



Re-navigating the Geopolitical Pivot: China in the Arctic-Heartland

Aneesa Aslam and Ayesha Shaikh

Global Affairs Review, Vol. 2, No. 2

Fall/Winter 2021

Re-navigating the Geopolitical Pivot: China in the Arctic-Heartland

Aneesa Aslam and Ayesha Shaikh

To cite this article: Aneesa Aslam and Ayesha Shaikh, *Re-navigating the Geopolitical Pivot: China in the Arctic-Heartland*, Global Affairs Review, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2021.

doi: 10.51330/gar.0020223

ISSN (online): 2660-6968

Global Affairs Review Website: <https://www.globalaffairreview.org/>

Published online: December 28th, 2021

Abstract: Halford J. Mackinder cautioned the world that if a great industrial power manages to rule over the Heartland, it will govern the world. The 21st century is marked by the resurgence of his classical geopolitical thought. Global warming has rendered the Arctic navigable, altering the dynamics of the Heartland and world organisms at large, but now the caution comes from the Arctic. Mackinder's assertion that China, as a great industrial power, has developed its Arctic strategy for a Polar Silk Road to pursue its determined interests in the Arctic-Heartland. To further strengthen its position in the region, it has forged a cooperative alliance with Russia, one of the biggest Arctic states. Chinese interest in the region and the Strategic Russo-Chinese Alliance to develop the Polar Silk Road along the Northern Sea Route is a matter of grave concern for the world at large: for whoever rules over the Heartland, governs the world.

*"China will participate in the pragmatic cooperation on the Arctic and the building of a Polar Silk Road"*¹

It was on the 6th of March, 2021, that China's 14th five-year plan (2021-2025) declared China's strategy to advance in the Arctic through what is usually referred to as the Polar Silk Road. History holds records of the deadliest of the territorial quests through the age of imperialism and the great wars, yet, it has been almost a century and already these events have been delegated to the remote past. Classical geopolitics, as defined by Phil Kelly, is the impact of certain features of geography upon the foreign policy and actions of states.² Halford J. Mackinder marked a new turn in the age of geopolitics when he established the idea of 'world organism.' In the Classical Age, dynasties and empires were fluid in nature; they had the urge to expand over as much land as was available for them. Mackinder determined in 1904 that as the whole landmass of the world has been explored, discovered, and owned by empires and states, so now the geopolitics is confined within this determined 'world-organism.' He stated that in the 'world-organism,' if there is a sudden surge in power and expansion somewhere at the strongest end, it will always be at the expense of the weaker end.³ Therefore, classical discovery is now replaced by conquest. Mackinder's line of thought is rendered ambiguous as the Arctic region opens up for navigation. A stretch of decency in between was not because territorial quest and expansion were some ancient traits of the Dark Ages, but because states did not have any

¹ "China Steps up Plans for Arctic Foray Raising Fears of Military Build-Up," The Economic Times, March 6, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-steps-up-plans-for-arctic-foray-raising-fears-of-military-build-up/articleshow/81363674.cms?from=mdr>.

² Phil Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics: A New Analytical Model* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

³ Halford John Mackinder, *Geographical Pivot of History* (Cosimo Classics, 2020): 438-439.

territory to discover, as they had stretched their boundaries to their limits of control. Heartland Theory is one of the classical theories of geopolitics as it provides level-headed justification for Arctic politics, yet with some essential modifications as the geographical and political changes demand.

Geographically, drastic climate shifts have rendered the Arctic navigable and it is no longer a geographical barrier as it has been in the past, but rather a region that offers a huge advantage to whoever manages to exploit it at the right time.⁴ Secondly, the Arctic is going to play a major role in deciding the fate of changing power dynamics. China was once a struggling power that has now emerged to an extent that alarms the world. Now, China is looking forward to expanding in every direction that is manageable and advantageous; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is known to be the Chinese grand strategy that supports China's expansionist ambitions. Mackinder also warned the world that China could one day threaten the balance of the world by organizing Eurasian resources and building an unbeatable sea power. As for today, the Polar Silk Route of China as a part of its BRI can be considered as a serious caution. Russian cooperation, as well as the BRI and China's presence in the Indian Ocean and Africa, are evidence of its prescient power.⁵

The world is in a state of multipolar transition. If the United States of America (US) is still the great power, it is certainly not the only one. One of the biggest challenges that confronts the US comes from the East, more specifically a rising China. Considering the contemporary dynamics of Arctic geopolitics, many questions regarding the political and strategic climate of

⁴ Carlos M. Duarte et al., "Abrupt Climate Change in the Arctic," *Nature Climate Change* 2, no. 2 (January 27, 2012): pp. 60–62, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate1386>.

