

China-US Confrontations in The Arctic Region: Strategies and Policies

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Abstract

The Arctic region until recently considered an area of international and regional cooperation, of common scientific research, of common concern for the melting ice masses, of low tension, of mutuality and win-win approach, is, according to the latest official American statements, transforming into a region of great power competition and rivalry. The US launched in late 2018 an anti-China campaign and widened it in 2019 to include alleged Chinese illegitimate interference and influence activities in the Arctic.

The article examines the two countries contrasting Arctic strategies and policies and their mutual interactions relating them to the overarching global competition.

The theoretical approach is neorealism based on the assumption that the current international system is a single superpower system. The method is comparative and action-reaction focused. The basic questions to be investigated are the following, taking point of departure in US China-related accusations: Is China attempting to sinicize the Arctic? Is China conducting an illegitimate interference and influence policy in the Arctic? Is China attempting to change the international rules for the Arctic towards internationalization? Is China militarizing the Arctic? Will China be the winner in the Arctic? The findings are that the American accusations are exaggerated and that China's influence is lesser than in other regions.

Introduction

By introducing China as “a Polar Great Power” in 2017, Xi Jinping indicated a new foreign policy role for the Arctic. In 2018 followed by a White Paper on China's Arctic Policy. This action exploded later in a heavy American reaction. As part of Vice President Pence's launching of an assertive anti-China political campaign in October 2018 the United States accused China of exerting heavy interference and influence activities in the US and in the world. The Arctic policy was accentuated in a most spectacular way in May 2019 by Secretary of State Pompeo stating that the Arctic now was a region of Great Power conflict and competition. The next phase was the farfetched offer from president Trump to buy Greenland, which could be seen as an attempt to hinder further expansion of Chinese influence in the region. The accusations could be summarized as Chinese attempts to sinicize the Arctic by capturing the new global frontiers, to use illegitimate interference and influence policy and abusing the Arctic, to change the international rules and finally to militarize the region.

All in all: China – in the American understanding- is not following a mutual responsive, cooperative, moderate direction in the relations of the two countries, but aims at being the true winners in the new Arctic Great Power competition.

The article will first try to render probable that the Arctic- practically over- night – in May 2019 was transformed from a region of cooperation and low tension to a region infected by great power conflict and competition based on global security policy. Second that the United States as the single superpower has initiated this transformation; only a superpower can succeed with a region-rearrangement like this. The US is stating that the activities of China and Russia in the Arctic are the reasons for the transformation. Third that the American intention with the transformation primarily is to keep China outside the Arctic.

The empirical and theoretical point of departure for examining these questions is the assertion that the current international system is characterized by the being a single superpower system, i.e. still we have an American managed World Order. This unipolar order is characterized by the lack of global

balancing, by attempts to asymmetrical balancing, by the situation where states are disposed to adapt to the superpower or to be free riding in the international system. Comparative methods and patterns of action-reaction are used to conduct the analysis. The investigation is mainly based on official statements and national strategies.

To set the stage, we briefly have to identify the China-USA- political process, which led to one of the culminations up till now: the transformation of the Arctic. What happened?

The China-US political process

The start was Trump's presidential campaign. The campaign was pure China-bashing: China was blamed for stealing, raping and cheating. But election campaigns are not politics. Soon after taking over as president a special relationship between Trump and Xi emerged. But in October 2018 the US-China policy eventually manifested itself. Vice-President Pence gave a speech at Hudson Institute in Washington, which was about to publish a comprehensive academic rapport on China's expanding and effective influence and interference campaign. Pence said that while he was speaking China and Chinese authorities were conducting effective and often illegal activities against the American society and authorities. It happened also other places in the world using methods which often were unacceptable. The Pence-speech introduced a new and well-coordinated China-Threat campaign, which half a year later in a spectacular way was referred to the Arctic region. The timeline is dramatic. May 6 2019 Secretary of State Pompeo is landing in Finland on a state visit. The next day he shall participate in the annual summit the Arctic Council. In his speech he declares that the character of the Arctic region has changed fundamentally. Former cooperation and low tension is now replaced by major power rivalry and competition. China and Russia are by their activities responsible for the change. Pompeo is criticizing the very comprehensive new Chinese Arctic strategy from January 2018; he is very negative. He is ridiculing China for calling itself a "Near Arctic State"; there are only two categories: Arctic countries and Non-Arctic countries. He is concerned for the economic, political and military activities in the Arctic. He has visions for closer relations with Greenland. A comprehensive consulate is to be set up in Nuuk. After the Arctic Council meeting he will go to Greenland, a visit, which however is postponed due to a critical Iran-meeting.

