

Different scenarios, different policies

China's engagement in the South China Sea and in the Central Arctic Ocean

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1 Introduction

American researchers have discussed the prioritisation of maritime capabilities in major national power strategising at the end of the 18th century. Across the 18th and 19th centuries, the American Naval Officer Alfred Mahan then contributed to drawing attention to the need to secure American access to international markets to absorb the tremendous amounts of goods produced domestically. Mahan's idea consisted of building a merchant navy, an American battleship navy, and a network of American naval bases. His theory has since been crucial for the development of American naval strategy and influenced the development of maritime-power strategising worldwide. In recent decades, with the Chinese economy booming after the country's opening-up reform, China became more dependent on seaborne trade than it had been before, and the Chinese leadership started prioritising maritime interests to expand

the country's trade lines. While in the first phase, their attention was on near seas, when China's shipping routes became globalised, it became necessary to improve Chinese maritime capabilities in far seas. This transition was crystallised in the Chinese military strategy released in 2015. In the document, it was stated that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) would gradually expand its activity from "offshore waters' defence" to the combination of "offshore waters' defence" and "open seas' protection" (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015). "Off-shore waters' defence" refers to the area between China's coastline and the second island chain (that is, the Philippine Sea) including, of course, the East and South China Seas; "open seas' protection" essentially focuses on other missions, including protecting China's sea lanes (SLOC) that cross the Indian Ocean en route to or from China.

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The improvement of Chinese naval capabilities increases the possibility of China engaging in new and emerging geopolitical scenarios. However, it also requires China to develop specific strategies for different scales and strategies modelled on regional specificities. For instance, while China's strategy in the South China Sea is mainly focused on securing China's maritime sovereignty over a large area (the South China Sea), at the global level, is more oriented toward striking a favourable power balance.

Recently, the Arctic has gained great attention for its potential, connected to natural resources, fishing, and commercial opportunities. The "Arctic race" narrative has started to emerge, fuelling global power competition. Since China started to show interest in the area, it has often been regarded as a threat to the current order in the region. Scepticism over China's declared interest in the region is based on increasing commercial shipping through the Northern Sea Route, along with the country's opportunities to exploit natural resources and fishing activities in the Central Arctic Ocean. It is thought China might see there being opportunities to improve its domestic stability and economic development. However, the long-term nature of China's policy in the Arctic, the stalling of the Arctic Council, and the probable military escalation in the region make it crucial that we strive to better understand the priority level the Arctic region occupies in China's foreign

policy. We must also pursue a deep understanding of geopolitical scenarios in which China is engaged or planning to enhance its engagement. The South China Sea and the Arctic region are two relevant geopolitical scenarios for China. However, there are profound differences between the two pertaining to regional governance, rights to conduct maritime activities, and the sociopolitical context, which may profoundly influence China's strategy for each area.

Despite these discrepancies, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in 2019, proposed assimilating China's strategies in both geopolitical contexts under the threat theory framework. Accordingly, the rhetorical question, "Do we want the Arctic Ocean to transform into a new South China Sea, fraught with militarisation and competing territorial claims?" represented the peak of discourse-building on China's threat in the Arctic (Hounshell, 2019).

Yet, is it really possible to compare these two geopolitical scenarios?

By highlighting the reasons for China's different levels of engagement in the South China Sea and Central Arctic Ocean, this article's main aim is to show that bundling the two geopolitical areas together to justify assertions that China will take a revisionist approach to change the global order is tendentious. The argument is built through an analysis on three levels. The first focuses on differences in regional maritime regimes, the second on how the regions differ in priority for China's national

and foreign policy, and the third concerns the regions' differences in how sovereignty claims from regional state actors are advanced and the mechanisms that have been developed to resolve territorial disputes.

