

Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

From April 2015 to the spring of 2017, the United States will chair the Arctic Council (AC). Based on the “National Strategy for the Arctic Region” issued by the Obama Administration on 10 May 2013, the U.S. government has announced an ambitious program for its two-year term as chair of the AC. According to the materials provided by the U.S. Department of State, the theme of the U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council (AC) is “One Arctic: Shared Opportunities, Challenges and Responsibilities,” a formulation which recognizes the peaceful and stable nature of the Arctic.¹ Up till now, the United States has developed an ambitious and balanced program for its chairmanship. Just as Young has pointed out, most of those who have commented on this program have focused on what the U.S. describes as “thematic areas,” including the impacts of climate change, stewardship of the Arctic Ocean, and economic and living conditions in the Arctic.² According to the U.S. official document, “improving economic and living conditions” comes first and “addressing the impacts of climate change” comes last but not least.

As a Chinese scholar, I am interested in analyzing how China can play a role in Arctic affairs during the U.S. AC chairmanship with such an ambitious program. It is not because most Chinese scholars working on the Arctic affairs think that China is a country near the Arctic region. I myself do not like to use such explanations. The main reason for me to be interested in this topic is that China has already been involved in Arctic affairs which have had close linkages to global affairs in an integrated world for a long time. The current relations between China, the second largest economic entity, and the U.S., the largest economic entity as well as the only superpower in today’s world, have expanded to all areas of global affairs. In order to promote the China-U.S. political, economic, cultural, and environmental relationship for stable and healthy development in the world, we need to study and analyze the relations between the two from an all-round perspective and try to understand the concerns, positions, and appeals of each other in different fields and areas, including Arctic affairs.

CHINA'S STANCE IN ARCTIC AFFAIRS

As an emerging power China has already been actively participating in global affairs including Arctic affairs, especially in efforts to deal with climate change. Such a situation clearly explains why China was active in Arctic affairs and Arctic governance even before becoming a formal observer in the Arctic Council. China will undoubtedly play a more active role in Arctic governance since gaining observer status in the AC in May 2013. It follows that understanding China's stance in Arctic affairs becomes critical in deliberating China's role in Arctic governance during the U.S. AC chairmanship from 2015–17.

First, China recognizes and respects the rights of the Arctic coastal states in the region in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other relevant international laws. China fully agrees that Arctic states have sovereign rights and jurisdiction in their respective areas in the Arctic region, and China will not interfere with Arctic states' inner affairs or bilateral negotiations on boundaries, border disputes, and other jurisdictional issues. Thus, "in terms of handling Arctic affairs we should respect sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction of Arctic countries from the basic foreign policy of peaceful development of China, and gradually eliminate doubts about our participation in the Arctic affairs."³

Second, given the global implications of certain Arctic issues such as climate change etc., as a non-Arctic state affected by developments like melting icecaps in the Arctic region and new shipping routes, China contends that it has the responsibility to provide public goods in Arctic governance treated as part of global governance. China also believes that both Arctic and non-Arctic countries play an indispensable role in Arctic governance in the context of global governance. As a non-Arctic state, China has to cooperate with Arctic states on the basis of UNCLOS and through participating in the activities of the Arctic Council as a permanent observer state. China believes that the AC is the most influential regional intergovernmental forum.⁴ Already as a temporary observer of the AC, China had appreciated the opening of AC to non-Arctic countries. Since becoming a permanent observer state, China has worked and will continue to work hard to strengthen cooperation with AC and its member states, increase mutual understanding and trust on Arctic affairs, and improve Arctic governance.

Third, scientific research in the Arctic is a priority for China's participation in Arctic affairs, and China believes that enhanced cooperation in scientific research will enable Arctic and non-Arctic states such as China, Korea, and Japan to view transregional issues from a global perspective and to facilitate the settlement of relevant issues. This model of cooperation has already yielded sound results for China in addressing such issues as climate change, Arctic marine environment, Arctic shipping, etc. The Yellow River Scientific Research Station established by China in Svalbard in 2004 has already been cooperating with countries such as Norway, the United States, and other non-Arctic states such as Germany, Korea, and Japan. China is also active in the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), providing one of the deputy chairs.

ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE MAIN AREA WHERE CHINA WILL CO-OPERATE WITH THE UNITED STATES IN ARCTIC AFFAIRS DURING THE U.S. AC CHAIRMANSHIP

One of three crucial areas in the U.S. program for its AC chairmanship is to address the impacts of climate change. China is able and willing to cooperate with the United States in this area during its AC chairmanship. The reasons are as follows:

- Both China and the United States are committed to responding actively to climate change. On 12 November 2014, the People's Republic of China and the United States of America issued a "China-U.S. Joint Announcement on Climate Change" in Beijing stating their respective post-2020 goals for coping with climate change. This announcement states that "the United States intends to achieve an economy-wide target of reducing its emissions by 26 percent to 28 percent below its 2005 level in 2025 and to make best efforts to reduce its emissions by 28 percent."⁵ According to the announcement, "China intends to achieve the peaking of carbon dioxide emissions around 2030 and increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 20 percent by 2030."⁶

The joint announcement also states that China and the United States "intend to continue strengthening their policy dialogue and

practical cooperation, including cooperation on advanced coal technologies, nuclear energy, shale gas, and renewable energy, which will help optimize the energy mix and reduce emissions, including from coal, in both countries.”⁷ With this in mind, it seems China will collaborate with the United States in achieving all goals in the area of addressing the impacts of climate change in the Arctic region during its AC chairmanship. These include: “Targeting short-lived climate pollutants, Supporting Arctic climate adaptation and resilience efforts, and Creating a Pan-Arctic Digital Elevation Map.”⁸

- The AC has already played a substantial role in dealing with climate change in the Arctic region, and China and the United States can cooperate quite well through the council in addressing impacts of climate change during the U.S. AC chairmanship. The Arctic Council issued the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment report in 2004, and the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) issued the Snow, Water, Ice, and Permafrost in the Arctic report in 2011. It is quite clear in the period of the U.S. chairmanship that the council will be well-placed to continue making significant contributions of this sort. Since becoming an AC permanent observer the Chinese government has sent different scientists and experts to participate in the activities of working groups addressing climate change issues in the council, such as the working group on Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), and the Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP). China’s performance in those working groups and programs has been praised by peers in the council. Without doubt, Chinese scientists and experts cooperate more actively with their counterparts in the working groups and programs of the AC in dealing with impacts of climate change in the Arctic region during the U.S. AC chairmanship.
- Most of China’s scientific activities in the Arctic region have been related to addressing climate change. Up till now, China has conducted six marine scientific expeditions in the Arctic—in 1999, 2003, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014—and has carried out comprehensive and multi-disciplinary observations on the sea, snow and ice, atmosphere, biology, and geology. China implemented the “China Polar Action Plan” during the International Polar Year (IPY) from 2007 to 2010, which demonstrated the cooperation between

China and countries within Arctic region as well as outside the Arctic region. China conducted these research programs as rapid changes caused by climate change took place in the Arctic region and participated in international Arctic scientific expeditions and several international Arctic science programs. China attaches great importance to Arctic environmental protection and to the impact of climate change there as well. China is an active member and facilitator in the international effort to address climate change. China is the first developing country to enact a “National Action Plan on Climate Change.” Being a party to relevant international conventions regarding Arctic environmental protection, China is faithfully implementing its obligations. China’s Arctic scientific research mainly focuses on Arctic climate change and its role in global climate change along with the dynamic processes of the Arctic Ocean and its impact on global ocean circulation, Arctic environmental processes, and ecosystem evolution. As these initiatives show, China will cooperate actively with the U.S. during its AC chairmanship from 2015 to 2017.

CHINA WILL COOPERATE WITH THE UNITED STATES IN IMPROVING ECONOMIC AND LIVING CONDITIONS IN ARCTIC COMMUNITIES AND IN “ARCTIC OCEAN SAFETY, SECURITY AND STEWARDSHIP”

According to the U.S. official documents, “remote Arctic communities face a number of threats to the health and well-being of their citizens, including food and water security, safe water, sewer and sanitation, affordable and renewable energy, adequate mental health services, and the need to ensure the continued economic viability of their communities.”⁹ That is the main reason why the U.S. put the area of “Improving Economic and Living Conditions in Arctic Communities” in the first place in the program for its Arctic Council chairmanship.

It is interesting that Ambassador Jia Guide, the former Deputy Director General of the Department of Treaty and Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, who led the Chinese delegation during the Sixth Round Dialogue on the Law of the Sea and Polar Issues between China and the U.S. held in Seattle 8–9 April 2015, mentioned the factor of indigenous peoples

in China's Arctic policy in an article entitled "On China's Participation in Arctic Governance under New Circumstance" published recently in *Global Review*, an academic journal sponsored by the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies. He expressed the view that while participating in Arctic affairs, China needs to "attach importance to indigenous factors in the Arctic affairs, fully understand, respect for indigenous people in the aspect of environmental protection, the apprentice, the distribution of economic benefits, as well as strengthen the communication and cooperation with them in order to promote the well-being of the Arctic people and the sustainable development in Arctic region."¹⁰

Although China has not yet issued its official Arctic policy paper, what Ambassador Jia's statement regarding the well-being of Arctic peoples shows that China wishes to cooperate with all people especially indigenous people in Arctic region in promoting their economic and living conditions. So it is likely that China and the U.S. can cooperate in pursuing some of the goals the United States has articulated in the area of "Improving Economic and Living Conditions in Arctic Communities," including "Promote the development of renewable energy technology, such as modular micro-grid systems, to spur public-private partnerships and improve energy affordability," etc.¹¹

As we know that China fully agrees that the Arctic states have sovereign rights and jurisdiction in their respective areas in Arctic, China will not interfere with the Arctic states' inner affairs and the bilateral or multilateral negotiations on boundaries, border disputes, and other jurisdictional issues among Arctic states. China has no intention to get involved in any traditional security affairs in the Arctic region because China has no national interests there. In terms of the nontraditional security issues in the Arctic region such as "Arctic Ocean Safety, Security and Stewardship," the second goal the United States includes in the program for its AC chairmanship, China will try its best to cooperate with Arctic countries including the United States.

