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Preparing for a Confrontation with China in the Arctic?

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"As China explores the Arctic, Canada's military is preparing for confrontation," CBC reporter David Common told Canadians on 28 September 2025. Having just returned from "exclusive access to the military and coast guard exercise [Operation NANOOK], just as Canada's traditional adversaries have shown growing interest in the North's rich deposits of critical minerals," the journalist explores how Canada would detect, interdict, and board "a foreign vessel that neither wanted to be seen, nor stopped."[1] But he does not stop there, painting a distorted portrait of the Canadian Arctic threat environment that suggests imminent military threats posed by the Russians and Chinese to Canada's Arctic. How does Common arrive at this argument, and how does his reporting stand up to recent scholarship as well as the facts on the ground about the ongoing limitations of China's Arctic reach?

First, we have the threats which relate to well-entrenched narratives about Canada's abundance of critical minerals and the increased accessibility of the Northwest Passage "as climate change makes for an increasing number of ice-free days." Carleton University associate professor Stephanie Carvin, a former national security analyst, is quoted repeating the simple maxim that "Russia and, increasingly, China," are seeking access to Canada's Arctic minerals and the Northwest Passage. She does not reveal any substantiating evidence and, with no apparent academic publications on the topic, there is no way to verify her sources.

This statement illustrates a familiar trope in some analyses of China's Arctic interests, namely transposing Beijing's interests with its capabilities. Although China does wish to invest heavily in strategic materials, including rare earths, as has been seen in activities in Africa and South America, China's extractive industries in the non-Russian Arctic are few and far between, with for example four planned mining projects in Greenland all in abeyance. Beijing has even less leverage elsewhere in the North American Arctic. As has been demonstrated in the most recent salvo of the Sino-American trade war, Beijing's dominance in rare earth elements remains solid, and there is little rush for Chinese mining interests to re-enter the Arctic.

Moreover, although Beijing was hoping that its Polar Silk Road, launched in 2017, would eventually encompass projects throughout the Arctic, the political aftershocks of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine, (and China's 'neutrality policy' towards the conflict), as well as the pandemic, have slowed progress considerably. The recent announcement of the 'China-Europe Arctic Express' through the Northern Sea Route (NSR), and the transit through the NSR begun this month of the Chinese container vessel *Istanbul Bridge* may be newsworthy, but in essence is simply a relaunch of the same maritime initiatives Beijing had touted a decade ago.

So are the assumptions in Common's article correct? Is the Arctic more accessible? There is more shipping activity in Canada's Arctic waters, but are the vessels conducting commercial or military transits? A recent assessment by University of Ottawa geographer Jackie Dawson and her team released last year demonstrating how warming temperatures have generated more sea ice choke points along the Northwest Passage (NWP), reducing rather than expanding the overall possible shipping season. Unpredictable sea ice correlates with increasing accidents for vessels operating in the waters of the NWP, particularly amongst commercial vessels.[2] This seems to confirm the work of political scientist Franklyn Griffiths twenty-five years ago, who predicted that the Passage would never become a reliable shipping lane, with shipping would be focused on getting things in and out of the Arctic (destinational shipping) rather than through it. Different rates of ice melt, oceanic currents, and broke ice would be flushed into Canada's Arctic Archipelago, leaving its waters "ice-infested" and unpredictable. Climate change would make the NWP the last and least desirable of the possible Arctic shipping routes to open, Griffiths concluded, and international shipping would find the NSR more attractive due to these physical restrictions.[3] By the time climate change fully melts the polar ice cap during the summer months, most scientists suggest that it will be a Transpolar Route (over the North Pole) that will be most attractive and feasible for transit traffic.[4]