2 Regional maritime regimes

2.1 South China Sea

The South China Sea is an enclosed sea that stretches around 3.5 million square kilometres and consists of thousands of small islands, reefs, shoals, and atolls, spanning from the Singapore Strait to the Taiwan Strait. Many states have South China Sea coastline, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, Vietnam, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan. In the area, decades-long tension is mainly fuelled by overlapping sovereignty claims and fisheries disputes between regional states. The biggest archipelago in the South China Sea is the Spratly archipelago, which consists of an area of 409,000 square kilometres, located between Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Closer to the Chinese coastline, the Paracel Islands are mainly disputed between Vietnam and China. This archipelago is 165 kilometres southeast of the Chinese island Hainan and 185 kilometres east of the Vietnamese coasts. The Pratas Islands, meanwhile, are situated southeast of Hong Kong and are under Taiwan's sovereignty. Then, the Macclesfield Bank, which consists of 25 reefs, is disputed between China and the Philippines.

The leading international ruling instrument for maritime sovereignty claims is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS; United Nations (UN), 1982). It establishes territorial sea up to 12 nautical miles from the baseline, the contiguous zone up to 24 nautical miles, and the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) up to 200 nautical miles from the outer limit of the territorial sea. Despite those clear demarcations, there are overlapping disputes over sovereignty claims, making the area highly disputed, because of the richness of fisheries resources. No regional fisheries management organisations (RFMO) regulate fishing activities in the area. RFMOs are regional mechanisms that promote coastal states or distant water fishing nations (DWFN) to share practical and financial interests in managing fishing stocks in a specific region. Their mandate might address the regulation of a specific species or a group of species or, broadly, ensure that fishing does not endanger the marine ecosystem. The absence of such a ruling mechanism increases the potential for overfishing and illegal and unreported fishing, which not only endangers marine species but also increases the possibility of disputes between neighbouring states. The fisheries management impact measures a state's fisheries governance capacity, which is assessed through research, management, enforcement, socioeconomics, and stock statuses, based on which all South China Sea states perform poorly (Melnychuk et al., 2016). To improve the scenario, creating a

multilateral ruling body may not only help manage fisheries activities and reduce illegal fishing and overfishing but may also help create a cooperation structure that facilitates dialogue and eases overlapping sovereignty claims and geopolitical tensions.

2.2 Central Arctic Ocean

The Arctic Ocean accounts for 8.6 million square kilometres (5.4 million sq. miles). Depths of the Arctic shelves range from 100 meters for the Siberian Shelf to 2000 metres for the Alaskan Shelf (Stabeno et al., 2004). The Central Arctic Ocean is the largest area of high seas in the Arctic. Five coastal states surround it, encompassing an area of 2.8 million square kilometres.

The area beyond the EEZs, also known as the high seas, is ruled under article 89 of UNCLOS: "No State may validly purport to subject any part of the high seas to its sovereignty" (UN, 1982). This resulted in the formation of high seas areas of the water column beyond the five coastal states' EEZs and national jurisdiction: the Donut Hole in the Bering Sea, surrounded by the EEZs of the United States and Russia; the Polygon in the Sea of Okhotsk, surrounded by the EEZ of Russia; and the Loop Hole in the Barents Sea, surrounded by the EEZs of Norway and Russia (Vylegzhanin et al., 2020).

While for decades, the Arctic Ocean's coastal states' attention was focused on creating legal and policy arrangements to allow the northern states to govern the

area, a real game-changer has since been the melting of the ice of the Arctic Ocean (Koivurova, 2019).

Regarding fisheries activities, the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) manages the long-term conservation and optimum utilisation of fishery resources in a swath of the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans north of 36°N and between 42°W and 51° E longitude, stretching all the way to the North Pole. With a specific focus on the Central Arctic Ocean, in October 2018, the five coastal states together with China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union—signed the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean (CAO Agreement; MOFA, 2018). The main feature of the Agreement is to prohibit unregulated fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean. It also provides for a Joint Program of Scientific Research and Monitoring to assess the prospects for the development of commercial fish stocks and, in the case commercial fishing becomes an attractive prospect, aims to launch a regular meeting to establish fisheries management organisations (Vylegzhanin et al., 2020). The CAO Agreement is based on the precautionary approach that, in the past decades, has emerged in environmental law and natural resources conservation in the face of scientific uncertainties. The concept emerged from the Rio Summit held in 1992:

In order to protect the environment the precautionary

approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation. (UN Conference on Environment and Development, 1992)

3 Priority given to China's national security

3.1 South China Sea

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value are shipped by sea, and 60% of maritime trade passes through Asia (UNCTAD, 2015). The South China Sea represents a crucial maritime crossroads for trade not only for China but also for many other states, including non-Asian states.

