



In the last few years, China has become a polar power, writes Patrick Hebrard. Beijing's interest initially focused on Antarctica, but its presence in the Arctic has accelerated in recent years, driven by global warming and melting ice. The term polar translates into Chinese by jidi (极地) which means the "extremes of the earth". The Arctic is therefore the "Far North", the Antarctic "the Far South". Long remaining ambiguous, the Chinese strategy for the poles now appears in official documents, showing its willingness to be a recognized actor in these regions of the world and to defend resolutely its interests.

China's presence in these extremes is recent. In 1925, China had signed, without enthusiasm, the Treaty of Paris on Spitzbergen, solicited by France. With the events that China went through, this signature fell into oblivion and it was only in 1964 that the State Administration of Oceans was created which progressively became interested in the polar environment. See more on next page

Antarctica

China's primary research interest is Antarctica, starting with the signing, in 1983, of the Antarctic Treaty. The southern continent attracts the largest share of research budgets with 80% of funds, concentrates the majority of polar expeditions and three-quarters of Chinese polar scientific publications.

China launched its first Antarctic expedition in 1984 and established four stations there. Great Wall (Changcheng) was built in 1984 on King George Island, in the part claimed by Chile. Its scientific activity has been decreasing in recent years and since 2013, places have been offered to foreign scientists. It has recently opened to Chinese tourists.

Zhongshan, the second base, dates from 1989 and is in the Australian part, and close to the Russian base of Progress II. It has an airport. The Kunlun resort, located at an altitude of more than 4000 m, near Dome A, the highest peak in Antarctica, was opened in February 2009. The routing of logistics is complicated, and the station remained almost empty for several years. This remoteness - it took more than a month of transit to connect Zhongshan to Kunlun (1235 km) - justified the creation, in 2014, of a fourth base, Taishan. Located at 2,600m altitude, it is open only during the austral summer. The station has an ice-air runway since 2016.

In May 2017, a White Paper on Antarctica was published announcing new investments in Antarctica, including the construction of a fifth station in the Ross Sea on Inexpressible Island in Terra Nova Bay. This base, near the stations of McMurdo (USA) and Scott (N.Z.), will be occupied permanently. It should be operational in 2023, with an airport.

For scientific missions and logistics of the polar bases, China bought from Ukraine in 1994 its first icebreaker, the Xue Long. The second icebreaker, domestically built, the Xue Long 2, sailed for her first voyage to the Antarctic on October 15 2019, for the 36th polar expedition.

It will be able to break 2 metres of ice, and is equipped with a helicopter and a small bathyscaphe. The next icebreaker should be nuclear powered.

China has also equipped aircraft capable of use in polar conditions for the transport of personnel and light equipment. The development of adapted vehicles and a communications network are included in the five-year plan 2016-2020.

The search for raw materials has become the main concern of Chinese scientists. China considers that the attempts to establish Special Protected Areas or Marine Protected Areas are in fact a way for the countries concerned to preserve their achievements and they systematically oppose them. China considers Antarctica as Res Nullius, open to all nations, and thinks that we will return to the ban on the exploitation of mineral resources set by the Madrid Protocol on the Protection of the Environment in 1991.

The Arctic

China's official Arctic research programme formally began in 1989 with the establishment of the Chinese Polar Research Institute in Shanghai. Since then, 8 expeditions have been made to the area.

Scientific research has been China's first gateway to the Arctic. Since 2004, the country has a research station, called Yellow River, in Ny-Alesund, Svalbard Islands. This station has a space physics observatory for study, in particular, aurora borealis. Since October 2018, China shares with Iceland a research station dedicated also to the study of aurora borealis and magnetic fields. In addition, like other countries in the Arctic, China has been deploying temporary iceberg stations since 2003.

Some analysts believe that scientific research is a political instrument of influence and that most of it is devoted to oil and gas interests. Chinese scientists are reluctant to share their data, a rule applied by all other delegations. One can also note, as does Frédéric Lasserre, that the themes of scientific publications on the Chinese polar site have progressively moved from the environment to economic and geopolitical issues.

China is also interested in maritime routes in the Arctic. In 2010, it signed a long-term cooperation agreement for the transportation of oil and gas products via the Northeast route with Russia. To do this, China has not challenged the sovereignty of Moscow over the waters of the Russian Arctic archipelagos. After a first successful transit with one of its vessels through the Northeast Route, in 2013, COSCO's is ambioning to transport 30% of its maritime traffic to the northern routes by 2030.

China is engaged in the economies of Iceland and Greenland. Taking advantage of the financial crisis, it has signed six cooperation agreements with Iceland and has the largest foreign embassy in Reykjavik, with plans to establish an important commercial base.

In 2013, the China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) was granted a license to exploit oil in Icelandic waters. In Greenland, China is interested by the presence of rare earths, ores and uranium. Chinese companies partnered with Britain's London Mining to win the first tender for Isua's iron ore mines, which went bankrupt in 2014. They are also exploring copper and gold mines in southern Greenland. Beijing also offers its services for the construction of ports and airports. But in 2016, the Danish government declined the Chinese proposal to buy an

abandoned naval base in Greenland.

Beijing has also acquired equity stakes in US and Canadian companies operating in Quebec and Nunavut (Canada). In 2012, CNOOC acquired the Canadian oil company Nexen.

In Russia, China National Petroleum Company signed a partnership in 2013 for the operation of 3 oil sites and took a 20% stake in the Yamal-LNG liquefied natural gas project. In August 2015, it was Novatek's turn to sell 9.9% of its stake in Yamal to Silk Road Infrastructure's Chinese fund. She also participates in the construction of floating nuclear power plants developed by the Russians. But this collaboration worries some Russian officials who fear that the Chinese financial aid will allow it to impose, in the long term, its conditions.

The White Paper on the Arctic, published in January 2018, sets out China's objectives in this region: to understand, protect, develop and participate in governance. Beijing intends to participate in the economic and social development of the region and inscribed the Arctic in the Belt and Road OBOR initiative with the Polar Silk Roads. Among the projects envisaged is the construction of the railway between Kirkenes in Norway and Rovaniemi in Finland connected to Helsinki, then Tallinn by a tunnel, and Warsaw, for a cost of 3 billion euros.

For China, the Arctic is one of the common goods of humanity. As such, it asks to be recognized as one of the actors in this debate, although it does not have territories in the area, applying the following principles: respect, cooperation, shared interest - win-win result - and durability. In 2013, she was granted permanent observer status in the Arctic Council. It does not support the claims of coastal states on the North Pole on the pretext of the extension of their continental shelf. Russia is one of them. According to Admiral Yin Zhuo: "The North Pole and the surrounding area do not belong to any state; they are part of the common heritage of humanity. "

"Respect" is the keyword of the White Paper invoked by China in the affairs of the Arctic zone, but this respect is two-way - respect for the rights of coastal states, respect for the freedom of other states, outside the zone Arctic, to operate in the area in accordance with the law, but also respect for the interests of the international community in the Arctic. "Arctic governance requires the participation and contribution of all stakeholders. "

Increasing investment in the Arctic region and bilateral agreements with members of the Arctic Council are the "soft" methods used by China to participate in the governance of the Arctic.

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