The US Arctic-campaign is met with astonishment and concern. More spectacular moves are however still to be seen. In August there are news from Trump. He wants to visit Denmark. He is of course invited, but suddenly the White House announces that the US wants to buy Greenland from Denmark. But Denmark does not own Greenland, and Greenland is not for sale. There is no market for buying or selling countries in 2019. We are in the 21st century. So, the Danish Prime minister's reaction is that this idea is "absurd". Trump calls the prime minister for "a nasty woman" and cancels his visit. A smart diplomacy fixes the tensions, and the prime minister is now in the Trump understanding elevated to "a wonderful woman". The US-Danish relations, which are critical to Denmark- are restored, but Trump has with his incredible and absurd offer, which never could be realized, set the scene for new interactions between the US, Denmark and Greenland.

Where was China in this game? China plays a hidden and an open role in the Arctic development. The US is eagerly engaged in undertakings, which can obstruct Chinese influence or pressure. Politically e.g. by opening the Nuuk consulate and pressing Denmark to anti-Chinese activities. Economically by supporting Greenland with establishing air ports in Greenland, and militarily by enhancing its military presence in the Arctic.

China's Arctic policy

How to read, examine and understand China's Arctic strategy and policy?

China's interest in the Arctic is not new. Scientific involvement goes back to 1925 by signing the Svalbard treaty, but during the Deng opening-up policy the focus on the Arctic – and on the Antarctic increased. In 2013 China together with other Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, India and Singapore became permanent observers at the Arctic Council. The long expected Chinese White paper on the Arctic was released in January 2018.

"China's Arctic policy" declared, first, that due to global warming and globalization, the Arctic is gaining global significance. And second that "the Arctic situation now goes beyond its original inter-Arctic-state or regional nature". Now "the Arctic has the interest of the international community."

China is not underestimating its global position in the Arctic. The White Paper states: “A champion for the development of a community with a shared future for mankind, China is an active participant, builder and contributor in Arctic affairs, who has spared no efforts to contribute its wisdom to the development of the Arctic region.” China delivers here an amazing self -confident and self- promoting proclamation referring to mankind and to Chinese wisdom.

The main statements are that China is a responsible, important Arctic stakeholder, a near Arctic state, a state having rights to navigation, research, overflight, fishing, resource exploration and exploitation, a state now having a “polar silk road,” a continuation of the BRI, The Belt and Road Initiative, an Arctic rule maker and a state, which is aiming at building an Arctic community with a “shared future for mankind.”

The main points of China’s Arctic strategy are – it is stated- to explore and understand the Arctic, to protect the eco-environment and address the climate change, to utilize Arctic resources, to promote Arctic governance and peace and stability in the region.

Sinicizing

Looking at the four questions lined up in the introduction, the first , will China take over-sinicize the Arctic, could be rephrased to whether it is China’s wish to interfere in the organizationally rather rigid and closed Arctic region as an example of a Chinese organized global subversion campaign in order to not only to compete with the US, having success with its own subversive activities, but also to overtake the US’s role, which until recently enjoys a rather monopoly-like position.

Here it is appropriate to ask to what degree China is acting according to and is accepting the fact that the US is the single superpower. The answer is that general political behaviour- in deeds and words- will demonstrate: yes, to a very high degree. China generally behaves politically reluctantly, cautiously and prudently vis a vis the US, often emphasizing that the US is superior politically, economically and militarily, indicating that in many cases it has to follow the American leadership. Even the very nationalistic newspaper Global Times, very close to the Chinese Communist Party, states. “We have to admit that we are living in an American World Order”. In any case, China does for now not want to take over the American global role as superpower.

In the Arctic case China is certainly not directly displaying subversion , and China admits that the US role in the Arctic is unprecedented. Further that the US has the ability to change the rules in the Arctic almost over-night.

Is China as a revisionist country-which the US claims in its National Security Strategy, or a status-quo country-which China- for obvious reasons certainly -not is claiming for itself? The question is tricky. No country aims at status quo; even the USA has as its goal: Make America Great again, also implying: to secure America’s unique global position as the supreme nation. To claim that China is a status quo nation sounds weird. China is- as a rising country- under constant change with far-reaching goals for the bright future. Certainly not a status quo policy.