China imports most of its energy supplies (oil and liquified natural gas) from African and Middle East regions through shipping lanes. According to the Energy Information Administration (EIA), more than 30% of global maritime crude oil passes through the South China Sea, consisting of 15 million barrels daily (EIA, 2018). The majority (90%) of the crude oil volumes managed in the South China Sea pass through the Malacca Strait, representing the shortest route between the African and

Persian Gulf suppliers for Asian markets. The three major Asian importers of crude oil in the area are China at 42%, Japan at 20%, and South Korea at 18%. China is the world's largest importer of crude oil; in 2018, its oil dependence reached 72%, and 80% of crude oil imports flowed through the Malacca Strait. The high dependence on this specific choke point is a long-lasting concern for the Chinese leadership. Moreover, the political instability and military conflicts that affect exporting regions have induced China's leadership to diversify energy supplies. Due to the long-distance shipments this entails, China should increase its expenditure on the modernisation of the military force of the PLAN, to improve its escort capabilities for energy supplies shipments (Wang and Su, 2021).

Liquified natural gas (LNG) is another energy resource vital for China's economy. China is the world's largest importer of LNG, having recently surpassed Japan. China's leadership has decided to increase the country's LNG imports to meet residential heating and industrial gas demands, principally led by the rising electricity consumption accompanying the country's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. China is also motivated to increase the LNG market with a view to the energy transition and moving to more environmentally sustainable development, with LNG the least polluting of fossil fuels. Compared to crude oil imports, China has been better able to

diversify its LNG imports: while Australia represents China's primary partner, Qatar, the USA, Russia, and Malaysia also stand as relatively stable partners. The Arctic represents one of the newest areas for LNG supplies destined for the Chinese market through a collaboration with Russia on a project in the Yamal Peninsula. Yet, despite China's diversification of LNG imports, the South China Sea still accounts for almost 40% of the LNG moved globally. Meanwhile, the major Asian importers are Japan with 42%, South Korea with 22%, China with 17%, and Taiwan with 14% (EIA, 2016).

Fishing is another highly contested issue in the South China Sea that profoundly influences China's national policy. The increasing fishing activities carried out by China have been identified as a critical driver for overfishing in the South China Sea, which highlights the lack of effective international governance in the region. China officially recognised the South China Sea in respect to the marine economy in its 13th Five-Year Plan, in which China's leadership clearly stated that the country "will develop national marine economic development experimental zones in Shandong, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Fujian, and Tianjin, support Hainan in using South China Sea resources to develop a distinctive marine economy" (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2016).

The importance of exerting influence on the area is not limited to ensuring energy

and fishery supplies but is also related to estimates of natural resources. According to the US Energy Information Agency (2013), the South China Sea holds about 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil. Control over reefs and waters in the area could also mean gaining access to 105 billion barrels of hydrocarbon reserves, which may consistently lower dependence on imports of oil and LNG supplies.

Energy and food security are the core points of China's national strategy because the government's capacity to foster China's economic development and secure internal stability legitimise the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

3.2 Central Arctic Ocean

China's Arctic engagement has been escalating in the last few years. When analysing China's most recent five-year plan (FYP), the increasing attention to the Arctic region can clearly be seen. While in the first phase, attention was focused on enhancing scientific research capabilities, it has since gradually expanded to developing tools and mechanisms to enhance China's participation in Arctic governance. In the 12th FYP (2011–2015), the Arctic was mentioned with regard to promoting the marine economy's development, and there was a focus on increasing China's scientific capabilities in the Arctic by conducting scientific research related to mapping and investigation (British Chamber of Commerce in China, 2011).

