

Polar Silk Road: a China's Ambitious Plan of Belt and Road Initiative in Arctic Region

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Abstract:

The Arctic area has recently gained special attention owing to climate change and the melting of ice; a fact that has attracted China's interest. To find new routes and connect Europe with Asia, Beijing is looking for transportation corridors to attain the objectives of its project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Consequently, China has introduced a strategy known as the Polar Silk Road (PSR) as a means to carry out its work in the Arctic. Within this context, the present article essentially seeks to determine the major opportunities provided by the development of the PSR. It equally sheds light on the responses of the US and Russia to this project. The descriptive and qualitative methods are, accordingly, implemented to explain the strategic benefits that China is likely to obtain from this strategy. The paper concludes that China intends to maintain and reinforce its influential role through the PSR strategy, striving for a prosperous and environmentally conscious future for the Arctic area.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China, Polar Silk Road Strategy, Russia, US.

1- Introduction

The Arctic area, an isolated and not widely known place, has become famous because of its particular geographical location, which combined the land and sea with its economic concerns and the climate change that caused the rapid melting of ice, resulting in the opening different shipping routes in addition to the exploration and mining resources. Regarding these advancements and due to its geographical proximity, China has shown its desire and interests in this region by operating its ambitions through a plan known as the Polar Silk Road (PSR), which is considered an element of BRI.

As part of Beijing's initiative One Belt, One Road (OBOR), which Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in 2013, China introduced a White Paper in 2018 known as *China's Arctic Policy*. It contained Beijing's Arctic program objectives. To carry out its work, China declared itself the closest nation to the Arctic in order to participate in the issues and affairs of the Polar States. Therefore, this document argues that the PSR is an essential step in integrating the Arctic Ocean into the road and extending the BRI to Europe. This suggests Beijing's goal of building a corridor connecting Asia with Europe, opening up new opportunities for economic growth, promoting long-term development, and fostering peaceful and sustainable growth in the Arctic.

In this regard, the focal question raised in this article is: How will the Polar Silk Road provide opportunities for China in the Arctic region? However, in terms of climate change and the geographical changes of the global system, the area has emerged as a potential place for competition between major rival powers, such as the US, which has proven a keen interest in the Polar region both militarily and diplomatically. Russia, on the other hand, is considered a closer player with China; this may result in direct conflict between them. The present article seeks to answer the following sub questions, on the basis of these data points:

- 1) Why has China been involved in the Arctic region?
- 2) Is the Polar Silk Road plan an extension of the Belt and Road initiative?
- 3) How have the US and Russia responded to China's PSR?

The nature of this study requires the use of the historical approach and the descriptive analysis method because it includes elements of historical, geographical, and multiple-level evaluations of international units as well as regional relations. The descriptive method is implemented to depict the main events that led to Chinese involvement in the Polar area, however, the qualitative method is used to find out the opportunities of the PSR in the Arctic, in addition to analyzing the main reactions of the US and Russia toward the Arctic strategy of China.

2- Arctic's Growing Importance

The Arctic is a distinct geographical area that covers the Arctic Ocean, the north of Asia and Europe, and the North American continent; it includes multiple islands with a collective land mass of more than 27 million km², or roughly triple the length of Europe; its main symbol is the Arctic Ocean, which stretches over 14.75 million km² (Dang et al., 2022). The region takes up roughly 8% of the planet's surface and covers the area north of the Arctic line (66 degrees 3' minutes N) (Feldt & Hébrard, 2021). It is composed of eight states: Iceland, Norway, Russia, Finland, the US (Alaska), Denmark (Greenland), Canada, and Sweden, in addition to the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (Rashmi, 2019).

For many years, the Polar Sea was regarded as land or the mainland since the area had been blanketed with ice (Feldt & Hebrard, 2021). The Arctic has considerable strategic importance in terms of economics, significant resources, and the fastest passages that connect the Pacific and Atlantic oceans; therefore, the area has become a focal point for the geostrategic agendas of major nations (Dutta & Banerjee,

2022). There is increasing interest in the economic, political, and social importance of the Arctic because of the fast melting ice and the global warnings (2022). As a result of these developments, the Polar nations have the opportunity to discover fresh resource reserves and use the newly available maritime paths for trade possible programs, investigations, stability, and peace have received global interest (Rashmi, 2019).

