

Briefing Note

The China-Nordic Arctic Research Center: One decade in

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The China-Nordic Research Center (CNARC) was established at an event hosted by the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) in Shanghai on the 10th of December 2013. CNARC has ten founding Member Institutes, four Chinese and six Nordic, which all have capacities to influence and coordinate Arctic research. They include polar institutes, research centres, research funders, universities and think tanks. The purpose of CNARC is to provide a platform for academic cooperation to increase awareness, understanding and knowledge of the Arctic and its global impacts, as well as to promote cooperation for sustainable development of the Nordic Arctic and coherent development of China in a global context. With a primary focus on three research themes: 1) Arctic climate change and its impacts, 2) Arctic resources, shipping and economic cooperation, and 3) Arctic policy-making and legislation.¹

During the past decade since CNARC was established, there have been notable changes in the geopolitical landscape and the Covid-19 world pandemic has affected international cooperation significantly. The focus on this commentary will be on how the CNARC cooperation has developed under three different periods, 1) pre-Covid-19, 2) during Covid-19 restrictions, and 3) post-Covid-19 restrictions. Highlighting the main activities of CNARC during the past decade and prospects for academic cooperation under the CNARC platform.

Pre-Covid-19

By the end of the year 2019, CNARC Member Institutes had grown from ten to eighteen members, and seven annual China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation symposium and economic roundtables had taken place. Additionally, 21 CNARC fellowships had been awarded and carried out by researchers between China and Nordic Countries, and two publications had been initiated by CNARC: 1) A special issue on “Arctic Policy and Sustainable Development” in *Advances of Polar Science* and a book, titled: “Sino Nordic Arctic Cooperation: Objectives and Approaches”.

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During this period CNARC grew into an important platform for China-Nordic cooperation and was both highlighted in 1) a “Joint Press Release Strengthening Sino-Nordic Cooperation”, following a meeting between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China and the Nordic Council of Ministers in Beijing on 25th of May 2017, under the theme: Science, research and education;² and in 2) China’s Arctic Policy White Paper where CNARC was named as one of four primary international forums (outside of the Arctic Council) for promoting exchanges and cooperation among the stakeholders.³ A CNARC project was furthermore included in the Nordic Council of Ministers’ Arctic Cooperation Program.⁴ CNARC provided support towards various high-level events between Nordic countries and China during this period, including a “China-Norway Dialogue on the Changing Arctic and International Cooperation” co-sponsored by SIIS and PRIC in Shanghai at the occasion of an official visit of then Prime Minister of Norway, Erna Solberg.⁵

The development of CNARC has been documented in several publications, such as the 5-year anniversary publication of CNARC, titled: “The Evolution of CNARC 2013-2018”,⁶ and in articles analysing the outcomes of the CNARC cooperation both from “Chinese” and “Nordic” perspectives. A “Chinese perspective” on the outcomes of the CNARC cooperation is presented in the article “Four Impacts for the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center”, by Yang Jian:

After five years of development, CNARC has produced four clear results. First, knowledge about governance structures has expanded from Arctic countries to non-Arctic countries. Second, the Chinese government has adopted the concept of “governance” to apply to its Arctic cooperation. Third, Chinese media and businesses have begun taking concrete actions to practice the concept of governance. Fourth, China’s positive role in Arctic governance is gradually being acknowledged.⁷

A “Nordic perspective” is presented by Egill Thor Nielsson in a publication titled: “Nordic–China: Cooperation Challenges and Opportunities”, lead by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers’. The paper highlights eight lessons learned from starting a new international and cross-cultural initiative such as CNARC:

- Cooperation through the CNARC proved to be a valuable way to build up a ‘track 2’ mechanism, in addition to the more immediate goals of establishing trust and mutual understanding on Arctic affairs by advancing both social and natural science research.
- The CNARC secretariat – hosted by the Polar Research Institute of China and in close cooperation with other Chinese member institutes, including the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies – has been highly useful for implementing projects and supporting initiatives that have been of regional Nordic relevance without interfering with national priorities of each Nordic nation and its specific relations with Chinese counter partners on Arctic issues.
- The CNARC model of joint Nordic collaboration has proved to be effective at focusing the attention of leading Chinese actors.
- For this joint research collaboration initiative to work, CNARC has had to identify where it can add value and thereby play a role as a complementary aspect to many ongoing bilateral collaborations.
- The largely informal setting and knowledge-based approach of CNARC to Arctic affairs have been assets in building a valuable China–Nordic Arctic network that still remains largely decentralized and is mainly a platform.

