

# China's Arctic Aspirations and Polar Silk Road: Implications for Great Power Competition

## Çin'in Kuzey Kutbuna İlişkin Hedefleri ve Kutup İpek Yolunun Büyük Güç Rekabeti Üzerine Etkileri

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### Abstract

This article offers an in-depth exploration of China's Arctic aspirations, with a specific focus on the development of the Polar Silk Road (PSR), and the ensuing implications for the dynamics of global power. The Arctic region, once considered remote and inaccessible, is undergoing a transformation largely driven by climate change. This transformation is unveiling new opportunities for navigation and resource extraction, thereby attracting the attention of various nations, including China. Despite its geographical distance from the Arctic, China has been vocal about its Arctic aspirations, most notably through its proposed PSR initiative. The article scrutinizes the development of the PSR, a component of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative, and its potential to bolster China's economic prowess by unveiling new trade routes and granting it access to valuable resources. It also discusses the potential implications of China's Arctic ambitions for the balance of power among major powers such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union. Drawing on theories from political science and international relations, including realism, liberalism, and constructivism, the article provides a theoretical lens to understand these dynamics. It underscores the need for careful management of Arctic affairs to ensure that competition does not escalate into conflict. The article concludes by highlighting the need for further research to fully grasp the implications of China's Arctic policy and to explore potential responses by other major powers.

**Keywords:** China, Arctic, Polar Silk Road, belt and road, great power competition

### Öz

Bu makale, özellikle Kutup İpek Yolu'nun (KİY) gelişimine ve bunun küresel güç dinamikleri üzerindeki etkilerine odaklanarak Çin'in Kuzey Kutbu'na yönelik hedeflerini derinlemesine incelemektedir. Bir zamanlar uzak ve erişilmez olarak kabul edilen Kuzey Kutbu bölgesi, büyük ölçüde iklim değişikliğinin yol açtığı bir dönüşümden geçiyor. Bu dönüşüm, seyrüsefer ve kaynaklara ulaşım için yeni fırsatlar ortaya çıkarmakta ve böylece Çin de dahil olmak üzere çeşitli devletlerin dikkatini çekmektedir. Kuzey Kutbu'ndan coğrafi olarak uzak olmasına rağmen Çin, özellikle de önerdiği KİY girişimi aracılığıyla Kuzey Kutbu'na yönelik arzularını dile getirmektedir. Bu makale, Çin'in daha geniş kapsamlı Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'nin bir bileşeni olan KİY'in gelişimini ve yeni ticaret yolları açma ve değerli kaynaklara erişim sağlama açısından Çin'in ekonomik gücünü destekleme potansiyelini incelemektedir. Ayrıca Çin'in Kuzey Kutbu hedeflerinin ABD, Rusya ve Avrupa Birliği gibi büyük güçler arasındaki güç dengesi üzerindeki potansiyel etkileri de tartışılmaktadır. Realizm, liberalizm ve yapısalcılık gibi siyaset bilimi ve uluslararası ilişkiler teorilerinden yararlanan makale, bu dinamikleri anlamak için teorik bir mercek sunmaktadır. Makalede rekabetin çatışmaya dönüşmemesini sağlamak için Kuzey Kutbu meselelerinin dikkatli bir şekilde yönetilmesi gerektiğinin altı çizilmektedir. Makale, Çin'in Kuzey Kutbu politikasının sonuçlarını tam olarak kavramak ve diğer büyük güçlerin olası tepkilerini anlamak için daha fazla araştırmaya duyulan ihtiyacı vurgulayarak sona ermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin, Kuzey Kutbu, Kutup İpek Yolu, kuşak ve yol, büyük güç rekabeti

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## Introduction

The Arctic, previously seen as a remote and unforgiving territory, has unanticipatedly emerged as a significant focal point in the international political arena. This shift is predominantly spurred by climate change, which results in the rapid melting of Arctic ice, consequently exposing new opportunities for maritime navigation and resource extraction. In light of these developments, China, despite its considerable geographical distance from the Arctic, has been displaying a keen interest in the region, articulating its Arctic aspirations prominently through its Polar Silk Road initiative.

The Polar Silk Road is a crucial element of China's overarching Belt and Road Initiative, designed to carve a fresh maritime route across the Arctic Ocean, thereby facilitating a direct connectivity between East Asia and Europe. This ambitious undertaking underscores China's recognition of the strategic and economic importance of the Arctic, along with its resolve to establish its presence in the prospective developments of the region.

However, the Arctic aspirations of China have not remained unobserved. These ambitions have kindled apprehensions among Arctic nations and other significant global powers, instigating dialogues on potential repercussions for sovereignty, environmental conservation, and regional security. Moreover, these aspirations have added a novel facet to the interplay of power among nations, with the Arctic transforming into a stage for strategic contention among leading powers including the United States, Russia, and the European Union.

In this study, we delve into China's Arctic aspirations, scrutinize the progress of the Polar Silk Road, and explore the implications for the balance of power among nations. Utilizing the latest literature and theoretical frameworks from political science and international relations, we seek to shed light on these complex issues. Throughout this detailed analysis, we posit that understanding China's Arctic policy and its impact on the balance of power among nations is crucial in navigating the changing dynamics in the Arctic, ultimately contributing to a peaceful and sustainable future for this region.