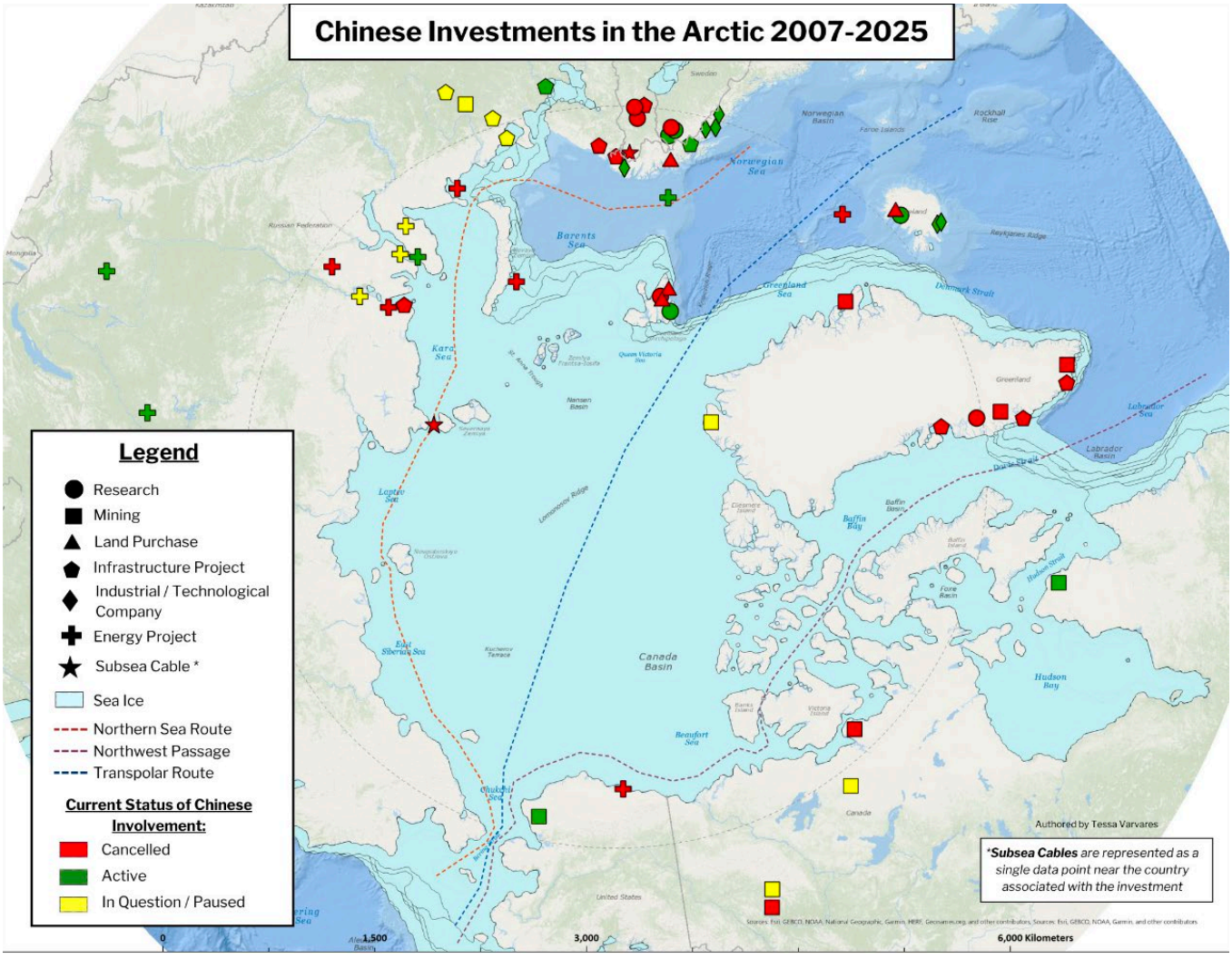
US Coast Guard Captain (retired) Lawson Brigham, a fellow at the US Coast Guard Academy's Center for Arctic Study & Policy, noted in an article released in September 2025 that: There are many practical navigation factors that prevent the NWP from becoming a regular trade route. Most critical is the presence of Arctic sea ice. Global climate model simulations project the Arctic Ocean will be ice-covered, fully or partially, for eight to nine months each year through mid-century. The NWP can be used for niche markets, such as today's voyages of Polar Class bulk carriers, but it remains ice-clogged and impassable except in late summer and autumn. The seasonal nature of access, shallowness of all but the most northern straits, lack of ports and infrastructure, need for ships to comply with mandatory polar rules and regulations, and the vagaries of Arctic weather and sea ice make it improbable that large container ships will ever use the NWP for trans-Arctic navigation.[5]

The September 2025 grounding of the Royal Wagenborg cargo ship *MV Thamesborg*, in an area of shallows in the Franklin Strait near Gjoa Haven, Nunavut, is a reminder of the ongoing risks associated with transits – even by experienced operators using Polar Class 7 icebreaking bulk carriers.

Carvin also declares that "[China] has an ambitious plan to basically control a lot of the rare-earth elements and mining and wants to invest in the Canadian Arctic." This is true. What Carvin and the reporter appear completely oblivious to, or chose to dismiss in the interests of telling an alarmist story, is the limited footprint that Chinese state-owned enterprises or state-controlled entities have been able to gain in the Circumpolar Arctic outside of Russia thus far. A recent study on *Cutting Through Narratives on Chinese Arctic Investments*, published in June by the Harvard University Belfer Center for Science and International affairs, highlighted how China's activities in the Arctic in recent years have been "highly exaggerated" due to "alarmist language in terms of scale, scope and risk." Lackenbauer, Anders Christoffer Edstrøm from Norway, and Guðbjörg Ríkey Th. Hauksdóttir from Iceland observed that Chinese investment numbers are highly exaggerated, often

with little distinction between planned and operational projects, and mobilized to support a narrative in which China is successfully "buying up" the Arctic region.

