



FALSE ALARM

Barry Scott Zellen, PhD, reveals why Beijing's Arctic presence is being exaggerated by the West

A new report by Harvard University's Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, *Cutting Through Narratives on Chinese Arctic Investments* published on 23 June, 2025, confirmed what I have long argued that China's historic presence and contemporary influence in the Arctic has been greatly overstated by America and the West. Harvard's breath of fresh analytical air generated a wave of sceptical headlines in the Arctic and shipping news, including these headlines: "China's Arctic Ambitions Are Overhyped Harvard Says: Potential Scenarios" (Container News, 30 June); "China's Arctic Investments Exaggerated, Harvard Report Finds" (Barents Observer, 26 June); and "Report: Most Chinese Investments in the

Arctic Have Not Fully Materialised" (High North News, 25 June).

As Harvard reports: "Chinese Arctic ambitions and activities are contentious" and that Western analysts "often frame Chinese investments in an adversarial way, describing Chinese activity in alarmist language in terms of scale, scope and risk." It explains: "analysts have the tendency to mix proposed investments with actual investments. For example, some analysts estimate that Chinese investments in the Arctic top \$90-billion and call this level of investment 'unconstrained.' According to one mainstream narrative, China will use this 'inflow of investments' to increase its influence among Arctic nations by means of debt-trap diplomacy. Our research finds that these numbers are highly exaggerated and often mobilised to support a narrative in which China is successfully 'buying up' the Arctic region, but that

Anti-China bias runs deep throughout America's polar research community

these inflated numbers include unsuccessful investment projects and proposed projects that have not been implemented." The result is the "scale and scope of actual Chinese investments are often exaggerated in media and public debate, and unsuccessful proposals are often taken into consideration when presenting the total amount of Chinese investment" when in fact, the number of stalled and/or failed projects is "striking". The report further observes: "Recent Chinese investment initiatives have increasingly met with headwinds in Arctic countries except for Russia," and it concludes: "Valuable analytical nuance is lost by discussing numbers only. The number and value of Chinese investments have become talking points for some commentators to prove the risk that China poses to the region, but the economic value and strategic value of a given asset are not always the same."

Ever since China shook the confidence of the West's Arctic security community in 2018 with the release of its own thoughtful Arctic policy (in the form of a white paper), the West has been obsessively focused on a largely illusory threat to the Arctic from China. Indeed, in its 2024 Arctic strategy update, the Pentagon expressed more concern with non-Arctic China than with the largest Arctic state (by geography, population, and economy), Russia, even though NATO has been embroiled in a proxy war with Russia since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Instead, China is illogically positioned atop of DoD's threat hierarchy for the region, elevated for ideological, budgetary rationalisation and partisan political reasons rather than from an objective strategic analysis of the climate-change transformed top of the world.

Beijing's Arctic interests and growing collaboration with Moscow, driven by the West's isolation of Russia since its 2022 Ukraine invasion, features prominently in DoD's perception of the Arctic strategic environment – accelerating the decoupling of the West and forcing Moscow to quickly pivot to Eurasia since 2022, where it has found new markets for its energy resources, not just China but also two highly Westernised and predominantly democratic Asian states, Singapore and India, which take a more balanced approach to East-West divisions in world politics that better align with the historical experience and diplomatic values of the Global South, opening new opportunities for Russia as Western doors suddenly swing shut.

Even though Moscow and Beijing are now closely aligned, it would be shortsighted to presume this alignment will endure given their past enmity and potential for a future breakup. According to the 7 June, 2025 edition of the New York Times, newly acquired and independently authenticated intelligence documents from Russia reveal deep concerns Moscow's alignment with Beijing, and describe Russia's efforts to counter many emergent long-term threats from China to Russian interests, including future territorial claims redressing unjust historical treaties that codified imperial Russia's 19th-century expansion onto Chinese-controlled territories: "Mr. Putin and Xi Jinping, China's leader, are doggedly pursuing what they call a partnership with 'no limits'. But the top-secret FSB memo shows there are, in fact, limits. ... In public, President Vladimir Putin of Russia says his country's growing friendship with China is unshakable – a strategic military and economic collaboration that has entered a golden era. But in the corridors of Lubyanka, the headquarters of

Russia's domestic security agency, known as the FSB, a secretive intelligence unit refers to the Chinese as 'the enemy'."

