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## Chinese Arctic Discourse, 2018 to Present

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*“China wants to play an important role, or even a leading role, in making the rules in the new spheres, since the traditional areas are already taken by the old powers.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Executive Summary

This Policy Primer provides a basis of study for future policy analysis on Chinese discourse and strategy in the Arctic. After analysis, the main findings are:

- China has notably softened its discourse on commercialization and the Belt Road Initiative (Polar Silk Road) since 2018 but has increased discourse on inadequate governance in the Arctic.
- Chinese (internal) media is more heavily focused on security and military affairs, while (external) media in English focuses on climate change and scientific research a basis for Arctic participation.
- The Chang’e-4 and BNU-1 satellites, as well as other space projects may be connected to surveillance of the Arctic for political-military purposes, though this is not their explicit purpose.
- China plans to increase ‘Digital Connectivity’ in the Arctic, including the implementation of Subsea Cables through the Arctic Connect Project, as well as underwater acoustic sensor networks for ocean observation, which may result in 5G and other digital projects in the region.
- China is dramatically increasing bilateral investments and ties with Arctic nations utilizing a ‘piecemeal approach’ of legitimacy building,<sup>2</sup> while softening on Arctic Council participation.

In accordance, the following topics are recommended for further research:

- Further information on Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) and bilateral investments in scientific research missions and facilities in the Arctic, as well as Chinese discourse on scientific engagement, to better understand Chinese motivations for different aspects of Arctic participation.

- Updated military and political goals of the Chinese government via websites like [81.cn](http://81.cn) and [dangshi.people.com.cn](http://dangshi.people.com.cn), which publish data on Chinese political and military affairs.
- 5G and digital connectivity projects, including the Arctic Connect Project, the Digital Silk Road Initiative (数字丝绸之路),<sup>3</sup> satellites, and acoustic sensor networks, to better understand China's Arctic digital investments.

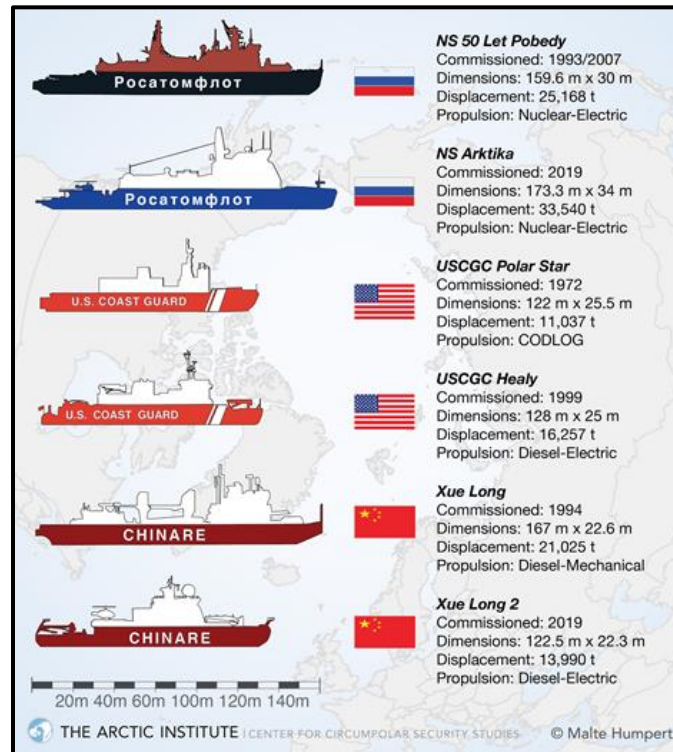
## Background

### Chinese Discourse and Strategy in the Arctic

China's interest and presence in the Arctic is undoubtedly increasing economically, politically, and culturally, as seen in recent high-profile visits by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, as well as hefty investments in Nordic tourism, scientific research, and bilateral commercial ventures. Pre-2018 analyses of Chinese Arctic discourse illustrate a hesitance to declare clear interests or policy direction on Arctic affairs despite tremendous activity. By 2015, Chinese Arctic scholarship saw a China attempting to legitimate itself as an actor in the Arctic by reframing itself as a "near-Arctic" state (近北极国家) and approaching climate change and scientific expeditions through a *globalist* Arctic narrative.<sup>4</sup> In a 2016 study of scientific publications on Arctic issues, Chinese publications had increased 260 percent over the previous decade—the highest increase of any nation.<sup>5</sup> Despite gaining observer status to the Arctic Council in 2013, investing heavily in what's now one of the most powerful Arctic fleets on Earth (see Figure 1 below), and with its state-backed China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) holding nearly 30 percent of the total LNG Russian Yamal Peninsula project by 2017,<sup>6</sup> China continued to publicly claim they possessed no Arctic policy until the release of their 2018 White Paper.