In 2015, the International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) was adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), constituting an historic milestone in IMO's work to protect ships and people aboard them, both seafarers and passengers, in the harsh environment of the waters surrounding the two poles. China is one of the leading members of IMO and has contributed substantially to the development of the Polar Code. During the process of drafting and

formulating the Polar Code, an expert group from China persisted in the maintenance of shipping safety and improvement of the environmental protection, considered keeping balance between existing technology and future development needs, and tried to maintain balance between interests of countries in and outside the Arctic region so as to provide reasonable proposals.¹²

Given the role of China in the IMO and especially the contribution of China in creating the Polar Code, it is reasonable to expect that China will cooperate well with United States in enhancing the ability of Arctic states to execute their search and rescue responsibilities and in emphasizing safe, secure, and environmentally sound shipping in the Arctic Ocean. China will also support the U.S. in efforts to ensure that future maritime development avoids negative impacts, particularly in areas of ecological and cultural significance in the Arctic. Although China is not an Arctic state, as a permanent observer in the AC, China will support the aims of the U.S. in the area of “Arctic Ocean Safety, Security and Stewardship,” such as “Better prepare those responsible to better address search and rescue challenges in the Arctic,” “Ensure marine environmental protection, including working toward the establishment of a network of marine protected areas,” etc.¹³

CONCLUSION

China’s stance in Arctic affairs comprises three parts. They are: first, recognizing and respecting the rights of the Arctic coastal countries and countries in the region; second, accepting that China has the responsibility to provide public goods in Arctic governance; and third, treating scientific research in the Arctic as a priority of China’s participation in Arctic affairs. With this stance in mind, it is easy to understand that addressing climate change is the main area for China to co-operate with the U.S. in Arctic affairs during the U.S. AC chairmanship from 2015 to 2017. The main reasons are: first, both China and the U.S. are already committed to actively responding to climate change; second, the AC has already played a substantial role in dealing with climate change in the Arctic region; third, China and the U.S. can cooperate quite well through the Council in addressing impacts of climate change; and fourth, most of China’s scientific activities in Arctic region have been related to addressing climate change. Besides climate change, China will also cooperate actively with the U.S. in

improving economic and living conditions in Arctic communities and in Arctic Ocean safety, security, and stewardship

Notes

1. Robert W. Corell, “U. S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council”—summary created from materials provided by the U.S. Department of State.
2. Oran R. Young, “The U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship, 2015–2017: A Scientific Perspective,” commentary prepared for presentation at the 2015 North Pacific Arctic Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, 5–7 August 2015.
3. Jia Guide and Shi Wuhong, “On China’s Participation in Arctic Governance under New Circumstance,” *Global Review* (Guoji Zhanwang, CN31-1041/D, July/August 2014): 27. Jia Guide was formerly the deputy director general of the Department of Treaty and Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, and led the Chinese delegation attending the 6th Round Dialogue on the Law of the Sea and Polar Issues between China and the United States (Seattle, 8–9 April 2015).
4. Hu Zhengyue (assistant foreign minister of China), “China’s View on Arctic Affairs,” *World Knowledge* (Shijie Zhishi ISSN: 0583-0176): 5.
5. “U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change,” Beijing, China, 12 November 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change>.
6. “China- U.S. Joint Announcement on Climate Change,” Beijing, China, 12 November 2014, http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2014-12/09/content_34268965.htm.
7. “China- U.S. Joint Announcement on Climate Change,” Beijing, China, 12 November 2014, http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2014-12/09/content_34268965.htm.
8. Robert W. Corell, “U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council”—summary created from materials provided by the U.S. Department of State.
9. Robert W. Corell, “U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council”—summary created from materials provided by the U.S. Department of State.
10. Jia Guide and Shi Wuhong, “On China’s Participation in Arctic Governance under New Circumstance,” *Global Review* (Guoji Zhanwang, CN31-1041/D, July/August 2014): 27.
11. Robert W. Corell, “U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council”—summary created from materials provided by the U.S. Department of State.

12. Yang Jian et al., *New Perspectives on the Arctic Governance*, Beijing: Current Affairs Publishing House (Shishi Chubanshe), 2014: 299.
13. Robert W. Corell, “U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council”—summary created from materials provided by the U.S. Department of State.