- Scientific findings that require a great deal of competence to generate have been shown to have great value for policymakers and businesspeople.
- Arctic affairs require long-term commitments and vision in order to enhance mutual understanding of a topic of global significance that is moving towards sustainable and peaceful practices. Similarly, an initiative such as the CNARC needs time, patience and effort from all parties in order to establish a foundation for work that can be of value to all stakeholders.
- From a Nordic perspective, the biggest contribution of the CNARC to date is arguably China's increased understanding of Nordic Arctic issues, as reflected by their accommodation within China's Arctic Policy White Paper.⁸

Both articles highlight the constructive aspects of the epistemological gains from the CNARC cooperation. While the researcher-to-researcher level of the China-Nordic Arctic cooperation has been seen as largely beneficial, there are geopolitical aspects that can affect a platform like CNARC. In May 2019 the 7th China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposium was hosted by the Shanghai Ocean University and co-convened with PRIC and SIIS as a back-to-back event to the Arctic Circle China Forum. The local organisation of the two events took place in conjunction and the Arctic Circle China Forum is to-date the largest international event on the Arctic hosted in China. The events took place only a few days after the 2019 Ministerial in Rovaniemi at the end of Finland's 2017-2019 Chairmanship to the Arctic Council in what Lassi Heininen dubbed as an "Arctic Super Week". At Rovaniemi Ministerial the then US State Secretary Michael R. Pompeo delivered a speech, titled "Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus" in which the tone towards China's Arctic engagement had soured significantly,⁹ only six years after China had been admitted as an observer to the Arctic Council at the 2013 Kiruna Ministerial.

During Covid-19 restrictions

In an article published in March 2023, titled: "An assessment of China's participation in polar subregional organizations" in *Advances in Polar Science*, Shan Yanyan et al. compare China's involvement in three different subregional polar organisations. While they argue that "CNARC is the youngest but the most vigorous organization of the three" they furthermore note that "...the CNARC is subject to the influence of future international politics. Affected by the COVID pandemic, CNARC symposia have been moved online, and business roundtables and visiting scholar projects have been postponed or stalled for the time being."¹⁰

CNARC's activities between 2020-2022 were limited mainly due to Covid-19 restrictions and as the Nordic countries started to loosen their policies on Covid-19 restriction, China's zero-Covid policy meant that in-person meetings would have to be delayed. The 8th China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposium that was planned to take place in May 2020 in Umeå, Sweden had to be postponed. Instead, the first CNARC online seminar took place via Zoom on 13-14 January 2022 under the theme: "Arctic Policy Development of China and Nordic Countries in the New Geopolitical Landscape", as well as a hybrid CNARC session at the 2022 Arctic Circle Assembly on "Interactions and Development in China's Arctic Cooperation". The CNARC website, www.cnarc.info, was updated in 2022 by the Arctic Portal and now also includes databases for both experts at CNARC member institutes in the field of Arctic research and relevant publications. As no Assembly of Member Institutes has been held since May 2019, which alongside the CNARC

roundtable are part of each China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposia, no new members have joined CNARC since the 2018 Assembly.

Post-Covid-19 restrictions

By 2023 in-person activities of CNARC have resumed, as China lifted its Zero-Covid policy. The first in-person CNARC event, after Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed, was a summer seminar on “Arctic Issues and China-Nordic Cooperation” hosted by the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies in August 2023. There the focus was on analysing the status and future prospects of China-Nordic cooperation under the current geopolitical situation and practical aspects regarding the CNARC cooperation.¹¹ It was furthermore decided that the 8th China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposium will take place in Guangzhou, China in 2023 (the dates were later set for 3-6 December) and CNARC session were furthermore hosted at the 2023 Arctic Circle Assembly. The 8th China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposium will focus on “Sustainable Development of the Arctic Oriented: The Role of Sino-Nordic Cooperation” and includes an economic roundtable on “Green Solutions to Arctic Tourism” and an Assembly of Member Institutes.¹² The event will be an important step towards a relaunch of “normal” CNARC activities following the period 2020-2022 period of Covid-19 restrictions.