### Theoretical framework

This research integrates three essential theories from political science and international relations: realism, liberalism, and constructivism, to thoroughly analyze China's Arctic ambitions and their impact on global power dynamics. These theories provide diverse lenses through which to interpret China's strategic motivations and actions in the Arctic.

For a profound comprehension of China's Arctic objectives and their impact on the interaction among leading powers, it is indispensable to adopt a theoretical perspective. Three cardinal theories from the disciplines of political science and international relations serve as instrumental frameworks for our analysis.

Comparing the three theories reveals varied interpretations of China's Arctic policy. Realism views it as power-driven, seeking strategic advantage in resources and trade routes. Liberalism sees it as a collaborative effort, fostering economic interdependence and global governance. Constructivism focuses on the role of social constructs, norms, and China's identity, suggesting its Arctic strategy is influenced by global perceptions and internal narratives. Each theory provides a unique lens, revealing different facets of China's approach and intentions in the Arctic.

### Realism

Realism, as a foundational theory in international relations, advocates that states navigate an anarchic global system by pursuing power and security as their primary objectives. In this context, China's Arctic strategy, as evidenced by the Polar Silk Road initiative, can be interpreted as a multifaceted endeavor to enhance its global standing. This strategy is not merely about creating new trade routes or accessing resources; it's a comprehensive move to reshape the geopolitical landscape to China's advantage.

The Polar Silk Road is a strategic chess move in the complex game of global politics, where China seeks to establish new economic and strategic pathways. This initiative reflects China's ambition to diversify its trade and energy sources, reducing dependence on traditional routes vulnerable to geopolitical risks. By investing in Arctic infrastructure and developing new maritime routes, China is essentially creating alternatives that could shift the global trade dynamics significantly (Sezen, 2021)

Realism, fundamentally, asserts that in an anarchic global order, states are the main entities operating in their self-interest to amass power (Fiammenghi, 2011). Applying this lens of realism, one might interpret China's Arctic objectives as a strategic ploy to augment its power relative to other nations. The initiation of the Polar Silk Road, for example, could bolster China's economic influence by creating new commerce channels and facilitating access to precious resources, possibly swinging the balance of power in its favor (Tillman et al., 2018). Furthermore, realism would imply that China's expanded footprint in the

Arctic emerges as a reaction to the perceived threats from other prominent powers such as the United States and Russia, who are equally eager to exert their influence in the region.

Furthermore, realism emphasizes the competitive nature of international relations. China's Arctic ambitions can be seen as a response to the moves of other significant players, notably the United States and Russia. In this high-stakes environment, the Arctic becomes a new frontier in the contest for global influence. China's presence in the Arctic, therefore, is not just about economic gains; it's a strategic move to counterbalance the influence of other powers and assert its own presence in a region that is gaining increasing strategic importance.

Through the lens of realism, China's Arctic policy is a direct manifestation of its growing assertiveness and strategic foresight. It represents a calculated effort to secure long-term national interests by expanding its sphere of influence. The Polar Silk Road, in this light, is more than an economic project; it is a significant piece in China's grand strategy to cement its status as a global superpower.

### **Liberalism**

Liberalism, in the context of international relations, emphasizes cooperation, the rule of law, and the role of international institutions. Applying this to China's Arctic policy, one can see its efforts in the region as an attempt to foster a cooperative international environment. The Polar Silk Road, from a liberal perspective, is not just an economic venture but a diplomatic initiative that seeks to build partnerships and engage Arctic states in a mutually beneficial manner.

Liberalism accentuates the importance of international institutions and mutual cooperation among states (Deudney & John Ikenberry, 2021). From a liberal viewpoint, China's Arctic engagement could engender favorable results if it fosters enhanced collaboration among Arctic nations. China could contribute to defining the regulations and norms presiding over the Arctic, hence fostering regional stability and cooperation. Additionally, China could join forces with other nations for scientific research and environmental preservation in the Arctic, aiding worldwide efforts to mitigate climate change. Liberalism would also underscore the potential of economic interdependence, enabled by the Polar Silk Road, to foster peace and cooperation among nations (Su & Huntington, 2021).

This theory suggests that China's Arctic activities, including its investments and scientific research, are part of a broader effort to integrate itself into the Arctic community. By participating in international institutions like the Arctic Council and adhering to international norms, China positions itself as a responsible stakeholder, contributing to the stability and governance of the region.

Moreover, liberalism highlights the potential of economic interdependence as a peace-building mechanism. The increased trade and connectivity offered by the Polar Silk Road could lead to deeper economic ties and interdependence between China and Arctic states, reducing the likelihood of conflict and promoting a more cooperative international order.

In essence, liberalism provides a framework for understanding China's Arctic strategy as an effort to constructively engage with the international community, adhering to international norms, and fostering economic integration and peace through cooperation. This approach contrasts with the competitive, power-centric view of realism, offering a more collaborative vision of international relations in the Arctic context.

