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END OF THE EARTH: THE ARCTIC

— Thomas Axworthy

Three state documents tell the story. At the end of 2015, President Vladimir Putin endorsed a new National Security Strategy to 2020 that explicitly aimed to increase the “competitiveness and international prestige of the Russian Federation.” The Arctic is central to this Russian worldview. The Arctic, President Putin told a meeting of the State Security Council before the strategy was officially released, was a region of “concentration of practically all aspects of national security—military, political, economic, technological, environmental, and that of resources.”

The President’s personal commitment to the Arctic has remained strong: in implementing the National Security Strategy, he told an international forum of Arctic leaders meeting in St. Petersburg in April 2019 that shipping through the Northern Sea Route would dramatically increase from 20 million metric tonnes shipped today to 80 million tonnes by 2035. He confidently stated that this is “a realistic, well-calculated, and concrete task.” And to ensure this happens, Russia plans to add 4 nuclear icebreakers to its fleet so that by 2035 Russia will have a total of 13 heavy icebreakers, 9 of them nuclear. Some may quibble about Russia’s great power status vis-à-vis the economy and technology, but in the Arctic, Russia is a superpower, and has enjoyed that status since the days of the czars.

In January 2018, China released a white paper on “China’s Arctic Policy,” and it was immediately evident that a powerful new Arctic player had emerged. Despite being more than 7,000 kilometres away from the Arctic Circle, the white paper declared China to be “a near Arctic State” and “an important stakeholder in Arctic

affairs.” In a comprehensive treatment, the white paper methodically outlines China’s goals in deepening the exploration and understanding of the Arctic, protecting the environment, utilizing Arctic resources, participating actively in Arctic governance, and promoting peace and stability, notably through the Arctic Council, which China joined as an observer in 2013.

China has backed up the rhetoric with actions: by the end of 2017, China had carried out 8 scientific expeditions in the Arctic Ocean and built the Arctic Yellow River Station in Ny-Ålesund in the Spitsbergen Archipelago. A second heavy icebreaker, *Xuelong 2*, joined its fleet in December 2017. In the same year, China’s other heavy icebreaker, the *Xuelong*, transited the Northwest Passage. There are reports that China has recently requested tenders for the construction of a nuclear icebreaker, potentially joining Russia in having elite Arctic capabilities.

But the big news of the white paper was the announcement that China would now include Arctic states in its “Belt and Road Initiative,” one of the most significant economic and geopolitical developments in our twenty-first century world. A “Polar Silk Road” if built, will make China a major Arctic influence for decades to come.

The third state document is a pretty damp squib compared to the other two. After years of consultations, on September 10, 2019, Canada’s Arctic and Northern Policy Framework was slipped out a day before the federal election campaign began, with little fanfare and even less praise.

The document enunciates 8 goals and 10 principles, but contains neither an implementation plan nor concrete policy choices. Rob Huebert, a Canadian specialist in the Arctic at the University of Calgary, says the federal government has long been aware of the issues of health, sustainable development, and sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, but, “All that’s been stated before. What’s not being stated here is any idea of how the government is going to address these well-known issues.”

25 Indigenous organizations, along with the territories of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and the provinces of Manitoba, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador (territories that are considered as Northern Canada and the Arctic within the Framework), joined in the process of creating the document. This multiple authorship might be why so many of the issues are fudged.

But it is certainly a lost opportunity: climate change, melting sea ice, and great power interest in the Arctic should make for a dynamic Arctic policy as an integral part of Canada’s most critical foreign policy priorities. Instead, Canada’s Arctic policy is simply a laundry list of objectives.

China’s white paper, in contrast, outlines the Arctic dilemma well. The first sentence declares that “global warming in recent years has accelerated the melting of ice and snow,” and that this poses a great security threat to China and the world. Only a few inches added to sea levels because of ice melt could cause devastating floods in coastal cities. If the Greenland ice sheet melted completely, the levels of the ocean would rise about 7 meters. Because of the severity of the climate threat, the Chinese logically conclude that science must be expanded, technology developed, adaptation enhanced, and the growth in greenhouse gases slowed. The scale and pervasiveness of the problem means that international cooperation is the only way to achieve this, and the Arctic is a critical place to start.

Yet the melting ice will allow shipping to use Arctic sea routes to connect China and Europe. Indeed, the Northern Sea Route could cut 20 days from the 48 days it currently takes to get to Rotterdam from China via the Suez Canal.

What is more important, our right to be cold or our desire to consume? The future of the Arctic, the End of the Earth, will provide the answer.

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