Official discourse on Arctic involvement by China remains quite heavily focused on scientific research, climate change, environmental protection, Arctic communications, and the hosting and participation of international meetings,<sup>7</sup> which complicates the understanding of Chinese strategy in the Arctic and furthers concerns about "dual-use" missions and facilities. This ultimately results in a China whose actions and discourse do not align.

For this reason, China's actions in the Arctic have been described as "a kind of doubly calculated diplomatic face-strategy," that outwardly projects peaceful plans for scientific research, partnerships, investments, and climate change response, while simultaneously investing heavily in maritime power and taking assertive actions worldwide in sea and space—suggesting that the country shows "a clear intention to re-interpret and re-design the conceptual international public order of UNCLOS." Continued analyses of discourse remain relevant because China's revisionist behavior may ultimately be viable as "changes in public political discourses can strengthen or weaken a cause significantly ... [to] create windows of opportunity for specific causes."<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1** A comparison of select major icebreakers of Russia, the United States, and China. (Malte Humpert)

China’s 2018 Arctic White Paper (中国的北极政策) focuses on sustainable development and governance, claiming that this stems from an initial interest *solely* in scientific research: “The goal of China's Arctic policy is to understand, protect, utilize and manage the Arctic, safeguard the common interests of all countries and the international community in the Arctic, and promote the sustainable development of the Arctic.”<sup>9</sup> The White Paper represents three pillars of Arctic policy: scientific research, participation in Arctic governance, and Nordic diplomacy.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the following is also mentioned: promotion of Arctic tourism,<sup>11</sup> digital connectivity,<sup>12</sup> and China as a legitimate governing actor and stakeholder<sup>13</sup> in the region as a “near-Arctic state.”<sup>14</sup>

Within the Arctic Council, China outwardly focuses on the following aspects: scientific research, climate change, environmental protection, and resource conservation, communications on Arctic affairs, and hosting and participation in international meetings on Arctic affairs. However, inwardly, Chinese publications additionally focus on the following items: military and security concerns, United States aggression and failure in the region, inadequate governance through the Arctic Council and UNCLOS, and trade, shipping, and commercialization through the Polar Silk Road and Belt Road Initiative.

## Discursive Themes

In an examination of approximately 200 Chinese and English documents, media, and journal articles pulled from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Mission to the United Nations, *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News*, *South China Morning Post*, and Chinese journals, the following discursive themes have been discovered:

### Inadequate Governance

Chinese Arctic engagement increasingly focuses on governance processes in the region. Governance mechanisms are discussed as a fundamental reason for increasing Arctic legitimacy: “As a country outside the Arctic region, China is an active participant, **builder and contributor in Arctic affairs**, striving to contribute China's wisdom and strength to the **change and development** of the Arctic.”<sup>15</sup> The Arctic Council, UNCLOS, and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) form a governance architecture based not on a protective treaty but around maritime law. On maritime affairs, Chinese strategy can be seen in direct relation to its *grand strategy*—in this case operating on the admonition of “hiding its capabilities and biding its time,” without a clearly expressed strategy.<sup>16</sup> On governance, China claims “no offside, no absence” (不越位、不缺位) in Arctic affairs, hinting that China does not intend to revoke its governance claims. In a highly globalist move, China, Japan, and South Korea held their first Arctic Dialogue in 2017—forcing Arctic Council members to apply for observer status to attend.<sup>17</sup>

### Geopolitics & Goeconomics

The Arctic contains up to 30 percent of the world’s undiscovered gas and 13 percent of the world’s undiscovered oil resources.<sup>18</sup> Almost half of the Earth's coal is also stored in the Arctic. The Arctic not only has diamond and precious metals such as gold, silver, and platinum, but also radioactive elements such as uranium and plutonium, the world's largest zinc mine, and the largest copper iron nickel complex. With climate change, non-Arctic actors are becoming geopolitically and geoeconomically more active with energy-dependent countries like China seeking resources from the region. China is increasingly securitizing energy access, effectively aligning its commercial interests in the Arctic with grand strategy concerns about an energy-scarce future. On resource extraction, the Arctic is referred to as “the future cornucopia of resources.”<sup>19</sup> This is further complicated by the Arctic’s enmeshment in Cold War geopolitics, and its lack of effective governance structure to navigate security concerns.