⁵ Francis P. Sempa, "China and the World-Island," – *The Diplomat* (for *The Diplomat*, January 26, 2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/china-and-the-world-island/>.

the Arctic and Chinese ambitions in the region occupy the space of thought. This research revolves around the following questions; What modifications can Heartland Theory accommodate in the wake of the melting Arctic Pole? Why is China tilted towards the Arctic? What are China's interests in the Arctic region and how is it playing upon the available policy and strategy tools? How can the convergence of interests between Russia and China in the Arctic raise security concerns for the Arctic states? The changing climate has shifted the pivot towards the Arctic region and Revisionist China, which, being dissatisfied with the current world order, is trying to dominate the Heartland through economics and building a strategic alliance with Russia for the Polar Silk Road. Following Mackinder's advice for an orderly world, the Arctic states should work to balance the power relations in the Arctic to prevent China from dominating the Heartland.

Geographical Pivot of History

In 1904, Halford J. Mackinder's article "The Geographical Pivot of History" presented the Heartland Theory. Mackinder, as a British geographer, divided the world into World Island and Outer crescent. The World Island incorporated Asia, Africa, and Europe, whereas the Outer crescent comprises the rest of the world. Furthermore, inside the World Island, he determined the central area as the pivot or the Heartland. As per Mackinder's considerations, Eurasia used to be the Heartland or the pivot of the World Island. He proposed that if any one state manages to control the Heartland, it will have the opportunity to control the World Island, and if a state has control over the World Island, it will have the power to master the rest of the world.⁶

⁶ Halford John Mackinder, 25.

In order to understand Mackinder's theory, one must understand the meaning and the significance of Heartland or Geographical Pivot. Mackinder determined Eurasia to be the pivot or the Heartland as it was the central point of the determined World Island. However, the significance of the region lay in the fact that it contained all of the essential resources required by a state to grow militarily and expand around the world. Moreover, it was a low-land area with no geographical barriers. Mackinder determined that if any state manages to build railway lines through the land, it will be able to approach the rest of the World Island more efficiently. Mackinder considered this whole landmass as the 'world-organism,' that was completely discovered and connected. He could not foresee at the time the technological advancements that the future would hold, nor did he know that the Arctic would be open to navigation.

Despite the drastic shifts in geography, technology, and power dynamics; certain points of relevance can still be drawn from the Heartland Theory to explain contemporary geopolitical trends. Firstly, Mackinder predicted great-power competition in the pivot area, for whoever rules the Heartland rules the world. Therefore, in contemporary geopolitics, the shift of great-power competition towards the Arctic determines that the Geopolitical Pivot has been re-navigated. The research aims at exploring the significance of the new geopolitical pivot; to explain why it is determined to be the pivot it will be.

Secondly, Mackinder determined two major trends about power competition. On the one hand, he determined that as the 'world-organism' is a closed geopolitical unit, the rise and fall of power is confined to this unit. Therefore, the gain of one power will be at the expense of another. Hence, states are concerned about the rise and fall of power of other states. Moreover, to further elaborate this point he explained that the expansionist tendencies in the states are less out of the

urge to expand and more out of the fear of aggrandizement of other states. He explained that Europe in the 19th century expanded out of fear of the Asian Empire. Likewise, in contemporary geopolitics Chinese expansion towards the Arctic as a “near-Arctic state” can be analyzed as a result of the fear of aggrandizement from other states. This research will take into account nascent geopolitical trends in the light of classical geopolitical parameters.

The Arctic Region: The Nascent Geopolitical Axis

The Arctic, a region of the world that has been covered with ice and permafrost for centuries, is now becoming a hotspot for militarization and cooperation for major world powers. The region is being surrounded by the Arctic states while attracting others due to its vast resources. The Arctic seems to be the next geographical pivot of the world, referring to the region that is central or detrimental to geopolitical activity. The dynamics of Mackinder’s Heartland will be altered as the Arctic opens up to navigation and the Heartland will no longer be the sole hub of great-power competition; therefore, contemporary geopolitics needs to re-navigate the Pivot. As the Arctic is attracting the great-game or the great-power competition, it is referred to as the nascent geopolitical pivot. The rising temperature due to climate change can cause the Arctic ice to melt more rapidly, which will expose the undiscovered resources of the Arctic, and increase the prospects for developments that will bring economic and strategic advantage to the competing states. Scientists have predicted that the Arctic will be ice-free by the middle of the 21st century.⁷ The following research will explain the characteristics of this nascent geopolitical pivot and why it is significant for states to compete for the region. This paper will

⁷ “Simulations Suggest Ice-Free Arctic Summers by 2050,” ESA Climate Office, 2020, <https://climate.esa.int/en/projects/sea-ice/news-and-events/news/simulations-suggest-ice-free-arctic-summers-2050/>.

focus on Chinese aims and objectives in the region, as well as its policy framework on the ground.

