



# China's Arctic Narrative as a Component of its Science Diplomacy Practices

## *Çin'in Arktik Anlatısının Tamamlayıcısı Olarak Bilim Diplomasisi Pratikleri*

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### Abstract

This study explores China's multifaceted Arctic narrative through the lenses of science diplomacy concept. The article starts with China's rationales in the Arctic Region, providing a critical reading of science diplomacy to demonstrate the evolution of the concept over time. After explaining the rationales behind the use of the science diplomacy concept in the Arctic Region, China's Arctic narrative is discussed under the umbrella of the science diplomacy concept. The main question of the study is how China uses narratives through its science diplomacy practices in order to justify its presence. Approaching the question through the emerging science diplomacy explanations rather than those of traditional ones, the study contributes both critical science diplomacy studies and China's dovish standing in the Arctic region on the ground of its Arctic narrative. The study concludes that, China enjoys the Arctic-club by using its narrative addressing traditional science diplomacy, while its ambitions strategically align with the emerging concept.

**Keywords:** China, science diplomacy, Arctic Region, narrative.

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Çin'in çok yönlü Arktik anlatısını bilim diplomasisi perspektifinden incelemektedir. Çalışma Çin'in Arktik Bölgesi'ndeki gerekçeleri ile başlamakta, bilim diplomasisine eleştirel okuma yaparak kavramın zaman içindeki değişimini göstermektedir. Arktik Bölgesi'nde bilim diplomasisi kavramının kullanılmasındaki gerekçelerin açıklanmasının ardından Çin'in Arktik anlatısı bilim diplomasisi kavramı altında tartışılmaktadır. Çalışmanın ana sorusu, Çin'in bölgedeki meşruiyetini sağlamak için bilim diplomasisi pratiklerinde nasıl anlatılar kullandığıdır. Araştırma sorusu, geleneksel bilim diplomasi yaklaşımının yerine eleştirel bilim diplomasisi açıklamaları üzerinden ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma hem eleştirel bilim diplomasisi çalışmalarına hem de Çin'in Arktik bölgesindeki barışçıl duruşuna katkıda bulunmaktadır. Çalışmanın sonucunda, Çin'in geleneksel bilim diplomasisini ele alan anlatısıyla Arktik kulübünde kendine yer edindiğini, ancak stratejik hedeflerinin yeni ortaya çıkan bilim diplomasi konseptiyle uyumlu olduğu ortaya koyulmuştur.

**Keywords:** Çin, bilim diplomasisi, Arktik Bölgesi, anlatı.

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## Introduction

The Arctic, lacking a distinct legal framework, in contrast to Antarctica, the Arctic serves as the convergence point of the European, Asian, and American continents. The region, where the USA and Russia are in close proximity, were standing for "Ice Curtain" during the Cold War (Young, 2019). Once perceived as obscure and isolated from global affairs, the region has gained recognition and international significance as a result of shifting regional geopolitics attributed to climate change effects.

The concept recognized in literature as "Arctic exceptionalism", the region as an extraordinary area marked by cooperation, distinct from conflict and political complexities. According to Lanteigne (2020), the threat to Arctic Exceptionalism stems from competitive strategies, particularly the pursuit of accessing resources ahead of others. The Arctic's historical emphasis on non-confrontational politics first came into focus during Russian titanium flag planting in the Arctic Ocean in 2007 (Coates & Holroyd, 2019), and concerns heightened following the 2008 United States Geological Survey report (USGS, 2008). Following emerging Sino-Russia partnership (Wishnick, 2017). and the US's active policies, once characterized as "reluctant power" (Hong, 2019)., the region's discourse transitioned from a paradigm of cooperative coexistence to more alarmist ones. These perceptions are further accelerated with emerging newcomers to the region.

### China's Rationales in the Arctic Region

The emerging involvement of Asia-Pacific states in the Arctic region as observer members has sparked another sense of alarm in Western academic and media circles. This apprehension has been labeled as "Polar Orientalism" by Dodds and Nuttall (2016), referring to the portrayal and perception of the East as an object of fear. While China is not the sole emerging country in the Arctic region, it has garnered the most attention among Asia-Pacific states not only for its observer status but also its various engagements in the region (Babin & Lasserre, 2019).

