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China and the “Pressing Need” for Investment and Defence in the Arctic

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The 25 September comment in the *National Post* by [Jesse Kline](#) headlined “[The pressing need to invest in, and protect, our Arctic territories](#)” is another example of why there needs to be a serious debate about Canadian Arctic security which avoids “conventional wisdom” and half-formed assertions about the strategies of Russia and China, and instead examines these issues on the basis of facts. This means focusing on what is there rather than what is not, and in so doing avoiding a common pitfall in many recent descriptions of Canada’s Arctic security challenges - including Kline’s latest offering.

Kline’s opinion piece starts off solidly enough by detailing the significant problems of underdevelopment, health challenges, food insecurity transportation, and lack of infrastructure in the Canadian North, (although a disproportionate amount of blame was placed on the post-2019 national carbon tax, a shaky assertion at best given the long history of these issues). It is the article’s rapid shift to the geopolitical and military challenges facing the north where the commentary descends into hyperbole and dated assertions which do not match the actual strategic situation in the Arctic today. The discussion of China’s Arctic policy in the article is the most glaring example of this problem.

Several assertions in the commentary about Beijing’s Arctic interests do not stand up to even basic fact checking. China has carefully avoided depreciating any legal and political organizations in the far north, be it the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) or the Arctic Council, and there have certainly been no “challenges” to the legitimacy of Canadian Arctic sovereignty over its territory. Beijing has even stayed silent on the thorny issue of the legal status of the Northwest Passage, and has no interest in courting regional condemnation by attempting to unilaterally extract raw materials from Canadian lands or waters. Not being an Arctic state, China has no basis to challenge regional rules and norms and seeks to avoid being viewed as an Arctic spoiler. Contrary to what Kline’s commentary implies, China has made no territorial claims in the Arctic, having stated in its [2018 White Paper](#) on the region that “states from outside the Arctic region do not have territorial sovereignty in the Arctic.”

Kline also describes a Chinese “naval Arctic fleet” which does not exist. China currently operates four civilian icebreakers capable of Polar regional missions, with a fifth scheduled to start construction next year. But Beijing is not in any position to “project military power” into the Arctic, as any such attempts would not only further adversely affect any economic plans there but also invite pushback from NATO as well as Russia. While there

are many recent signs that Beijing and Moscow are coordinating their Arctic policies, the Putin regime has no desire to see any outside military actor gain traction in sensitive Russian Arctic waters.

The assertion that China's Polar Silk Road (PSR) is being given "far more leeway" in the wake of the full Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2022 omits the point that many PSR projects, particularly in Canada and the Nordic region, have either been delayed or halted because of Arctic states' economic and security concerns, leaving Russia as the only major contributor to the Chinese polar initiative. The decision by Beijing to adopt a *de facto* neutrality policy regarding Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine has predictably cost China much goodwill in Europe, further hampering any advancement of the PSR in the Nordic region.

Cooled economic relations between Beijing and Ottawa, including most recently over the decision in August by the Canadian government to implement a 100% tariff on Chinese electric vehicles, mean that the PSR is unlikely to make further inroads in the Canadian North. Therefore, any suggestion that China could "could turn around and claim" any Canadian territory as theirs after a long period of hypothetical local investment is not only suspicious but perpetuates the "bad penny" myth that sovereignty and international law somehow both vanish once one travels North of 60.

With the expansion of NATO to include Finland and Sweden, and the understanding that great power competition has become more visible in Arctic discourse, there absolutely needs to be a measured discussion of the roles which Beijing is now playing, and those that it wants to play, in the Circumpolar North. We must remain vigilant with respect to Chinese dual-use data gathering under the auspices of scientific research in the Arctic, the growth of Chinese influence operations, and probable grey zone activities in and about the Arctic. We should also contemplate how close Sino-Russian cooperation in the far north may get and the implications for our security. We should also consider what might happen if Chinese and Russian Arctic interests more openly diverge in the future, as there are [friction points in their Arctic partnership](#) that should not be overlooked or downplayed.

Canada needs to be more active in these debates, but a necessary first step is more clearly understanding the limitations of Chinese capabilities in the Arctic. A sober appraisal demands that we avoid the mixing of assumptions and facts. As one of the authors and various colleagues suggest [in a 2022 article](#), the Arctic states are the "peers" in the Arctic strategic equation. However much Beijing desires to become a "polar great power," China remains firmly in the second tier of Arctic stakeholders—and competitors. We need to avoid overinflating the importance of China as a regional actor in commentaries that, ironically, tends to echo Beijing's own narrative about the importance and significance of China's Arctic presence. Although the Arctic fits within Beijing's broader global agenda of shaping the international system, China is not a peer or even near-peer of the Arctic states in an Arctic context. We must be sober in our depictions of the scale of Chinese investment and other forms of engagement in the Arctic. China's push into the Arctic has met far more resistance, and its presence remains far more tenuous, than Beijing advertises.