilities within the SCS to ensure their dominance; other islands include aircraft hangers, military-grade ports, and missile batteries.³⁴

Anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities allow China to protect its SLOCs and posture forces to protect regional resources in the SCS. Offensively, China uses its coast guard and a maritime militia to expand its influence in the area. Both the coast guard and maritime militia actively prevent the use of fishing grounds and oil exploitation in Chinese-claimed territory. Independent militia comprised of Chinese citizens, trained by the Chinese military, often strong-arm civilian and commercial fishing vessels and oil rigs, while providing the Chinese government a level of deniability.³⁵ Since 2010, 73% of the reported vessel to vessel incidents in the SCS have involved a Chinese flagged ship.³⁶ China's actions in the SCS remain heavily focused on military use as they seek to establish regional dominance against militarily smaller nations and ensure seamless completion of the BRI network.

Chinese military activities in Africa, in support of its BRI, center on training, weapons sales, and power projection. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducts multiple training exercises with over a dozen African nations, primarily focused on counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance.³⁷ The exercises reinforce relationships and influence with those countries China deems important for its BRI, possess geostrategic importance, and provide subsequent access to natural resources and commercial markets. The nations targeted by China also lack credible instruments of national power to rebuke China's progress if threatened. Weapons sales are another method to increase its influence with host nations. The Chinese government offers better prices, faster delivery times, and less vetting than the western alternatives, making Chinese arms

sales the better option for developing nations.³⁸

The key to the Chinese military's support for BRI is power projection. In 2017, the Chinese built a naval base in Djibouti, only a few miles from an American base, with additional bases planned in the future.³⁹ The base not only provides a location for the Chinese military to project its power into the African continent, but it is also a strategically important location from which to secure the SLOC that runs through the Red Sea and around the Horn of Africa. Chinese military actions in Africa directly support its BRI and military power projection, focusing on nations in geographically important locations that lack the capabilities to resist Chinese aggression.

While the potential exists for Chinese military actions in support of the BRI in the Arctic or the PSR, there are few historical precedents. The only physical presence made by the PLA was a 2015 trip to the Bering Sea after completing military exercises with the Russian Navy.⁴⁰ Despite the minimal PLA presence, China's increasing military partnership with Russia provides them a supporting presence in the Arctic. In the long-term, the Chinese strategy suggests that if Arctic resources and shipping routes provide a significant contribution to the Chinese economy and are under threat, they will deploy forces to protect the assets.⁴¹ As the Chinese pursue diplomatic and economic objectives in the Arctic, the potential for Chinese military activity in the region increases if the CCP determines threats to national priorities.

China's Economic Actions within the South China Sea, Africa, and Arctic Region

China's use of the economic instrument of national power has focused on achieving economic security through solidifying its access to vital commodities and the infrastructure necessary for extraction and transportation. To meet its strategic objectives, China has implemented a globalized approach singularly focused on achieving economic ends while varying ways and means in response to a combination of geopolitical and environmental constraints.

In the SCS, Chinese economic security is located just below the seabed with large amounts of oil and natural gas reserves pumping twenty-three to thirty billion tons of oil and sixteen trillion cubic meters of natural gas into their economic machine.⁴² The area is a resource-rich and crowded environment with more than 200 companies engaged in petroleum extraction activities.⁴³

The Strait of Malacca is one and seven-tenths of a mile wide at its most narrow point and the choke point sits on the shortest navigational route between Europe and Pacific Asia. The Strait is vital to China with 85% of all Chinese oil imports transiting the Strait, and it is vital to global commerce because one-third of world shipping passes through the narrow body of water.⁴⁴ As key terrain, the Strait is critical to the global economy, and whoever controls it could dictate global economic affairs.⁴⁵ In response to the vulnerability, China made plans to secure the Strait of Malacca through the employment of maritime militia vessels. The vessels would clog the strait to deny other countries access and halt global trade.⁴⁶ As evidenced in the SCS, China's pursuit of economic security at the expense of others is an example of policy by domination and not cooperation.