While China is formally the 7<sup>th</sup> largest commercial carrier in the Northern Sea Route (NSR), Greece (Dynagas), the United Kingdom (Teekay Shipping LNG), and Japan (Mitsui O.S.K. Lines) all made joint ventures with subsidiaries of China’s COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited (COSCO), with COSCO financing the construction of the new Arc7 LNG fleet at some USD 300 million per vessel. With COSCO representing approximately 45 percent of all international transits during this period, China is possibly the largest non-Russian carrier in the NSR.<sup>20</sup>

### Maritime Power

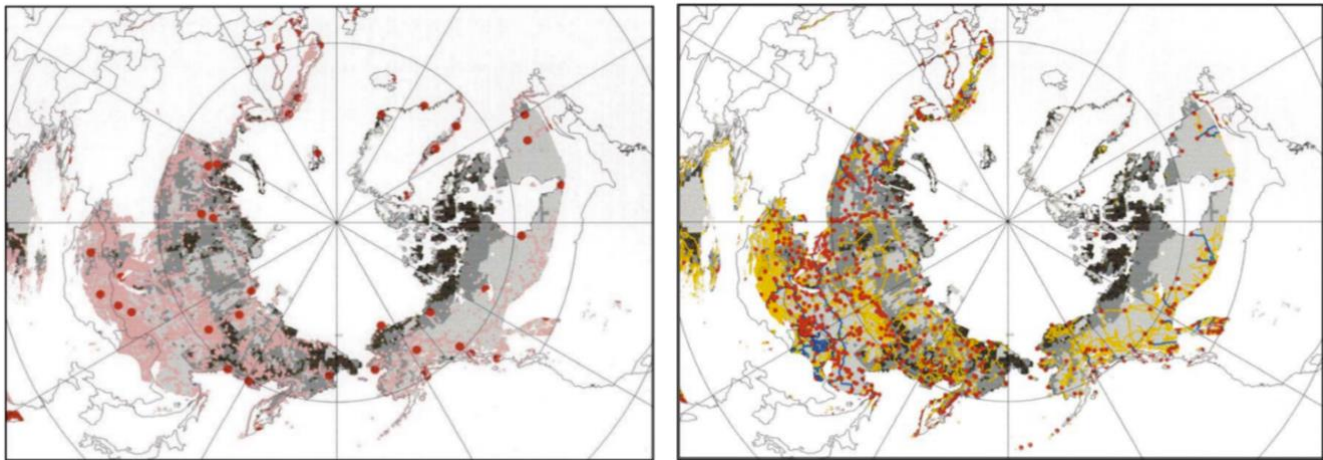
Chinese Arctic policy is primarily maritime in nature. With China’s largest sector being its maritime economy and shipping trade,<sup>21</sup> it is impossible to separate Chinese maritime strategy from Chinese *grand strategy*,<sup>22</sup> and therefore challenging to separate China’s actions in the NSR from its larger strategic concerns about energy access and the success of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Currently China possesses a maritime advantage due to its high investments in marine forces and advanced maritime operations. Simultaneously, China has been



known to threaten maritime security in other regions like the South China Sea (SCS) and Malacca Strait, and there is reason to believe this could be done in the NSR when threatened by other nations in the Arctic—particularly once firm legitimacy has been established. In maritime situations, China continues to serve as a revisionist state acting on economic needs, as opposed to values,<sup>23</sup> with increasing desperation in a resource-starved world.