Whoever Rules the Heartland, Governs the World

Back in 1904, when Halford J. Mackinder came up with the Heartland Theory, he identified the pivot of geography to be located in the Heartland. He divided the world into three concentric parts: the Heartland, World Island, and Outer crescent. The theory proposed that owing to its significant characteristics, the Heartland is the pivot of geography. If any land power manages to establish rule over this pivot, it will have both the access and ability to rule over the World Islands. Whoever manages to rule over the World Islands incorporating Asia, Africa, and Europe, will ultimately rule over the world.⁸ Owing to two major flips in the geopolitical dynamics, the Heartland Theory needs to be re-navigated. Firstly, the Arctic is accessible due to drastic climate change, secondly, states like China have the capacity to make it to the region. This major shift raises a question mark over Mackinder's advocacy; he proposed the theory in a bid to negate the preexisting sea-power theories and maintained that it will be a land power that will rule over the world, but a navigable Arctic will make it possible for a naval power to access the Heartland promptly.

Shortly after the development of the Heartland Theory, Nicholas J. Spykman, an American political scientist challenged Mackinder with his Rim Land Theory. Spykman proposed that a strong naval power like Great Britain at that time, will encroach upon the Heartland and will thus rule over the world. In contemporary geopolitics, the economy is one of the most significant factors in determining power, with access to trade routes and resources

⁸ Torbjorn L. Knutsen, "Halford J. Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Heartland Thesis," *The International History Review* 36, no. 5 (July 29, 2014): pp. 835–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2014.941904>.

making it as crucial for a state as militarization. In the context of the Arctic, it is the navigable Northern Sea-Route and not the land route that is significant. Therefore, China as the second largest economy in the world, with access to the Northern Sea Route, has the potential to access the Heartland.

Re-navigating the Heartland

In 1942, revising the geographical pivot in his article “Round World and Writing of Peace,” Mackinder redefined Central Asia to be the Pivot and no longer Eurasia. He ascertained certain characteristics of what he called the Heartland. The Heartland, in his terms, was a low land area with no internal barriers and inaccessible to naval powers provided by the Arctic Barrier. Heartland had rivers flowing towards the Arctic, as the Arctic used to be the frozen pole; hence, it was not possible for any naval power to attack the Heartland from there as it was not navigable at that time. Therefore, Eurasia as the Heartland was known to be the greatest natural fortress. Mackinder cautioned that if any industrial power takes hold of the Heartland, and develops a railway network through it, the industrial power will be successful in establishing its empire in the region.⁹ Furthermore, the empire thus established will have a dual advantage. Firstly, it will have access to the energy and resources of the region without any serious security threat of external intervention due to the geographical barriers. Secondly, it will be able to attack the coastal states of the Rim Land and expand further to then rule over the rest of the world. The limitation that Mackinder put to this was that the land power taking hold of the Heartland must be free from the threat of another land power and must be solely holding the Heartland. Mackinder warned against any state’s encroachment of the Heartland, and determined the

⁹ Stefan Bouzarovski, Broto Vanesa Castán, and Martin J. Pasqualetti, *The Routledge Research Companion to Energy Geographies*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2017).

condition to limit this encroachment to be the balancing of power of rising states. By balancing the power, no one state grows enough to take hold of the Heartland all by itself.

The dynamics of the 21st century are not the same, but the caution is still there. Mackinder's thoughts justify the current situation, but with some essential modifications. Firstly, now that the Arctic is open to navigation the Heartland is no more protected geographically; now the rivers flowing towards the Arctic are not a one-way channel and any state that can access the Arctic can also access the Heartland. A significant amount of scholarship has criticized the classical dimension of geopolitics in the wake of technological advancement. Scholars claim that airplanes and missiles have rendered geographical barriers insignificant. Considering the amount of natural resources buried beneath layers of Arctic ice and the trade route that it will provide to connect the compact political units of the World Island, its geostrategic significance cannot be denied. If a state gets hold of these reserves and has access to Arctic trade routes, it will have an edge over other states to break past the multi-polarity.

According to the US Geological Survey, the Arctic is the hub of natural reserves as it contains 13% of undiscovered global oil reserves and about 30% of undiscovered natural resources. Minerals such as nickel tungsten, cobalt, diamonds, and palladium are already being extracted in the Arctic region. The existence of oil and gas provides economic and energy security to states.¹⁰ Apart from economics, this region also has a geostrategic and geopolitical significance for states. The geographical location of the Arctic region provides the shortest trade route between the continents of America, Asia, and Europe. The melting of the Arctic ice creates

¹⁰ “China and Its Arctic Trajectories: The Arctic Institute’s China Series Report 2020,” The Arctic Institute, December 29, 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-arctic-trajectories-the-arctic-institutes-china-series-report-2020/>.