For more emphasis, Ronald C. Brown states that the Arctic area became reachable due to the melting of ice and climate change, which has led to opening opportunities for port building, infrastructure, mining supplies, gas, and oil, in addition to the utilization of North Western maritime routes and harbours (2022). Thus, the Arctic regions are anticipating future opportunities, such as the development of innovative pathways for navigation and the utilization of unexplored resources, besides the provision of financial aid (Rashmi, 2019). It possesses an enormous quantity of minerals and resources, with 13% of oil reserves and 30% of natural gas still undiscovered (Dang et al., 2022).

In a particular evaluation carried out by the US Geological Survey (USGS) in twenty five chosen states within the Arctic region, it was determined that there was at least a 10% potential of finding more than one gas or oil deposit in these provinces; thereby, depending on these assessments, coastal states contain about 84% of worldwide unexplored natural gas and oil reserves (Rashmi, 2019). In 2008, as reported by USGS, there were approximately 90 billion oil barrels, 44 billion barrels of liquids, and 1669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the Arctic (2019).

3- China's Involvement in Arctic Region

Due to the effects of environmental change and the growing involvement of non Arctic regions, China showed its full focus and interest in this area, despite its physical isolation of China from the area, its historical limitations, and its lack of sovereignty there

(Grieger, 2018). Sanna Kopra stated that with scientific research, China has launched its engagement in the Arctic, where, in 1925, it ratified the Svalbard Treaty; however, at the early stages of the 1990s, Chinese scientists have been involved in the area and Arctic missions by using the study of Icebreaker *Xue Long* (Snow Dragon) (2020).

Thereby, on Svalbard, China launched its premiere Polar research centre, the Yellow River institution in 2004, and has completed 11 experimental voyages between 1999 and 2020 (Almén & Hsuing, 2022). Furthermore, the active role of China has increased since its joining the International Arctic Science Committee in 1997 (Jackobson, 2010). In an attempt to learn more about Arctic operations, China attended the meeting of the Arctic Council like an *ad hoc* participant in 2007, and the following year, it formally started announcing its intention to join the Council (Hong, 2018).

Nong Hong pointed out that China, along with Japan, India, and North Korea, were granted observer's positions in May 2013 by the Arctic Council, through this membership, China would be allowed to participate in different meetings held within this Council, such as in 2016, when it conducted several sessions held in the Council; besides, it ensured to attend the governmental forums to which observers were granted admission (2018). A significant move forward is the increased participation in Arctic affairs since its affiliation with the Council in 2013 (Almén & Hsuing, 2022).

Therefore, China is concentrating on fortifying its relationships bilaterally with the following five countries in Northern Europe: Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland; this cooperation was shown through the opening of the Chinese Embassy in Iceland, also, in 2012, Wen Jiabao, a Chinese Premier travelled to Sweden and Iceland; during the same year, Hu Jintao was the first Chinese President to make his first trip to Denmark in the 62 years since the two nations' diplomatic ties started (Hong, 2018). China also took part in the Year of Polar Prediction (YOPP), the Assembly of the Circle Arctic, and the International Arctic Science Committee (2018).

Linda Jakobson noticed that although China didn't introduce clear objectives and opinions on Arctic issues, Zhengyue Hu, a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, confirmed that Beijing lacks an Arctic plan and policy (2010). Furthermore, China has played a low key role in the region, where its presence is based on the improvement of ties with Polar states and has taken part in the growth of the area's resources' (Hong, 2018). Unfortunately, the Arctic governments showed their mistrust toward China's intention in the region, rejecting its proposal to become a permanent monitor in the Council three times, before granting membership (2018).

China delivered the Arctic White Paper, a document that highlighted its primary goals for policy, in January 2018 (Kopra, 2020). It is entitled *China's Arctic Policy*; it aims to preserve, develop, comprehend, and play in its leadership to enhance the shared interests of the global society and all Arctic nations and foster the long-term growth of the region (2020). The published paper proved that under the first term of President Xi Jinping from 2013 to 2018, the Arctic area has made significant progress on the priorities of China's foreign affairs (Grieger, 2018).

