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CHINESE  
EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY



# ARCTIC NARRATIVES AND POLITICAL VALUES

RUSSIA, CHINA AND CANADA IN THE HIGH NORTH

PREPARED BY THE  
NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS  
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE



Author and Principal Researcher – Iona Allan

Content Editor – Elina Lange Ionatamishvili

Text Editor – Anna Reynolds

Peer Reviewers – Troy Bouffard and Eric Chamberland

Design and Production – LTD Aplauz Ireneusz Mazur

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NATO STRATCOM COE  
11b Kalciema Iela  
Riga LV1048, Latvia.

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# China's Arctic Strategy

This is a summary of research based on a discourse analysis of official statements, speeches, and policy documents published by the Government of the Peoples Republic of China in English from 2012-2018. The narratives derived from the discourse are coded according to the national power dimensions and political values which they communicate. Sources were identified using a key word search of these publicly available resources.



# Introduction

Although international interest in China's Arctic policy has intensified following the publication of their Arctic Policy Paper in January 2018, Chinese ambitions in the region are nothing new. China has been cautiously promoting itself as an active and legitimate player in the Arctic since before Xi Jinping came to office in 2013. The 2018 policy paper does however, represent the first 'unified' presentation of Chinese Arctic policy and attempt to formalize their ambitions in the region.

The document, like previous statements and communiqués on the Arctic goes to great lengths to show that China plays by the rules and respects the sovereignty of other Arctic nations. Beijing has placed a consistent emphasis on demonstrating China's rule abiding-credentials and track record for environmental consciousness. Overall, China's Arctic communication strategy is characterized first and foremost by messages of reassurance, designed both to calm fears about Chinese encroachment and to present China as a responsible and

trustworthy ally in the region. At the same time however, Beijing has made increasingly assertive statements regarding the need to 'diversify' the framework of Arctic governance and challenge the collective authority of the Arctic Council, where China is only an observer. Internationalizing the structures of Arctic governance and re-branding the region and its changing climate as a 'trans-regional' issue is a central feature of Beijing's Arctic strategy.

This executive summary identifies the dominant narratives of China's Arctic communications and the specific political values which they communicate. The majority of these narratives are aimed at building China's self-image and constructing its own distinct Arctic identity. Shaping perceptions of region and framing relations with other actors plays a lesser but nonetheless significant role China's Arctic strategy. These narratives are expressed through a range of different national power dimensions from political-economic to more historical/societal focused.



'China is a key player and participant in the Arctic on cross-regional and global issues, especially the global challenges of climate change.'

PRC News Office, Beijing, 28 Jan 2018.



# Dominant Chinese Narratives

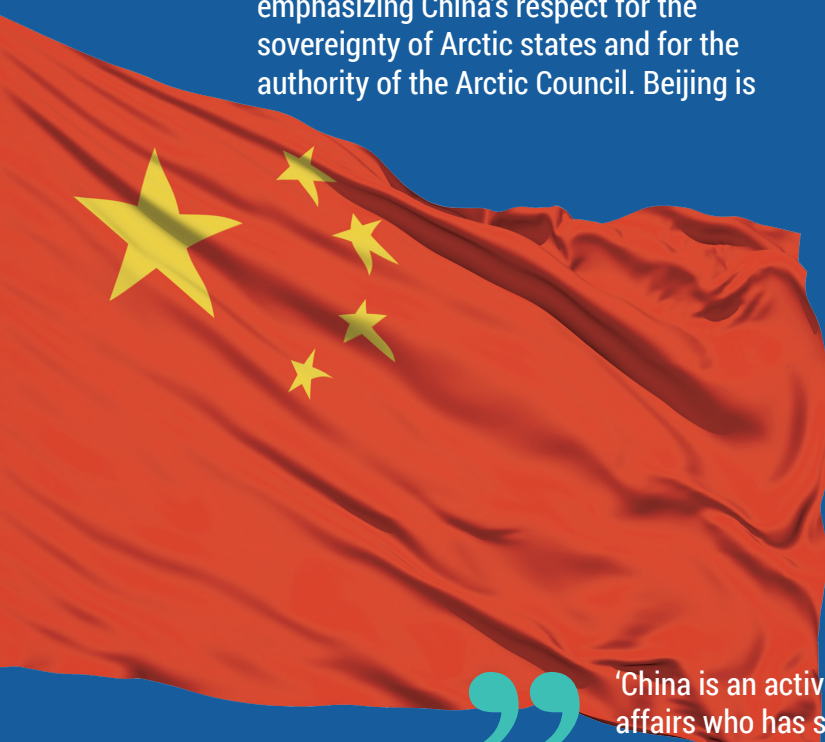
## CHINA'S 'NEAR ARCTIC' IDENTITY

### Political Values – Rule of Law, Integrity and Environmentalism.

Overall China portrays itself as a responsible and legitimate stakeholder in Arctic affairs. China's Arctic identity is rooted in its desire to be accepted as an equal partner in the region and avoid being labelled an external 'gatecrasher'. In the historical dimension, China emphasizes its longstanding commitment to safeguarding the Arctic environment, often citing its adherence to the Svalbard Treaty of 1920. In the political/ economic dimensions, China presents itself as a rule abiding and environmentally conscious actor and one that poses little threat to the current status quo in the Arctic.

