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Principal features of China's policy in the arctic region: transformation of priorities

UDC 327.8

DOI <https://doi.org/10.24195/2414-9616.2024-1.21>

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The article highlights the main aspects of China's policy in the Arctic region and their transformation according to changes in directions and national interests of the state. Various priorities of Beijing in the context of Arctic policy are explored, particularly in relation to the development of transportation routes through the Arctic Ocean, the increasing geopolitical significance of the region as described in the «2018 White Paper on the Arctic Region.» The aim of the article is to analyze China's role in cooperation with other Arctic states, its economic and geopolitical interests, as well as its impact on regional security. The relevance lies in understanding the strategies, tactics, and changes in China's priorities, which are important for forecasting its future actions, influencing regional security, interacting with other states, and developing effective political and diplomatic strategies of other countries in the context of Arctic diplomacy. The study is based on methods such as analysis of official statements, documents, and decisions of the People's Republic of China, as well as historical and comparative analysis, which allows effectively tracking the trend of Beijing's growing interests in the Arctic region. The research results can be useful for understanding China's strategy in the Arctic region, revealing key aspects of China's policy in the Arctic region and its evolution over time. They also provide structural insights into strategic transformations in China's policy, which significantly affect the geopolitical situation on the world stage.

Key words: China, Arctic region, transformation of priorities, Arctic Council, strategy.

Introduction. At the beginning of the 21st century, there is a noticeable increase in attention to the Arctic region from various geopolitical actors, who are including it into their geopolitical strategies. The main reasons for such actions are evidently the melting of ice cover due to climate change, the opening of new maritime routes, etc., significantly reducing the time and costs for cargo delivery between Europe and Asia. From a region that predominantly held military significance in past years, the Arctic is transforming into an increasingly attractive international economic region, with growing energy and transportation importance. Simultaneously, the increasing strategic role of the region also leads to heightened competition among countries vying for leadership in the Arctic, exacerbating territorial disputes among Arctic states and attempts to solidify their positions in the Arctic by leading non-Arctic world powers, especially China.

The growing interest of China in Arctic region is altering the balance of power in the area, affecting relations among regional countries, and investments and cooperation in energy, transportation, and other sectors could change the economic landscape of Arctic nations. China's activity in the Arctic region, which is one of the most vulnerable regions due to climate change, poses a risk of altering the Arctic ecosystem.

Among the scholars who have illuminated the dynamics of Arctic policy in their works are A.-M. Brady, B. Millard, V. P. Lakenbauer, and others. In particular, they analyze China's interests in the Arctic and its potential for developing the region. S. Blank draws attention to the specifics of China's

military and foreign policies, as well as the ways of implementing these political strategies. Among the Chinese authors, it is necessary to mention the works of R. Doshi, A. Dale-Huang, and G. Zhang, dedicated to the analysis of China's Arctic ambitions and their implementation. Among the domestic authors, the work of O. Horobets, which explores the challenges facing China's Arctic interests, as well as the works of S. Koshovy and S. Herasymchuk, which analyze China's Arctic ambitions, should be noted.

Objective and goals. The aim is to determine the main features of China's foreign policy in the Arctic region by analyzing the strategies and motives of Beijing's foreign policy regarding this region, the transformation of China's priorities in the Arctic; identify potential challenges to China's presence in the region.

Research methods. The research methodology relies on the historical method, enabling the tracing of China's involvement in the Arctic region. The comparative method helps identify the specific features of China's strategies concerning the region compared to strategies of other international actors. Internal analysis of strategies and documents describing Beijing's foreign policy course is also conducted.

Results. The Arctic factor, in light of climate change and ice melting, presents new opportunities for navigation in the northern latitudes. This especially pertains to commercial routes, the development of port infrastructure, the extraction of mineral resources, particularly energy resources, in the region rich with them, as well as the intensification of the fishing

industry. However, these opportunities are accompanied by significant risks to the unique and vulnerable Arctic environment. In order to expand its influence on both global and regional levels, including in the Arctic, China is making efforts to adapt to new international conditions. This is aimed at maximizing its potential, enhancing international status, and securing economic benefits from changes in the North Pole region. Meanwhile, China's official position regarding the Arctic is clearly defined by the country's leadership and is implemented in accordance with the state strategy.

China showed interest in the Arctic region as early as 1925 when the country joined the Spitsbergen Treaty. This treaty, signed in Paris on February 9, 1920, determined the status of the archipelago. According to this document, China, like other participants, had the right to conduct economic and scientific research activities on the archipelago and in its territorial waters [14].