There is multidimensional nature of China's regional involvement in the literature emphasizing its endeavor driven by a complex interplay of various factors. Brady (2017) discussed that the nation's interests in the

region encompass traditional and nontraditional security considerations. Bennett (2015) underscores China's ambition for global prestige and recognition, reflecting its broader desire for status as an extraregional state in the Arctic. Scholars have provided different interpretations of China's regional policies, including viewing them as a potential threat to the sovereignty of coastal nations (Wright, 2011), efforts to secure energy and raw materials (Lanteigne, 2014), and aims to access overseas producers and consumers (Descamps, 2019). Wright (2018) stressed that China's interest extends beyond economic motives, encompassing natural resources, navigation routes, and the opportunity to influence Arctic affairs, in the same vein, Brady (2017) underscores China's aspiration to be merely "polar great power"; representing hawkish manner.

According to Hong (2014), China's interests encompass involvement in governance matters, resource accessibility, exploration of shipping routes, and engagement in polar research. Sørensen and Klimenko (2017) outlines diverse motivations, including scientific research, resource access, shipping development, and political influence, contributing to a holistic understanding of China's Arctic agenda. Weidacher Hsiung (2016) challenges the economic motivation argument, asserting that China's interest in resource development is not prominent due to the challenges and high costs of resource extraction in the Arctic region, coupled with China's diversified import options worldwide. These perspectives collectively reveal the multifaceted nature of China's engagement. Moreover, China already published its White Paper to articulate its goals and principles (State Information Office, 2018). According to the text, China's Arctic engagement, encompasses security, economic, global, and environmental considerations. "Science Diplomacy" becomes rationale for China's involvement in the region, highlighting its web of interests and diplomatic strategies to promote international collaboration in the Region.

### Rationales for Using Emerging Concept of "Science Diplomacy"

Science diplomacy is relatively recent concept and continually evolving, posing challenges for its examination and analysis. While the notion of international scientific collaboration dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which is mainly criticized by

Flink (2020) in guise of historical instances serve to exemplify the enduring but overlooked impact of science diplomacy, “science” with “diplomacy” emerged toward the end of the 20th century (The Royal Society & AAAS, 2010). The concept of science diplomacy experienced a significant shift with the establishment of the AAAS Center for Science Diplomacy in 2008 and the introduction of the inaugural specialized journal, “Science & Diplomacy,” in 2012, reflecting noteworthy growth as indicated by increased references in scholarly literature. Additionally, 2009 conference on “New Frontiers in Science Diplomacy” in the UK played a crucial role in generating interest and involving the global diplomatic community (Berkman, 2019). Science diplomacy encompasses three primary dimensions, as stressed by the Royal Society (2010). “Science in diplomacy” focuses on the incorporation of scientific advice into the decision-making processes, the essential role that scientific knowledge plays in shaping diplomatic strategies. “Diplomacy for science” involves cooperative endeavors among multiple nations to establish scientific projects and large-scale research facilities, highlighting the importance of international collaboration and resource-sharing for advancing substantial scientific endeavors. “Science for diplomacy” underscores the role of scientific collaboration in fostering peaceful relations among nations, contribution for the development of positive and constructive diplomatic relationships globally. Eventually, the utilization of science in political arena enhances political discourse and bolsters the credibility of policymakers, possibly contributing to the advancement of a nation’s strategic goals and dealing with global challenges that impact humanity.

The concept of science diplomacy presents significant challenges. The ambiguity inherent to the concept makes it difficult to discern distinct national styles of science diplomacy among states. Additionally, the blurriness between science diplomacy and international cooperation complicates the identification of actions and agents that qualify as science diplomats, even if there are some efforts for clarification. Copeland (2016) made a distinction between science diplomacy and international cooperation, emphasizing the former has direct state involvement whereas the latter is commercially oriented. From the traditional point of view, when science diplomacy is implemented to “address global challenges”, it could be reduced to only the notion of global

challenges. Those who attribute such positive image or sacred qualities to science diplomacy as transforming or improving international relations, actually idealize it beyond its true limitations. Furthermore, this type of definition makes states passive actors in the diplomatic practices that they perform as if science diplomacy were the sole catalyst for positive change. When considering the Cold War period, “diplomacy for science”, which performs mitigating the tensions between the superpowers (Suttmeier, 2010), it makes sense. When considering global challenges, “diplomacy in science” makes sense as well. However, the “national interests” are missing part in these explanations, one of the building block and requirement of diplomacy. Therefore, utilizing new approaches to science diplomacy is more effective way to understand and provide solid foundations for the cases.