shorter sea lanes that will provide alternatives to the existing trading routes. This opening up of new corridors for states to use becomes an influential aspect in world politics.¹¹

Considering the political dimension, China has made its space in the global arena as a challenger and a competitor of the current world order. Likewise in the Arctic, China has stakes in the governance of the Arctic. Chinese interests, and the strategies that they have adopted to pursue those interests, are a matter of grave concern considering Mackinder's claim that whoever rules the Arctic, governs the Heartland; whoever rules the Heartland, will govern the World Island, and whoever rules the World Islands governs the world.¹²

China – The Near Arctic State's Interest in the Arctic Region

The 21st century has witnessed two significant changes in international affairs. First is the changing geopolitical situation of the Arctic and second is the rise of China. China has not only emerged as the second-largest economy in the world, but is also challenging the United States of America in almost all areas. One of the areas in which China has expanded its interests is in the Arctic region. China considers the Arctic as a global commons and respects the rights of the Eight Arctic States: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, and the United States. It also claims itself as a “Near Arctic State,”¹³ residing in proximity to the Arctic Circle, that should have the right of fishing, navigation, research, exploration, and exploitation of the natural resources of the Arctic region under the United Nations Convention on

¹¹ Lassi Heininen and Heather Exner-Pirot, “Conclusion: The Search for a New Security Paradigm Begins in the Arctic,” in *Climate Change and Arctic Security: Searching for a Paradigm Shift* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

¹² Stephen Blank and Younkyoo Kim, “The Arctic and New Security Challenges in Asia,” *Pacific Focus* 28, no. 3 (December 2013): pp. 319-342, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12017>.

¹³ “Arctic States,” Arctic Council, accessed December 18, 2021, <https://arctic-council.org/about/states/>.

Law of Seas (UNCLOS) and the Spitsbergen Treaty.¹⁴ In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping decided to incorporate the Arctic into the Belt and Road Initiative. After a joint declaration with Vladimir Putin, China incorporated the development of the Northeast Passage (NEP) to the Polar Silk Road.¹⁵ Therefore, the claim that whoever controls the Arctic route will control the world economy has its roots in factual evidence.

Economy

China, as the fastest growing economy in the world, demands huge energy and is looking for oil imports.¹⁶ The Arctic provides the best opportunity to fulfill its energy demands. Further, this region is full of vast resources. China has expanded its interests in these resources and supply of these commodities for its rapidly growing economy. That is why China is interested in the research, infrastructure, and development projects of the Arctic. Moreover, China has a great appetite for other natural resources such as gold, diamond, nickel, and copper. Greenland, as a part of the Arctic, has rare earth deposits and China is interested in these deposits. China has sought to establish an iron ore mine in Greenland that would provide a proxy voice in Arctic affairs, but Greenland refused to accept the mine because the Chinese company failed to make the agreed guarantee payment.¹⁷

¹⁴ China sent two legal documents to legitimize its rights in the Arctic. One is the UNCLOS and the other is the Spitsbergen Treaty. United Nations Conventions on the Law of Sea is an international agreement that was signed in 1982 that provides an international legal framework for marine and maritime activities. The UNCLOS has defined the contiguous zone, continental shelves zone, exclusive economic zones and high seas for the states where they can assert their territorial rights. China signed the Spitsbergen Treaty in 1925, but did not rediscover its signatory status until the 1990s. The treaty stipulates that all the parties to the treaty enjoy equal, non-discriminatory rights to entry, fishing, mining, and trade as long as they are in accordance with Norwegian law.

¹⁵ Mariia Kobzeva, "Strategic Partnership Setting for Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Shipping," *The Polar Journal* 10, no. 2 (August 28, 2020): pp. 334-352, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2020.1810956>.

¹⁶ Sanna Kopra, "China's Arctic Interests," Research Gate (University of Lapland, 2013), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269109588_China.

¹⁷ "China's Strategic Arctic Interests," *Strategic Comments* 20, no. 2 (February 7, 2014): i-ii, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2014.914777>.

Scientific Research

China is also interested in the research of the Arctic region along with many other countries such as Germany, Italy, and India. Since the 1990s, China has sent scientists to the Arctic to collect data and gain experience. Meanwhile, the Chinese have built the Xue Long, an ice breaking research vessel, and the Chinese Arctic scientific research station named 'Yellow River Station' was established in 2004. China has an increasing interest in the Arctic region in order to gain a better understanding of climate change in the Arctic and how they can benefit from the situation.