As previously stated, the purpose of CNARC is to provide a platform for academic cooperation to increase awareness, understanding and knowledge of the Arctic and its global impacts, as well as to promote cooperation for sustainable development of the Nordic Arctic and coherent development of China in a global context. This purpose is even more important than when it was framed in 2013 and the benefits of increased understanding between different parties can be showcased in the CNARC cooperation. Geopolitical aspects can impact research cooperation severely as is visible in the state of international Arctic cooperation following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24th of February 2022. The security aspect in Nordic-China relations is also more evident today than it was ten years ago and by 2023 all Nordic States are either members of NATO or applying to become members. NATO’s position on Arctic affairs was presented at the 2023 Arctic Circle Assembly by the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, who underlined that “NATO does not consider China as a threat, but as a challenge”.¹³

Security aspects can impact China-Nordic Arctic research cooperation and it would be naïve to disregard them completely. However, when evaluating the first decade of CNARC’s activities it can be argued that it has proved to be a constructive platform for exchanges, primarily research cooperation, while there has been important participation at CNARC events from policy-makers and industry alike. The focus on understanding each other’s objectives in Arctic cooperation and communicating values related to sustainable development and joint solutions on common challenges, including climate change, and opportunities, including innovation and economic development, require international cooperation. CNARC, and similar platforms, can contribute towards constructive dialogue and play an important role in enhancing the well-being of the eight billion people living in the world today and towards improving the future.

Notes

1. ¹ China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, December, 2013, https://www.cnarc.info/images/documents/CNARC_Brochure.pdf.
2. ² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, "Joint Press Release Strengthening Sino-Nordic Cooperation", May 26, 2017, http://dk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zdgx/201705/t20170526_2557196.htm.
3. ³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," January 26, 2018, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.
4. ⁴ Nordregio, "The China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC)", 2018, <https://nordregioprojects.org/blog/2019/10/01/the-china-nordic-arctic-research-center-cnarc/>
5. ⁵ Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, "H.E. Erna Solberg Visits SIIS and Delivers a Speech", April 12, 2017, <https://www.sis.org.cn/SeminarConference/9480.jhtml>
6. ⁶ China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, "The Evolution of CNARC 2013-2018", December 2018, cnarc.info/images/documents/CNARC2013-2018_final.pdf
7. ⁷ Yang, J. (2017), "Four Impacts of the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center", In R.W. Corell et al. (eds.), *The Arctic in World Affairs: A North Pacific Dialogue on Building Capacity for a Sustainable Arctic in a Changing Global Order*, pp. 291-299, Korean Maritime Institute and East-West Center, https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/2017arctic_0.pdf
8. ⁸ Nielsson, E.T. (2019), "China-Nordic Arctic Research Center", In A.B. Forsby (ed.), *Nordic-China Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities*, NIAS Reports, No. 52, pp. 59-63, NIAS Press, https://www.fni.no/getfile.php/1311593-1576073459/Filer/Publikasjoner/Nordic-China_Cooperation-report.pdf
9. ⁹ Heininen, L. K. (2019). "The Arctic Super Week in May 2019: from Rovaniemi to Shanghai", *Arctic Yearbook*, 370-377, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Briefing-Notes/13_AY2019_BN_Heininen.pdf
10. ¹⁰ Shan Y.Y., He J.F., Guo P.Q., et al. (2023), "An assessment of China's participation in polar subregional organizations", *Adv Polar Sci*, 34(1): 56-65, doi: 10.13679/j.advps.2022.0023
11. ¹¹ Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, "Nordic scholars visit SIIS", August 24, 2023, <https://www.sis.org.cn/Visits/15088.jhtml>
12. ¹² See more on CNARC website: [Upcoming Symposia - China-Nordic Arctic Research Center - CNARC](http://www.cnarc.info)
13. ¹³ Edvardsen, A., NATO's Military Leader: "We Must Be Prepared for Military Conflicts Arising in the Arctic", *High North News*, 01 November 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/natos-military-leader-we-must-be-prepared-military-conflicts-arising-arctic>