

Special Section Introduction

China Seeking Arctic Resources – The Arctic Seeking Resources in China

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'Resource' (noun): a useful or valuable possession or quality of a country, organization, or person (Cambridge dictionary).

While the contributions for this special section were under review, the mutual quest for resources between China and the Arctic took a dramatic turn – at least when seen from certain vantage points. The drama began with the need for infrastructure investments in Greenland. The government of Greenland wants larger airports in Nuuk, the capital, and in Ilulissat, the main tourist destination, and has made an open tender, for which the large Chinese state-owned enterprise *China Communication and Construction Group* had been prequalified. This tender led to a heated debate in Denmark and Greenland about the desirability of a large Chinese investment in critical infrastructure. In September, Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, representing the Danish government, which has the sovereignty over foreign policy and security issues in Greenland, met with Greenlandic Prime Minister Kim Kielsen. The Danish Prime Minister offered that Denmark would finance parts of the airports and secure loans for part of the further finances. The Danish support would eventually have to be approved by the Greenlandic government. However, one of the coalition parties in the Greenlandic government saw the Danish move as an attempt to maintain Greenland's reliance on Denmark by keeping Chinese investments out of Greenland. This view was further supported a few days later when the US embassy to Denmark published a "Statement of Intent on Defense Investments in Greenland":

[the statement] lays out the principles for investment in Greenland to enhance U.S. military operational flexibility and situational awareness in order to address the changing security environment in the Arctic. In light of this development and in an effort to strengthen U.S. and NATO capabilities, the US Department of Defense intends to pursue potential strategic investments vigorously, including investment that may serve dual military and civilian purposes. For example the U.S. Department of Defense intends to analyze and, when appropriate, strategically invest in projects related to the airport infrastructure in Greenland.

The incident illustrates many of the issues studied in the contributions to this special section on the mutual quest for resources between China and the Arctic: first, it demonstrates how debates involving China and the Arctic are very often about imagining the future and guessing at hidden motivations rather than about existing and concrete facts on the ground. Second, it shows how both China and the Arctic has to be deconstructed in order to become meaningful analytical entities. Though this incident might mark a dramatic turn for Chinese-Arctic relations when seen from Nuuk, Washington, Copenhagen, and possibly Beijing - it may not mean much when seen from other towns or settlements around the pole; from a cruise ship or a bulk carrier going through the Northwest Passage or the Northern Sea Route; from regional governance fora; or from Chinese board rooms and institutions further from Beijing. Finally, it demonstrates how resources may be ascribed different values at different times and by different actors. Investments in Greenlandic infrastructure was not high on the Danish government's list of priorities until they became enmeshed with a resource that *is* highly valued – the strategic importance of Greenland in the Danish-US relationship. Likewise, Danish financing for Greenlandic airports is not an attractive resource from the perspective of pro-independence Greenlandic politicians.

The articles in this special section all deal with Chinese-Arctic cooperation from a resource quest perspective, exploring the real and imagined valorization of resources by a variety of actors both in China and in the Arctic. However, as this compilation of articles illustrates, the study of China's interests in and relations with the Arctic is challenging. The first challenge is that since China and Arctic communities until recently had hardly any direct contact with each other, Arctic images of China and Chinese images of the Arctic are even less founded in actual experiences than pre-conceptions usually are. In Greenland, like in most other parts of the Arctic, actual Chinese presence and real investments remain relatively limited, but the imaginary visions of what China might mean for the Arctic in the future already loom large. This special section discusses both the Chinese expectations towards Arctic resources (Bislev & Smed; Sørensen) and Arctic expectations towards resources from China (Gad *et al*; Taksami). The study of Arctic images of China and Chinese images of the Arctic reveal that there is a large and mutual knowledge gap among the very diverse potential Chinese and Arctic partners.

The diversity of these actors constitute the second challenge. On the Chinese side, we see many diverse state and non-state actors engaging with the Arctic, while the extremely fragmented nature of Arctic governance means that most of the Arctic region is under the sovereignty of capitals located outside the Arctic. One could press the point to say that setting out to characterize “Chinese-Arctic cooperation” is missing the point: many of the actors in the empirical material for the analyses in this special section do not engage in “Chinese-Arctic cooperation”: rather, they venture to see how their community (say, Nantortalik or Narsaq), their company (Shenghe or

Greenland Minerals and Energy), their scientific project (studying a natural or social phenomenon), their economy (Greenland or Iceland) can gain access to a specific resource by hooking up with a counterpart that happens to be based in China or somewhere in the Arctic. In that sense, neither “the Arctic” nor “China” may be the most pertinent scale to engage when studying the relation. Resources may range from raw materials and finances; via know how, leisure activities and human resources; to international recognition and a geostrategic foothold. Some of these resources may be distinctly Arctic or Chinese – whether objectively or imagined. In other instances, the resource is generic, but public imagination or conscious calculation point to the Arctic or China as the best or most convenient place to obtain it.