### **Constructivism**

Constructivism in international relations focuses on the role of social constructs, identities, and norms in shaping state behavior. Regarding China's Arctic policy, this perspective can provide insights into how China's self-perception as a 'near-Arctic state' and its narratives influence its Arctic ambitions. China's articulation of concepts like 'peaceful development' and 'community of shared future' reflects its desire to be seen as a responsible global actor, shaping its engagement in the Arctic.

Constructivism underscores the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behavior (McCourt, 2023). Constructivists might explore how China's self-identification as a "near-Arctic state" and its narrative of a "community of common destiny" influence its Arctic policy. They might further assess how global norms on matters such as climate change and indigenous rights steer China's Arctic aspirations (Su & Huntington, 2021). Constructivism would argue that China's Arctic policy incorporates not only material interests but also its identity and role within the global community. It would also emphasize the potential of norms and ideas, like environmental stewardship and respect for indigenous rights, to shape states' actions in the Arctic (Xinmin, 2019).

Constructivism would analyze how global norms and expectations, like environmental responsibility and respect for

indigenous rights, are internalized by China and reflected in its Arctic policy. This theory suggests that China's approach in the region is not purely driven by material interests but is also significantly influenced by its identity and the international community's norms. Constructivism also explores the impact of international discourse on state actions. In this context, the way other nations and international bodies perceive and react to China's Arctic activities influences Beijing's approach and policies in the region. This reciprocal relationship between China's actions and the global response plays a crucial role in shaping the evolving dynamics of Arctic governance (Wegge, 2014).

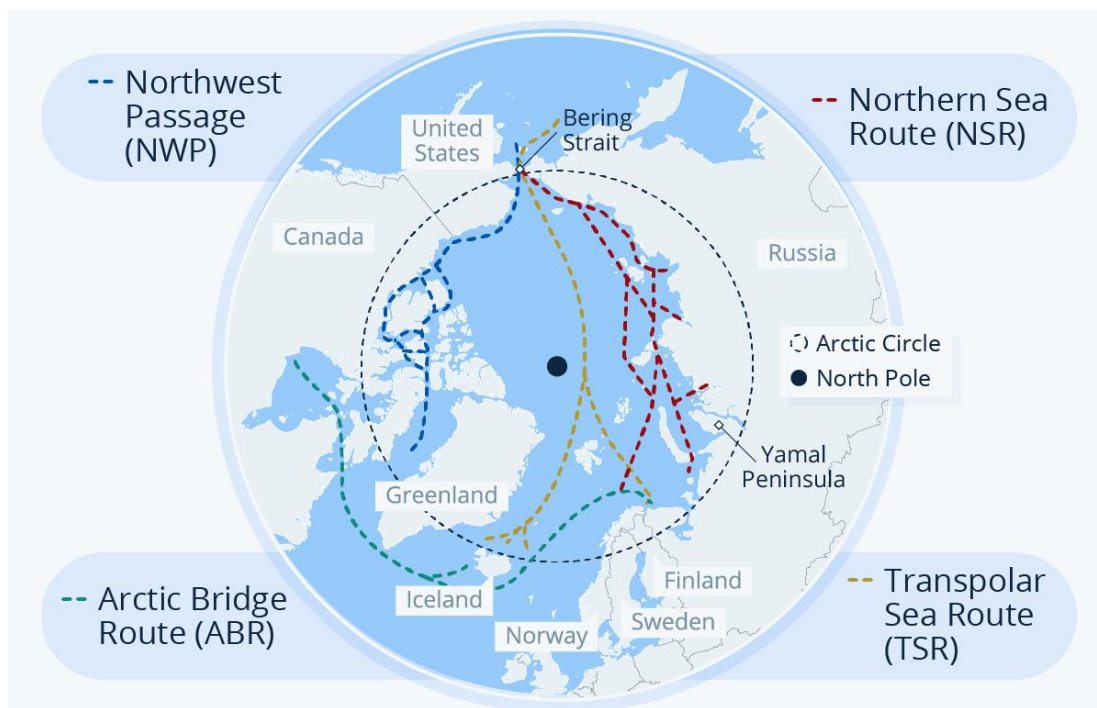
Through the lens of constructivism, China's Arctic policy is a complex interplay of strategic interests, identity, and adherence to international norms and expectations. This perspective offers a nuanced understanding of China's role and behavior in the Arctic, highlighting the importance of social constructs and shared norms in international relations.

In the ensuing sections, we will harness these theories to delve deeper into China's Arctic objectives, the evolution of the Polar Silk Road, and the implications for the power dynamics among leading nations. We will scrutinize how these theories can illuminate our understanding of the intricate interplay of power, interests, and norms in the Arctic and how they can offer insights into the potential trajectories for cooperation or conflict among states in this region.

### Background and importance of the Arctic region

The Arctic region, once a remote and lesser-known area, has gained global prominence due to economic interests and the imperative of understanding climate change. This shift has not only changed the nature of exploration but also its impact, necessitating advanced technology, international cooperation, and infrastructural development. Consequently, the Arctic has become a focal point of geopolitical competition and cooperation, with states vying to increase their influence and attract international investments, underlining the ongoing predominance of national interests in the region (Ayaydin, 2022).