The white paper clearly stated that from the beginning, China has recognized its hopes for the region to move from scientific studies to include a number of business operations (Grieger, 2018, p.1). Accordingly, the paper attempts to ease worries from both Polar and non Polar nations about the extent of China's Arctic intentions by emphasizing its engagement with international law, collaboration, and maintaining a balance between commercial objectives and environmental preservation (2018). Thus, when it serves as a participant member within the Council, Beijing is defined as the nearest Arctic nation under the Arctic Policy of 2018 (Kopra, 2020).

Accordingly, China is seeking to construct a PSR in the area as an element of the BRI, which could serve as a new route to European

markets (Gaens, et al., 2021). This initiative first appeared in a publication entitled *China's Arctic Policy* of 2018 (Topcu, 2023).

4- Polar Silk Road Project

For further understanding of the PSR project, this article sheds light first on the main meaning of the BRI. The 'Belt' conception encompasses transcontinental transportation routes that go from China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia, with a main emphasis on commerce, transportation systems, and energy; however, the 'Road' means that the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, in recent years, was concentrated on the Indian Ocean (Øfjord Blaxekjaeret et al., 2018).

The Chinese first used the term PSR and mainly applied it to the project of the Arctic maritime corridor, which links the three main global economic regions (Hadow, 2023). According to Tillman et al. the PSR is an international collaborative effort including China, Russia, and the Nordic nations, which has attracted the attention of the worldwide media; for China, there is a similarity between its Arctic policy and other nations' plans involving global climate change, long-term growth, and adaptive measures (2018). This plan is considered an essential part of the BRI which had an enormous effect on economic benefits for China, on the other side, other small Arctic states like Denmark and Iceland embarrass the efforts as well (Ushakova, 2021).

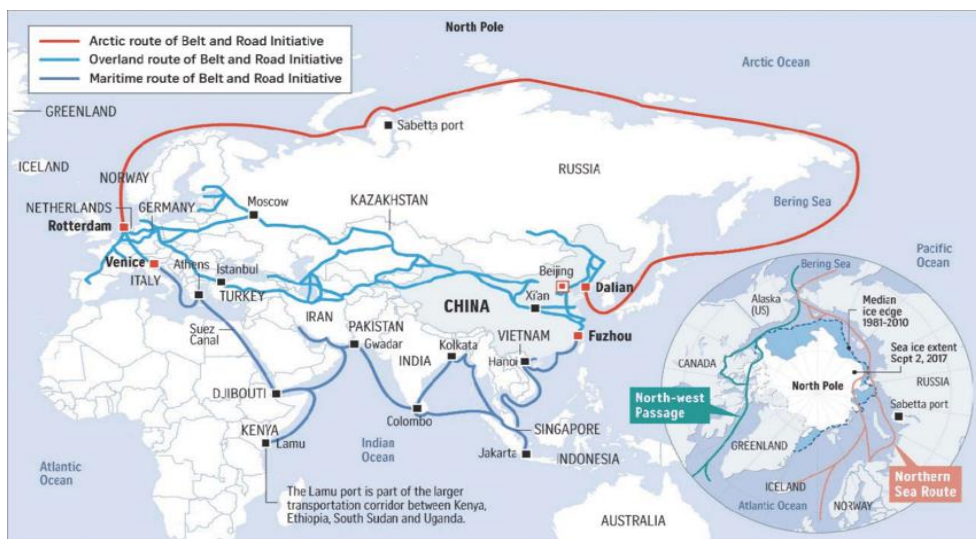
In order to ensure its strategy, China has introduced official documents, such as *Beijing's 14th Five-Year Plan*, which was announced in May 2021 stating that China could collaborate actively in the Arctic in order to develop the PSR, therefore, a former published paper of June 2017 which is entitled *the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*, emphasized that the Arctic is recognized as a three key passages of blue economic that connect to a wider interconnectivity goals of the BRI (Almén & Hsiung, 2022). Also, *the 13th Five-year* recommended increasing

scientific activities in oceanic Polar regions and speeding up the discovery and expansion of underwater resources (Hadow, 2023).

The idea of the PSR came first under the name of Silk Road on Ice was suggested by President Xi Jinping and his Russian analog Sergi Lavarov during a meeting in May 2017 (Tillman et al., 2018). Actually, China and Russia mentioned the PSR in an official meeting between, expressing their intention to establish what is known as the Northern Sea Route (NRS) (Ushakova, 2021).