However, despite our reservations about discussing ‘China’ and ‘the Arctic’ as homogenous entities, we recognize that this is a quite common strategy. Some actors *do* indeed award ‘the Arctic’ or ‘China’ special attention as entities or theatres when developing strategies for their community, company, or state. Also, increased global attention to both China rising and the Arctic at once opening up and institutionalizing has become self-reinforcing: Increasingly, you need to have an ‘Arctic Strategy’ and a ‘Chinese Plan’ to be taken seriously and to be able to take yourself seriously. Iceland, e.g., has spent considerable energy re-branding itself as Arctic - including developing the Arctic Circle conference circuit, and to become a hub for China’s involvement with the Arctic. The Nordic Institute for Asian Studies has for years prioritized Asian-Arctic relations, focusing both research and networking specifically on the Nordic part of the Arctic, and on China’s Arctic relations. Accordingly, we are not just witnessing an increasing institutionalization of “the Arctic” as a region but also an increasing institutionalization of the academic field of “China-Arctic relations”.

The collection of articles published in this special section are the result of one instance of such institutionalization: a workshop held at Aalborg University, Denmark in January 2018. The workshop was entitled “Chinese Arctic Cooperation: China Seeking Arctic Resources – The Arctic Seeking Resources in China”. The contributions to this special section hence all study the link between resources and Sino-Arctic cooperation. The role of resources in Chinese-Arctic relations is diverse, covering hopes for plentiful Chinese capital and human resources destined towards the Arctic (Gad *et al*), expectations towards the Arctic as a resource of unique travel experiences (Bislev & Smed), and the possibility of the Arctic as a source of geopolitical influence for a coming super power (Sørensen). Arctic mineral and energy resources remain underexploited and are yet to benefit both China and the Arctic. How to manage the possible exploitation of these resources is the topic of Deng, Buhmann and Andersson *et al*. The actual possible exploitation of such resources raises a number of issues, such as the establishment of shipping lines and rail lines (Deng; Taksami), the need for the Arctic being able to understand, evaluate and maybe affect Chinese codes of conducts and environmental regulations (Buhmann; Kirchner), and the need for China to understand the concerns of Arctic stakeholders (Deng). Another crosscutting theme is the possible dual interest of investment in extraction of mineral resources and China developing and tapping Arctic knowledge and influence as more elusive types of resources (Andersson *et al*, Deng, and Sørensen).

Just as ‘China’ and ‘the Arctic’ need to be deconstructed in order to become analytically viable, the valorization of resources also demands a nuanced understanding. On the one hand, the value of any resource is a question of supply and demand. On the other hand, certain types of resources have distinct ways of generating value, depending on whether they are finite or renewable, and whether they become more valuable when engaged by more parties or they are in effect the object of zero-sum games. The resources studied in this special section have in common that they may serve several purposes and have different values for different actors. These differences may be imagined or real. The seal sausage business venture discussed by Gad *et al* about the imagined Chinese demand for properly treated, packaged and presented seal meat, reveals how misconceptions of when and why other actors regard a resource as valuable can lead to large disinvestments. Andersson *et al* and Deng show how insecurity about what other actors want from a resource may easily make the transfer of resources a matter raising concern about possible security threats. In the case of mining in Greenland, a major obstacle to future Chinese investment appears to be fears that China does not just want the minerals, but also wants the influence that it could gain by investing an amount equivalent to Greenland’s annual GDP (Andersson *et al*). In addition to fears of a changed international order resulting from Chinese investment (Sørensen), other possible prices paid by Arctic communities for the use of local resources include the willingness to accept pollution from cruise ships (Kirchner) and radically changed labour and social standards (Buhmann). However, though the contributions in this special section do point to potential challenges in Arctic-Chinese exploitation of resources, they also point to possible ways in which resources could be used to the benefit of both the Arctic and China. Buhmann, Deng and Kirchner all offer concrete suggestions for how increased understanding of Chinese legislation and codes of conduct will enable Arctic communities to make Chinese use of resources form the Arctic less damaging for the Arctic environment and less challenging to existing social structures.

In sum, this themed section reveals how the pursuance of Arctic and Chinese resources is not just a simple matter of extracting them from their source and bringing them home – whether in the form of minerals, signed contracts, or holiday photos. While the use of Arctic resources may be important for China, they will in any case remain marginal to both China’s domestic development and to China’s overall position in the world. Conversely, the use of Chinese resources may fundamentally change the ways some Arctic communities regard themselves and what it implies to be a citizen in these communities. This may be seen as a positive opportunity to redefine the status of the community, as in the case of the pro-independence Greenlandic party who see Chinese investments as a potential contribution to their quest for independence. However, it warrants special consideration as to how the relation should be regulated and managed, in order to facilitate success and manage negative side effects in other spheres of life and in other relations. Arctic communities have ample experience of being at the receiving end of asymmetrical relations, and therefore has an interest in diversifying relations in order to break free from these asymmetrical relationships. However, new relations will not necessarily materialize as less asymmetrical. It is therefore of vital importance for both Chinese and Arctic actors to invest time and effort in getting to know and understand their new counterparts in order to benefit from the new, potential resources becoming available through the increasing Chinese-Arctic cooperation.