The importance of improving the country's scientific capabilities was then reiterated in the 13th FYP (2016–2020), which mentioned the country having objectives to "strengthen the prospecting and development of marine resources and expand scientific expeditions to marine polar regions" (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2016). More broadly, the polar-related policy covered:

- Establishing a new shore-based Arctic observation station through cooperation;
- Establishing a new Antarctic research station;
- Building new advanced icebreakers;
- Improving Antarctic aviation capabilities;
- Completing the basic framework for a land/sea/air observation platform in the polar regions;
- Researching and developing exploration technology and equipment suitable for the polar environments;
- Establishing a service platform for the provision and application of information regarding the polar environments and potential polar resources (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2016).

Among these points emerges the ambition to advance the country's capabilities to access polar regions by developing the first China-built icebreaker, and polar regions are also mentioned in a section dedicated to the "International Economic Governance

System", in which China calls for an "active role in formulating international rules in areas such as the internet, the deep sea, the polar regions, and aerospace" (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2016). This last point is highly relevant because it highlights China's commitment to engaging in the policymaking process.

The 14th FYP concerns the period from 2021 and 2025. In this document, the Arctic is framed in many different areas that range from the maritime community to the community of destiny and from scientific research to the development of blue corridors (i.e. the polar silk road). The concept of "community of common destiny" was first mentioned by former Chinese Communist Party's General Secretary Hu Jintao to the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, referring to shared blood and common destiny of mainland China and Taiwan. The current leader Xi Jinping has slightly modified the concept into "a community of shared future" that conceptualizes the community of common destiny with mankind as the primary aim of Chinese foreign policy (Mardell, 2017). Section 3 of Chapter 33 is dedicated to China's participation in global ocean governance, where it aims to "actively develop blue partnerships, deeply participate in the formulation and implementation of international ocean governance mechanism and related rules, promote the construction of a maritime

community of common destiny" (People's Government of Fujian Province, 2021). In relation to blue partnerships, the document states that China "will deepen practical cooperation with coastal nations in the fields of marine environmental monitoring and protection, scientific research, and maritime search and rescue. We will participate in pragmatic cooperation in the Arctic and build the Ice Silk Road" (People's Government of Fujian Province, 2021).

When analysing the last three FYPs, it can clearly be seen that the prioritisation of Arctic engagement has gone through an evolutionary trajectory, gradually shifting from enhancing scientific research capabilities to improving participation in global governance and building partnerships.

4 Regional diplomacy framework

4.1 South China Sea

The contested area in the South China Sea has a decades-long history. China's claims in the area are the heritage of the eleven-dash line marked by the nationalist party Kuomintang 国民党. China's claims include territorial sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands (Nanhai Zhudao), which comprise the Pratas Islands (Dongsha Qundao), the Paracel Islands (Xisha Qundao), Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal (Zhongsha Qundao), and the Spratly Islands (Nansha Qundao) (Gupta and Geraci, 2020). In the 1970s, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai reduced the eleven dash-line to nine.

To sustain such claims, China promulgated in 1992 the "Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone". Article 2 established:

The territorial sea of the People's Republic of China is the sea belt adjacent to the land territory and the internal waters of the People's Republic of China. The land territory of the People's Republic of China includes the mainland of the People's Republic of China and its coastal islands; Taiwan and all islands appertaining there to including the Diaoyu Islands; the Penghu Islands; the Dongsha Islands; the Xisha Islands; the Zhongsha Islands and the Nansha Islands; as well as all the other islands belonging to the People's Republic of China. The waters on the landward side of the baselines of the territorial sea of the People's Republic of China constitute the internal waters of the People's Republic of China. (Government of the People's Republic of China, 1992)

Legal interpretations of the lines mainly take one of four viewpoints:

- They serve as a delimitation of the attribution of the islands therein;
- They represent the scope of the historical rights, which indicate where rights to fish and develop resources were historically exercised;

- They delineate the boundaries of China's sovereignty historically;
- They resemble the traditional sphere where China's influence was established. (Ikeshima, 2013).

