

China and the Arctic

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One of the indices of a country's power in the international system is the territory it holds. The importance of territory since the treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648, laying down some of the central tenets of international politics as we know it today; has existed through various epochs of history. Territory, in the simplest terms is an area of land (or sea or air or space) that is under the jurisdiction of a state. However, as international relations evolved concepts such as exclusive economic zones (EEZs), sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) among others also entered the lexicon, all of which hinge on the concept of territory. China in the current epoch of history has caused more churning in the understanding of the concept of territory as it now seeks a greater role in the governance of territories that are geographically thousands of kilometers away. The biggest example of this is in China's 2018 official Arctic Policy paper, in which it declares itself as a near Arctic state, an "active participant, builder, and contributor in Arctic affairs," and one that has "spared no efforts to contribute its wisdom to the development of the Arctic region."

While there is no legal basis to China claiming itself as a participant in the Arctic region, it becomes pertinent to analyse why a state claiming to be a responsible player in international relations would make an irresponsible and irrational claim such as the one China has made in its official Arctic policy paper. Given the vast resources of oil, minerals, trade routes and even fish in the Arctic, there has been more desire to exploit the region. Given Chinese reliance on oil supplies, and the necessity of the Chinese economy to have sustained trade routes, China's postures towards the Arctic become clearer. However, fact also remains that the Arctic is warming faster than anywhere else on the planet. Emergence of players and entities which legally and rationally do not have any stake in the region, for the purposes of exploitation of the myriad resources of the region will only contribute to further devastation of the fragile climate. Ironically China claims to be an important player in tackling climate change. In order to ensure that further degradation of the Arctic does not take place, it becomes pertinent to closely observe and analyse Chinese actions so that a coherent approach to tackling the fallouts can be undertaken by states that actually share territories with the Arctic region.