



# Facing Up to China's Military Interests in the Arctic

by Anne-Marie Brady

Republished and edited for OE Watch in collaboration with the Jamestown Foundation, The China Brief, Vol: 19, Issue: 21, dated 10 December 2019.

For the full article, see: <https://jamestown.org/program/facing-up-to-chinas-military-interests-in-the-arctic/>

**OE Watch Commentary:** China's military ambitions in the Arctic and its growing strategic partnership with Russia have rung alarm bells in many governments. Chinese submarine-based ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) operating in the Arctic could restore China's nuclear deterrence capability. China currently operates six nuclear-powered attack submarines, four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and 50 diesel attack submarines, with more under construction. If Chinese nuclear-armed submarines were able to access the Arctic basin undetected, this would be a game-changer for the United States, the NATO states and their partners, and the wider Asia-Pacific. It would strengthen China's military dominance in Asia and bolster China's emerging position as a global military power.

Xi Jinping, the current President of China and Party Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is acutely aware of the strategic importance of both the Arctic sea route and the Arctic nuclear missile route to China's security. Moreover, because of People's Liberation Army (PLA) involvement in setting up China's first Antarctic base during the same time period, Xi is more conscious than most senior CCP leaders about the strategic importance of Antarctica also.

China's rapid economic growth and technological progress over the last two decades have enabled it to steadily expand its submarine capabilities. In 2013, China demonstrated the capacity to take its nuclear-armed submarines beyond China's near seas and into the Indian Ocean. China's nuclear submarines can now launch missiles at targets 4,600 miles away. China's land-based nuclear arsenal targeting the US already has an Arctic trajectory. In 2015, Global Times predicted that the next breakthrough for Chinese submarine forces would be accessing the Arctic Ocean.

Russia's negative attitude has always been a sticking factor in China's long-held Arctic military plans. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarines transiting to the Arctic must get through several chokepoints: (1) the straits that divide the Japanese archipelago; (2) the Bering Strait; and (3) Russia's Severnaya Zemlya and New Siberian Islands along the Northern Sea Route. Japan, Russia and the United States closely observe these chokepoints and waters. A further potential barrier to PLAN sailing in Arctic waters is that there is a scarcity of detailed charts on Arctic sailing routes and bathymetrics. Currently, Russia is reputed to have the most precise route charts, though China's polar researchers have mapped submarine and shipping routes in the Arctic for at least the last 10 years. But what if Russia not only tolerated China's submarines operating in its waters, but actively facilitated their presence there?

In May 2019, in a report for a Russian military magazine, Russian military specialist Alexander Shirokorad raised the possibility of Russia providing port support for Chinese submarines in the Arctic and proposed a joint Russia-China air and missile defense system for the Arctic. In August 2019, the Russian ambassador to China invited Beijing to invest in port and infrastructure development in the Russian Arctic in order to open up the Northern Sea Route. China's Arctic submarine plan will require nuclear icebreaker back-up and friendly ports. Russia has 10 nuclear icebreakers (the United States has none).

Russia is also an enthusiastic partner in Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes plans for a "Polar Silk Road." China incorporated the Arctic into the BRI over five years ago. Among Arctic region countries, Finland, Iceland, and Russia have signed on to the BRI; while Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have adopted a wait-and-see approach. Canada and the United States have made it clear they will not sign on.

BRI partners participate in China's Digital Silk Road, which utilizes Beidou-3, China's indigenous global navigation system. The Beidou ground station at Norway's polar scientific hub Svalbard is crucial for the global coverage of Beidou. In 2020, Beidou is expected to have accuracy on par with the US Global Positioning System (GPS). Beidou, like GPS, provides missile positioning and timing, as well as access to fleet-based broadband for unclassified and classified systems and environmental situational awareness. During a potential conflict, if the United States denied access to GPS, China and Russia could employ Beidou and the Russian GLONASS to guide strike weapons and other military operations. However, China's Arctic military interests do not depend on Russian collaboration and support.

