



Defining the Chinese Threat in the Arctic

April 7, 2020 • By [Yun Sun](#) • [China](#), [Commentary](#), [Defense and Security](#)



The Chinese icebreaking research vessel Xue Long – or Ice Dragon – has played a key part in Chinese capacity building in the Arctic since the 1990s. Photo: [Natalie Tapson](#)

China's Arctic engagement has increased considerably during the past decade, which has not only offered plentiful economic opportunities but also created new risks and concerns among the eight Arctic states, non-state actors, and peoples. To increase understanding of dimensions of Beijing's Arctic activities, The Arctic Institute's new [China](#) series probes into China's evolving Arctic interests, policies, and strategies, and analyses their ramifications for the region (and beyond).

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peace, development, and improving Arctic governance. However, given the opaqueness of China's decision-making and capability development, many American policymakers and observers, if not most, remain skeptical or even hostile toward China's potential in the Arctic. A solid strategy on China in the Arctic should begin with a well-defined and well-articulated concrete threat perception by Washington.

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The concern about the [Chinese threat](#) in the Arctic is a manifestation of the rising strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China in the era of great power competition. American criticism of China's Arctic policy reached an unprecedented level in 2019. Both the U.S. Department of Defense and Secretary of State publicly cast doubt on China's self-proclaimed status as a "near-Arctic state". Strategic thinkers in the U.S. worry that China's economic engagement in the region could be a precursor to much more invasive political and strategic ambitions. China's Arctic infrastructure development has the potential for dual-use facilities, paving the ground to Beijing's permanent security presence in the region. In their view, the Sino-Russia commercial cooperation in the Arctic is also creating potential opportunities for security collaboration in the context of their strategic alignment vis-à-vis the United States. In addition, many liken China's intentions in the Arctic to that in the South China Sea, which has resulted in the South China Sea being "[fraught with militarization and competing territorial claims](#)".

China certainly has not helped its own case in the Arctic. Arctic policy-making in China is opaque at best, creating ambiguities in its priorities and ambitions. While Beijing publicly claims that its goals in the Arctic are about "[knowledge, protection, development and governance](#)" of the region, it has also declared China's "[activities, assets and other interests](#)" in the polar regions as intrinsic to China's national security. China's record of incremental development of overseas power projection capability in the name of asset protections, attested by its [naval base in Djibouti and dual-use facilities in the Indian Ocean](#), suggests a pattern repeatable in the Arctic. And observers only get a glimpse of China's capability when Beijing chooses to publicize information on topics such as the state of its nuclear-powered icebreakers, exacerbating anxieties about what other capabilities are under development.

On a more strategic level, China's desire to expand outside its power-saturated neighborhood is understood as a rising hegemon's effort to export power and influence outside the overcrowded East Asia. Such efforts, as spearheaded by the Belt and Road Initiative, are integral to its bid for global hegemonic status. The Arctic may not be a power vacuum, but it represents a front where power export is still possible for China. For example, the infrastructure projects China has proposed in Russia and Iceland represent the Chinese effort to channel its financial wealth into footholds in the region.

Upon understanding the Chinese strategic thinking, the next step is to accurately define the Chinese threat in the Arctic specifically based on concrete evidence. Instead of speculating about China's potential, efforts should be focused on assessing probabilities and capabilities. We need to be vigilant about China's intentions and activities, but also vigorous in gauging the nature and depths of the threat it concretely poses.

Creating an accurate picture of China's threat in the Arctic is important for consensus building and alliance management with other Arctic states, such as the Scandinavian countries. Given their better negotiation positions vis-à-vis China compared to, for example, debt-ridden Africa countries, some may not feel as vulnerable or share the same threat perception about China with the U.S. Despite their unease with Sino-Russia cooperation in the High North on energy development in Siberia's Yamal Peninsula and the shipping lane through the Northern Sea Route, they may not be convinced of Beijing-Moscow military cooperation in the Arctic given the Russian territoriality about the region.

In addition, the clear definition of China's threat in the Arctic is also essential to the development of a counter strategy. Denying China access to the Arctic and preventing its activities there is not legal, sensible or feasible. It should be acknowledged that susceptibility to the Chinese presence in the Arctic does not equate to vulnerability to Chinese dominance. Some Arctic states might be susceptible to the appeal of Chinese investment, but it does not mean that they will be compelled to embrace invasive Chinese activities. The question here is not whether China will try to expand activities in the Arctic, because it will. The question is how to develop sophisticated policies to



In this sense, the key to U.S. policy toward China's Arctic influence and activities should begin with solid assessment of China's concrete capabilities instead of speculations about its intentions and potential. A preemptive or complete denial of China in the Arctic may be desirable but not feasible. Chinese economic activities in the Arctic have been welcomed by some Arctic States. The scope and depth of China's military ambitions need much more research and deliberation before consensus could be reached and common actions be developed.

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