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China as Arctic Council Observer: Compliance and Compatibility

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How can we characterize China's involvement in the Arctic Council? What do China and the other observers actually do? What does China's involvement tell us about its strategic objectives in the Arctic region? How are Canada and its allies responding?¹ What is China's level of compliance with the rules of the Arctic Council? How compatible are its ambitions with the institution?

Background

Since May 2013, China has been an accredited observer to the Arctic Council, which is the preeminent regional organization of the eight Arctic states to address environmental and sustainable development issues.² By participating, the Chinese government is signalling that it has an Arctic interest and seeks to be a part of regional governance.

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² The member states are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. Six Indigenous people's organizations have permanent participant status, namely the Aleut International Association, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich'in Council International, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Saami Council.

Headlines portraying China's Arctic motivations as rooted in conflict and domination are not hard to find.³ Meanwhile, many academic studies suggest that Chinese interest in the Arctic region stems from some combination of climate change concern and interest in accessing the region's economic resources and shipping routes (see Chater, 2016). The balance between the two is difficult to discern. Ryan Dean and Whitney Lackenbauer (2020) summarize:

[China's] growing power and resource needs are drawing its attention farther from home, its interests largely outlined by the signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – a plan to link the perimeter of the world back to the Middle Kingdom through a series of infrastructure projects. Raw resources will proceed to China while products will flow out from it. Though initially centred on Eurasia, the BRI has been expanded to include Africa, Latin America, and the Arctic – the latter as a 'polar silk road.'

³ For example: "China Has Big Plans to Dominate the Arctic" (National Interest, January 22, 2021); "U.S. Needs 'Resilient' Strategy to Counter China, Russia in Arctic, Experts Say" (U.S. Naval Institute News, December 17, 2020); "China's Arctic Gambit a Concern for U.S. Air and Space Forces" (Space News, October 5, 2020)

Meanwhile, the Western relationship with Beijing is increasingly strained. The Uyghur genocide has led to calls from politicians and human rights activists for sanction and Olympic boycott. Furthermore, the allegedly retaliatory detention of Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig has been a diplomatic thorn in the side of the Trudeau government, as has Canada's arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou.

If there is Chinese ambition to "dominate" the Arctic region, the Arctic Council might be one avenue to reach that goal. On one hand, the issue of observer status in the Arctic Council is controversial, which shows that observers have consequence in the institution. It was a stumbling block in negotiations to create the institution in 1995 and 1996 (Bloom, 1999: 720). Policy-makers from countries such as Denmark, Iceland, and Norway feared that environmental observers would use the Council to criticize the whaling industry (Chater, 2016: 176).

Nevertheless, the role of observer has limits. As per rules adopted in 2013, observers can attend Arctic Council meetings, access Council documents, make statements in meetings after states and permanent participants have had their say, contribute to Council projects, and pay for parts of Council work, all at the discretion of the states. Observers cannot compel the Arctic Council to do anything that the member states do not fully support. Non-Arctic states, non-governmental organizations, and intergovernmental institutions can become observers. Observers can gain accreditation of approved by states in one of the Council's biennial declarations, and must re-declare their intention to be an observer every four years. Observers also can attend on an ad-hoc basis (Arctic Council 2013b).

By participating in the Arctic Council, China's government already has had to agree that it will

not challenge the established Arctic governance regime and will comply with international law. To become observers, each applicant "recognizes Arctic States' sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic" (Arctic Council 2013b, Annex 2, Article 6.b), "recognizes that an extensive legal framework applies to the Arctic Ocean" (Arctic Council 2013b, Annex 2, Article 6.c), and "respects the values, interests, culture and traditions of Arctic Indigenous peoples and other Arctic inhabitants" (Arctic Council 2013b, Annex 2, Article 6.d).

Despite these limits, China's observer status can fulfill strategic objectives. If China's government wanted to sponsor an Arctic Council project and brought significant resources to the table, member states might have a hard time justifying their refusal. If Beijing sponsored a project, it would have significant power to shape the project goals. A scientific assessment or policy related to shipping could help fulfill China's economic ambitions.

This policy brief presents some insight from a larger research project into Chinese ambitions in the Arctic region. The goal is to understand China's behaviour in the Arctic Council and how it exercises observer status.

Method

This brief presents a descriptive statistical analysis of key Council documents. The goal is to characterize China and other observers' Arctic Council involvement and activities, as well as uncover clues about the Arctic ambition of each. Since 2013, under the Arctic Council's rules, accredited observers have to submit a report every four years detailing the country or group's Arctic activities and Council contributions. The first group of reports came out in 2016, with a second group in 2018. These documents present a complete record

of observer activities. This research codes the activities summarized in these reports to uncover common trends.