China's position at the top of DoD's list of Arctic concerns is an illogical strategic prioritisation of the least worrisome of Arctic security threats faced by America and the West. Indeed, unnoticed was that China's Arctic policy resembled more in form and substance that of its East Asian neighbours, particularly Japan. China has risen fast and high as a global power, seeking (as the Pentagon describes): "to pursue greater influence and access" – not just in the Arctic, but worldwide. China's not alone in asserting its Arctic interests and ambitions: Japan, Korea, Singapore and India are all increasingly active non-Arctic states with expanding Arctic interests and ambitions, and these need not be perceived as threats to the Arctic, nor to the West. Indeed, they are to the benefit of Arctic peoples – many of whom continue to live in poverty and face persistent gaps in health, nutrition and economic security with their countrymen to the South – who welcome increasing interest in

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developing their homelands after long histories of colonial neglect and exploitation.

Anti-China bias runs deep throughout America's polar research community, and since NATO's Northward expansion incorporating Sweden and Finland has been spreading like a zombie virus across Europe. After 2022, the USA took the lead in undermining a cooperative, multilateral Arctic in its quest to contain Russia, just as it did again after 2024, as reflected in the Pentagon's focus on containing China. The West's consistent but misguided alarm over China's dual civil-military use of Arctic research is a case in point, as China's research practices mirror those of America and its allies with Arctic research programmes. From the Cold War's end until 2022, all nations worked together to transcend old East-West divisions in the Arctic, and dual-use has become a universal fact of life for Arctic research with a mutual dependency on government funding and an alignment of research with policy priorities.

Indeed, dual use of Arctic research is much more a norm than a subversion of norms, despite the disingenuous protests of an army of DoD-funded scholars to the contrary. Consider these public comments made by the former director of the now shuttered Wilson Centre Polar Institute – closed down by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) in early 2025 for fostering ideas that undermined White House policy – who described to National Public Radio in August 2024: "I think we see the PRC attempting to undermine regional governance and to increasingly advance this narrative that non-Arctic states should have influence in the region. So I think that is something where we do see the PRC influencing the governance conversation in a way that is contrary to US interests... China sends

its research ice breakers to the Arctic every year ostensibly to collect climate data. But, of course, they're also collecting, you know, intelligence data and mapping submarine cables and all that kind of thing because, you know, everything they do is dual use."

Ironically, the US polar research community in the civilian academic world is equally dependent upon US government support for ice breaker access as well as other infrastructure and transportation support, all the way from Pituffik Space Base (formerly Thule Air Base) in North Greenland, to the North-West Passage and High Arctic Archipelago off Canada's mainland, all the way to Antarctica. Dual use doesn't differentiate

IT'S SHORTSIGHTED TO PRESUME RUSSIA AND CHINA'S ALIGNMENT WILL ENDURE GIVEN THEIR PAST

China from the West, but instead unites them. Just as the Pacific is not and was never truly an American lake despite the predominance of US naval power in the post-WWII Pacific, the Arctic is not and has never been an American lake, in large part because Russia flanks more than half of the Arctic basin, far surpassing America's or its allies' Arctic littoral territories.

While the United States unfairly portrays Beijing's vision of the Arctic as part of the global commons as a ploy to: "shift Arctic governance in its favour" – as the Pentagon described in its 2024 Arctic strategy – the Arctic as global commons is actually a widely held view shared by many Northerners, including

prominent Americans such as former Alaska governor Wally Hickel – who served twice as Alaska's governor and also as Interior Secretary in President Richard Nixon's cabinet. Hickel promoted Alaska and the Arctic as not only part of the global commons, but the solution to what ecologist Garrett Hardin called the "tragedy of the commons," as described in Hickel's 2002 book, *Crisis in the Commons: The Alaska Solution*. China's view of the Arctic as part of the global commons is therefore not a nefarious plot to undermine the West's interests or values, but the logical outcome of a generation of globalisation linking East and West since the Cold War ended, integrating the economies of both hemispheres and aligning economic values.

If anything, China is rising to the challenge of Arctic development made possible by the West's collective historic failure to fully develop its own remote Arctic territories and to fully transcend its own tarnished colonial histories. China's pragmatic realisation that there is now mutual opportunity for investing in the Arctic that can benefit Arctic peoples long neglected by their respective sovereign states is only possible because of such neglect across long periods of disinterest in the USA and its allied Arctic states for their far-Northern peripheries. China should instead be welcomed as an economic partner that reflects Beijing's rising global stature and upon which so many Western nations have come to depend, and not as a spoiler intent on disrupting the Arctic status quo. China's participation in Arctic economic activities and engaging regional governance structures just as it does elsewhere in the world is part and parcel of being a global power. It's time for the West to put such anti-China prejudices aside ●

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The Pentagon believes China is making huge efforts "to pursue greater influence and access" in the Arctic