Shipping

The melting of the Arctic ice provides three alternative shipping routes: the Northeast Passage (NEP) around Eurasia, the Northwest Passage (NWP) around North America, and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) also called the Central Arctic route that are important for the Chinese economy. The Northern Sea Route, provides the safest and shortest trade route to Europe and overcomes its 'Malacca Dilemma.'¹⁸ As China is the largest oil importing country, it is highly dependent on foreign oil to satisfy its growing energy needs. This dependence on foreign oil to run the country's economy created what is called the "Malacca Dilemma," a term coined by Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2003. It created a dilemma because approximately 80% of China's imported oil has to pass through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow passageway between Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula. Singapore, a natural ally of the US that frequently participates in US naval drills, is located at the eastern mouth of the Strait's opening. Consequently, the Strait of Malacca becomes a strategic chokepoint, and in case of conflict the

¹⁸ Old Writer, "The Malacca Dilemma: A Hindrance to Chinese Ambitions in the 21st Century," Berkeley Political Review, August 26, 2019, <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2019/08/26/the-malacca-dilemma-a-hindrance-to-chinese-ambitions-in-the-21st-century/>.

rival country can easily block the Malacca Strait. So, China is in a situation where if the Malacca strait were to be blocked, it will drastically affect the Chinese growing economy. In order to overcome this dilemma, having access to the Arctic will provide secure sea lanes. Further, it could be used to increase energy and infrastructure transportation by linking it to the BRI.

International Status

As the new geographical pivot is shifted towards the Arctic, China has become a permanent observer on the Arctic Council in order to have more influence over the governance and politics of the region. This observer status has a high symbolic value as it not only legitimizes China as a major stakeholder in the Arctic, but also provides China an opportunity to influence Arctic policies such as a polar code for shipping.¹⁹

Although China being a near-Arctic state is not a direct stakeholder, it is demonstrating active participation and cooperation to expand its peaceful development in the Arctic region as well. As the coastal states encircling the Arctic have exclusive economic rights over the region, Beijing has constructed the concept of 'Near Arctic States' as it considers itself to be located near the region and views the Central Arctic Ocean as a global commons to exert its influential role in the unexplored and resource-rich Arctic region and emerge as a global power.²⁰

China Playing the Diplomatic Card in the Region

To pursue its interests, China has played its diplomatic cards very well. It developed bilateral relations with Russia, Iceland, and Denmark, along with the working groups of the Arctic Council. The Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project is the first overseas

¹⁹ Njord Wegge, "China in the Arctic: Interests, Actions and Challenges," *Nordlit*, no. 32 (July 25, 2014): p. 83, <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.3072>.

²⁰ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "China and Arctic Energy: Drivers and Limitations," *The Polar Journal* 6, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): pp. 243-258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2016.1241486>.

mega-project after the BRI, marking it as China's first and largest investment project in Russia. This integrated project covers oil and gas exploration and development along with natural gas processing, liquefaction, and shipping. China, being the strategic partner of Russia, is investing a significant amount in the LNG project.²¹ Additionally, Chinese workers are also involved in the infrastructure and drilling activities at Yamal. Considering China's energy exploration and navigational interests, they are providing logistical support such as the construction of ports and other infrastructure. Beijing along with Russia, aspires to build a water port in the city of Arkhangelsk, Russia, that will likely be part of the Polar Silk Road, which is part of China's BRI project to foster global trade.²²

To achieve its desired outcomes, China has moved beyond Russia to build relations with Canada, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, and Norway. Both Iceland and China are cooperating in the fisheries and research sectors and working jointly on a variety of projects in the Arctic. Apart from the mineral deposits, Greenland and Chinese companies are cooperating in telecommunications to connect the telecommunication lines of Greenland with Canada and Iceland. President Xi Jinping also visited Alaska to discuss trade related issues with the US and local communities. Furthermore, Chinese companies entered into an agreement with Alaska to invest in the LNG project, but the diplomatic card has not played well due to rising tension between the United States and China.

Chinese Strategy on the Ground - The Polar Silk Road

²¹ Feng Anquan, "Sino-Russian Arctic Energy Cooperation – a Case Study of Yamal LNG Project," *Creative Economy* 15, no. 7 (2021): pp. 3079–90, <https://doi.org/10.18334/ce.15.7.112398>.

²² Mia M. Bennett, "How China Sees the Arctic: Reading between Extra-regional and Intraregional Narratives," *Geopolitics* 20, no. 3 (April 15, 2015): pp. 645–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1017757>.

China's BRI strategy signifies the importance of the Arctic as, “whoever has control over the Arctic route will control the new passage of world economics and international strategies.”²³ In January 2018, China issued a white paper entitled “China Arctic Policy,” in which China documented its interests in the Arctic and highlighted its policy position in the Arctic affairs. The BRI is considered to be China's grand strategy, with the Polar Silk Road as an offshoot and China's strategic foothold in the Arctic.²⁴ The Polar Silk Road passes through the Northern Sea Route, as claimed by Russia. It connects China with Europe and is a preferable alternative to the existing routes as it reduces the distance by 40%, approximately 2,700 nautical miles and reduces travel times by as much as two weeks.²⁵

The strategic importance of the Polar Silk Road rests upon the fact that it will not only provide an escape to China from the existing threat of blockade from the US at the Strait of Malacca or Suez Canal, but it will also provide China a strategic edge for maintaining the hold over the less costly and quickest routes. It will also relatively weaken the strategic primacy of the US as there will be at least one challenger to the existing geopolitical status quo. Therefore, whoever has control over the Arctic will control the international strategies.