China has quite a long-term agenda in the Arctic. In January 2018, China's State Council Information Office released a white paper on "China's Arctic Policy." This paper gave a partial account of China's Arctic strategy, highlighting scientific and economic interests in the region while eliding China's military and strategic interests. China's polar analysts divide China's Arctic interests into three core priorities:

- Security (安全, anquan): the Arctic is crucial for China's nuclear deterrence.
- Resources (资源, ziyuan): China wants access to Arctic minerals and hydrocarbons, fishing, tourism, and transport routes.
- Strategic science and technology (科技, keji): access to the Arctic is essential for the roll-out of the Beidou global navigational system, China's rival to GPS. Beidou is crucial for China's cyber warfare capabilities and C4ISR.

The PLA is an important actor in planning China's future polar strategy, and its role has long been disguised by China's polar science program. But since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has been more and more upfront about its interests and priorities in the Arctic. The PLAN is integrating recent political, economic, and strategic developments in the Arctic into its global maritime strategy. The PLAN is the world's largest navy in terms of personnel, and second only to the US Navy in fleet tonnage. In other words, China is steadily moving from being a land-based regional military power to becoming a maritime power with a global reach.

(Continued)



## Continued: Facing Up to China's Military Interests in the Arctic

The PLA's military expansionism strategy is to develop a blue water navy to protect sea lines of communication (SLOCs); develop global markets; gain privileged access to resources and/or establish colonies to secure resources; and promote maritime consciousness in the population. China's significant global shipping interests are the official justification for the PLAN's expanded maritime strategy and capabilities. As Arctic shipping, tourism, scientific expeditions, and Arctic oil and mineral exploitation become more significant for China, the PLAN may be expected to become more active in protecting Chinese interests in the Arctic.

In order to operate safely in Arctic waters, the PLAN must have: accurate bathymetric charts; the capability to monitor Arctic atmospheric conditions and utilize remote sensing to identify the thickness of Arctic ice; submarine personnel experienced in under-ice operations; submarines capable of navigating the aforementioned series of chokepoints safely and secretly; a Chinese nuclear icebreaker; and access to friendly seaports and airports in the Arctic.

The Chinese polar science program's new research vessel, XueLong 2, launched in July 2019. It was built to PLAN specifics and is equipped for bathymetric surveys. In September 2019, China launched its first polar observation satellite, BNU-1 to monitor sea ice drift and ice shelf collapse, which will improve China's remote sensing capability and help expand Arctic shipping.

In 2018, China's State Oceanic Administration announced that it was planning to build a nuclear icebreaker for polar science expeditions and to support Chinese shipping in the Arctic. (The PLAN currently has four diesel icebreakers for port operations.) It will also be built to PLA specifications and could be used to rescue Chinese submarines in the Arctic. In a time of war, State Oceanic Administration vessels are under PLA command.

Since 2003, China has followed the example of other polar great powers such as Russia and the United States in setting up short-term Arctic ice camps (冰站, bingzhan). This enables China to avoid Arctic sovereignty issues while establishing a scientific base useful for strategic science. The United States uses Arctic ice camps as temporary command centers for training submariners to operate under the ice.

China—like the United States—regards Arctic sea routes as international straits, but neither Russia nor Canada accepts this position. China favors accessing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as it crosses directly over the Arctic Ocean. China is adamant that it must be included in setting the norms for international shipping along this route. Beijing stresses its interest in the Arctic sea route as a means to position China as having legitimate interests in the Arctic region, so that it can ensure that it has a seat at the table in any future Arctic-related negotiations.

From the point of view of China and the United States, the opening of the Northern Sea Route as a regular, ice-free sea route in the summer months could turn Russian and Canadian territorial waters into acknowledged shipping straits—which would mean that international-waters rules would then apply for submarine transit.

Understanding China's Arctic military interests requires knowledge of China's interlocked strategic, economic and science activities in the Arctic. China's military interests in the Arctic are merged with commercial objectives, or the Party-State-Military-Market nexus (党政军企共建, dang-zhen-jun-qi gongjian). Some of China's Arctic science activities have both civil and military use ends. The challenge for other states in the Arctic will be working out which partnerships with China are benign or mutually beneficial, and which will serve as force multipliers for the PLA. If China succeeds in its military goals in the Arctic, then its ascendance as a new global power will be certain. **End OE Watch Commentary (Brady)**



**China's cyber policy appears to have three vectors—peace activist, espionage activist, and attack planner—that dominate China's cyber policy. Some are always hidden from view while others are demonstrated daily. Three Faces of the Cyber Dragon is divided into sections that coincide with these vectors.**

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/195610/download>