The overarching image that China projects about its Arctic identity is one of a trustworthy and law-abiding partner, emphasizing China's respect for the sovereignty of Arctic states and for the authority of the Arctic Council. Beijing is

conscious of being perceived as an external 'gatecrasher' and therefore refrains from making any territorial claims. For China, endorsing international law is the most practical way of gaining access and influence in the region.



'China is an active participant, builder and contributor in Arctic affairs who has spared no effort to contribute its wisdom to the development of the Arctic region.'

China's Arctic Policy, Beijing, 26 Jan 2018.

rule of law  
integrity  
environmentalism  
cooperation globalization  
social obligation and  
multilateralism  
progress  
cultural collectivism

China



Members of a Chinese Arctic expedition raise China's national flag at a research station on Svalbard, Norway, 2001.



One of the most striking features of China's Arctic identity is its self-ascribed title of 'Near Arctic state.' This description has been used regularly in official statements since 2015 and is justified by the apparently disproportionate impact that Arctic climate change is having on Chinese economic and agricultural production. According to Beijing, this justifies China's interests in Arctic affairs and reinforces its position as an important stakeholder in the region. Although this 'nearness' is based more on its vulnerability to the effects of climate change rather than its physical proximity to the Arctic, it still draws attention to this loose territorial sense of the region and in doing so, undermines their continuing attempts to globalize the Arctic region. This contradiction between China's regional/territorial and globalist perception of its Arctic identity is never fully resolved.

Given its lack of legitimate territorial claims, Beijing has understood that most powerful source of leverage lies in its vast capital and technological know-how. Framing itself as an indispensable investor in the region and a valuable source of scientific 'wisdom' is another important feature of China's Arctic image. By focusing on China's economic and technological contributions in the Arctic, China can make itself appear both altruistic, and politically unthreatening, and, for states like Russia, an economically indispensable Arctic ally. Fostering such bilateral partnerships is just one way the Chinese government have expanded their influence in the region, presenting their involvement in Arctic affairs as a fait accompli.



Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou shows a white paper on China's Arctic policy during a press conference in Beijing, Jan 2018



# THE GLOBAL ARCTIC

## Political Values – Co-operation and Globalisation

China is making continuing efforts to internationalize the Arctic and paint the region as a place of common interest and shared responsibility. From a societal dimension, China promotes the creation of a global and harmonious Arctic culture, presenting Arctic climate change as a challenge that impacts the entirety of mankind rather than regional states alone.

The promotion of a globalist narrative is central to China's Arctic communications strategy. Since 2013, the Jinping government has consistently depicted the Arctic as a global space, or 'commons', where environmental change is impacting countries

well beyond the immediate 'Arctic 8.' Arctic climate change threatens the 'future of humanity as a whole' and demands urgent collective action, and even, ironically, from China, the world's largest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter.



'The future of the Arctic concerns not only the wellbeing of the Arctic countries and people but also the overall interests of the entire international community.'

Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming, Reykjavik, Oct 2015



Members of China's research team set up an ocean profiling float near the icebreaker Xuelong, 2016.

Alongside attempts to reimagine the Arctic as a communal, international space, Beijing has also made repeated efforts to present the current situation in the Arctic as not just a challenge to overcome but, also as an 'historic opportunity' that must be exploited. Chinese statements emphasize the growing

strategic significance as the ice melts and new shipping routes emerge. Presenting climate change as an unique and profitable situation, provides Beijing with a useful justification for its commercial development of the Arctic and feeds into its 'now-or-never' line of reasoning.

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'China, as a responsible major country is ready to cooperate with all relevant parties to seize the historic opportunity in the development of the Arctic.'

China's Arctic Policy, Beijing, 26 Jan 2018.

# ARCTIC ALLIES

## Political Values – Multilateralism, Co-operation & Social Obligation.

**China is keen to bolster its bilateral and multilateral partnerships with other Arctic countries and build a 'win-win' relationship with Indigenous populations. From an economic perspective, China frames its relations with the various Arctic peoples in the Circumpolar North as mutually beneficial and based upon cultural respect and sensitivity. From a political perspective, the Chinese Arctic strategy attempts to both reassure sovereign Arctic states and to promote alternative and more inclusive structures of governance.**

Building an 'altruistic reputation' and reaching out to Indigenous populations has become an important element of China's Arctic strategy. The 2018 White Paper emphasizes how Chinese economic activity in the Arctic goes to great lengths to accommodate the interests of local populations and to increase their socio-economic wellbeing. Chinese Arctic development therefore promises

to bring tangible benefits to Indigenous communities and to deliver an overall 'win-win' situation in the region. This emphasis on 'Indigenous populations', over which China has no national jurisdiction, is part of the broader effort to sway a wide range of Arctic stakeholders toward supporting China's presence in the region.





Indigenous hunters work on a caribou in the Canadian Arctic, May 2018.