In Africa, China has focused on the extraction of minerals and petroleum products from countries facing widespread corruption and failing economies. The instability within the

countries created opportunities for China to entice political leadership into debt-trap diplomacy.⁴⁷ The predatory lending practice offers large amounts of money for development projects through opaque lending practices that withhold key repayment terms from the borrower.⁴⁸ The loans usually contain hidden conditions with poorly defined repayment criteria.⁴⁹ Other terms of the loans mandate Chinese firms manage the construction projects with all disputes being mediated through Chinese courts.⁵⁰ The terms and clauses designating Chinese construction firms have led to significant cost overruns and schedule slips, making projects much more expensive than projected.⁵¹ The widespread cost overruns forcing countries into loan defaults are likely by design to further China's debt-trap-diplomacy. Though initially appealing, the financial assistance eventually burdens countries with high-interest debt they are unable to repay.⁵² The Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway is an excellent illustration of the practices. The Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway cost Ethiopia nearly a quarter of its 2016 budget.⁵³ If a country defaults on its payments, the Chinese government assumes ownership of the infrastructure or mining operation and resources to further its economic goals at the expense of the country.⁵⁴

China's incessant need to control economic corridors and hoard resources is a manifestation of their deep-seated anxieties.⁵⁵ The ruling party fears an economic slowdown resulting from supply disruptions or material shortages could lead to civil unrest and eventual regime change.⁵⁶ To mitigate the single point of failure and secure its vital interests, China turned its attention towards the North Sea Route, the third leg of its belt and road initiative.⁵⁷

Since 2003, China has invested nearly \$90 billion into the Arctic region with the acquisition of two polar-capable ice breakers and infrastructure development from Canada to Siberia.⁵⁸ The alternate corridor has significant advantages over the Strait of Malacca by reducing shipping time by 22% and lowering transportation costs by as much as \$127 billion dollars.⁵⁹ Another significant advantage to an Arctic route is Chinese shipments would transit more secure waterways instead of traversing pirate-infested waters off the coast of Somalia or around unstable countries whose internal instability could impact maritime activity.

Chinese economic strategy for the Arctic is more ambitious than simply accessing maritime corridors. China's government-controlled corporations have aggressively used instruments of national power to secure lucrative economic arrangements within the non-NATO Arctic nations of Sweden and Finland. Chinese firms have bought large interests of Swedish corporations and used their influence to attempt acquisitions of military and civilian infrastructure. The latest such attempt involved a proposal to construct and manage a deep-water port to secure their footprint.⁶⁰ To date, Sweden has blocked the Chinese expansionist activities, but Chinese diplomatic efforts have aimed at reversing Swedish policy, illuminating their strategic intent for the Arctic.⁶¹ Within Finland, Chinese firms have relied heavily on an amalgamation of diplomatic activities to exert the leverage needed to increase economic access. Successful corporate partnerships with local business owners and politicians have enabled China to solidify its economic access within the relatively small but strategically important country. The arrangements have become increasingly transparent as CCP umbrella corporations throughout Finland make the population dependent on Chinese trade and susceptible to its political manipulation.⁶²

Discussion & Findings

Establishing a pattern by which China pursues its objectives remains difficult as the CCP has proven it will make use of the range of national instruments of power. Diplomatically, China has pursued its BRI initiatives with both heavy-handed coercion and dexterous collaboration, utilizing whichever method best achieves the desired end-state. Simultaneously, however, the CCP has also demonstrated a disregard for international tribunal findings to which it is a party. The differing approaches suggest flexibility and an ability to approach diplomatic initiatives pragmatically. In the Arctic, China's approach has been slow and deliberate, mindful of the established powers in place and willing to invest in long-term initiatives. Likewise in Africa, China has shown its willingness to engage in scientific and political forums with the only appreciable benefit of fostering new diplomatic opportunities or creating a narrative of well-meaning expansion.

The willingness to use information as a tool of power is also highly illustrative. Many of China's endeavors in the Arctic, such as polar research, do not yield rapid results, if they yield results at all. Rather, China has taken a similar tact to its engagements throughout Africa, in that it hopes to promote its image and reduce the political costs of its aggressive behavior along the BRI. Coupled with a willingness to engage over years and decades, China's informational initiatives appear to be focused on setting the stage for future opportunities. Given China's immense energy needs and recognition of the Arctic as a potential energy-rich region, it stands to reason that they are forecasting their national resource needs. To ensure unfettered access to the Arctic when the time comes, China is making a concerted effort to be known as a collaborative neighbor and downplay its criticized heavy-handed methods used in the SCS.

The process of fostering the narrative is not itself a problem for NATO. What is important is that the information campaigns are indicative of future intent and may directly influence NATO efforts. Planners within NATO need to know when natural or logistical resources may be unavailable to them and a concerted effort by China to improve relations with a NATO member, or a large company native to said country, is indicative of Chinese interest. If a Chinese enterprise reaches an agreement with a port written into NATO plans, it may negatively impact NATO's ability to project power in the region. Maintaining situational awareness of China's information campaigns, as well as its diplomatic engagements, can help NATO stay abreast of a changing geopolitical landscape and integrate this awareness into its planning process.

