

Beijing's Arctic goals are not to be feared

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For a few hours last week, the Arctic Council, an obscure intergovernmental organisation, gained an unusual level of attention, as officials and journalists awaited its decision on China's application to become a permanent observer. Ultimately, the eight member states decided in favour of China and four other Asian nations: India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.

In part, the interest reflected the scrutiny applied to China's every move. Suspicions about its intentions abound. No one knows how China will use its power. This uncertainty gives rise to anxiety, even fear. China's assertive behaviour in seas closer to home over the past three years has fuelled suspicions that it might turn into an aggressive bully with expansionist inclinations.

China's motives in the Arctic are perfectly comprehensible. First, melting Arctic ice will have a profound effect on northeast Asia's climate, perhaps harming agriculture. China is one of the most susceptible countries to rising sea levels because of its low-lying coast.

Second, within 20 years the Northern Sea Route across the northern coast of Russia could offer an alternative way to transport goods from northeast Asia to Europe during summer. No country dependent on trade can ignore the possibility that traffic along the Arctic sea routes will increase substantially.

In the short term, the most pressing issue for China is what tariffs Russia will impose for passage through its coastal waters and the use of ice breakers. In private conversations, Chinese officials express concern that Moscow could make the Northern Sea Route unprofitable by setting unreasonably high tariffs. These are issues that the Arctic Council will have to deal with over the coming years.

Third – and this is where many suspect China's motives – the melting ice is expected to provide access to plentiful energy and mineral resources under the Arctic seabed.

The region is also expected to provide new grounds for fishing.

But what is often missing from these assumptions is that nearly all of the identified Arctic resources lie within state borders or within the universally agreed 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone of the coastal states. This means that they are not subject to debate.

Last week, Beijing again reiterated its recognition of the Arctic states' sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the region. Considering China's insistence on respect for state sovereignty in territorial disputes in its own near seas, it is hardly going to challenge the principles of sovereignty in the Arctic. Instead, it is likely that China – and Japan and South Korea – will strive to form partnerships with Arctic states, perhaps offering investment to develop resources.

What, then, does Beijing hope to get out of the Arctic Council? China sees economic opportunities in the Arctic and wants to influence decisions about how the region is governed.

Although it has no voting rights as a permanent observer, Beijing presumably hopes that it will, over time, have an impact on informal discussions that help shape decisions.

In the past few years, Chinese scholars have started to emphasise that the opportunities and challenges in the Arctic are global. Therefore, China should also be perceived as an “Arctic stakeholder”.

Still, the Arctic is not destined to be a priority in China’s overall foreign policy. As with numerous other second-tier foreign policy issues, Beijing can be expected to persistently pursue recognition of its growing power which entitles it to be included in shaping the Arctic’s future.

Moreover, Chinese academics and officials will repeat the notion that China has rights in the Arctic in the hope that it gradually begins to be accepted.

There is some irony when Chinese officials call on Arctic states to consider the interests of mankind so that all nations can share the Arctic. China displays no such benevolence when it comes to what it perceives as its sovereign rights in seas closer to its own territory. When China’s core interests are at stake, we can expect assertiveness. In areas such as the Arctic, we should not let anxieties take hold.

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