Therefore, here the emerging concept of science diplomacy is utilized. As Turekian et al. (2015) mentioned, the primary aim of science diplomacy frequently involves leveraging scientific endeavors to advance the foreign policy objectives or interstate interests of a state. More holistic approach to the concept made by Gluckman et al. (2017), actions aligned with fulfilling and advancing the unique needs and priorities of the state; addressing shared concerns and cooperative ventures that involve multiple states; recognizing the interconnectedness of issues on a global scale. Moreover, science diplomacy at the same time should designed to fulfilling domestic needs, as exercising soft power, ensuring national security and meeting economic dimensions.

As the Arctic landscape and narrative changes in every aspect, it becomes the easiest but dead-end way to explain from the lenses of traditional science diplomacy. While science can indeed function as a tool for diplomatic efforts, it is crucial to recognize it as an integral component of a government’s comprehensive strategy. The difficulties at hand call for a concentrated examination within particular contexts and undertakings, leading to focalize on China’s utilization of science diplomacy as a tool to leverage scientific channels for diplomatic involvement and position itself as an acknowledged stakeholder and strategic ally, thereby mitigating possible misunderstandings. China’s amplified deployment of science diplomacy coupled with its Arctic narrative serves to reduce misinterpretations of its motives and mitigate perceptions of it as a risk. All the efforts made by China at the end of the day,

eventually serves its national interests at length.

### **Interpretation of the Science Diplomacy in the Arctic Region**

As it mentioned, though not compulsory, presenting science diplomacy as a tool to address global challenges in a manner that suggests it is not merely a tool but a necessity may sanctify the concept. This type of ascription lends it omnipotence and may effectively underestimate its political implications.

The Arctic serves as a pivotal region in the utilization of scientific knowledge in diplomatic endeavors due to its status as a critical climate change hotspot, marked by uncertainty and unpredictability, necessitating the cooperative involvement of multiple states. Beside its changing narrative, discussed hereinabove, the Arctic Council also changed its trajectory from the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) to the Council itself (Arctic Council, 1996), committed to fostering international cooperation, scientific research, and diplomatic dialogue to address the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the changing Arctic environment, despite still pursuing monopolization of decision making process. While overt endorsements of international scientific collaboration contribute to the region's cooperative environment, they exemplify a positive correlation between science and diplomacy.

Fundamentally, in any context where science exists, there is a methodical inquiry process allowing the accumulation of knowledge, regardless of whether it is advantage of humanity. Crucially, science is not inherently associated with political or ideological motivations; rather, it functions as a universal medium for knowledge (Copeland, 2011). From this perspective, the concept is envisaged to serve a general purpose by states cooperating through diplomatic initiatives. Additionally, some scholars provide another notable contribution examining how states interpret science diplomacy, asserting that very few Arctic states explicitly mention "science diplomacy" (Rüffin & Rüländ, 2022). The study reveals that states predominantly associate the term "science diplomacy" with the integration of policymaking solely at the international level. Erett and Halařková (2022) initiated a discussion on the legitimacy of "science diplomacy" and found that despite the absence of explicit discourse or definition of the term, Arctic nations

have already integrated the notion of "science diplomacy" into their strategic approaches. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that all joint declarations, actions, and agreements may not exclusively fall under the purview of science diplomacy. The Arctic is undergoing notable environmental transformations which given rise to an intricate and delicate landscape. Moreover, geopolitical elements add an additional layer of complexity, consequently heightening uncertainties in the region. Within this context, scientific collaboration serves as a stabilizing influence between regional and non-regional actors (Bertelsen et al., 2016). From this perspective, China strengthens its presence through exchange of scientific knowledge by instrumentalization of its Arctic narrative.