## Development and Infrastructure

As the Arctic opens for commercialization and governmental affairs, there is an increased risk of terrorism, attacks, and conflict at critical points of U.S. and European critical infrastructure. Figures 2 and 3 show critical points in the Arctic that could be targets—particularly as the NSR becomes a major shipping route as early as 2030. As illustrated, there are hundreds of critical points in the Arctic that lack a security infrastructure of protection. As reliance on these locations for critical infrastructure increases, the risk of predation on these points may become uniquely easy targets. Increasing presence of Chinese nationals in these regions, as well as a permanent presence in Svalbard in “commercial” and “scientific” expeditions, poses a singular threat Arctic infrastructure development.



**Figure 2 and 3: Infrastructure and transportation risk points in the Arctic. Infrastructure and transportation risk points in the Arctic. In Figure 2, red dots indicate population centers and pink shading indicates areas of human settlement. In Figure 3, yellow lines indicate winter trails; blue lines indicate railroads; and red dots indicate airfields.<sup>24</sup>**

## Findings

Evaluating the discourse using the above-listed concepts, notable shifts can be seen since 2018. Chinese discourse has shifted in the last few years to focus less on scientific endeavors under the guise of “common heritage” and towards the need for a new governance framework—an internationalist approach that poses challenges for the Arctic Council. Further, focuses on commercialization and Polar Silk Road investments have decreased since the production of China’s Arctic White Paper, and the discourse has shown a greater focus towards strengthening bilateral ties with Arctic countries like Norway, Iceland, and Greenland. Scientific endeavors continue to serve as the basis for China’s interest in the Arctic but increasing discourse on digital

connectivity and surveillance (for the purposes of scientific endeavors) hints at the possible threat of dual-use facilities in the region.



Figure 4: 100 Most Used Words in Chinese Arctic Discourse since 2018.

## Notable Themes in Chinese Arctic Discourse

### Sustainable Development & Polar Silk Road (冰上丝绸之路)

China continuously cites the goal of “sustainable development” and “win-win cooperation” in the Arctic, initially through the Belt Road Initiative and Polar Silk Road, but increasingly through bilateral investments and diplomacy, private investments, and digital connectivity. China “...focuses on forward-looking investment in Arctic waterway and energy cooperation and development, so as to contribute to infrastructure construction and digital construction in the Arctic region.”<sup>25</sup>

### Tightening Sino-Russian Ties

While China and Russia are not typically considered major allies, Chinese Arctic discourse suggests that Russia and China will increasingly work together on Polar Silk Road projects and bilateral investment in political-military and commercial affairs. This can be seen in large-scale energy projects such the Arctic LNG-2 project on the Yamal peninsula,<sup>26</sup> as well as references to the entire Polar Silk Road developing jointly with Russia.<sup>27</sup>

### Digital Connectivity & Arctic Surveillance

Though not explicitly stated, there is reason to believe that China’s Arctic Connect Project—to install sea cables in the region—and China’s satellites, including the Chang’e-4 and BNU-1, may both be used to monitor and control communications in the Arctic. China says they will “actively promote digital connectivity in the Arctic and gradually build an international infrastructure network” in line with their goal of “sustainable development”<sup>28</sup> while also “enabl[ing] China to put an end to its heavy reliance on Western companies' satellites for images and data from polar regions.”<sup>29</sup>

## U.S. Aggression and Failure in the Arctic

Chinese media regularly cites U.S. aggression and failure in the Arctic, particularly utilizing the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement as a failure on climate change and a major failure in Arctic diplomacy. This is then used to justify increasing scientific research in the Arctic, and by extension, increasing Chinese legitimacy. In one article, scientific engagement is explicitly linked with “the national goal.”<sup>30</sup> China accuses the U.S. of aggressive Arctic monitoring through the Arctic Mobile Observation System (AMOS)<sup>31</sup> as well as “...infiltrating into the Arctic region, in an attempt to compress Russia's space in the Arctic region.”<sup>32</sup> Further, on the United States: “According to all kinds of information disclosed in recent years, we all know who in the world is monitoring, monitoring, stealing secrets and infiltrating other countries on a large scale, maintaining and exerting influence on the polar regions.”<sup>33</sup>

## Cultural Engagement in the Arctic

China is increasingly pedaling a discourse that it is a “near-Arctic state,” which is then used to engage culturally with local Arctic communities. By acting as “cultural ambassadors” for the Arctic, this discourse is then used to justify legitimacy in Arctic governance, as well as “Chinese values.” Cultural engagement takes the form of cultural events, movies, (for example, 《光语者》) and other media that ties Chinese regions to Arctic affairs.