Also the US as the single superpower in the international system is not a status quo power. Rather the US will be disposed to change the system by promoting its global project. The United States stands for democracy, market economy, individual freedom, human rights and international law and order. In short form: an open liberal order. Exactly this order has allowed China to rise, to promote its opening up policy making possible a massive low cost export and a corresponding import of resources and raw materials in a global environment of free trade and developing aid. Without this world order China’s economic rise could not take place. This situation is still in operation. And as China’s and CPC’s survival to a certain degree is depending on a continuing rise, it is reasonable in this context to characterize China as a status quo country. Also in this understanding China is exploiting the US-World order by being allowed to extend its economic and other interests to the changing and resourceful Arctic.

Interference and influence

The following question is whether China is using interference, influence and submission in the Arctic. Is China abusing the Arctic? What China does is primarily to utilize and exploit the available opportunities and underscore that it just like any other countries has legitimate rights in the Arctic. China is accused for attempting to interfere and influence the Arctic in suppressive and improper ways, for example to lure Greenland into mining adventures and to try to buy Iceland and to prepare Iceland as a Chinese infrastructure hub in the Arctic region. China does play an increasing important role. But

China is aware of the limits. And China is much concerned to keep its official activities to look as low key as possible and thereby try to avoid any unnecessary provocations primarily in connection to the US.

Rule maker

Is China a rule maker or a rule follower in the Arctic? China is not in doubt. Although the current international norms and rules indeed are stable and constructive for China and can be exploited, China also is interested in translating its rising global influence into rules and norms “with Chinese characteristics”. Besides China’s solemn references to the shared future of mankind and references to China’s wisdom and vision concerning the Arctic, China is also modest and humble in its claims. The following is an example of the direction China wants to follow: China seems to point to the Arctic Council as lacking behind being effective, authoritative, representative and international. The council – China claims - is only a forum that lacks legal status under international law, having no leadership role.

But what kind of leadership? In the current situation the US- as the single superpower- has the possibility of exerting global leadership whatever happens the Arctic Council

China is aware of this and is all the time continuing to exploit the open, liberal world order but is also trying to suggest changes in order to turn the development in direction of specific Chinese interests. This reveals a dilemma: on the one hand China is trying to exploit the American management conditions - on the other hand it offers specific Chinese concepts. While the US management conditions rests on the US-global project, which is referring to universal values and norms, part of China’s attempts to counter the US in this arena is specifically grounded in specific Chinese inherent, excluding, culturally determined elements, which reflects “Chinese characteristics”, Chinese ancient history.

So, China generally is attempting to appear as a rule maker, but still under the conditions of the dilemma mentioned above. In the Arctic case China is to a considerable degree hindered in pressing for unilateral norm and rule transforming activities as China’s status as an observer in the Arctic Council is dependent on its observance of the constitution of the Arctic council. A scenario could be – at least after recent the American proclamation of inclusion of the Arctic into the global sphere of great power competition- a US demand of suspension of China from the Council due to e.g. possible Chinese illegal military activities in the South China Sea.

Militarizing

The next question is whether China is militarizing the Arctic. Will China as military power number two in the world promote a militarization in the Arctic or will it continue the generally declared policy of avoiding war and military confrontations?

There are no problems when it comes to human security, which includes the individual safety. In the Arctic there is a well-established and developed regional and international cooperation in this area. Search- and-Rescue operations are appealing to all Arctic and all non-Arctic countries.

More problematic are the hybrid operations and dual use equipment in the grey zone between military and civil means. China has considerable experience with this kind of hybrid warfare e.g. to use fishing boats and coast guard forces in military -like operations in the South China Sea. In the Arctic China has two rather new icebreakers and is preparing building a nuclear driven icebreaker. Chinese ships handling scientific research are thus accused for conducting intelligence activities.

Militarization in the hard understanding belongs to the core areas of national security. China is conducting a relative new “going global” policy in the maritime arena. The basics were formally published in the 2015 White Book, “China’s Military Strategy”, and further developed in the newest Military White book from June 2019. Blue water operations to protect the expanding global sea lanes, which are paramount to China’s economic survival are part of the extensive planning. The Arctic connectivity requires some kind of military means. China’s military strategy emphasizes specifically maritime military forces and “active defence”.

