



BOOK REVIEW

China's role in the Arctic: observing and being observed. ISBN 9780367278694. Published May 12, 2020 by Routledge. Author: Nong Hong. 232 pages. (Paperback)

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As indicated by its title, the author of the book – Dr. Nong Hong – focuses her efforts on understanding the current ways in which China sees and operates the Arctic, hence reflecting on how it seeks to develop its policies for the region and how its actions are seen by other actors. In summary, the book's eight chapters could be grouped into three main points: China's involvement in international organizations, its relations with Arctic stakeholders, and more specifically its actions across the Arctic territory, signifying the extent of its engagement with shipping activities and scientific development. Arguably, the main idea is to show readers how the world's most populous nation is expanding its influence and increasing political power well beyond its surroundings, and how Arctic geopolitics will likely be altered by the actions proposed, taken and/or implemented by it and other non-Arctic states in the near future.

The author mentions the existence of a report known as “China's Arctic Policy”, released on 26 Jan 2018 and initially, based on its contents, she alludes to the importance it has given to becoming a key player in global affairs. This particular set of strategies came to reaffirm China's commitment to foster international cooperation for resource management and scientific research across the Arctic, while respecting international agreements and Arctic native communities. In essence, Dr. Hong argues that “China's Arctic policy uses these two words

(understand and protect) to underscore the importance of improving capacity and capability of scientific research in the region, so as to create favourable conditions for mankind to better protect, develop and govern it". Labelling itself a "near-Arctic state" China's ambitions, will, however, eventually outgrow its seamlessly peaceful motives for cooperation, challenging the very notion that only Arctic nations should have a say over what happens in the region.

Climate change has, unsurprisingly, prompted various countries to act to preserve their interests in the global economy. Illustrating this, the author mentions the cases of nations such as Japan and South Korea participating as observer states in the Arctic Council due to the belief that their economies will eventually be affected by the extreme weather events we have been witnessing. China, on the other hand, has been since 2007 an ad hoc observer in the Arctic Council, gradually demonstrating its wishes to play a more prominent role in the region's politics. In 2009, it officially announced its intention to become an observer state, a position that sectors from the media feared could occasionally undermine the system of Arctic governance in place until that moment. Regardless of suspicions, however, and with the public support from the Nordic countries, China was granted observer status in 2013. In the next pages, the author goes on writing about Beijing's relationship with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), as well as its adoption of the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Ocean (CAOFA) and support for the establishment of an organization that manages Arctic fisheries under the dispositions established in the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In summary, the idea is to state that China has sought to gain more power over decision making processes for the Arctic region in a lawful manner.

Another point raised is China's relationship with Arctic indigenous communities. According to Dr. Hong, China signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), explicitly stating its respect for these individuals and their ancestral knowledge. In fact, she writes that "China is striving to strengthen communication and exchanges with these (indigenous) organizations", while also briefly stressing the necessity of appropriate mechanisms to

avoid misunderstandings between East Asian stakeholders and indigenous communities. In essence, the idea stated is that intentions may be good, but how they are applied is crucial to their success.

The next sections touch on the issue of Arctic shipping routes. Essentially, according to the author “China is eager to diversify its supply and trade routes, particularly by reducing its reliance on shipping through the Straits of Malacca and the Lombok Strait”. This change in behavior, coupled with the fact that climate change will inevitably facilitate transportation across the Arctic Ocean, have prompted reactions from Arctic and non-Arctic states, which view China with “suspicion and caution”, as fomenting a “threat narrative”. However, despite these scenarios, it is explained that Beijing’s actions have been consistent with international legislation hitherto.

Furthermore, aside from the points raised above, the book fundamentally alludes to the fact that whether or not nations such as the United States and Russia support it, China (and other non-Arctic states/organizations, e.g., Japan and the European Union, respectively) will likely continue to bolster their influence across the Arctic, including frequent and significant investments in scientific research and development. The next decades will continue to see changes in the region’s governance system, as climate change reshapes political and economic relations worldwide. The question is no longer how these transformations will occur, but rather how we can all adapt to them. As the author shows, environmental tragedies in the Arctic such as organic, petroleum and radioactive pollution are part of the heritage left by the XX century and its many conflicts. Stronger mechanisms to foster international cooperation for the planet’s protection are now more vital than ever before in our history. Fundamentally, looking forward is the only way we may have a chance to survive.