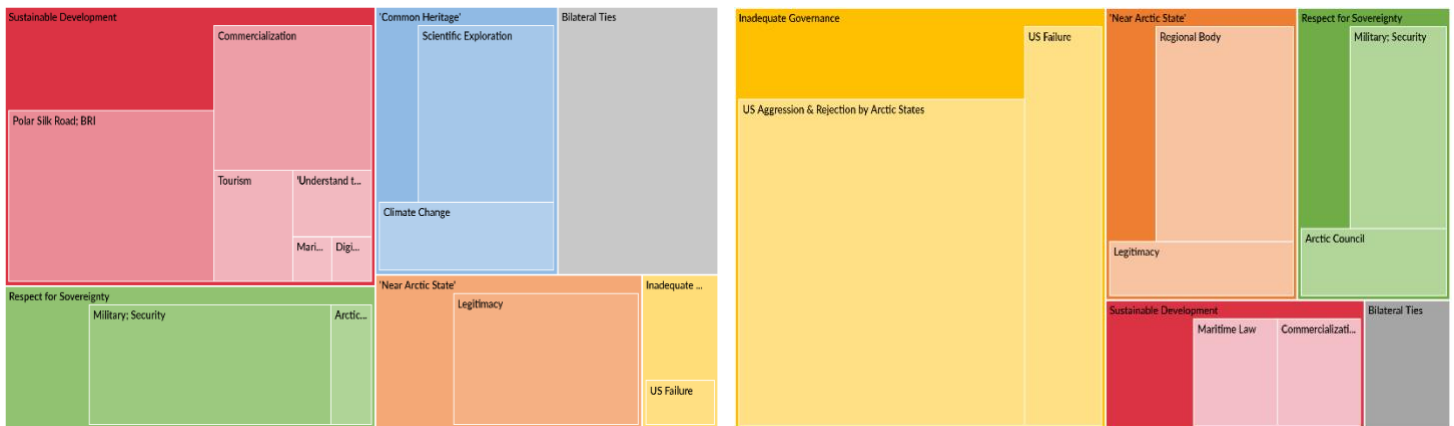


Figure 5: 2018 Coded Themes (left) versus 2021 Coded Themes (right).

## Implications of a Shifting Chinese Discourse

### Increasing Private Investment by Chinese Companies

Chinese discourse suggests a strong increase in bilateral investments and FDI in Arctic countries – particularly Iceland, Norway, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands – which suggests a China with increasing power over the political affairs of these countries in the near future. Bilateral investments allow China to bypass the political issues associated with Arctic governance, while still implementing dual-use facilities and operations in the region.

## **An Independent Greenland with Strong China Ties**

Greenland remains primarily concerned with economic growth as it moves towards independence, hoping to wane itself from the Danish subsidies it currently relies upon. Private investments by China in Greenland risk a form of “debt-diplomacy” seen previously in its Arctic ties, including Norway, which was punished for awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo with a six-year trade freeze. While the newly elected Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA) party seeks to protect the environment through the blocking of the controversial Kvanefjeld mining project,<sup>34</sup> there remains a priority to gain and increase access to the Chinese market to diversify its economy. Discourse suggests an increasing interest by China in Greenland.

## **A “New Malacca Strait”**

The NSR has the potential to become a new Malacca Strait or SCS where the United States and other NATO member states must engage to protect the security of the surrounding area. The risks of an NSR controlled by Chinese state-backed companies and marine forces remains relevant, particularly as Chinese discourse continues to focus on investment in the region, utilizing a globalist perspective that delegitimizes present EEZs and claims of sovereignty.

## **A Digitally Connected Arctic Led by China**

If China gains an advantage over Arctic communications infrastructure and 5G, the Arctic is at increased risk of becoming digitally connected and in Chinese control. This could result in an inability to operate in the Arctic without continuous surveillance of military and political communications by the Chinese state—particularly as Chinese telecommunications companies are increasingly fused with the state, required to “support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts”<sup>35</sup> of the CCP. Further, risks of an independent Greenland operating under Chinese 5G threatens the security of communications in the region.