China has displayed strategic interest in the high north. It has participated in vast military exercises in the Baltic sea, and in the Arctic 2018 strategy the right to navigation in the Arctic sea is specifically accentuated.

But to characterize the Chinese behaviour in the Arctic as attempts to militarize the Arctic region is a vast overstatement. Firstly, China constantly emphasizes its core interest in peaceful development,

a statement which is in full agreement with the fact that any kind of widespread wars would be devastating to the comprehensive 2049 plans for the Chinese dream of being a harmonious, prosperous, democratic, advanced and beautiful country. An additional plan is however also to have a world class military. Second, China is clearly stating in its Arctic strategy that it aims at a non-militarized, peaceful and developed Arctic. Third, and most important: There is no clear evidence of any Chinese hard security activities in the Arctic region. Also, China is in no way interested in conflicting military or strategic relations with the United States in the Arctic. China is fully aware of general global and the specific regional heavy asymmetric relations as concerns capabilities.

The recent political development in the Arctic thus displays a superpower, which by means of introducing an intense political-diplomatic global campaign toward what is referred to Chinese interference and influence, which half a year later expands this campaign to include the Arctic, possesses the ability – almost overnight- to transform the global and international conditions of a vast region, the Arctic. This is an astonishing demonstration of a superpower's attempt to- and probably having success with "re-organizing" a region from an intense co-operative, low-tension loaded region to a region loaded with great-power competition and conflict.

China as the winner

The considerations mentioned above also give an answer to the last question: Will China be the winner in the Arctic? The structural winner is given; as long as the superpower maintains and is enlarging its focus on the Arctic, and nothing seems to indicate the opposite, the US will stay as the supreme Arctic Power. This is in line with the US position as an Asian power, as a European power and a Middle East power.

There could be circumstances in the future where the US-Arctic focus could diminish. In that case, China has – due to its increased capabilities- vast opportunities to engage in and exploit the Arctic. Due exactly to the physically swift transforming as the ice is melting – the Arctic will continue to attract China's attention- making China a "Polar Great Power". But the relations to the US in this case will remain utterly asymmetric implying that in the end China will not emerge as the winner.

The US Arctic policy and its relations to China's Arctic role

In this section an attempt will be made to examine in a comparative manner the current Arctic strategies and policies of the United States and of China. The method is to take point of departure in the current US-Arctic policy and then confront it with China's Arctic policy according to the main issue areas.

The Arctic almost disappeared in the US- strategic thinking or debate after the cold war. Even in the general US Arctic strategy from 2017, prepared during the Obama administration, but published after Trump had taken over, the Arctic was still described as a region with low priority and consequently left with few and limited resources. Co-operation, environment, research and development were the main issues. In the 2018 American Military strategy the Arctic was not mentioned at all. In the National Security Strategy from 2017 the Arctic was mentioned only one time as part of one of many new areas and frontiers to look at.

But then suddenly something happened. An astonishing revolutionary new US-policy was announced with Pompeo's trip to Finland May 2019 as described above. Presumably the new policy had been prepared over a certain timeline, and it could be seen as a widening and deepening of the general new Anti-China- political campaign from October 2018. A month later, June 2019, Department of Defense published its new Arctic strategy. The character and message was noticeable: this was a transformation. It is very different from its 2016 predecessor. The first sentence sounds: "This document articulates the DoD's strategy for the Arctic Region in an era of strategic competition". Thus: the strategic environment is new. Further the strategy emphasizes strongly that "the network of US allies and partners with shared national interests in a rule-based order is the US's greatest strategic advantage in the Arctic region". Thus: the US is dividing the Arctic countries in two: allies or no- allies. And more: the allies are supporters and the no-allies' opponents of rule based order. Add to this: the strategy emphasizes that strategic advantage counts. Thus the strategy goes on stating that the allies and partners help deter strategic competitors from "seeking to unilaterally change the existing rule-based order". gain- there are allies, which support the US and strategic competitors, which are revisionist oriented.