### **Instrumentalization of Arctic Narrative as a Component of Science Diplomacy Practices**

Science diplomacy functions navigating the challenges of the Arctic region. Given the impact of climate change, exploitation and exploration of the resources, emerging maritime routes, international cooperation has become indispensable. Here, the author does not discuss how China implements science diplomacy, rather argues that traditional and emerging explanation of science diplomacy gives China suitable area for articulation its narrative, whereas its engagement holds greater value for its national interests.

Throughout China's historical engagement with the global community, science has consistently held a crucial role. The ascendancy of European powers in the 19th century heightened the significance of scientific affairs in both China's domestic governance and its diplomatic interactions with other nations (Freeman, 2019). China, despite lacking territorial claims in the Arctic region, has directed its efforts towards its narrative through science diplomacy initiatives. Drawing on the Svalbard Treaty joined in 1925 (Svalbard Treaty, 1920), under which China enjoys freedom to enter and access specific regions within the Arctic and practice of scientific research, it justifies its continued presence in the region, aiming to consolidate its narrative as an "Actor" and "Stakeholder". Consequently, China aims to be one of the influential countries in the globally impactful Arctic, in accordance with the international law, for "the common interests of the international community" as it was stressed in the White Paper (State Council Information Office, 2018), through which China demonstrates a



human-centric approach, prioritizing the interests of all humanity over geopolitical interests. China is also “responsible stakeholder” in the Arctic Region, acknowledging its contribution to addressing global challenges and upholding international norms and rules. Through diplomatic cooperation, scientific endeavors, and investments, China seeks to safeguard its interests in the Arctic in line with the positive impacts of its involvement (Jakobson & Peng, 2012). China, therefore, is assertive in its stance that it deserves to be involved in all future deliberations related to Arctic development. While China’s engagement has generated apprehensions, its scientific contributions have been acknowledged by the Arctic states (Kopra & Puranen, 2021). Employing scientific knowledge to foster alliances through cooperative endeavors is in line with the goals of utilizing science for diplomatic purposes, seeking to enhance its persuasive influence of China. China also perceives that partnering with the Arctic States holds the potential for mutual benefits, particularly through the establishment of a permanent Chinese research outpost or observatory, providing access to invaluable long-term research data (State Council Information Office, 2018).

Since the beginning of the 2010s, Chinese sources have referred to the polar regions as “New Strategic Frontiers”, where major powers compete and are not restricted in the utilization of resources (Doshi et al., 2021), in accordance with international law and UNCLOS (State Council Information Office, 2018). Consequently, the Arctic geopolitics in which Russia, the United States, and China are involved, is re-articulated through emerging narratives, highlighting the continuous status quo as an arena for these major powers to assert their presence in this backyard, at times despite each other. Therefore, narrative construction has a significant role in the Arctic engagement. Consequently, the meticulously crafted narrative allows China to challenge the perception of “China threat” (Rainwater, 2013) without triggering any adverse reactions or misunderstandings from the international community.

Given the considerable geographical distance separating China from the Arctic, it becomes essential to be accepted as a stakeholder by regional states. Additionally, observer status in the Council provides an additional avenue for facilitating this acceptance and consent of the regional states. China puts significant emphasis

on bolstering its influence through science diplomacy practices. Furthermore, its increasing presence in a variety of other regional Track II platforms, regional initiatives, including the China-Russia Arctic Forum and the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, aimed at strengthening relations through science diplomacy (Doshi et al., 2021). Observer status presents a hopeful and potentially distinct chance for China to formalize its involvement in Arctic governance and the associated decision-making processes (Graczyk & Koivurova, 2014). Following granted status in 2013 as observer, China has steadily fortified its diplomatic ties with Arctic countries and participated in scientific activities in the region (Hong, 2018). China has encountered direct repercussions of climate change, impacting its industry as well as agriculture (State Information Office, 2018). China displayed not only active but also ambitious engagement in Arctic affairs which surpasses those of the Arctic States (Ingimundarson, 2014). In line with this, China has explicitly affirmed its full endorsement and deployment of specialists to contribute to the Council’s working groups and task forces, as well as to partake in international partnerships, such as the Arctic Science Ministerial Meeting. China, takes active part in intergovernmental science practices “to seize the historic opportunity in the development of the Arctic” (State Council Information Office, 2018).