Many of China's claims are based on historical rights (Ikeshima, 2013; Dupuy and Dupuy, 2013). Dupuy and Dupuy (2013) reconstructed the main stages China has gone through to establish and advance the legitimisation of its historical rights: in 1958, with the Declaration of China's Territorial Sea, China considered the Pratas Islands, Paracel Islands, Macclesfield Bank, and the Spratly Islands its territory; then, in 1992, article two of the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone echoed such sovereignty over other islands and the South China Sea and surrounding waters. At the third session of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress, in 1998, China adopted the Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Act. Article 14 seems to make the first "historic rights" reference. It states, "the provision of this Act shall not affect historical rights of the People's Republic of China" (United Nations, 1998). A further official statement from China came in reaction to a joint submission by Malaysia and Vietnam to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf concerning the outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles. In a note verbale (no. CML/17/2009) to the UN Secretary-General, China stated that:

China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof [...] The continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles as contained in the Joint Submissions by Malaysia and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has seriously infringed China's sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea. (no. CML/17/2009)

Just two years later, China reiterated its position in a second note verbale (no. CML 08/2011), in which it stated:

China's sovereignty and related rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea are supported by abundant historical and legal evidence. The Republic of the Philippines had never made any claims to the Nansha Islands or its components. Since the 1970s, the Republic of the Philippines has started to invade and occupy some islands and reefs of China's Nansha Islands and made relevant territorial claims, to which China objects strongly. (no. CML 08/2011)

Despite the narrative of "historical rights" to sovereignty over the South China Sea, as is often adopted by China's leadership in official statements, the meaning and

relevance of such terminology remain unclear (Dupuy and Dupuy, 2013).

One highly relevant player in the area is the Philippines, whose claims focus on the Spratly Islands and the maritime space around them, including Scarborough Shoal, a small ring of rocks and reefs more than 200 kilometres west of Luzon (International Crisis Group, 2021). Overlapping demands also involve Vietnam, which claims the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Claims over the Spratly Islands are also advanced by Malaysia and Brunei.

In 2013, the Philippines initiated a case regarding China's claims and activities in the South China Sea. It mainly consisted in assessing the validity of China's claims based on the nine-dash line under UNCLOS and evaluating China's interference with the Philippines' rights to utilise resources within its claimed waters. In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague released a 479-page ruling mostly favouring the Philippines. The US–China Economic and Security Review Commission listed the key results:

- China's claims to historical rights and resources within its nine-dash line have no legal basis;
- None of China's claimed land features in the Spratly Islands are an island capable of generating a 200-nm exclusive economic zone;
- China violated the Philippines' sovereign rights by interfering with Philippine oil exploration activities,

prohibiting Philippine fishing vessels from operating, failing to prevent Chinese fishing vessels from operating, and conducting land reclamation in areas where the Philippines enjoys sovereign rights to explore for and exploit natural resources;

- China violated its marine environmental protection obligations under UNCLOS by causing "severe harm to the coral reef environment" with its land reclamation activities and harvesting of endangered species (US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2016).

The ruling represented a key moment in the South China Sea geopolitics. It was welcomed by Vietnam through the words of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Le Hai Binh, who not only declared Vietnam's support for the peaceful ruling from The Hague but also reiterated Vietnam's sovereignty over both archipelagos (Spratly and Paracel), internal and territorial waters, its EEZ, and its continental shelf (Vietnam Law and Legal Forum, 2016). However, the ruling was met with strong opposition from China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2016) released this statement:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China solemnly declares that the award is null and void and has no binding force. China neither accepts nor

recognizes it. [...] The Chinese government reiterates that, regarding territorial issues and maritime delimitation disputes, China does not accept any means of third party dispute settlement or any solution imposed on China. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016)

This statement showed China's willingness to resolve the issue through bilateral negotiations as an alternative to a third-party entity ruling over the issue (e.g. UNCLOS). Yet, in geopolitical terms, Beijing's opposition to the arbitration was relevant for two main reasons: it supported the widespread Western perspective of China disregarding the international legal order, and it deepened the country's strategic rivalry with the US, further endangering regional stability.