Shaping relations with other Arctic actors is another priority in China's Arctic strategy, and one that demands a careful balance between stating its intention to be seen as a serious Arctic actor, yet reassuring others that it won't overstep the mark. Beijing is therefore keen to build co-operative bilateral/multilateral relations with other Arctic states, creating a 'fait accompli' that necessitates China's continued presence in the Arctic. Beijing therefore promotes partnerships between Arctic and non-Arctic states, framing this as the new regional 'norm' and most effective form of cooperation in the Arctic.

Central to building this image of co-operative Arctic relations is China's endorsement of the Arctic Council. Although Beijing has gone to pains to emphasize its respect for the Arctic Council and willingness to comply with international law, it has also made clear that this respect must be reciprocal, emphasizing the rights of non-Arctic countries and the 'interests' of the international community more generally. In reality however, the Arctic Council owes no such 'reciprocity', making China's attempts to leverage greater authority almost futile. From 2015, Chinese statements have also called for the creation of a more 'diversified' and 'inclusive' system of Arctic governance- one that would give China more influence than it has in its current position as observer.

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'Respect is the key basis for China's participation in Arctic affairs. Respect should be reciprocal.'

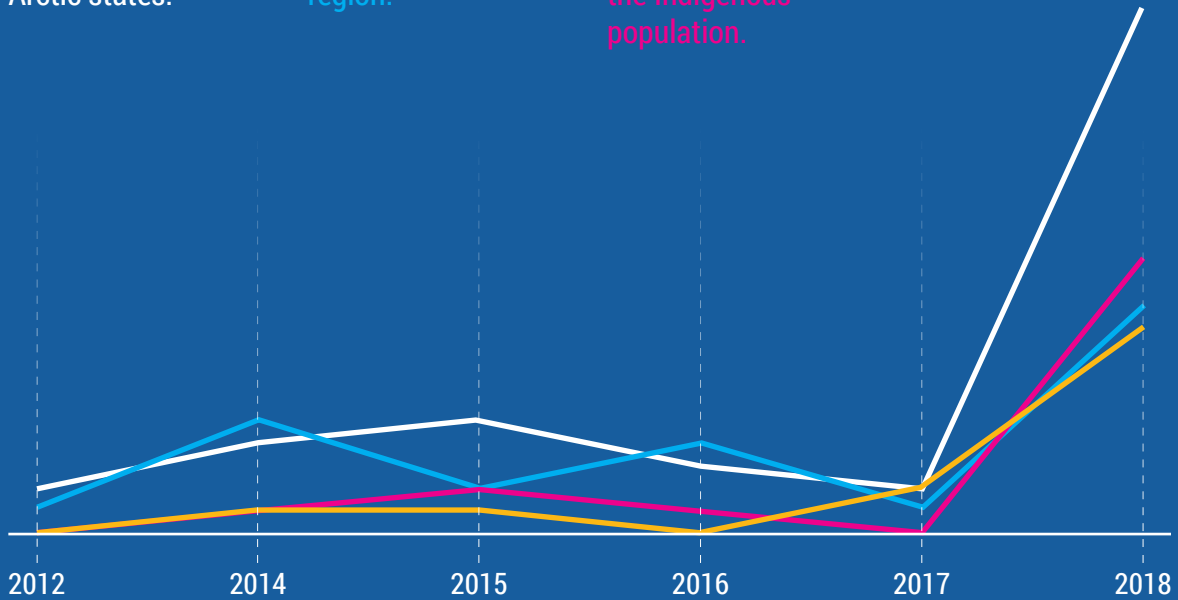
China's Arctic Policy, Beijing 29 Jan 2018.

China respects the rule of law and sovereignty of other Arctic states.

China is a Near Arctic state and important stakeholder in the region.

Chinese Arctic development respects and will benefit the Indigenous population.

China is an indispensable investor in the Arctic.



China's economic activity in the Arctic is environmentally conscious.

China is an indispensable investor in the Arctic.

China respects the rule of law and sovereignty of other Arctic states.

The future of the region depends on the increased cooperation between Arctic and non-Arctic states.

There is a need to create a more diversified system of Arctic governance.

Need to seize the historic opportunity to develop Arctic.

China has long since been involved in Arctic affairs.

China is a Near Arctic state and important stakeholder in the region.

The Arctic is a 'trans-regional' issue which impacts non-Arctic states and the entire future of mankind.

Chinese Arctic development respects and will benefit the Indigenous population.





## REGION

2 NARRATIVES



The Arctic is a 'trans-regional' issue which impacts non-Arctic states and the entire future of mankind.

Need to seize the historic opportunity to develop Arctic.

## SELF

5 NARRATIVES



China respects the rule of law and sovereignty of other Arctic states.

China is a Near Arctic state and important stakeholder in the region.

China's economic activity in the Arctic is environmentally conscious.

China has long since been involved in Arctic affairs.

China is an indispensable investor in the Arctic.

## OTHER

3 NARRATIVES



The future of the region depends on the increased cooperation between Arctic and non-Arctic states.

Chinese Arctic development respects and will benefit the Indigenous population.

There is a need to create a more diversified system of Arctic governance.

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