In 2014, Xi Jinping announced its aspiration to attain the status of a “Great Polar Power” (Brady, 2017). This is definitely articulation of China’s intention to become the leading polar power, which was subsequently integrated into the country’s maritime strategy to reaffirm its global prominence. The statements “polar power” and “great polar power” become embodiments of China’s ambitious to engage in Arctic research. Collaboration among stakeholders becomes essential where global crisis emerges such as the Arctic, where the resources of individual states may prove insufficient to challenge this. It is not surprise that, in such environment, China has evolved over time into a “professional partner” and “wisdom sharer” within scientific research, rendering its exclusion untenable (Su & Mayer, 2018). This anew strengths China to expand its capacity.

It is noting that China’s Arctic footprints have started with a scientific foundation. In 1882, China attended First International Polar Year, following signing Spitsbergen Treaty, China participated

in Soviet research in the Arctic. To engage polar expeditions, State Oceanic Administration (SOA) was founded in 1964. The year 1966 China Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA) foundation (previously the Chinese Antarctic Administration of the State Antarctic Research Committee founded in 1981, joining International Arctic Science Committee (Hong, 2020). Yellow River Station, established in 2004, the China-Iceland Joint Aurora Observatory (CIAO) was inaugurated in 2018, operating as China's second science station (Koivurova et al., 2019). China, preparing for its 13<sup>th</sup> Arctic expedition (Kubny, 2023), has been conducting Arctic expeditions since 1999 (State Council Information Office, 2018). Importance of these expeditions is to collect firsthand data in a way that other countries have not done before (Hong, 2020). Moreover, these expeditions were conducted with the participation of scientists from many countries as a transnational expert network (Su & Mayer, 2018). China's effective polar missions have positioned the nation to advance polar research further, laying the groundwork for future comprehensive explorations. These missions serve a dual purpose of increasing China's presence in the Arctic region, domestically and internationally. Interdisciplinary research performs a vital function in comprehensively examining the phenomenon of global climate change and its implications for polar ecosystems, eventually China's climate.

A key advantage of science diplomacy lies in the continuity of scientific collaborations, as researchers who have worked together for extended periods continue to engage in joint scientific endeavors even during periods of strained international relations. This enduring collaboration is sustained by science diplomacy, allowing scientists to pursue shared objectives despite political or diplomatic strains (Bertelsen, 2020). Norway's decision not to veto China's bid for observer status, citing China as "the world's leading polar explorer" (Hong, 2018) and Russian foreign minister acceptance China as a "strategic partner in science and technology" during a period of tense relations (Wishnick, 2017) are noting examples of the significance of science diplomacy for continuation the relations. This is truly distinctive sign of Sino-Arctic epistemic communities (Bertelsen, 2020) creating trust and consent of the states without hesitation (Su & Mayer, 2018). China's commitment to prioritizing scientific research and promoting

international cooperation stands as a cornerstone of its approach to addressing global challenges, sustainable development of the Arctic region in its narrative.

Due to its rapid evolution, scientific collaboration and knowledge in the Arctic region will serve as a stabilizing force in an environment with uncertain future. China's engagement in Arctic scientific narrative has solidified its status as an "indispensable partner" (Willis & Depledge, 2015). Collaboration among scientists contributes to the fostering of a peaceful diplomatic environment among nations (Lanteigne, 2017). As it depicted in the White Paper, China's commitment to play constructive role in promotion international cooperation in the Arctic Region serves its broader practices of science diplomacy.