4.2 Central Arctic Ocean

During the Cold War, the Arctic region was a theatre for hegemonic competition between the US and the Soviet Union and a place of substantial military deployment. In the 1980s, the concept of security started to shift from military security to environmental security thanks to the increasing awareness of global warming and concerns about the deterioration of environmental conditions. This gradual shift led to the foundation of collaborative mechanisms for addressing environmental issues, such as the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation (AMEC) between Russia, Norway, and the US, and the International Arctic Science Committee

(IASC). While the first aimed to enhance Russia's capacity to manage radioactive waste from its northern fleet, the latter was founded to encourage cooperation over Arctic research, a field that was also open to non-Arctic states. It has already been noted that China's active engagement in the Arctic started with improvements to its scientific research capabilities. The interconnectedness between scientific knowledge and expertise and Arctic governance might have influenced China's posturing in the Arctic and its commitment to scientific work.

China is a member of the IASC, and thanks to its observer status in the Arctic Council, has access to the its working groups. Under the Arctic Council, three main international binding agreements have been negotiated: the Agreement on cooperation on aeronautical and maritime search and rescue in the Arctic in 2011, the Agreement on cooperation on marine oil pollution preparedness and response in the Arctic in 2013, and the Agreement on enhancing international Arctic scientific cooperation in 2017. These three key deliverables of the Arctic Council show how cooperation and science have founded a common ground for fruitful cooperation between the Arctic states.

However, negotiations of the CAO Agreement have also been opened up to non-Arctic states, including China. Liu (2021) underlines that even though the Chinese delegation's presence has been "under the radar", it has marked the first

time China has sat equally alongside Arctic states in the negotiation processes. Certain issues with China's active participation in Arctic platforms have been raised by Ren (2019), who has investigated China's participation in task forces and highlighted: the country's non-attendance of some meetings, discontinuity of the delegation participating, and lack of expertise of the delegates. While these insights show China should probably strive to improve its negotiation capacity, its endorsement of international cooperation mechanism also seems to have set a precedent for China's Arctic engagement to be highly oriented towards maintaining the status quo in the region.

5 Discussion

Regional maritime regimes shape the manoeuvring space for regional actors and, to some extent, result from the interests of and relations between those actors. Accordingly, the differences between any two scenarios can be profound. In the South China Sea, fishing represents a priority for the regional economies, and the absence of an RFMO means there is little to prevent illegal fishing from taking place. In this area, disputes over fisheries have been waging for decades and have contributed to the difficulty in establishing an RFMO. Even if the Chinese economy's dependence on fishing differs from other countries', it still represents an essential factor in its engagement in the area. Meanwhile, for most of the 20th century, the Central Arctic Ocean has been perceived as a frozen sea

with little to offer. Even though in recent decades it has attracted the attention of Arctic and non-Arctic states, fishing still represents a considerable challenge. To regulate fishing, the NEAFC has been created to manage fishing quotas. However, fisheries activities are not a game-changer for coastal states' economies, which are mostly well-developed. More so than fishing activities, Arctic states are concerned about other states accessing international waters for regional security issues.

A driving force that has helped shape the regional maritime regime is science. The CAO Agreement highlighted the need to acquire more knowledge and expertise in the area. Yet, what led China to be part of the Agreement? While in drafting the Agreement, some states were more active than others, for China, this represented its first opportunity to be involved in the negotiating process for an Arctic Agreement. It has been proposed that China flew "under the radar" during negotiations, remaining largely quiet (Liu, 2021). From another point of view, this approach reflects China's long-term strategy in the Arctic to be gradually included as an actor in Arctic governance. Such a gradual process entails the need for China to be perceived as a responsible actor in the region and as a contributor to fostering scientific knowledge.

While the South China Sea is entirely accessible and China possesses the world's largest fishing fleet, the Central Arctic

Ocean still requires us to gain much more knowledge about the marine ecosystem and the seabed. Making such contributions to our scientific knowledge is a key objective for China to secure its place in Arctic governance since one of the criteria for observers is to "have demonstrated their Arctic interest and expertise relevant to the work of the Arctic Council".¹ While its engagement in the South China Sea is guided by sovereignty claims over a large part of the area, needed for it to keep conducting (also) fishing activities, in the Central Arctic Ocean, it seems the country's engagement is more based on consolidating its role in Arctic governance, which requires its strong engagement with scientific knowledge production.