At the moment there are many concerns over the success and fortune of this strategy, for the Arctic is only open to navigation for a few months of the year and frozen for the rest of the time, therefore these benefits are limited to that period. Yet, it was only a few decades ago that states could never have imagined the Arctic being open to this degree of access. If global

²³ “Belt and Road Initiative,” Belt and Road Initiative, 2013, <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>.

²⁴ Gang Chen, “China’s Emerging Arctic Strategy,” *The Polar Journal* 2, no. 2 (December 2012): pp. 358–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2012.735039>.

²⁵ Henry Tillman, Jian Yang, and Egill Thor Nielsson, “The Polar Silk Road: China’s New Frontier of International Cooperation,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 04, no. 03 (January 2018): pp. 345–62, [10.1142/S2377740018500215](https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500215).

warming continues to increase at the current rate, it will soon turn the Arctic into a more reliable maritime route. Furthermore, the production cost of icebreakers is also very high, approximately 1 billion dollars per vessel. If this cost is added to the opportunity cost of trade through the Arctic, it is even more expensive than the existing routes. Finally, sovereignty claims of the Arctic states and the legal requirements can make the situation critical and whoever manages to establish legitimate access to the region will have an edge.²⁶ Therefore, China has based its argument upon the legal standing of UNCLOS and the Spitsbergen Treaty, it acknowledges the sovereign claims of Arctic states and establishes its stance based upon the common good of humankind and cooperation for the benefit of all. Blueprints of China's strategy are in line with Mackinder's caution regarding the industrial power who manages to establish infrastructure and travel routes through the Heartland will govern the world.

Russia - Gateway to the North

In a realist world, there are no permanent friends or foes, only permanent interests. Considering the geographical and strategic advantage that Russia holds over the region, the relationship of the Arctic states with Russia will determine their standing in the region. For any state to rule over the Arctic, it requires either to completely conquer Russia or to forge cooperative ties with Russia. It is not possible, without major bloodshed, to conquer Russia or to politically deprive it of the hold it has in the Arctic, as Russia is one of the members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Thus, it has the power of veto against unwanted agendas, and consequently, cooperative diplomacy is the only feasible option. Moreover, apart from the sovereignty claims that Russia has in the Arctic, it also has the most experienced,

²⁶ Mariia Kobzeva, "China's Arctic Policy: Present and Future," *The Polar Journal* 9, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): pp. 94–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2019.1618558>.

trained, and equipped services in the Polar region. Russia is the only state that has 40 icebreakers, most of which are heavily armed, whereas the US only has two icebreakers, but the Arctic Icebreaker Healy is currently not operational as it suffered an electrical fire during a mission. On the other hand, China has two operational ice breakers.²⁷ Therefore, whoever needs to rule over the Arctic needs to garner Russian support.

China and Russia are now strategic partners in the Arctic. They both have complementary interests in the Arctic and work as a force of influence on each other to boost benefits for the other.²⁸ Both these countries have been cooperating impressively in the areas of defense, cyberspace, and other technology, and now share the same views about the international arena of power politics.²⁹ The Sino-Russian strategic partnership is a strategic calculus of both sides because both these countries face a backlash in international relations. China's image has been questioned due to growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and human rights violations, while Russia has been sanctioned by the West due to the annexation of Crimea. As a result, both countries need to cooperate on matters that bring absolute gains for them.³⁰

There is no doubt Russia is a gateway for China's successful ventures in the Arctic. As there is nothing free in international politics, Russia wanted to exploit the resources of the Arctic but it could not do so alone. Being sanctioned by the West, Russia would not be able to develop technology or receive help from European countries. Thus, it has had to rely on China for its

²⁷ James Di Pane, "U.S. Needs Icebreakers to Keep up with China and Russia in Arctic," The Heritage Foundation, January 18, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/us-needs-icebreakers-keep-china-and-russia-arctic>.

²⁸ Andreas Østhagen, "High North, Low Politics—Maritime Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 7 (May, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.17585/arctic.v7.255>.

²⁹ Lincoln E. Flake, "Russia and China in the Arctic: A Team of Rivals," *Strategic Analysis* 37, no. 6 (November, 2013): pp. 681–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2013.847048>.