Thus the strategy further states that it must address central problems like the US Joint Force's eroding competitive edge against China and Russia and address and follow the "imperative to ensure favourable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific and Europe". Also it is underlined in the paper that "the Arctic remains vulnerable to "strategic spill-over" from tensions, competition or conflict in these other regions" (i.e. Indo-Pacific and Europe). In this way the Arctic is considered a potential corridor between the Indo-Pacific and Europe, and the US-homeland. Thus, this means that not just regional and local security issues are important and central parts of the strategy, but that the Arctic is tightly incorporated in the global strategic security situation. The Arctic is a fundamental and inherent part of the US-world order. This part of the strategy is again conflicting with the positions of the earlier US- Arctic strategies. Another rather novel functional creation is the dividing of the Arctic region in two different parts: the North American Arctic, which has a harsher climate and the milder, Gulf Stream-affected, European Arctic. The North American Arctic also lacks the relatively robust logistics infrastructure of the European Arctic. This divide, requires "the Department of Defense to make time-sensitive, risk-informed investments to understand and build awareness of the region."

These specific circumstances are obviously not new. New is, that the US now is taking the local realities seriously as a background for realising the desired end-state, namely first, to building Arctic awareness, second, to enhancing Arctic operations, and third, to strengthening rules-based order in the Arctic.

To do this requires a "more lethal, resilient, agile and ready Joint Force". And to maintain a credible deterrent, it is necessary to "understand and shape the Arctic's geo-strategic landscape for future operations and to respond effectively to contingencies in the Arctic Region".

Here again, the strategy convincingly combines the defence of Arctic with the general US defence, which was not that obvious in the former strategies. New is that the Arctic requires this tight amalgamation due to the two countries, Russia and China, now considered strategic competitors.

Russia is for good reasons described as a big troublemaker and rival. But it is new that China is even more under attack, and – interesting enough -for apparently less troubling activities. China and Russia are mentioned all through the paper. China is accused of future deployment of submarines, of seeking a role in the Arctic governance. According the US China is investing in strategic sectors. China is conducting comprehensive scientific research. China is aiming at undermining rules and norms, China's political and economic presence is playing a considerable role, which is influencing a great part of the Arctic.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that the US succeeded with its project of transforming the Arctic region – almost overnight- from a peaceful, cooperative and low tension region into a region dominated by great power rivalry and competition. Further that only a single superpower can accomplish such a political move and claim that the transformation is caused by the policies not least by China. Third, the paper argues that the US project primarily has the purpose of keeping China out of the Arctic.

The paper is using the spectacular occurrences around the US perception of Chinese activities in the Arctic region to point to some general questions: Is China attempting to sinicize the Arctic? Is China conducting an illegitimate interference and influence policy and abusing the Arctic? Is China a rule follower or a rule maker in the Arctic? Is China militarizing the Arctic? And finally will China be the Arctic winner?

Using a neorealist theoretical concept claiming that the international system is a single superpower system as point of departure for the analysis, it can be concluded,

-China is not going to take over neither the world nor the Arctic. The US-China capability asymmetry will remain for many years. The Arctic has a moderate priority in China's foreign policy,

-China is a developing country, revisionist in terms of achieving own progress and advancement, but is a status quo power as it is taking advantage of possibilities of the current unipolar world order. In this context China is disposed to follow an adapting policy, not least cautious to challenge the US in its own backyard.

-China is exploiting the possibilities in the Arctic, new shipping routes, heavy presence of resources such as raw materials, minerals, rare earth, uranium, gold, gas and oil. But also the BRI with the Polar Silk Road is a gigantic political and geo-economic operation, which also is based on a desire from the involved countries to attract Chinese investment and to get China to deliver infrastructure and

industrial and economic structure. China seems primarily to care a lot about getting profit and activities are sought where the political relations and possibilities are best and where environmental obstacles are few and where local political and societal problems can be solved in accordance with the indigenous population. So, very often, the Arctic will not be China's first choice. Add to this, the US has now reinvigorated the Arctic in their national sphere of influence, which in the long run will leave lesser and lesser room of manoeuvre to China.

-China as a rule maker in the Arctic is extremely limited. China will mainly stick to the already existing rules, norms, and laws. China is naturally exerting influence, but the restraints are considerable.

-China is not militarizing the Arctic; on the other hand, the qualitatively expanding Chinese military will have a natural incentive to protect the increasing possibilities for using new and cost effective seaways.

-China is not going to be the winners in the Arctic. The asymmetry and the lacking systemic balance will propel China in the direction free riding.

-The United States will continue and intensify its campaign against China's global influence and interference policy.

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