The Launch of the PSR provided truly international significance for the BRI project (Rashmi, 2019). In fact, the PSR showed the physical representation of Beijing's Arctic Policy that reflects its purposes, desires, and commitments (Türker, 2024). It also represents the rise of China at the international level and its willingness to establish power in unexpected and crucial fields, rather than just serving as trade roads (2024).

Once this project is finished, China wants to encircle Asia with Europe and earn some foothold in Africa (Rashmi, 2019). However, the PSR project in the Arctic that links Asia and Europe has caused a lot of external debate on whether China is using this plan to gain strategic dominance and influence in the area (Dang et al., 2022).

Figure 1: Polar Silk Road Main Routes

Source: Kovalenko, A., Morgunova, M., & Gribkovskaia, V. (2018).

Infrastructural Synergy

of the northern sea route in the international context.

Jenergeticheskaya

Politika, 4(7), 57–67.

The map above showed how China used the Arctic regions as a way to reach Europe and Africa, in addition to different routes of land and sea of BRI, in addition to, the PSR road.

4.1. Opportunities of Polar Silk Road

The Arctic Corridor exposes outstanding opportunities for the collaboration of China within the boundaries of the PSR, hence, the Chinese investment would be very valued in which its businesses have been invited to held talk for the potential engaging in different projects, such as a mutual cooperation between Norway and China, their governments are trying to restart free trade talk that have been put on their agenda; more precisely, Norwegian shipping companies

are willing to interact with Chinese partner and predict more involvement from the Chinese sailing enterprises, like Kirkenes which is the nearest western harbour to Southeast Asia across the NSR will be essential for future partnership (Tillman et al., 2018).

From the above point, Neslihan Topcu notices that since China joined the Arctic Council, it has increased its business involvement in the region, like the advancement of different projects at the level of technological infrastructure, such as polar navigation systems and icebreaker ships, PSR also shortens sea voyages from 35 to 19 days between East and West; in addition, nations profit from traffic expenses, avoiding harmful pirate roads, and reducing fuel consumption (2023). Like the North Sea Passage (NSR) provides a path for travel between Europe and Asia that could be as much as 40% less than today's Suez Canal path, which has the capacity to boost the effectiveness of trade and drive job creation in many East Asian and European regions (Türker, 2024). Also, the expansion of NSR would accelerate fossil fuel exploitation and transportation to China and East Asia (Ushakova, 2021).

China has become an important trading partner with most Nordic nations, where the Chinese trade percentage increased between 2018 and 2021, for example, in Norway, the portion of Beijing grew in 2018 from 5.2% to 9.9% in 2020 (Almén & Hsuing, 2022). Furthermore, China contributes approximately 20% of worldwide industrial product imports of goods, with a dominance of electronics and equipment in Finland and Norway; clothing is also an important export from Beijing to the Nordic regions (2022). Chinese ships are allowed to sail freely in accordance with Polar laws that impose limitations on both Canadian and Russian naval vessel surveillance, where the International Maritime Organization aimed to decrease greenhouse gases from shipping to 50% until 2050, so this policy promotes the usage and advancement of Arctic canals which provide maritime opportunities (Dang et al., 2022).

The environmental issues have an impact on Chinese tourism in the Arctic; they enhance the global economy, where Chinese tourism is successful particularly with Russia and the Nordic regions, which are based on commerce and economic growth; also attracts investment and diversify these regions (Ushakova, 2021). China is continuing to explore natural resources like oil as well as gas in the polar region, which contains one fourth of global unknown resources, one quarter of the globe's gas investments, and 10% of undiscovered crude oil reserves (2021).

Haşim Türker concludes that as a result of the BRI and PSR economic goals, Beijing has moved its plans to the Barents Sea, considering that the Norwegian waters are used for 80% of trans-arctic economic activities (2024). Another opportunity created by China's PSR via the Arctic may increase the challenge for the European regions in different areas, like underwater trade, naval construction, the creation of development fields in the blue economy, and the international presentation of the Chinese naval forces (Sharma, 2021).