However, due to limited scientific and technical resources and instability in its domestic political situation, China failed to actively engage in activities in the Arctic region. The situation changed after the reforms in 1978. In 1982, China acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This led to the revival of the State Oceanic Administration of China's activities, and the country began implementing a program of polar scientific research. In the 1980s and 1990s, these research activities primarily took place in Antarctica [6].

In 1996, China joined the International Arctic Scientific Committee (IASC), founded in 1990, which became a significant Arctic initiative. Playing a leading role in Arctic research is the Polar Research Institute of China, established in 1989. This research institution coordinates Chinese polar research, manages the scientific research vessel "Snow Dragon," operates the submersible "Jiaolong" for deep-sea dives and oceanic research, provides logistical support for Chinese scientific expeditions, collaborates with global partners, advances understanding of the Arctic region, and publishes scientific research [11].

In 2018, the Chinese government published the "White Paper on China's Arctic Policy," which drew the attention of the global community to China's role in the Arctic region. The document outlines the main directions of China's state policy and lays the groundwork for increasing scientific research, solidifying the country's positions in the region, and developing maritime routes. This "White Paper" is a foundational document that clearly delineates China's vision of its national interests and establishes the republic's policy in this direction [5].

According to the aforementioned document, China's policy objectives regarding the Arctic encompass four main pillars: understanding, protection, development, and participation in governance. These goals aim to safeguard the common interests of all nations

and the international community in the Arctic while promoting its sustainable development. Understanding the Arctic:

1. China seeks to enhance its scientific research capabilities to gain a deeper understanding of the Arctic. This involves exploring the region's natural laws, changes, and development, enabling better protection, development, and governance.

2. Protection of the Arctic: China is committed to actively addressing climate change in the Arctic and preserving its unique natural environment and ecological system. This includes promoting climatic, environmental, and ecological resilience, and respecting the cultural diversity and historical traditions of indigenous peoples.

3. Development of the Arctic: China aims to enhance its technological capabilities and innovation in applied Arctic technology. This involves strengthening environmental protection, resource utilization, and the development of shipping routes in the region. China intends to contribute to the economic and social development of the Arctic, improving the living conditions of local populations and striving for mutual development.

4. Participation in Arctic Governance: China pledges to participate in regulating and managing Arctic affairs based on established rules and mechanisms. Internationally, China adheres to existing frameworks of international law, including the UN Charter, UNCLOS, climate change treaties, and IMO regulations. Domestically, China will regulate Arctic-related affairs within its jurisdiction, enhancing its capacity in understanding, protecting, and developing the Arctic, and actively engaging in international cooperation on Arctic matters [5].

It is necessary to highlight the wide spectrum of interests that China has in the Arctic region, including infrastructure projects, maritime connectivity, oil and gas extraction, fishing, extraction of rare metals abundant in the region, scientific research, initiatives, and even "polar tourism". An explicitly outlined vector is also the energy sector, understanding that the region holds promise for implementing projects in geothermal, wind, and other forms of renewable energy [12].

On one hand, such a move demonstrates China's consistency in defining its role as a state with interests in the Arctic region. On the other hand, it can be perceived as observations of the reactions from polar states that have direct access to the Arctic Ocean (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russia, the United States, and Iceland). Now they have two options: either to cooperate with China and receive investments for the development of the region, or to resist and engage in a "cold war" for the Arctic. According to China, this region is the common heritage of humanity, not the private property of Arctic Council members. Chinese researchers point out that despite Iceland, Russia, Canada, and some European states

attempting to assert sovereignty over the Arctic, they could just as well claim sovereign rights to the Moon.

It can be concluded that China pays great attention to preparing and announcing its "Arctic initiatives." In 2004, a Chinese scientific arctic station "Huanghe – Yellow River" was put into operation on the Spitsbergen archipelago. In 2013, China (together with India) obtained observer status in the Arctic Council, a group of states bordering the Arctic. That same year, the China-Nordic Research Center was established in Shanghai, which included representatives from Finland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, and Sweden. Since then, China has significantly expanded its presence in the Arctic in all spheres of interaction: geostrategic, trade, scientific, and diplomatic [9].

Considering China's activities in the Arctic region, it is worth noting the country's participation in the Arctic Council. With the aim of coordinating policies and fostering cooperation among countries with interests in the Arctic, the Arctic Council was established in 1996 in Ottawa, Canada. The Arctic Council comprises eight Arctic states: Canada, Denmark (represented by Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. Additionally, representatives of indigenous peoples and other interested parties may participate in the Council's work. The Arctic Council serves as a regional forum aimed at promoting cooperation among states in environmental protection and ensuring sustainable development in the Arctic region. A significant aspect of its work is the coordination and interaction among Arctic states and indigenous peoples to foster interest in issues concerning the region [1].