³⁰ "Fighter Sale Talks: New Era for Sino-Russian Cooperation?," *Strategic Comments* 20, no. 10 (November 26, 2014): p. vii–viii, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2014.1019241>.

investment and capital. The Arctic-related projects have to rely heavily on Chinese technology and investment such as the Yamal LNG project. On the other hand, good relations with Russia act as insurance to China's Arctic Policy. Without having friendly relations with Moscow, China's Polar Silk Road ambitions would remain only a dream. As the pivot has shifted towards the Arctic, China has also expanded its interests in the region. Shipping routes hold a significant position in the China Arctic Policy of 2020. The melting of the Arctic ice opens up three shipping routes that affect trade to a larger extent: the North-East Passage connects East Asia to Europe on the Russian coastline, the Northwest Passage passes through the North American Arctic, and the Northern Sea Route.³¹ China, being the revisionist power, does not have any alternative other than having a partnership with Russia. To access the European market and Arctic shares, China has to acknowledge all of the territorial claims of the Arctic Ocean.³²

The China Arctic Policy is based on three principles: respect, cooperation, and sustainability. Now the Arctic has officially become part of the BRI and China is keen to use Russia as a gateway to the Northeast Passage. The NEP has a strategic advantage for China. Firstly, it would provide the shortest routes to the European market. Secondly, this route is more strategically significant for China because it provides energy security as the energy from Asia and the Persian Gulf have to pass through the Strait of Malacca, which is being dominated by the United States. Therefore, the Northeast Passage provides an alternative to the Malacca Dilemma. Moreover, Russia considers the Northeast Passage as being within its internal waters, whereas

³¹ Ju.V. Zvorykina and K.S. Teteryatnikov, "The Northern Sea Route as a Tool of Arctic Development," *Russian Economic Journal*, no. 4 (August 2019): pp. 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.33983/0130-9757-2019-4-21-44>.

³² Kristina M Mikhaylichenko, "The Project «Ice Silk Road» within the Framework of the Initiative «One Belt and One Road» as the Realization of the Interests of Russia and China in the Arctic Region," *RUDN Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 2 (December 15, 2019): pp. 333-345, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2019-21-2-333-345>.

the US considers the Northwestern Passage as an international route. Thus, China does not challenge Russian jurisdiction over the NEP.³³ Further, the Arctic environment makes China apprehensive, so a strategic partnership with Russia provides aid in building polar ships and marine technology. The strong Sino-Russian partnership would mean a bright future for the Polar Silk Road.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind Mackinder's caution, the contemporary Russo-Chinese Alliance and encroachment of the Arctic through the Polar Silk Road or the Northern Sea Route is as much of a challenge for the world as the Indo-Pacific. The shift of the geopolitical pivot follows Mackinder's prediction: industrial powers are building infrastructure through the Heartland and they have access to the resources of the region. Apart from the resurgence of classical geopolitics, two developments did not follow traditional methods. Firstly, unlike Mackinder's claim of a land foothold, there is a naval encroachment and more so in terms of trade and economic benefit rather than a military quest. Secondly, no single industrial power can take hold of the region. Even Russia, which has been building plans for years, could not bring them to fruition due to the lack of economic resources. While China has enough economic resources, it still needs Russian support to lay its legitimate foothold on the Arctic land. Therefore, the essential balance of power that Mackinder suggested to keep this region out of the influence of challengers is nowhere to be found. The only way out of this dilemma is for the Arctic states to balance their power against the emerging alliance of challengers, using the same diplomatic and multilateral tools as used by China to maintain the competition on legal grounds. What can serve

³³ Liu Nengye, "China-Russia Trouble on the Arctic Silk Road?," – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, July 22, 2017), <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-russia-trouble-on-the-arctic-silk-road/>.

as the biggest challenge against this balance of power are the economic cards that China has played. The Arctic states and residents of the region consider the Chinese support and development to be of mutual interest for the common good. Hence, the Arctic Council needs to come up with its own version of a multilateral economic development plan in the region, along with investment in these sectors to overcome Chinese soft-power influence over the Heartland; for whoever rules over the Heartland, governs the world.