Once perceived as an isolated and impenetrable area, the Arctic region has been acquiring increasing significance in global commerce, particularly in the domain of East-West trade. This change is principally attributed to the substantial reduction in travel distances that the Arctic facilitates. Despite its harmful impacts, climate change has resulted in the broad-scale melting of Arctic sea ice, paving the way for novel opportunities in commercial shipping. The Arctic's Northern Sea Route (NSR) offers a travel distance up to 40% shorter between Asia and Europe compared to the existing Suez Canal route, which could potentially enhance trade efficiency and promote economic growth across numerous European and East Asian nations (Yumashev et al., 2017).



**Figure 1:** The Polar Silk Road – The four major transatlantic maritime routes opening up by Arctic ice melting (Fleck, 2023)

Projections indicate that approximately 5% of global trade could be routed through the NSR alone, given year-round and unhindered navigability. Such a shift in trade routes could generate extra revenue for the nations involved. However, it's crucial to recognize that the full capacity of the NSR is likely to be realized over a century hence, with a consistent rise in traffic expected from the mid-2030s (Karamperidis & Valantasis-Kanellos, 2022).

The implications of this shift extend beyond the economic sphere. The environmental consequences of amplified shipping in the Arctic, including the emission of short-lived pollutants such as black carbon, as well as CO<sub>2</sub> and non-CO<sub>2</sub> emissions associated with the additional economic growth enabled by the NSR, warrant careful consideration. These environmental factors underline the necessity for policy measures aimed at curbing emissions from Arctic shipping and providing reparation to the impacted regions (Makarova et al., 2022).

In this scenario, China's involvement with the Arctic is a relatively new development. The year 2018 marked a pivotal point when China revealed its Arctic policy through a White Paper, outlining its ambitions and strategies for the Polar Silk Road's development across the Arctic Ocean, symbolizing China's intention to assume a more assertive role in the region (China's Arctic Policy 2018).

The White Paper emphasized China's cognizance of the Arctic's economic potential, as well as the territorial challenges it encounters in its pursuit of an active role in the region. Considering its status as a non-Arctic state with no territorial claims, China is likely to rely on collaboration and invitations from Arctic states to further its regional interests (China's Arctic Policy 2018).

China's Arctic policy also indicates its intention to contribute to the governance of the Arctic Ocean. The policy intimates that China aims to assume a dynamic role in the region, presenting itself as a cooperative partner rather than a challenging actor (China's Arctic Policy 2018).

Furthermore, China's Arctic policy is inherently tied to its broader Belt and Road Initiative, especially the establishment of the Polar Silk Road. This initiative aims to create a new maritime route across the Arctic Ocean, connecting East Asia with Europe. The Polar Silk Road is perceived as a concrete embodiment of China's Arctic policy, mirroring its interests, objectives, and responsibilities in the Arctic region (Jian & Long, 2020).

Moreover, China's Arctic policy implies its intention to participate in the governance of the Arctic Ocean. The policy infers China's objective to occupy an active role in the area, identifying itself as a collaborative partner rather than a contentious actor (China's Arctic Policy 2018). This represents a considerable shift from the conventional power dynamics in the region, predominantly dictated by the Arctic states. China's proactive approach in the Arctic indicates its escalating global influence and its aspiration to assert itself in zones traditionally beyond its sphere of influence.

Nevertheless, China's Arctic objectives have triggered apprehensions among Arctic states and other leading powers. These worries pertain to matters of sovereignty, environmental conservation, and security in the Arctic. Specifically, the establishment of the Polar Silk Road carries implications for the region's balance of power (Peiqing & Huiwen, 2023).

The environmental impact of China's Arctic endeavors is a primary concern. For example, heightened shipping traffic along the Polar Silk Road could result in increased emissions of greenhouse gases and other contaminants, potentially intensifying climate change and inflicting harm on the delicate Arctic ecosystem. Moreover, the exploitation of natural resources, such as oil, gas, and minerals, could contribute to environmental degradation and a decrease in biodiversity (Manta, 2019).

From a security standpoint, the augmented presence of non-Arctic states in the region could escalate tensions and potential disputes over resources and territorial claims. This is especially pertinent in the context of the ongoing debates over the Arctic Ocean's legal status and the rights to its resources (Viguiet, 2021).

In terms of investment, China's financial commitment in the Arctic has been noteworthy. For instance, between 2012 and 2017, China invested over \$90 billion in the Arctic region, with the majority of these investments allocated towards energy and mining projects (China Regional Snapshot: Arctic 2022). Additionally, China has been an active participant in Arctic governance, with Chinese entities maintaining observer status in several essential Arctic organizations, such as the Arctic Council (Chen, 2023)

Regarding the effect on the Arctic states, China's activities have elicited varied responses. Some Arctic states, such as Russia and Iceland, have greeted Chinese investments and partnerships as opportunities for economic development. In contrast,

other states, including the United States and Canada, have voiced concerns about China's expanding influence in the region and the potential threats to their national security (Chen, 2023).

In conclusion, China's Arctic strategy and the construction of the Polar Silk Road are altering the dynamics in the Arctic region. While these developments usher in opportunities for economic growth and collaboration, they also present challenges concerning environmental protection and security. Therefore, it is essential for the Arctic states and the international community to engage with China in constructive dialogue to ensure the sustainable and peaceful development of the Arctic.