However, the activity of the Arctic Council recently faced its greatest threat to existence since its establishment in 1996. In 2022, it suspended its work due to Russia's actions in Ukraine, particularly because Russia was supposed to chair the organization at that time. Countries, including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States, refused to send their representatives to the council meetings in Russia. However, a solution was found: at the 13th meeting of the Arctic Council, held in the Russian city of Salekhard in an online format, Norway assumed the rotating chairmanship from Russia [15].

In an article for "The Diplomat," Stephen Blank provides information that prior to obtaining observer status in the Arctic Council, China made significant financial investments in the economies of certain member countries of the organization, including Denmark, Iceland, and Russia [2]. Additionally, in October 2013, the Danish Ambassador to Beijing, Freijs Arne Petersen, expressed the opinion that China has "natural and legitimate economic and scientific interests in the Arctic." It is also important to note that Iceland actively supported the idea of admitting China to the Arctic Council as an observer, even during the diplomatic crisis between China and Norway [13].

China's activity within the Council is focused on financial support, information exchange, and conducting scientific expertise. Chinese scientists are consistently involved in the work of all working groups. Starting from 2018, China organized the 9th, 10th, and 11th Arctic expeditions and conducted research on Arctic marine biodiversity, ocean acidification, the impact of new types of pollutants, ocean-atmosphere interactions, and more. Additionally, the country actively participates in the development, review, and implementation of the Work Plan of the Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative for the period from 2019 to 2023 [4].

China highly values its participation in the Arctic Council, even if it does not yield tangible results for the country. Such participation allows China to maintain its image as a "near-Arctic state," as stated in the 2018 White Paper on Arctic Policy. Consequently, China plans to continue supporting the work of the Arctic Council, participating in all projects, and enhancing information exchanges and communication within this organization.

Although China does not claim ownership of the Arctic, its government gradually increases its economic and scientific-technical presence in the region. It's worth noting that since China does not have full status in the Arctic Council like the Arctic Eight, it seeks ways to expand cooperation. A recent direction in China's foreign policy is to focus on cooperation with small countries in the Arctic. China utilizes various economic means to strengthen its position in the region through collaboration with these countries. For small states like Iceland or Denmark, the opportunity to cooperate with China is seen as a chance to more effectively protect their interests and increase their political weight in the Arctic [6].

In 2017, China included Arctic routes in «The Belt and Road Initiative» as an additional economic pathway through the Arctic Ocean to Europe. This led to intensified political dialogue between China and the countries of the Northern Baltic Eight (NB8).

As part of this dialogue, parliamentary speakers met in Beijing to discuss cooperation prospects. The main objective was to activate political dialogue between the Northern Baltic Eight and China, in line with a new model of international relations. The parties explored the possibility of creating a joint institutional platform for dialogue with China in various spheres, such as politics, technology, investments, logistics, and cooperation within the framework of the Arctic Council. These exchanges at the legislative level envisage mutually beneficial cooperation for the countries of the Northern Baltic Eight and China [10].

Probably, China intends to transform the Arctic region into another important global trade route, initially advancing its own interests. For example, China effectively leverages Russia's position and dependence on investments in financing natural resource extraction. This enables China to gain a certain share in various Russian projects [8].

In July 2017, during the visit of the Chinese President to the Russian Federation, the Chinese leader expressed the intention to jointly develop maritime corridors with the Russian side and participate in the modernization of the Northern Sea Route. This route is considered a component of a new project called the "Polar Silk Road." China also plans to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the Arctic region, support the development of interaction between competent authorities, research institutions, and enterprises. It also expressed readiness to conduct joint scientific expeditions, exploration and development of energy resources, promotion of Arctic tourism, and environmental protection. However, the question of reconciling Russian initiatives regarding control over cargo traffic along the Northern Sea Route with China's interests remains unresolved. Russia seeks to attract investments in ports and port facilities along this route, especially in the face of sanctions imposed against it by Western countries since 2014 [10].

Due to economic isolation resulting from its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has turned to China for support in the development of the Arctic, as Western energy companies refuse to participate in Russian projects. This new cooperation is particularly noticeable in the increased supply of oil via the Northern Sea Route, which traverses the Arctic from the northwest of Russia to the Bering Strait.

Although the volumes of supply remain small compared to those transported by other routes to the south, they have grown rapidly in recent times. Russia asserts its right to control transit along this route and emphasizes that increased demand has forced it to allow larger tankers, not equipped with "ice classification," which guarantees a stronger hull and other reinforcements, to sail through icy waters, causing concerns about the possibility of spills in a remote region.

Russia has long been unsympathetic to China's presence in the Arctic region. Previously, it actively opposed China's efforts to obtain observer status in the Arctic Council and blocked Chinese ships conducting research in Arctic waters. In 2020, Russian authorities even arrested an Arctic researcher on suspicion of passing intelligence to China. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed this dynamic. As a result of Western sanctions pressure, Russia was forced to turn to China for support in ensuring its economic development, military efforts, and conducting research in the Arctic region [7].

