Summary of the Issues

Melting Arctic ice is transforming the region into an area of global resource interest replete with competing commercial, scientific, security and environmental concerns, with profound implications for the international legal and political system. In this current environment of both international competition and cooperation, China has been working to gain further access to the Arctic. China officially does not have an Arctic strategy; however China is clearly now in the process of establishing its position within the region. Although China is not a littoral State and thus lacks claims of sovereignty in the region, its growing interest in natural resource sources and energy security nonetheless makes the Arctic region an area of considerable national interest to it. This chapter explores the commercial, political, and security implications for China of a seasonally ice-free Arctic region, China’s participation in the Arctic Council, and the importance of the Northern Sea Passage. While China has no shores along the Arctic Circle, its interest in playing a role in defining future international regimes regarding the Arctic is evident.

Introduction

The Arctic is warming at twice the average rate of global warming. The impacts on the physical environment are clearly visible, one of which is that snow and ice are melting at an increasing rate, reducing in mass by 3–4 percent over the last three decades, and disappearing at an accelerated rate of more than ten percent in the last ten years. Ice is the main barrier for shipping through the Arctic, making ordinary navigation impossible except during the summer months. With the prospect of year-round access aided by ice-breakers, the shipping route via the Arctic Ocean between Europe, Japan and China will become 10 to 12 days shorter as opposed to the time required for conventional route through the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, or the Cape of Good Hope. In the next few decades the Northern Sea Route will become increasingly commercially attractive and possibly ice-free year-round by 2060 at the earliest. As the world’s largest exporter,
China has much to gain from this new passageway. Rerouting through the Arctic is economically attractive for China as it saves not only time, insurance and fuel costs, but also decreases the energy security risk.

China’s rapid economic growth has prompted Beijing to undertake an aggressive search for natural resources as economic growth is most directly linked to energy. Rising consumer demands in China, coupled with occasional rolling blackouts due to spiraling demand for energy in Chinese cities, have prompted anxieties in China concerning energy security. Alternate energy sources are receiving heightened attention; so, as a potential source, the Arctic has come under close scrutiny. In 2009, a two-year Chinese research project focusing on the Arctic was completed. Scholars and officials from throughout the country had compiled extensive information on everything Arctic related, from resources and their exploitation to Arctic transportation, Arctic law, Arctic politics and diplomacy, military factors in the Arctic, China’s strategic position in the Arctic, and China’s Arctic policy and recommendations.¹

China’s energy development is progressing in a remarkably comprehensive, nuanced fashion. China’s energy strategy is vital to the future of the nation’s energy development and its strategic implications for the United States, with particular attention to maritime development in both countries. The United States is deeply concerned that China is drawing upon much of the world’s remaining oil reserves for its domestic use. The resulting competition for this diminishing resource could lead to energy insecurity and may support other tendencies toward rivalry that in turn could foster a naval arms race neither side seeks. This essay analyzes the implication for China’s resource interests in the Arctic, Arctic shipping routes, future perspective of the Northeast Passage and Northwest Passage, China’s Arctic research, and China’s role as an ad hoc observer in the Arctic Council. China is currently formulating its Arctic Strategy in order to preserve Chinese strategic interests in the Arctic as it would like to play an active role in international affairs in the Arctic region.

**Climate Change and Geopolitics in the Arctic**

Climate change will cause major physical, ecological, economic, social, and geopolitical adjustments. Global climate change has catapulted the Arctic into the centre of geopolitics, as melting Arctic ice transforms the region from one of primarily scientific interest into a focus of competing commercial, national security, and environmental concerns, with profound implications for the international legal and political system. As the region opens to increased human activity such as traffic from commercial shipping, tourism, and oil and gas exploration, soot

¹ See text at note 35, *infra.*