The process of observation includes China's scientific, economic, and most critically, military endeavors in the Arctic. China's military actions vary from almost non-existent to hyper-aggressive. As China continues its long game to expand its influence and prestige in the world order, it will use the military instrument of national power in varying degrees to achieve its objectives. Like the SCS, there remains a potential that positions within the Arctic will be developed into military staging points. Whether they are built by China or allotted by agreements from other nations, their military capabilities will be utilized to ensure strategic objectives. While China has demonstrated a willingness to bully less militarily capable nations it does not appear to be China's approach in the Arctic. Often military in nature, e.g., SCS, such coercion might also occur by way of economic tools, one of China's most frequently used methods of influence.⁶³

China's economic approach has varied significantly based on the political and geographic constraints. Like diplomatic, informational, and military methods, economic efforts have also

varied greatly. What has stayed consistent throughout China's economic expansion, however, is its objective to control access to resources from extraction through transportation. As evidenced through multiple endeavors, China has begun its economic exploitation through means to build infrastructure and gain access to resources. It appears to be partnering for the mutual benefit of both countries and over time begins to monopolize power over the strategic assets. Once under its control, China then leverages its position to dominate other aspects of the region, further controlling strategic access at the expense of neighboring nations. China's movement into the Arctic shipping lanes through the acquisition of Arctic capable ships and its efforts to build infrastructure along the route is the first step of many by which they will slowly take control of the strategic waterway for transportation and resource exploration. The infrastructure development and the control implicitly developed by it could directly impact NATO and its freedom of navigation within a region, as it enters an economic contest of wills frequently seen in other areas of Chinese influence.

NATO Establishes Standing Communications Protocol to the Chinese Navy

If China opts to make use of northern sea lanes, more accessible in the future because of melting ice, there is a commensurate risk of miscommunication and potentially military action. Like the U.S. and Soviet Union during the Cold War, establishing a "red-phone" to facilitate immediate communications between NATO and the CCP would help avert potentially dangerous situations. While a CCP Navy presence in the Arctic may be unlikely, if the ruling party feels its interests are at risk, they may opt to provide an escort for commercial vessels. As evident in the SCS, China's Naval Forces and government-sanctioned maritime militia frequently dictate authority over other nations' vessels. Given NATO Allies' flagged vessels operating in the Arctic, it remains prudent that NATO can communicate directly with the CCP to clarify the task and purpose of any CCP military forces. As more ships enter a finite space, there will undoubtedly be problems, and having the capability to resolve the disputes will help avert a crisis.

NATO Incorporates Intelligence Assessments of Chinese Arctic Activities into its Planning Cycle

Based on China's current engagements in the Arctic, any potentially upsetting actions it may take will likely be preceded by lengthy periods, with years and maybe decades, of informational campaigns and diplomatic engagements. Maintaining situational awareness of Chinese activities remains prudent to NATO as risks to the alliance are not exclusively military in nature. Should China secure a controlling interest in major ports or airfields for its interests, even if purely economic, it may undermine the ability to use those same logistics nodes for military activities unrelated to China.⁶⁴ Ultimately, NATO may be unable to influence the outcomes, but at least the staff will be aware so that they can adjust their plans accordingly.

NATO Establishes or Revisits Protocol Guiding Economic Decisions

One of China's most effective tools is its considerable economic influence. Just like the Gazprom pipeline planned to support Russia-Western Europe power needs, any significant investment on the part of China could create a similar dynamic. To some extent, there may be little that can be done out of respect for national sovereignty. If NATO members opt to pursue

close economic endeavors with China, the degree to which the cooperative efforts may impact NATO interests should remain transparent to the alliance writ large.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that China will not halt its pursuit of a greater presence in the Arctic. NATO must remain aware of China's Arctic efforts and account for them in NATO planning. NATO's planning awareness will help it shape initiatives by reducing the likelihood of miscommunication and accommodating China's diplomatic and economic influence on its member states. The Arctic is poised to be an increasingly busy place in the coming years, and NATO must be prepared to work in a dynamic and potentially crowded Arctic.

Notes

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⁵⁹ Geoffrey F. Gresh, *To Rule Eurasia's Waves : The New Great Power Competition at Sea*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 2670. <https://search-ebscohost-com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/>

⁶⁰ Jerker Hellstrom, "Solving Sweden's China Puzzle," June 30, 2020, <https://www.echo-wall.eu/knowledge-gaps/solving-swedens-china-puzzle.com>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

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⁶⁴ Ibid.