## **Scientific Endeavors or Dual-Use Facilities?**

China’s discursive focus on scientific endeavors in the Arctic begs the question of whether facilities will serve as dual-use facilities with secondary political-military goals. Scientific endeavors as the basis for such extensive investment and participation remains questionable, particularly when most of the facilities funded bilaterally and exist in areas of critical importance (for example, Svalbard).

## **Contested Governance**

A discursive shift towards greater criticism of the current governance structures in the Arctic show a China propagating a revisionist narrative of Arctic affairs. Discourse has increased on illegitimate and failing governance structures that will ultimately require Chinese participation: “China is not only a ‘stakeholder’ in Arctic affairs, but also a successor to Arctic governance.”<sup>36</sup>



## Further Research Recommendations

Considering the above findings, the following recommendations are made regarding future research:

### **Continued Surveillance of Chinese Government Websites**

A continued review of Chinese government and military websites, which are only available in Chinese or appear different than the English versions, should be performed. The 81.cn website appears different than the English version of the website (<http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>). Other websites do not have English versions at all, such as <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/>, which is an official source of PLA information and is recently released. These websites contain potentially valuable information on Chinese political-military actions and grand strategy in the Arctic.

### **Private Arctic Investment by China-backed Companies**

Private Chinese companies with links to the CCP show signs of increasing interest in FDI and infrastructural development projects in the Arctic. Examination and continued data collection on these investments will provide a clearer understanding of what “sustainable development” refers to in Chinese discourse. Notable current projects include the Wilson Center Polar Institutes’ [Arctic Infrastructure Inventory](#).

### **5G and Digital Connectivity Projects in the Arctic**

Research should continue to examine 5G and Digital Connectivity projects in the Arctic, particularly Greenland, as China seeks to pursue private projects in connectivity in the region. Arctic sea cables (participation in the [Arctic Connect project](#)), the Chang’e-4 satellite and 5G projects should be examined in-depth.

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- <sup>31</sup> 蓝海星、王国亮、魏博宇. “国外北极地区装备技术发展动向.” *Sohu News*, December 11, 2018. [https://www.sohu.com/a/281166142\\_465915](https://www.sohu.com/a/281166142_465915)
- <sup>32</sup> “军情瞭望: 角力北极, 俄不断加强北极建设.” *People’s Daily*, March 19, 2020. <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0319/c1011-31639327.html>. Original Text: 美国主要采取加强与加拿大、挪威等北极周边国家协调合作的方式, 渗透进入北极地区, 企图在北极区域压缩俄罗斯的活动空间
- <sup>33</sup> “西方宣扬“中国威胁论”反映其妄图永霸世界心态 [The “China Threat Theory” advocated by the West reflects its mentality of trying to dominate the world forever]” *People’s Daily*, February 2, 2018. <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0202/c1002-29802622.html>. Original full Text: 你心里怎么想, 你眼里的世界就是什么样。从这个意义上讲, 世界上最大的情报头目说出那样的话, 并不奇怪。”外交部发言人华春莹 1 日在例行记者会上用“相由心生”一词回应美澳情报部门的“中国间谍威胁论”, 狠狠打了发言者一巴掌。“事实胜于雄辩。根据近年来披露出的各种信息, 世界上到底是谁在对其他国家实施大范围监听、监控、窃密、渗透, 无所不用其极地维持并施加影响力, 大家心中其实都很清楚
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- <sup>35</sup> Kitchen, Klion. “Issue Brief: The U.S. Must Treat China as a National Security Threat to 5G Networks,” *The Heritage Foundation*, April 16, 2019. <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/IB4952.pdf>
- <sup>36</sup> 肖洋. “约束与突破: 中国在北极理事会的规范性话语权提升路径探析 [Constraints and Breakthroughs: An Analysis of China’s Normative Discourse Power in the Arctic Council],” *和平与发展 [Peace and Development]*, 1 (2020). <https://www.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?filename=HPFZ202001003&dbcode=CJFQ&dbname=CJFD2020&v=Po8UmfZsLARGEzoYuNgNZVrvjmKxvA%mmmd2Fxi2cfBwTR9oBSVdDIQjdlcYF3n36vwtru> Original Text: 中国不仅是北 极事务的“利益攸关方”, 也是北极治理的后来者