4.2. Risks of Polar Silk Road

Neslihan Topcu highlighted some threats from the PSR at different points: firstly, the Associate Professor from the Norwegian Arctic University, Dr. Marc Lanteigne, predicts that the Arctic area may serve as the New Middle East in terms of transportation and the production of energy due to its growing economic importance and state involvement. Secondly, China's increasing presence became a crucial point for certain government regions, like Norway and Denmark, despite the benefits they receive from working with China, they do not consider this partnership to be highly advanced, while Canada and the US have expressed their pleasure and are worried about the presence of China in the area. Thirdly, the Polar governments have expressed their worries about the Sino- Russian collaboration, noting that the growing influence of Beijing and the expansion of Moscow's political power are not supported by other nations (2023).

Another challenge confronting China's PSR is that Beijing faces difficulties due to geophysical circumstances, financial benefits, and ecological balance, which means businesses are unwilling to develop oil deposits; also, the Arctic roads are unsafe for adoption in international travel (Sharma, 2021). Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine and the disintegration of Arctic collaboration have hampered the ongoing implementation of the PSR concept in the area (Hadow, 2023).

The latter situation raised worries among Chinese companies about doing business with their partners in the area and the potential impact on their commerce with Europe, therefore worsening the currently stagnant PSR (Stünkel, 2022). As noticed by the risks of the PSR and its strategic and economic importance, it has caused international conflict, competition, and instability in the region; this is why the US and its allies are worried about the growing Chinese impact in the Arctic (Topcu, 2023).

5- American- Russian Responses to China's Polar Silk Road

The Polar region has become a competitive arena due to the involvement of strongholds like the US, China, and Russia. This article highlights some views from the US and Russia regarding the role of China in the Polar region through the implications of the PSR project, which is considered a central component of China's BRI.

5.1. American Response

According to experts, the PSR program offers economic challenges for the United States (Grady, 2020). Larissa Stünkel noticed that the Arctic region became a new zone of conflict in Sino-American relations, where the United States feared the Chinese presence there and its economic influence growing near the American borders (2022).

Rashmi B. R argued that due to the US' widespread suspicion of China's growth, scholars have defined it as the start of 'the Second

Cold War'; furthermore, China's Arctic Strategy is portrayed in American literature as a hidden danger in Eurasia and the Pacific Rim, as well as an imminent threat to the US in the High North, which is comparable to the US Marshall Plan (2019). A retired major general in the Air Force, Randy Kee with the Wilson Centre, argues that in order to decrease challenges, he recommends collaboration with the NATO and NORAD with the Canadians, as well as maintaining the airfield in Thule, Greenland (Grady, 2020).

Consequently, for both national security and economic reasons, the US has outlined an Arctic strategy for 2022 in order to emphasize its strategic importance and counter any threat (Türker, 2024). The White House published a strategy in October 2022 that represents the main four pillars to preserve American leadership both domestically and internationally, for the next ten years, these pillars will determine US policy in the area (2022). As Haşim Türker emphasized, in response to China's advances, Washington will expand its footprint in the Arctic (2024).

Accordingly, the main pillars of US strategy are: at the security level, the United States works to prevent threats at home and its allies by implementing coordinated strategies, boosting capabilities, and keeping active operations in the Arctic; the second element focuses on handling climate change and environmental protection; as an aspect of the effort to mitigate the damaging impacts of global climate change, the US plan aims to preserve the Arctic ecosystems and advance knowledge in science by decreasing pollution (The White House).

However, the third pillar tackles the issue of the sustainability of economic development, where this strategy seeks to work with partners and hopes to promote long-term growth of Alaska and incomes, particularly for Native communities of Alaska, by making investment infrastructure, upgrading services, and bolstering the financial stability of the state. However, the last element involves international collaboration and governance. This strategy claims that in order to handle the effects of rising activity in the area, the US

would try to preserve organizations for collaboration, like the Arctic Council. It also commits to upholding international law, regulations, standards, and guidelines in the polar region (2022).

The strategy indicates five guiding principles that the US will implement throughout its four pillars: engaging Alaska Native Tribes and Communities through consultation, coordination, and co-management with them. Additionally, it seeks to strengthen bonds with partners and allies, make long-term investment strategies, promote inter sectoral alliances and creative thinking; and adhere to a strategy that is based on evidence and involves the whole government (The White House, 2022). However, Richard Weitz stated in an online debate hosted by the Hudson Institution that China used an approach *emphasizing win-win*, progressing through the PSR program. Also, despite being nearly 1000 kilometers away from the Arctic, Weitz strongly argued in the white paper of 2018 that ‘China has a role’ from maritime paths to mineral extraction and climate (Grady, 2020).