### **China's Arctic aspirations and Polar Silk Road**

China's Arctic objectives are shaped by an amalgamation of economic, strategic, and environmental factors. Economically, the Arctic is conjectured to harbor substantial untapped resources such as oil, gas, and valuable minerals (Biedermann, 2021). Strategically, the region offers a maritime shortcut—the Northern Sea Route—promising a significant reduction in transit time between East Asia and Europe. This strategic corridor forms the backbone of the Polar Silk Road, a vital artery in China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (Çevik & Durukan, 2020).

In its 2018 White Paper, China delineates a multifaceted Arctic strategy that encapsulates its vision to actively shape Arctic governance, develop Arctic shipping routes, and engage in scientific research and environmental conservation (China's Arctic Policy 2018). The paper positions China not merely as a stakeholder but as a 'near-Arctic state,' a term China adopts to justify its involvement in the region despite its geographical distance. This designation underscores China's intent to assert its presence and influence in Arctic affairs.

External events have considerably impacted China's Arctic interests, including the annexation of Crimea in Ukraine by Russia in 2014 and the subsequent incursion into Ukraine that commenced in February 2022. These actions provoked serious economic and financial penalties against Russia by Western countries (Trough, 2022). Reacting to these circumstances, Russia has sought closer economic relations with China. Consequently, the Russian Arctic has metamorphosed into a fresh horizon for Moscow's economic diplomacy with China. China's interests in energy and shipping dovetail with Russia's economic objectives in the Arctic, cultivating a fortified China-Russia alliance with notable consequences for the Euro-Arctic region. The persistent conflict and the developing alliance between China and Russia infuse an additional layer of intricacy to the geopolitical panorama in the Arctic, further amplifying the competition between great powers in the area (Sheng, 2022).

China's Arctic plan has increasingly adopted a security aspect, reinforced by the military (Havnes & Seland, 2022). In 2015, five Chinese warships were observed navigating along the Alaskan coast, leading observers to infer that China was broadening its maritime domain into the Arctic (LaGrone, 2015). This incited countries like Sweden, Norway, and Denmark to perceive China as a potential threat in the Arctic.

In 2018, China publicized its plan for a 'Polar Silk Road' as a segment of the Belt and Road Initiative, underscoring the strategic and economic values of the Arctic. China's BRI and PSR infrastructure objectives have prompted a shift in China's Arctic interests towards the Barents Sea, given that 80% of trans-arctic shipping traverses Norwegian waters (China's Arctic Policy 2018).

Concurrently, the European Union's Arctic strategy is also gravitating towards the Barents region, where it maintains a robust institutional presence, and where Denmark and Iceland's roles are comparatively diminished. The Barents region, rich in minerals—including rare earth elements—and marine protein, is not only the most economically promising sub-region of the Arctic but also the most viable channel for trans-Arctic shipping, per the Northern Sea Route's current trajectory (Biedermann, 2021).

Furthermore, China's Arctic pursuits are not only influenced by resource acquisition and strategic positioning but also by the desire to establish itself as a key player in global environmental governance. China's involvement in Arctic research initiatives, particularly in climate change studies, reflects its commitment to understanding and mitigating environmental impacts in the region. This scientific engagement, though beneficial for global climate research, also serves China's interests in gaining a foothold in Arctic governance and policy-making (Wang, 2023).

In addition, China's Arctic ambitions are closely linked to its broader geopolitical strategy, where it seeks to balance its rise as a global power with the existing international order. The Polar Silk Road is more than a route for commerce; it is a symbol of China's growing global influence and its ability to project power in new and strategic domains. However, this expansion has led to apprehension among traditional Arctic powers, who view China's growing presence in the region as a potential

challenge to their interests and sovereignty (Çevik & Durukan, 2020).

As the Arctic becomes an arena of heightened geopolitical interest, the interplay of these various factors – economic opportunities, strategic positioning, environmental stewardship, and global power dynamics – will continue to shape the policies and actions of China and other key players in the region. The outcome of these interactions will have significant implications for the future of the Arctic, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that considers the interests of all stakeholders in the region.

### **Implications for Great Power Competition**

China's Arctic endeavors and the creation of the Polar Silk Road hold significant implications for the trajectory of global power dynamics. The Arctic region is progressively transforming into a venue for strategic rivalry, with major powers such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union keeping a vigilant eye on China's activities in the region. The complex interplay between these nations and their Arctic strategies is multifaceted (Fravel et al., 2021).

The factors driving China's interest in the Arctic are diverse, encompassing the quest to secure novel shipping paths, access to natural resources, and a strategic position within the region. The formation of the Polar Silk Road, a system of maritime routes through the Arctic, is a central element of China's Belt and Road Initiative, leading to heightened observation from other major powers apprehensive of China's expanding influence in the region (Sharma, 2021).