Bibliography

- Anquan, Feng. "Sino-Russian Arctic Energy Cooperation – A Case Study of Yamal LNG Project." *Creative Economy* 15, no. 7 (2021): 3079–90. <https://doi.org/10.18334/ce.15.7.112398>.
- Bennett, Mia M. "How China Sees the Arctic: Reading between Extra-regional and Intra-regional Narratives." *Geopolitics* 20, no. 3 (April 15, 2015): 645–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1017757>
- Blank, Stephen, and Younkyoo Kim. "The Arctic and New Security Challenges in Asia." *Pacific Focus* 28, no. 3 (December 2013): 319–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12017>.
- Bouzarovski, Stefan, Broto Vanesa Castán, and Martin J Pasqualetti. *The Routledge Research Companion to Energy Geographies*. 1st ed. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.
- Chen, Gang. "China's Emerging Arctic Strategy." *The Polar Journal* 2, no. 2 (December 2012): 358–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2012.735039>.
- "China and Its Arctic Trajectories: The Arctic Institute's China Series Report 2020." The Arctic Institute, December 29, 2020. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-arctic-trajectories-the-arctic-institutes-china-series-report-2020/>.
- "China Steps up Plans for Arctic Foray Raising Fears of Military Build-Up." The Economic Times, March 6, 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-steps-up-plans-for-arctic-foray-raising-fears-of-military-build-up/articleshow/81363674.cms?from=mdr>.
- "China's Strategic Arctic Interests." *Strategic Comments* 20, no. 2 (February 7, 2014): i–ii. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2014.914777>.
- Duarte, Carlos M., Timothy M. Lenton, Peter Wadhams, and Paul Wassmann. "Abrupt Climate Change in the Arctic." *Nature Climate Change* 2, no. 2 (2012): 60–62. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate1386>.
- "Fighter Sale Talks: New Era for Sino-Russian Cooperation?" *Strategic Comments* 20, no. 10 (November 26, 2014): vii–viii. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2014.1019241>.
- Flake, Lincoln E. "Russia and China in the Arctic: A Team of Rivals." *Strategic Analysis* 37, no. 6 (November, 2013): 681–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2013.847048>.

Heininen, Lassi, and Heather Exner-Pirot. “Conclusion: The Search for a New Security Paradigm Begins in the Arctic.” Essay. In *Climate Change and Arctic Security: Searching for a Paradigm Shift*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Di Pane, James. “U.S. Needs Icebreakers to Keep up with China and Russia in Arctic.” The Heritage Foundation, January 18, 2021.
<https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/us-needs-icebreakers-keep-china-and-russia-arctic>.

Kelly, Phil. *Classical Geopolitics: A New Analytical Model*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016.

Knutsen, Torbjorn L. “Halford J. Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Heartland Thesis.” *The International History Review* 36, no. 5 (July 29, 2014): 835–57.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2014.941904>.

Kobzeva Mariia. “China’s Arctic Policy: Present and Future.” *The Polar Journal* 9, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 94–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2019.1618558>.

Kobzeva, Mariia. “Strategic Partnership Setting for Sino-Russian Cooperation in Arctic Shipping.” *The Polar Journal* 10, no. 2 (August 28, 2020): 334–52.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2020.1810956>.

Liu Nengye, “China-Russia Trouble on the Arctic Silk Road?,” – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, July 22, 2017),
<https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-russia-trouble-on-the-arctic-silk-road/>.

Mackinder, Halford John. *Geographical Pivot of History*. Cosimo Classics, 2020.

Mikhaylichenko, Kristina M. “The Project «Ice Silk Road» within the Framework of the Initiative «One Belt and One Road» as the Realization of the Interests of Russia and China in the Arctic Region.” *RUDN Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 2 (December 15, 2019): 333–45. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2019-21-2-333-345>.

Østhagen, Andreas. “High North, Low Politics—Maritime Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic.” *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 7 (May 12, 2016).
<https://doi.org/10.17585/arctic.v7.255>.

Sempa, Francis P. “China and the World-Island.” – The Diplomat. for The Diplomat, January 26, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/china-and-the-world-island/>.

“Simulations Suggest Ice-Free Arctic Summers by 2050.” ESA Climate Office, 2020.
<https://climate.esa.int/en/projects/sea-ice/news-and-events/news/simulations-suggest-ice-free-arctic-summers-2050/>.

- Tillman, Henry, Nielsson Egill Thor, and Jian Yang. "The Polar Silk Road: China's New Frontier of International Cooperation." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 04, no. 03 (January 2018): 345–62. [10.1142/S2377740018500215](https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500215).
- Wegge, Njord. "China in the Arctic: Interests, Actions and Challenges." *Nordlit*, no. 32 (July 25, 2014): 83. <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.3072>.
- Weidacher Hsiung, Christopher. "China and Arctic Energy: Drivers and Limitations." *The Polar Journal* 6, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 243–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2016.1241486>.
- Writer, Old. "The Malacca Dilemma: A Hindrance to Chinese Ambitions in the 21st Century." Berkeley Political Review, August 26, 2019. <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2019/08/26/the-malacca-dilemma-a-hindrance-to-chinese-ambitions-in-the-21st-century/>.
- Zvorykina, Ju.V., and K.S. Teteryatnikov. "The Northern Sea Route as a Tool of Arctic Development." *Russian Economic Journal*, no. 4 (August 2019): 21–44. <https://doi.org/10.33983/0130-9757-2019-4-21-44>.