The article has also addressed the extent to which these two different scenarios are relevant to China's national security. The discourse has mainly been focused on energy security, with it highlighted that most of the imported oil and gas pass through the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. It has also been argued that economic development in China is strictly connected to the legitimisation of the CCP. On the other hand, analysis of the most recent FYPs has revealed how the Chinese leadership's attention to the Arctic region has gradually shifted from enhancing

research and scientific access to improving its position in Arctic governance. While both regions are relevant for natural resource access, a key difference lies in the *actual* and well-structured supply chain of energy resources through the South China Sea and the *potential* access to Arctic resources. The speculative narrative that presents China as a threat in the Arctic is principally based on its interest in exploiting Arctic natural resources (e.g. Rainwater, 2013; Robinson, 2013). Yet, Stunker (2022) and Pezard et al. (2022) have noted that there is a huge difference between the rhetorical expansion of China's presence in the Arctic and the reality on the ground.

China has not hidden its intention to realise the Polar Silk Road, framed as an extension of the larger Belt and Road Initiative. However, the actual route is ambiguous. While its collaboration with Russia may facilitate increased shipping along the Northern Sea Route, the creation of a transpolar route from the Bering Strait to Greenland has also been discussed. The advantage of this last route lies in its passage through the Central Arctic Ocean (mainly international waters), lessening the dependency on Russia. Given the harsh climate conditions, this will never represent China's primary route for energy supply.

¹ See the Arctic Council website: "Observers—Arctic Council" www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/observer-menu

Nonetheless, the development of northern shipping routes presents a means to avoid the Malacca Strait at times, and the Northern Sea Route has often been raised as an alternative to passing through the Suez Canal, especially after the accidents in 2020 (Abay, 2021).

While Wang and Su (2021) proposed that China should modernise the military force of the PLAN to improve its capabilities to escort energy supplies shipments, heavy military deployment in the Arctic is unlikely due to the obligatory passage through territorial waters. On the topic of the military, the solidity of Sino-Russian relations offers another point to reflect on. Even though Russia's invasion of Ukraine has, to some extent, reinforced the Sino-Russian axis in the Arctic, Moscow showed initial distrust about the internationalisation of the Arctic Council when China first applied to become an observer member of the Arctic Council in 2009 (Willis and Depledge, 2014). Current contingencies have facilitated Russia's isolation in the Arctic and have pushed Moscow to strengthen cooperation with China. However, it is unlikely that we will see China sustaining a Cold War model of division in the region, with Western countries on one side and Russia and China on the other. Instead, China's long-term policy and maintenance of stable relationships with other Arctic states seem part of a step-by-step approach China is taking to implement its strategy in the

region, where Russia is not the only actor involved.

The last section of this article analysed regional diplomacy and China's sovereignty claims. In this context, the differences between the two scenarios appear incontestably profound. They are principally based on legitimising (regional) rights. In the South China Sea, China has sovereignty rights and, through the nine-dash line, advances historical claims over a large area of the South China Sea. In the Arctic it has no rights. Meanwhile, in the Arctic, China has officially declared its adherence to the extant legal framework (UNCLOS), while in the South China Sea, it has disputed the arbitration against it as raised by the Philippines and expressed a will to resolve disputes bilaterally rather than through international law.

For China, today, being part of global governance and falling in line with international frameworks represents an essential strategic approach to being perceived as a responsible actor in global politics. In the Arctic, this approach has contributed to enhancing China's position in regional governance. Yet, China's claims over the disputed area in the South China Sea have a long history, predating such modern strategising. China's assertion of its rights in the area is twofold: at the domestic level, it is oriented toward establishing a coherent legal framework, but at the international level, the advancement of its rights is based on historical rights. Engaging in disputes at

both levels shows China is highly committed to asserting and legitimising its regional rights.