China has successfully integrated the "Arctic Dream" into the "Chinese Dream". The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as part of "Chinese Dream", put forward by Xi Jinping, is a multi-dimensional global endeavor (Kobzeva, 2019). Although the integration of science diplomacy into the BRI has yet to be fully actualized (Freeman, 2019), China officially included the "Polar Silk Road" into the BRI, and address its constructive role in the establishment of international regulations pertaining to the Arctic and the advancement of sustainable development through developing the Arctic routes (State Council Information Office, 2018). Consequently, both scientists and policymakers are collectively engaged in these processes, serving as a mechanism that enhances communication within interstate relations.

It is also important to note that translations of official statements are deliberately phrased with softer language to avoid backlash and create a positive atmosphere. China employs a fierier rhetoric when addressing the domestic audience, contrasted with a softer tone for foreign audiences (Doshi et al., 2017), which does not pose an obstacle to the study due to focusing of China's intentional narrative.

China is already aware of the "China Threat" perception. Krasnyak (2023) notes the absence of explicit prioritization for the employment of science diplomacy as a tool for implementing wider foreign policy objectives. Nonetheless, a clear emphasis is placed on understanding how China's *dovish* dimension of its narrative aligns with its diplomatic strategies in the Arctic region. From this point of view, China has built its policies

towards the region on the concepts of “respect, cooperation, win-win result and sustainability”. The White Paper legitimizes China’s presence in the region, demonstrates its determination to become an Arctic actor, and asserts that it will comply with international law, strengthen international cooperation, and also naturalize the internationalization of the region (the State Information Office, 2018). China labels itself as an “Arctic stakeholder” and a “near-Arctic State”, emphasizing the pivotal role of scientific activities in bolstering China’s strategies, particularly in the regulation of Arctic governance. Therefore, the White Paper was prepared using a language that appeals to Euro-centric values to break down all biases. “Respect”, as stated, signifies China’s commitment to adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, recognizing the sovereignty and sovereign rights of the Arctic states. “Cooperation” is proposed as the most effective means for China’s involvement in the region. Accordingly, it advocates for the construction of the region’s future through multilateral international cooperation. The concept of “win-win” implies China’s stakeholder status in the region, asserting that it does not adopt a competitive stance against the Arctic states, but rather seeks mutual benefits and common interests. “Sustainability” underscores the necessity for the region’s sustainable development to continue peacefully and securely, considering environmental protection (State Council Information Office, 2018). This also emphasizes the acknowledgment of scientific research as a fundamental element in shaping and executing China’s policies. The Arctic is depicted as a “shared future for mankind”, cementing China’s default position as a key player in the region. In the White Paper, China has explicitly stated that its primary focus in scientific endeavors is the preservation of the environment and ecosystems, as well as raising awareness about climate change as a “active participant” in the Arctic affairs. What is more, China intends to leverage the technical knowledge acquired through Arctic scientific researches to serve strategic purposes as a force of influence and to fortify its position in the region. Although national interests are not explicitly mentioned in the White Paper, all aspects emphasizes its Arctic ambitions which serve for being great polar power.

## Conclusion

As Chinese proverb says that “when the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others

build windmills”, China has been taking any emerging advantage to improve its maneuvering capacity in the Arctic as it changes. As the region once perceived as a remote or solely ice-covered area, sustains its narrative as a resource-rich, promising, and accessible. China’s initiatives in the region have evolved from “High Arctic, Low Politics” to “High Arctic, High Diplomacy” over time. In order to justify its presence as an “observer being observed”, scientific cooperation constitutes the foundation for increasing China’s influence in the region, further facilitated by its Arctic narrative. Pursuing an active policy in new frontiers and becoming a stakeholder in these boundaries will enhance China’s power and bring it closer to the Chinese Dream. Scientific cooperation will undoubtedly benefit China’s national security indirectly, through the direct strategic data collection related to the exploration of resources, routes, and climate change in the Arctic. Carefully crafted with a Euro-centric tone, its narrative helps alleviate concerns of the Arctic nations. From this point of view, it was discussed that China’s implementation of traditional science diplomacy concepts, addressing global challenges, stating it has been in the Region for scientific purposes as a long time, however, China’s narrative legitimizes its sense of belonging and presence in the region while ultimately contributing to its grand strategy. Effectively integrating its national interests with the interests of the international community, China performs as an accepted and unquestionable active player in the Arctic for its broader purposes.

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