#### **The United States**

In the context of growing geopolitical attention towards the Arctic region, notably from countries such as China, an updated Arctic strategy has been presented by the United States in 2022. This revision amplifies the nation's resolve to uphold a rules-based order in the region, a principle originally outlined in the U.S. Department of Defense's 2019 Arctic Strategy. This commitment is designed to mitigate potential threats and underscores the strategic significance of the Arctic region for the U.S.'s national security and economic concerns (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

The revised strategy shines a spotlight on the nation's escalated focus on the Arctic. While remaining vigilant of China's initiatives, the U.S. has enhanced its Arctic presence. This intensified attention manifests in an expanded military footprint and vigorous diplomatic initiatives. The U.S. is strengthening its alliances with other Arctic states and underscoring the importance of a rules-based order in the region, thus aligning its actions with its strategic aims. Further, the strategy accentuates the crucial role of collaboration with NATO and other Arctic states in ensuring regional security and stability (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

In addition, the 2022 strategy signals the U.S.'s intention to harmonize its security concerns with a pledge to environmental sustainability and respect for the rights of the region's indigenous peoples. These considerations infuse an additional layer of complexity into the nation's Arctic policy, exemplifying the U.S.'s comprehensive approach to its Arctic strategy (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

Recognizing the strategic importance of the Arctic for its national security and economic interests, the U.S. has heightened its focus on the region. In reaction to China's initiatives, the U.S. has been bolstering its Arctic presence, both militarily and diplomatically, which includes reinforcing its alliances with other Arctic nations and advocating for a rules-based order in the area (Li et al., 2023).

The United States' 2022 Arctic Strategy not only reinforces its commitment to security and economic interests in the region but also emphasizes a strong focus on addressing climate change and environmental protection. The strategy commits to partnering with Alaskan communities and the State of Alaska to build resilience to the impacts of climate change. This includes efforts to reduce emissions and improve scientific understanding of the Arctic environment, thereby contributing to global mitigation efforts and conserving Arctic ecosystems. These initiatives underscore the U.S. government's holistic approach to balancing security concerns with environmental stewardship in the Arctic region (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

Moreover, the strategy delineates a clear direction for sustainable economic development, aiming to improve livelihoods in Alaska, including for Alaska Native communities. This includes investing in infrastructure, improving access to services, and supporting growing economic sectors. By fostering sustainable development across the Arctic region and working with allies and partners to expand high-standard investment, the U.S. demonstrates its commitment to the economic well-being of Arctic residents and the long-term prosperity of the region (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

In terms of international cooperation and governance, despite the challenges posed by global geopolitical shifts, such as Russia's war in Ukraine, the U.S. remains dedicated to sustaining institutions for Arctic cooperation, including the Arctic Council. The strategy aims to position these institutions to effectively manage the impacts of increasing activity in the region. Upholding international law, rules, norms, and standards in the Arctic forms a key component of this commitment, reflecting the U.S.'s resolve to maintain a rules-based order in the region amidst rising strategic competition (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

The U.S. strategy also prioritizes five guiding principles across all four pillars of its Arctic policy. These principles include: consulting, coordinating, and co-managing with Alaska Native Tribes and communities; deepening relationships with Arctic allies and partners; planning for long lead-time investments; cultivating cross-sectoral coalitions and innovative ideas; and committing to a whole-of-government, evidence-based approach. These guiding principles are integral to the U.S.'s comprehensive approach to tackling the emerging challenges and opportunities in the Arctic region (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

The U.S.'s Arctic strategy also emphasizes enhancing technological capabilities and infrastructure development in the region. This includes upgrading existing military facilities, investing in new maritime capabilities suitable for Arctic conditions, and improving regional surveillance and communications systems. These developments are crucial for maintaining a strategic edge in the region and ensuring rapid response capabilities to any emerging threats (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

Moreover, the strategy highlights the importance of scientific research and collaboration. The U.S. aims to lead in Arctic research, focusing on climate change, environmental protection, and sustainable development. This scientific leadership is seen as vital for not only understanding the changing Arctic landscape but also for shaping policy decisions in the region. The U.S. is actively engaging with international partners and organizations to advance scientific understanding and address the challenges posed by the rapidly evolving Arctic environment (National Strategy for Arctic Region 2022).

### **Russian Federation**

Russia, with its geographical proximity to the Arctic, has been leveraging its position to assert dominance in the region. The country has been enhancing its military presence and infrastructure in the Arctic, demonstrating a willingness to collaborate with China, particularly along the NSR. However, Russia's approach to China's Arctic aspirations is marked by a degree of skepticism, and the country remains cautious of China's expanding influence in what it considers its strategic territory (Staun, 2017).

Russia's Arctic strategy is multifaceted, encompassing economic, strategic, and geopolitical dimensions. The country's Arctic resource developers are making long-term delivery contracts to customers for the majority of their output volumes, which allows the companies to weather short-term drops in commodity prices and fluctuations on the freight market (Maksakova, 2022). The country is also investing in intermodal sea-land transport connections in the Arctic, with plans to improve the railway system and connect the industrial complexes of the Urals and Western Siberian region with maritime transport on the NSR (Liu et al., 2021).