For actors with territorial rights in the Arctic, meanwhile, solving territorial disputes functions to improve their cooperation and dialogue over relevant factors that may foster economic development. While in the South China Sea, rivalry and confrontational attitudes prevail, the *potential* commercial opportunities in the Arctic contribute to deescalating power tensions and solving decades-long disputes over maritime boundaries. The Arctic Council has also played a key role in generating effective cooperation. This capacity to cooperate rather than fall into confrontation has led to the conceptualisation of Arctic exceptionalism. Yet, even though the region has not experienced any military conflict in the past decades, the author does not totally agree with viewing the Arctic as exceptional to states' confrontation. The recent joint decision of the Arctic 7 to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and halt the work of the Arctic Council reveals the limitations of the platform when it comes to political and security issues, which should be excluded according to the mandate. The freeze of the Arctic Council may negatively impact observer states with limited rights, which may lose influence in regional governance.

For China, the Arctic Council represents a pivotal platform to better engage with Arctic issues. It is likely we will see China

working to re-establish the work of the Arctic Council, including Russia. Some insights came from the Arctic Circle Conference held in Reykjavik last October when Gao Feng, China's special envoy for Arctic affairs, publicly stated that "if an A-7 so-called Arctic Council is to come to reality, I don't think that is the original—that will be a different one" (Schreiber, 2022). This last point is critical to underline the difference between China's approach in the two settings studied in this article. While China's confrontational approach to international law in the South China Sea reveals the country's preference for solving disputes at the state level through bilateral agreements, China's perception of the Arctic is based on a global approach that privileges dialogues and relations through international platforms. Its global perception of the Arctic region is also profoundly shaped by the transnational impact of climate change-induced effects. Since the work of the Working Groups under the Arctic Council is mainly focused on dealing with environmental issues in the region, China's efforts to restore the work of the Arctic Council might be read as not only as a means of avoiding the marginalisation of non-Arctic states in Arctic governance, but as also showing how China perceives the Arctic as a region whose issues require global platforms and international mechanisms if they are to be effectively resolved.

6 Conclusion

This article has analysed China's approach and space of engagement in the South China Sea and Central Arctic Ocean to show it is inappropriate to assimilate the two areas when discussing China as a threat to the Arctic regional order. The discourse has been built by focusing on three spheres: regional maritime regimes, priority in China's domestic policy, and the peculiarities of regional diplomacy. In all three, slightly different approaches emerged from China. While the legitimisation of China's claims has not been the core of the study, attention has been paid to understanding the framework and regional geopolitical and governance features that induce China to shape its policy, and why it is hard to envision China's assertiveness in the South China Sea being replicated in the Arctic region. While China's approach to the South China Sea is guided by issues strictly related to national security, in the Central Arctic Ocean, China's posture is far softer and in line with multilateral agreements and international platforms.

It has been argued that the South China Sea is a core point of China's foreign policy because it represents a decisive area for energy and food supplies. Moreover, the lack of an RFMO means there is nothing to adequately prevent illegal fishing from being conducted by coastal states, facilitating regional tensions. Lastly, the richness of hydrocarbon deposits estimated in the area makes the

sovereignty confrontation even tenser. In the Arctic, meanwhile, China's declared alignment with the ruling order and its participation in safeguarding marine ecosystems shows it endorses a global governance approach, rather than assuming a confrontational stance. Although China's dynamism in discussing bilateral agreements with many Arctic states has raised and fuelled the threat theory, Pezan et al. (2022) and Stunkel (2022) have shown that China's presence in the region is still extremely limited. The reasons for such limitations include the direct actions of other governments and sub-local authorities, as well as resistance from indigenous people to massive infrastructural projects.

China's Arctic strategy is a long-term strategy highly dependent on regional political stability, on bilateral relations with the Arctic states, and on China's position within Arctic governance. Comparing China's approach in the South China Sea to the Central Arctic Ocean may be instrumental in fuelling Cold War rhetoric, but due to the illustrated differences, it is extremely hard to find deep strategic commonalities for these two markedly different geopolitical scenarios.

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