Chapter 14

China’s Emerging Arctic Strategy and the Framework of Arctic Governance

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The Arctic is a relatively “closed” environment surrounded by five coastal states; relations among these countries pose a diplomatic challenge to China’s more conservative and traditional perspective.1 Because of intensifying global warming, the significance of an ice-free Arctic environment has been gradually realized. At least two consequences could be expected in an Arctic with less ice. First, the seabed-rich in natural resources will be more accessible, exposing untapped resources and making exploitation easier. Second, a reduction of sea ice makes navigable sea routes more navigable. The most convenient sea lane is the one historically referred to as “Northwest Passage,” which shortens the voyage between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean by 9,000 kilometers.2

Based on rapid changes of natural and political environments initiated both domestically and internationally, Arctic countries have updated their Arctic polices for the region to better cope with new relationships, and to gain advantage in geopolitical competition.3 Changes in the Arctic environment have sparked a chain reaction in the diplomacy among various states. From one perspective, the economic and geopolitical connections between Arctic states and those in other regions in the world have been strengthened. On the other hand, however, the rush for “ownership” over the resources in

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1 Yue Dong, “Trends of the Arctic Legal Order and New Horizons for China’s Rights in the Arctic” (beiji fah zhixu zouxiang yu zhongguo beiji quanyi xinshiye), Journal of Ocean University of China (Zhongguo Haiyang Daxue Xuebao) 6 (2012), 1.
3 Junyuan Lu, “On the Common Goal of North Pole Policies of the North Polar Countries” (beiji guojia xin beiji zhengce de gongtong quxiang ji duice sikao), Journal of University of International Relations (Guoji Guanxi Xueyuan Xuebao) 3 (2011), 64.
vast areas of the Arctic Ocean is becoming fierce. Accordingly, geopolitical developments may help better inform governance over the Arctic. The current situation, however, illustrates the need to establish a reasonable framework in order to resolve problems before they grow.

Unfortunately, there is currently no Arctic Treaty to provide overall governance of Arctic affairs, and such a treaty is not practicable in the short term. Mechanisms such as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Svalbard Treaty, and various other bilateral agreements, already establish a legal basis for the actions of the sovereign coastal states in the Arctic. These instruments hold intrinsic defects, however, that

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4 Nevertheless, there are certain rules (such as Articles 76 and 74/83 and the CLCS guidelines) that are relatively effective. Baozhi Cheng, “On Legal and Political Construction and Consummation of Arctic Governance” (beiji zhili jizhi de goujian yu wanshan: falv yu zhengce cengmian de sikao), International Review (Guoji Guancha) 4 (2011), 2.

5 Some scholars have argued that geopolitical theory has played a dominant role in Arctic affairs. The conduct of America, Russia, and Canada in the Arctic region are also under great influence of this theory. During the post-cold-war period, despite of the incremental influence of governance theory, it is still subject to the control of geopolitical theory. The author believed that the existence of geopolitics as practical basis for Arctic governance at president, while its continuation and expansion as external motivation for development of governance mechanisms. Jiang Ye, “On Double Effect of Geopolitical and Governance Theories on Arctic Affairs” (shilun beiji shiwu zhong diyuan zhengzhi lilun yu zhili lilun de shuangchong yingxiang), International Review (Guoji Guancha) 2 (2013), 32–38.

6 Certain scholars have argued that it is unwise to apply the Antarctic model to the situation of Arctic due to various differences between the Antarctic and Arctic. For example, Antarctica is a single continent that has no permanent human inhabitants, and, and largely thanks to existing international agreement, no industrial or commercial activities; the Arctic is quite different in these respects. Moreover, Antarctica is a continent, while the Arctic is an ocean. Countries are interested in using the Arctic for navigation, mining and fishing, while countries wanted to prevent these uses in Antarctica. See, for example, Stefán Þór Hauksson, “A Legally Binding Regime for the Arctic,” available at skemman.is/stream/get/1946/3090/8142/1/prentun_fixed.pdf.