The Russian Arctic has also been shaped by external events, such as the annexation of Crimea in Ukraine by Russia in 2014 and the subsequent incursion into Ukraine that commenced in February 2022. These actions provoked serious economic and financial penalties against Russia by Western countries (Zhuravel & Timoshenko, 2022). In response to these circumstances, Russia has sought closer economic relations with China, transforming the Russian Arctic into a new frontier for Moscow's economic diplomacy. China's interests in energy and shipping dovetail with Russia's economic objectives in the Arctic, cultivating a fortified China-Russia alliance with notable consequences for the Euro-Arctic region (Ren, 2023).

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the developing alliance between China and Russia add an additional layer of complexity to the geopolitical landscape in the Arctic, further amplifying the competition between great powers in the region. The international sanctions on Russia following Russia's invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 by the EU, United States, UK, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and several other countries are likely to have negative impacts on Russia's resource development in the Arctic. These sanctions have essentially cut the entire Russian oil and gas sector off from Western support (Zhuravel & Timoshenko, 2022).

Despite these challenges, Russia remains determined to utilize its vast Arctic resources and build up large-scale industrial production within its Arctic zone. The country has demonstrated that it is technically and financially feasible to extract natural



resources throughout the year from remote parts of the Arctic and ship large quantities of raw materials along its Arctic coast to international markets. Russia's focus on the high Arctic underlines the increasing importance of Arctic export terminals for Russia's future extractive industries and energy policy (Gunnarsson & Lasserre, 2023).

In sum, Russia's Arctic strategy is a complex interplay of economic, strategic, and geopolitical considerations. The country is leveraging its geographical proximity to the Arctic to assert its dominance, while also fostering economic diplomacy with China. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the resulting international sanctions against Russia have added a new layer of complexity to the situation. Despite these challenges, Russia remains committed to its Arctic ambitions, underscoring the strategic importance of the region in the broader context of global power dynamics.

### **The European Union**

The European Union's stance on Arctic matters has shown flexibility in adapting to the evolving conditions in the region. The Arctic approach of the EU, updated as recently as 2021, underscores the vital role of international collaboration, perpetuation of sustainable practices, and adherence to the principles of international law within the Arctic region. The EU's attention is specifically drawn to the potential environmental consequences linked with China's actions in the Arctic, leading to its persistent calls for robust environmental control measures in the region (A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic 2021).

The fundamental elements shaping the EU's Arctic policy include its steadfast commitment to the preservation of the environment and proactive action against climate change. The EU has marked its presence in the global stage by contributing significantly to the fight against climate change, setting ambitious goals for curtailing greenhouse gas emissions. This commitment is visible in its Arctic strategy, which gives precedence to the principles of environmental conservation and sustainable growth (A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic 2021).

Furthermore, the EU has taken the initiative to endorse scientific research and foster international cooperation concerning Arctic matters. Notably, the EU's Horizon 2020 program has sponsored a multitude of research initiatives on Arctic-related issues, contributing to an enriched understanding of the region's environment and climatic conditions (EU Arctic initiatives 2023). The EU also actively engages with other stakeholders in the Arctic, including Arctic states, indigenous populations, and non-governmental bodies, encouraging dialogues and collaborative efforts on Arctic issues (The EU in the Arctic 2021).

Moreover, the interaction of the EU with other major powers, notably China and Russia, has a significant bearing on its Arctic policy. The EU exercises caution concerning China's expanding Arctic footprint, aiming to balance economic interactions with China while remaining committed to upholding international laws and norms in the region (Biedermann, 2021). Furthermore, the EU's relations with Russia, a state with significant Arctic presence, have been affected by geopolitical tensions, which add another layer of complexity to the EU's Arctic approach (Skripnikova & Raspotnik, 2019).

In conclusion, the EU's Arctic policy is a nuanced interplay of environmental, economic, and geopolitical considerations. As the Arctic gains further global attention, the EU's approach to the region will likely continue to evolve, reflecting the mutable dynamics governing the Arctic.

### **NATO**

NATO, acting as a collective defense organization, has been closely observing the changing security dynamics in the Arctic. While China is not considered a direct threat in the Arctic, NATO acknowledges the strategic implications of China's regional activities. With Finland's recent NATO accession in 2023 and Sweden's impending membership following the decision at the 2023 Vilnius summit, NATO's presence and influence in the Arctic are set to amplify, thereby enhancing its situational awareness and capabilities in the Arctic (Alberque & Schreer, 2022).

The NATO enlargement, with Finland becoming the 31st Alliance member in 2023 and Sweden's ongoing accession aspirations, has shifted the balance of power within both Europe and NATO toward the northeast of the transatlantic sphere. This shift has not only reshaped the strategic landscape of the Baltic Sea but also the Arctic. Politically, with Finland and Sweden's membership, Russia will be the only member on the Arctic Council that is not a member of NATO (Gisclon & Keyman, 2023).

The addition of Finland and Sweden to NATO has not only reshaped the strategic landscape of the Baltic Sea but also the Arctic. Politically, with Finland and Sweden's membership, Russia will be the only member on the Arctic Council that is not a member of NATO. Militarily, Finland's sizeable icebreaker fleet and Sweden's submarine fleet will help secure the high seas.

Both militaries have significant experience in preparing for the extreme temperatures in this region and can offer other member states knowledge in this area through joint exercises (Møller, 2019).