While Chinese investment in the Russian Arctic has increased since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, nearly all Chinese investments in the Canadian Arctic and the Arctic regions of the other seven "like-minded" Arctic states have failed or stalled. China's ownership footprint in Canada's North includes a Nunavik nickel mine, owned by Jien Canada Mining Ltd., and two mineral development projects in the Yukon and the NYT that have been in stasis for several years. Accordingly, the authors concluded that China's investment record in the Canadian North is not strong, and Chinese companies have also seen significant failures, along with considerably less space to invest in the North American and European Arctic due to political and security concerns. Regarding worries about a Chinese takeover of the Arctic mining sector, "it is apparent that most of this anxiety is about what *might be*, not what has actually happened."



The danger of these sorts of narratives is that, by trumpeting China's Arctic interests but failing to assure Canadians that their governments and those of like-minded Arctic states have taken measures to address or counter them, they represent an unintentional soapbox for Beijing. Chinese media outlets have stressed that the Arctic should be a common heritage for humanity, and that it is the West which is seeking to militarize the Arctic, implement hegemony, and engage in 'small circle' strategies which push out China and governments of the Global South. This view has been driving Russia to put forward the BRICS+, of which Beijing is a member, as a possible alternative regime in the far north. Canada should be focusing on how to address these narratives along with developing a strategic approach to the Arctic which better distinguishes between types of risks and their severity. Furthermore, although there are growing concerns about the militarization of the Arctic as a result of the spillover of the tenuous security situation in Europe, international law remains in place in the far north, and there is no mechanism in place to allow Beijing to seize another state's Arctic assets.

So what we should be focusing on? Common highlights that he spent time in Pond Inlet / Mittimatalik observing Operation NANOOK in recent weeks, and it is at its best when he is sharing what he observed there. Unfortunately, there is too little emphasis on the actual operation at a specific time and place, playing out credible scenarios. We would have liked to learn more about what the Canadian Armed Forces and other agencies are actually doing to improve interoperability and readiness.

Common's article then turns to the Canadian Armed Forces "tailing" Chinese research icebreaker *Xuelong 2* in the Bering Sea "as it returned to Arctic waters for the second year in a row." Here, the narrative is more positive, suggesting that "China's interest in the Arctic has been closely monitored by Canada's military and coast guard" – thus intimating that Canada has the capabilities to monitor and control activities in the region. The reporter does not explicitly remind readers that the waters in which the Chinese research icebreakers operated this summer lay far from Canada's shores and outside of its jurisdiction. There is no public record of any Chinese marine scientific research (MSR) operations in Canadian waters since 2017 (which you can read about in a recent volume on *Northwest Passages*).

Perhaps Common operates from the assumption that CBC readers do not need this spelled out for them. By subtly conflating activities in "the Arctic" more generally with threats to the Canadian Arctic in particular, the story follows an all-too-typical pattern of journalistic alarmism aided and abetted by Professor Rob Huebert of the University of Calgary. Huebert, who has been ringing the alarm bells in the Arctic for more than two decades at this point, offers his usual thoughts but they are unclear in their intended implications for Canadian action. The Chinese vessels are "not warships *per se*," he notes, "but they are capable of taking all sorts of... information that of course then can ultimately be utilized by warships in the future." The inclusion of *per se* (meaning "by or in itself") is telling. These scientific research vessels are "dual use" (meaning that their research has both civilian and military applications). But does that make them nearly synonymous with warships? Does the same hold true for US, European, and Canadian research icebreakers conducting MSR? By declaring these vessels as key enablers for warships threatening our Arctic security, is Huebert trying to make these legitimate military targets? The implications are troubling if this same logic is applied elsewhere.

There are certainly concerns inherent in the expansion of China's research capabilities in the Arctic as well as the possibility of increased dual use cooperation with Russia. Since late 2024, China now has five Arctic-ready operational icebreakers and has shown many signs of wanting to jumpstart its physical presence in the far north. However, these issues need to be tempered with the understanding of both the limits of China's policies in the Arctic as well as the Sino-Russian partnership. Many initiatives to share research between the two powers have not moved beyond the blueprint stage, and Canada needs to ask itself what the implications may be not only of China-Russia Arctic cooperation, but also the implications of China eventually developing an independent Arctic policy at a greater distance from Moscow.