5. 2. Russian Response

Russia had been looking for different negotiations with Western companies such as American Exxon Mobil, French Total, and Norwegian oil companies. However, this collaboration came under the threat of the Ukrainian crises and the financial penalties applied by Western nations. Consequently, Russia looked to the East, where the main linkages in Sino-Russian collaboration have evolved into China’s BRI initiatives (Ushakova, 2021). Russia seems to be very receptive to Chinese involvement in the Arctic; they play an essential role in hydrocarbons and infrastructure, and they excel in the Polar Silk Road initiatives (Rashmi, 2019).

Elena G. Ushakova argued that the PSR could play a crucial role in securing Russia’s authority over the region, particularly in light of to the recent event where NATO forces have endangered the Arctic’s stability. Furthermore, the US has been vocally opposing Russia’s military actions in the area (2021). As a result, China made a

significant investment in the Yamal LNG projects, since Russia came under sanctions imposed by the West. In 2016, Chinese banks involved in the projects as prospective lenders offered \$12 billion, which met two-thirds of the requirements for financing abroad (Rashmi, 2019).

The economic relationship between Moscow and Beijing is projected to triple to US\$ 200 billion by 2024, with growth expected to be at a rate of fifty million dollars per month (Brown, 2022). Moreover, through this collaboration with Beijing, Moscow will secure its national interests and overcome the political and economic confinement that it encounters from Western nations. On the other side, Beijing has increased its partnership with Moscow in order to oppose US policy in the Asia-Pacific region and preserve its energy independence (Dang et al., 2022). Due to its proximity to the Arctic, Russia has been able to assert its authority over the region; consequently, it is cooperating with China, particularly across the NSR, and enhancing its military position and capabilities, although Russia is still wary of China's Arctic advance into its vital region (Türker, 2024).

However, the Russian Doctrine of July 2022, which defines the High North as 'our Arctic waters', presents a risk to this partnership, increasing a global contest that promoted NATO's involvement and troubled relations with the US. Additionally, Beijing's acknowledgment of the Polar Silk Road could potentially challenge Moscow's territorial claims and the current state of affairs in the NSR (Stünkel, 2022). Haşim Türker noticed that the deep relationships between Moscow and Beijing may create a difficult geopolitical situation, boosting the rivalry among the major powers in the Arctic (2024).

6- Conclusion

The region of the Arctic has become an area of interest because of the ice melting and climate change. In addition to the closest passages that link Asia, North America, and Europe, on the other side, the appearance of shipping roads facilitate the development of economic and geopolitical objectives. The region is also rich in natural resources such as petroleum and gas, which have moved to a critical place in an Arctic state like China.

The BRI aims to emphasize China's dependence on the Arctic region, a strategy that the PSR eventually performed. This project involves encouraging deeper economic ties between China and the polar states. China can expand its territories and employ a substantial workforce of Chinese workers along the BRI beyond the Arctic, provided it maintains its position as the closest Arctic nation

Beijing uses the PSR to preserve and take benefits of different opportunities, both locally and internationally. It will open investment to different businesses to invest in this area; it will also maintain the balance of power as long as Washington and Moscow have affairs and armed forces in the Polar. It, also established bilateral and multilateral relations with different Polar nations, which will include open economic negotiations and trade agreements.

Moreover, through its partnership with Russia, China would protect its national interests and advance the BRI. The close relationship between them would also ease tensions with the US and its partners in the Polar area.

According to the Arctic, the foundation of the military forces of the US, Russia, and NATO would be feared; however, threats could rise in the area due to a potential conflict between the US, China, Russia, and Europe, which could result in an interruption of the promotion of the Silk Road project. Despite the challenges that face China's PSR, Beijing will keep working toward its long-term objectives to preserve its position as a prominent player in the area.

In summary, the effectiveness of the Arctic policy of China will be based on its determination to foster regional cooperation, employ strong language, and adhere to international accords. Additionally, the success of China will rely on its ability to engage in dual trade negotiations in addition to handle whatever opposition it comes across.

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