China's Arctic policy also conceals potential security threats, particularly in the scientific and economic spheres. Scientific research conducted by the country in the Arctic may serve as a basis for more aggressive expansion of economic interests, which in turn could lead to the involvement of military presence, including submarines [12].

The United States expresses concern over the absence of open conflicts with Russia and China in the Arctic in past years, considering it an unsat-

isfactory factor as the threat to NATO and its allies could arise unexpectedly. Such a scenario could lead to military encroachment. Although China officially asserts that it has no intention of bolstering its military presence in the Arctic region and directs a significant portion of its resources toward enhancing coastal defense and its fleet in the South China Sea, China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) capabilities for conducting operations in the Arctic are limited. China employs non-military methods to expand its influence, including participation in legislative activities. For example, in 2014, Chinese experts participated in the development of the International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters, regulating requirements for transportation and vessel passage within the North and South Poles. This is seen as an example of strategic long-term planning, as China seeks to establish leadership positions in the regulation of polar sea routes before they become freely accessible [8].

Conclusion. In recent years, the Arctic region has garnered significant attention due to climate change and the expansion of opportunities for exploiting natural resources, as well as active development in commercial, environmental, and geostrategic initiatives. Increased interest in the Arctic requires the international community to jointly solve problems and manage the region within the Arctic Council and other international and regional organizations. China's geopolitical role in the Arctic region has grown in recent years, and the country actively demonstrates interest in this strategically important region.

Published in 2018, China's White Paper on Arctic Policy outlines the country's interests in the region and represents an important step in shaping priorities. By conducting scientific research in the Arctic region and actively participating in international initiatives, China seeks to play a key role in addressing Arctic issues and promoting sustainable development. China's historical interest in the Arctic, ratification of numerous international agreements, and participation in scientific organizations attest to the country's long-term and systematic interest in this strategically important region. China's activity in the Arctic is explained not only by economic motives but also by a desire to take responsibility for the preservation and rational use of this unique natural resource.

The reduction of ice cover opens up new maritime routes through the Arctic, such as the Northern Sea Route. China is expanding its presence in the Arctic to utilize these routes to shorten transportation routes and reduce transportation costs, as well as to explore new opportunities for resource extraction. This strategy entails partnership with Russia, which possesses significant resources and controls a large portion of Arctic territories. In turn, Russia sees cooperation with China as a way to attract investments to the region, especially amid economic isolation due to sanctions following the Ukraine invasion.

As China's attention to the Arctic grows, geopolitical tensions arise with other states, particularly those with claims to the region's resources. China's interaction with Russia, the United States, Canada, and Scandinavian countries may shape the geopolitical landscape in the Arctic. The expansion of China's economic presence in the Arctic also raises security concerns. Cooperation with Russia alters the balance of power and creates a potential threat to stability and security in the Arctic.

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Основні риси політики КНР в Арктичному регіоні: трансформація пріоритетів

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У статті висвітлено основні аспекти політики Китаю в Арктичному регіоні та їх трансформацію відповідно до змін напрямів та національних інтересів держави. Досліджуються різні пріоритети Пекіну в контексті арктичної політики, зокрема у зв'язку з розвитком транспортних маршрутів через Північний Льодовитий океан, зростанням геополітичного значення регіону, що описано у «Білій книзі щодо Арктичного регіону» 2018 року. Стаття має на меті проаналізувати роль Китаю у співпраці з іншими арктичними державами, його економічні та геополітичні інтереси, а також вплив на регіональну безпеку. Актуальність полягає в розумінні стратегій, тактик та змін у пріоритетах Китаю, що має важливе значення для прогнозування його майбутніх дій, впливу на регіональну безпеку та взаємодії з іншими державами, а також для розробки ефективних політичних та дипломатичних стратегій інших країн у контексті арктичної дипломатії. Дослідження базується на таких методах: аналізі офіційних заяв, документів та рішень Китайської Народної Республіки, а також історичному та порівняльному, що надає змогу ефективно прослідкувати тенденцію зростання інтересів Пекіну до регіону Арктики. Результати дослідження можуть бути корисними для розуміння стратегії Китаю в арктичному регіоні, вони розкривають ключові аспекти політики Китаю в арктичному регіоні та її еволюцію з часом. Також надають структурні уявлення про стратегічні трансформації у політиці Китаю, що неабияк впливають на геополітичне становище на світовій арені.

Ключові слова: Китай, Арктичний регіон, трансформація пріоритетів Китаю, Арктична рада, стратегія.