Huebert also suggests that "China may now have maps allowing its submarines to run through Canadian waters." This has been an imagined danger expressed by China hawks for years, and again discounts the political and strategic limits to such a situation. This is one of his favourite bogeymen: the spectre of Chinese submarines penetrating Canada's Arctic, presuming to disrupt the strategic balance and threat North America. Whether they actually have the capabilities to do this today is not disclosed. The statement is inherently speculative, of course, and avoids the question of *why* China would want to run submarines through Canada's Arctic waters. To steal resources? Protect shipping lanes? Launch a strategic nuclear strike on Canadian and American bases or cities? While China's maritime capabilities are growing, one must not forget the cost / benefit question of whether China would want to unilaterally increase its military presence in the Arctic, especially with the region now a greater priority for Russia and NATO. Moreover, given Moscow's sensitivities about protecting its Arctic sovereignty, speculation that any Chinese unilateral deployment of submarines or other naval forces will appear, unchallenged, in the Arctic Ocean falls into what was previously called the 'Schrödinger's Russia' logic trap[6]: that Russia will vigorously defend its Arctic waters against NATO incursions but will blithely stand aside if China seeks unfettered military access.

Common's article also reports that both China and Russia "are known to use 'shadow' or 'ghost' vessels, which appear to be merchant or other inoffensive vessels, but are actually used for espionage or other nefarious activities." These activities are well documented in other parts of the world, but does the journalist or his informants have any evidence of these activities in Canadian Arctic waters? Activities in other parts of the Arctic are important indicators, but is it responsible journalism to suggest to Canadians that these things are happening in their backyard? This argument indicates another common trope, namely the suggestion that Beijing poses the same set of risks in the Arctic as in the South China Sea (SCS). In addition to the expansion of the Chinese Coast Guard in the SCS over the past decade, 'blue hull' vessels, namely armed civilian / fishing ships, are also a security challenge there. Yet this is a far lower concern in the Arctic, given the region's radically different geography, and the security situation in the far north which bars Beijing from engaging the same sort of 'lawfare' commonly seen in the SCS – unless Common and Huebert know something that the rest of us do not.

The CCG and RCN scenario that Common recounts strikes the reader as more of a law enforcement issue playing out in Canada's sovereign jurisdiction than it does a military concern. It speaks to the importance of domain awareness and of a need for more constabulary capabilities than of the headline screaming that "Canada's military is preparing for confrontation." The author concludes by noting how "Canada's raft of

recent defence purchases will certainly change the dynamic." The P-8 Orion surveillance aircraft will replace the CP-140, and Canada is partnering Australia to build its Arctic over-the-horizon radar (AOTHR) system "to detect missile and maritime threats." We agree that these are important investments to defend against military threats through and to the Arctic. But how do these systems relate to China's desired control over the critical minerals sector?

As with so many of the stories that simply return to tired old frames, this story paints a confusing picture of the Canadian Arctic security environment. On a panel at the Canadian International Council's 2025 Couchiching Conference held in Toronto, the same day that Common's article appeared, photojournalist Gavin John emphasized the need for journalists to move beyond tired old tropes being pawned off as new and instead frame the more substantive issues with which Canadians should be grappling in an era of uncertainty and precarity. We agree that it is time for journalists to break out of their formulaic box, filled with worn-out narratives that simplistically conflate sovereignty and military security, and instead grapple with more sophisticated concepts of whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to comprehensive security (like our Nordic allies do).

There remains the need to more effectively identify China's potential challenges, both singly and in cooperation with Russia, to the Canadian Arctic. This entails more deliberate attention to degrees of threat, differences between direct military threats and 'grey zone' / hybrid operations, and the likelihood of various Chinese actions in the region given the heightened military attention the Arctic Ocean is now receiving. This also requires more imaginative journalism, backed by more refined expert commentary, to discern more calibrated Canadian solutions to address the most probable scenarios that Canadians are likely to encounter in our Arctic. Misplaced alarmism is more of a hindrance than a help if we want sustained investments in Arctic security capabilities that are designed to address the actual threats that we face – not the unlikely ones imagined by pundits who prioritize sensationalism over sophistication.

Notes

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[1] David Common, "As China explores the Arctic, Canada's military is preparing for confrontation," CBC News, 28 September 2025, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-arctic-military-exercise-sovereignty-1.7632848.

[2] Alison J. Cook, Jackie Dawson, Stephen E.L. Howell, Jean E. Holloway, and Mike Brady, "Sea Ice Choke Points Reduce the Length of the Shipping Season in the Northwest Passage," Communications Earth & Environment 5, no. 362 (2025): 1-11.

[3] Franklyn Griffiths, "The Shipping News: Canada's Arctic Sovereignty Not on Thinning Ice," International Journal 58, no. 2 (2003): 257-82.

[4] Ryan Dean, "Comparing the Northwest Passage with the Northern Sea Route," NAADSN *Policy Brief*, 30 April 2025, https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/25apr-Comaparing-the-NWP-with-the-NSR_RD-NAADSN-Policy-Brief.pdf.

[5] Lawson Brigham, "The Northwest Passage: Transit Realities," *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 151/9/1,471 (September 2025), https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/september/northwest-passage-transit-realities.

[6] Marc Lanteigne, "The Arctic is Not the South China Sea," *South China Morning Post*, 25 May 2021, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3134261/arctic-not-south-china-sea.