An increased NATO presence inside the Arctic Circle not only has the potential to counter Russia's militarization of the region but also China's efforts to further destabilize the region as it builds up its Polar Silk Road. As NATO's High North has become increasingly important to Allied security as the ice in the Arctic continues to melt, Sweden and Finland are essential to help NATO defend this new strategic center (Baudu, 2023).

Apparently, the activities of China in the Arctic have not only sparked concerns among these major powers but have also introduced a new aspect to the broader great power competition. The Arctic is emerging as a fresh frontier in this competition, with each power striving to secure its interests and influence within the region. It is critical to understand China's Arctic policy and its implications for the management of changing Arctic dynamics and the assurance of a peaceful and sustainable regional future.

In summary, the aspirations of China in the Arctic and the development of the Polar Silk Road are recalibrating the geopolitical equilibrium in the Arctic. They are affecting the Arctic strategies of major powers and amplifying the competition for regional influence. As the Arctic's significance in global politics continues to rise, the actions and interactions of these powers will play a decisive role in determining the future of the region. Understanding these dynamics is vital for managing Arctic geopolitics' complexities and ensuring a peaceful and sustainable regional future.

### **Conclusion**

China's Arctic ambitions, exemplified by the Polar Silk Road initiative, are a vivid illustration of its expanding influence in global geopolitics. This strategic shift, while adapting to the evolving climate of the Arctic, also signifies a profound change in the geopolitical landscape, marking a new era in international relations. The development of the Arctic region, due to climate change and its untapped resources, has emerged as a vital strategic and economic frontier, with China positioning itself as a key player.

An in-depth theoretical analysis from the perspectives of international relations theories provides varied interpretations of China's Arctic strategy. Realism views China's Arctic foray as a strategic power play, reflecting its ambitions to expand influence in a new domain, as evidenced by its increased investment in Arctic infrastructure and military capabilities, including icebreaker ships and dual-use Arctic research facilities. Liberalism, conversely, suggests a potential for cooperative governance and mutual benefits, recognizing the Arctic Council's role in facilitating collaborative efforts among Arctic states, including China's observer status and its participation in various scientific and environmental initiatives. Constructivism focuses on how China's Arctic engagement is shaping its global identity and vice versa, influenced by its interactions with other Arctic players. This is seen in China's self-identification as a "Near-Arctic State" and its diplomatic efforts to secure a role in Arctic governance, challenging traditional notions of Arctic sovereignty and prompting a reevaluation of Arctic policies by other great powers.

Among these theories, realism offers the most comprehensive explanation of the current situation, especially when considering China's strategic investments and activities in the Arctic. Realism's focus on power dynamics and national interests aligns closely with China's assertive approach to establishing a foothold in the Arctic through infrastructure development, military enhancements, and diplomatic maneuvers. This realpolitik approach underscores China's pursuit of geopolitical influence and resource control in the region, reflecting a traditional power-centric perspective in international relations that accurately captures the essence of China's Arctic ambitions.

China's strategic maneuvering in the Arctic region is reshaping global maritime dynamics, challenging the existing power balance. This shift is prompting a reevaluation of Arctic strategies by major global powers, especially the United States, Russia, and the European Union. Each of these powers, with their own interests and strategies in the Arctic, is adjusting its approach in response to China's growing presence. This creates a complex web of interactions, marked by cooperation, competition, and strategic realignments.

From an environmental perspective, China's role as the world's largest carbon emitter juxtaposes its Arctic aspirations. The Arctic's susceptibility to climate change makes it imperative for China to adopt sustainable development practices. Balancing economic ambitions with environmental stewardship is crucial, necessitating policies that consider the ecological fragility of the Arctic and its global climate implications.

On the diplomatic front, China's Arctic policy entails a sophisticated balance of cooperation and rivalry with Arctic and non-Arctic states. Understanding these diplomatic intricacies is essential, as they influence regional power dynamics and have broader implications for global geopolitics. China's diplomatic tactics in the Arctic, involving bilateral and multilateral engagements, reflect a complex strategy aimed at maximizing its interests while navigating the sensitivities of Arctic governance.

Looking ahead, the future of Arctic governance demands a comprehensive and cooperative approach. Strengthening international norms and institutions, fostering scientific collaboration, and promoting environmental protection are crucial for managing the region's growing competition and ensuring its sustainable development. This involves a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including Arctic states, non-Arctic nations, indigenous communities, and international organizations.

In the realm of academic research, an interdisciplinary approach is paramount to fully grasp the nuances of China's Arctic policy. Political science, international relations, environmental science, economics, and strategic studies all play vital roles in analyzing the complex interplay of factors shaping China's Arctic involvement. This research is instrumental in informing policy decisions and shaping the future of Arctic governance.

In conclusion, China's increasing involvement in the Arctic is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing strategic, environmental, and diplomatic dimensions. The Arctic region, as a focal point of global changes, presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Continued scholarly investigation and policy innovation are necessary to navigate these complexities and chart a course for a peaceful and sustainable future in the Arctic.

*Hakem Değerlendirmesi:* Dış bağımsız.

*Çıkar Çatışması:* Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

*Finansal Destek:* Yazar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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