This research proceeded in three steps. First, all observer actions were reviewed and six broad categories of activities emerged. They are:

1. Project sponsorship or leadership (namely the specific mention of leadership of a Arctic Council project) (an example might be providing leadership on an environmental assessment or action plan in the Council);
2. Active contributions to projects (namely the specific mention of providing data or input to an Arctic Council project) (an example might be contributing data from a national weather station to a Council project);
3. Informal contributions (namely mention of contributions to Council work in a broad way, such as hosting a conference to share results) (an example might be hosting a conference and allowing Arctic Council working group researchers to present);
4. Participation by national or group scientists (namely mentions of participation of scientists in Arctic Council working groups and task forces) (an example might be connecting a university researcher to a working group);
5. Special contribution (namely or mention of a niche contribution to the Council) (an example might be providing secretariat function to a particular Arctic Council project);
6. Intention of aspirations for future participation (such as apologies for lack of participation in Arctic Council activities).

Second, each observer report was coded and each activity was placed into one of the six categories. For each observer, at least one activity fitting with a category was coded 1; a lack of activity fitting a particular category was coded 0. Third, a research assistant re-coded 10 per cent of the documents as a measure of reliability; the re-coding was similar enough to the initial coding to establish reliability (87% similar for the 2016 documents and 90% similar for the 2018 documents).

Results

In both 2016 and 2018, China's Arctic Council activities fell into three categories: active contributions to projects, informal contributions, and participation by national or group scientists. If Chinese officials sought to shape Arctic governance or pursue a particular foreign policy objective, one avenue to do so would be by sponsoring a project or leading an initiative of the Arctic Council. Leading or sponsoring a project involves conceiving of something for the Council to do, organizing the work, providing the financing, and shepherding the results. China's officials, however, do not take such action in the institution.

Arctic contributions to projects might include giving data from a national satellite to an Arctic Council project or making a financial contribution to a Council initiative. In 2016 and 2018, China made one active contribution: a financial donation (of unknown amount) to a project called *A Story Map of Indigenous Peoples and the Arctic Council* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China, 2018).

Informal contributions are items that help the Arctic Council share or develop its work, but do not specifically contribute to a particular Council project; examples might include hosting a conference and organizing a presentation by a

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Council working group. China has contributed in this way; for example, in 2016, it attended the Arctic Science Ministerial meeting in Washington, DC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China, 2016).

Participation by national or group scientists refers to sending scientists or experts to take part in Arctic Council working groups; these might be university researchers or government researchers. China's 2016 report notes, "China has recommended more than 25 experts to relevant programs [and] 8 of them have been invited to engage in specific programs" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China, 2016). More specifically, the 2018 report notes that experts from the National Birds Banding Center of China made suggestions that were incorporated into a Council-sponsored plan called *Arctic Migratory Birds Initiative Work Plan 2015-2019* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China, 2018).

China's Arctic Council activities are consistent with the other observer states. In 2016 and 2018, no observer state sponsored any Arctic Council projects and their activities fell almost entirely into the same three categories as China's work. Most attend Arctic Council meetings, contribute data where possible, provide opportunities for the Arctic Council working groups to share findings, and send scientists to contribute. The data reveals that China's contributions are in line with the contributions of other non-Arctic state observers.

After examining the reports, all of China's activities were broadly environmental in nature, save for actions in support for Indigenous peoples. Economic work is not an outward preoccupation in the Arctic Council or China's activity in the institution. China's government does not provide any special contributions to the Arctic Council, such as hosting a secretariat.

Activity	Does China Contribute In This Way?
Project sponsorship or leadership	No
Active contributions to projects	Yes
Informal contributions	Yes
Participation by national or group scientists	Yes
Special contribution	No
Intention of aspirations for future participation	No

Conclusions

As an Arctic Council observer, China seeks to contribute to the work of the institution through financial contribution, information sharing, and scientific expertise. It does not insert its own foreign policy objectives into the institution or lead projects. Overall, China is in compliance with the role of an observer.

What do China and the other observers actually do? It is fair to say that China, as an Arctic Council observer, mostly observes proceedings. In this sense, its actions are in line with those of other observers.

What does China's involvement tell us about their strategic objectives in the Arctic region? It is possible that China's good behaviour in the Arctic Council is a bid for soft power or a good reputation to aid it later in developing shipping routes or other economic opportunities. However, China's co-operation in the Council also serves to support the Arctic states and their foreign policy objectives, particularly as their main focus is on the

environment. Its goals are compatible with those of the Council.

Canada and the other member states of the Arctic Council co-operate with China's activity in the Arctic Council. If Canada or any member state did not approve of something China wanted, Arctic states would have little difficulty stopping an Observer owing to the structure of the Council (and there is no evidence that this situation has occurred to date). China's work on climate change and its ostensible support for Indigenous rights serve general Western foreign policy objectives. Thus, Canada and China may have disagreements in other areas, but the relationship through the Arctic Council appears to be stable.

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