

ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY AS CHINA'S STRATEGY IN THE ARCTIC REGION TO SUPPORT THE POLAR SILK ROAD INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes China's strategic implementation of economic diplomacy in the Arctic region to support the Polar Silk Road (PSR) initiative, an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although China is not geographically an Arctic state, it claims the status of a "near-Arctic state" to justify its increasing involvement in Arctic affairs. Utilizing Kishan S. Rana's economic diplomacy framework—consisting of economic salesmanship, networking and advocacy, image building, and regulatory management—this research explores how China promotes infrastructure development, fosters cross-sectoral partnerships, enhances its global image, and engages with regulatory frameworks in line with international norms. Furthermore, the study applies the Multi-Track Diplomacy theory to illustrate China's use of multiple diplomatic channels, including government relations, scientific collaboration, business cooperation, and media engagement, to expand its regional influence. Employing a qualitative method and literature-based research, this paper reveals that China's approach is a long-term, multidimensional strategy that combines soft power, economic interests, and institutional participation to gain legitimacy in Arctic governance. Ultimately, China's diplomatic strategy in the Arctic is not merely reactive to global environmental and trade shifts but is part of a broader effort to position itself as a central player in shaping the region's future geopolitical and economic order.

INTRODUCTION

The Arctic region is estimated to hold approximately 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of undiscovered liquefied gas (Gautier, 2008). These reserve estimates represent significant economic value and emphasize the Arctic's strategic dimension in global energy politics. In the context of competition between major powers, these resources can be a source of geopolitical tension and a tool for negotiating power, especially amid rising energy demand and global market uncertainty. Geopolitically, ice melt in the Arctic opens up access to previously unreachable areas, fuelling the interest of non-Arctic states to engage in the management of the region. Although not an Arctic state geographically, China has shown significant



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interest and engagement in the region. Since the early 2010s, China has developed a narrative as a near-Arctic state and launched the Polar Silk Road (PSR) initiative in 2018 as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through this initiative, China seeks to integrate the Arctic region into its global economic network, emphasizing scientific cooperation, infrastructure investment, and the construction of new trade routes.

Mariia (2019) and Mahendra (2019) underline how the PSR is integrated with China's broader maritime and energy security agenda, indicating a shift from passive scientific observation to active strategic positioning. This aligns with China's 2018 Arctic Policy White Paper, which frames the country as a "near-Arctic state" entitled to participate in Arctic economic and governance affairs, reinforcing its legitimacy to shape regional infrastructure and trade. Through PSR, China is driving investment in maritime infrastructure, energy exploration, and scientific cooperation, de facto expanding its economic and technological presence in a region that has been under the dominance of Arctic states. This approach reflects China's sophisticated strategy of combining soft power and geoeconomic interests while raising concerns among Western countries regarding the potential for changing the geopolitical order in the strategically sensitive region.

Although not an Arctic State, China strategically utilizes the 'near-Arctic state' narrative as a diplomatic platform to expand its regional influence. China's presence at the forum is not limited to participation in scientific cooperation, but is also part of a long-term strategy to build political validity that strengthens bilateral relations with Arctic states. This approach reflects China's soft diplomacy, where normative engagement is used to strengthen strategic interests. Thus, observer status is not a limitation but rather an opportunity to monitor Arctic institutional structures while avoiding direct competition and encouraging the formation of a new order involving more non-Arctic actors (Grieger, 2018).

Building on the understanding that both adaptive behavior and strategic expansion shape China's involvement in the Arctic, Alif et al. (2022) explain China's evolving strategy through an adaptive behavior approach, where internal reform under Xi Jinping and external changes like ice melt and new trade routes influence China's foreign policy. Puranen and Kopra (2023) further deepen this view by presenting a comprehensive approach, asserting that China simultaneously integrates political, economic, scientific, and security elements to build influence. However, while these perspectives highlight the scope of China's involvement, they often lack clarity on how economic diplomacy mechanisms operate within China's Arctic strategy. Supporting this analysis, China's strategic use of soft power and non-traditional diplomacy has also been observed in other regional contexts. Khoirunnisa (2022) shows how China's vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a humanitarian gesture and a calculated foreign policy instrument to expand political influence in Southeast Asia. This demonstrates China's consistent pattern of leveraging soft power tools for strategic purposes—an approach similarly visible in the Arctic. In a broader context, studies on Indonesian diplomacy highlight the role of symbolic, non-military instruments in shaping global perceptions. For instance, Khoirunnisa and Jubaidi (2024) emphasize the role of symbolic representation and peaceful diplomacy during Indonesia's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, showing how middle-power countries use image-building to promote national interests. Indrawati and Nugroho (2018) similarly discuss maritime diplomacy as an identity-based strategy under Indonesia's free and active foreign policy.



To address this gap, this study draws on Kishan S. Rana's theory of Economic Diplomacy, which views diplomacy as a critical tool for achieving economic objectives. Rana outlines four phases—economic salesmanship, networking and advocacy, image building, and regulatory management—each reflected in China's Arctic engagement. For instance, through state-owned enterprises and diplomatic visits, China promotes Arctic investment (economic salesmanship); through partnerships with Nordic research institutes and energy firms, it strengthens cross-sector collaboration (networking and advocacy); through official narratives like the 2018 Arctic White Paper, it constructs a cooperative, scientific image (image building); and through participation in Arctic Council working groups, it seeks to shape norms and regulatory discourse (regulatory management) (Kishan Rana, 2018). These practices demonstrate that China's Arctic presence is not incidental but deliberately structured around long-term economic gains under the banner of the Polar Silk Road.

However, China's non-Arctic status limits its influence in formal Arctic governance. Its strategy increasingly relies on multi-actor engagement beyond traditional state-to-state diplomacy to overcome this. This dynamic is effectively captured by Diamond and McDonald's Multi-Track Diplomacy (MTD) framework, which recognizes that diplomacy operates across multiple interconnected tracks—government, business, academia, civil society, and media. In China's Arctic strategy, Track One diplomacy is visible in bilateral cooperation with Russia and Nordic states. In contrast, Track Two and Track Five diplomacy emerge in scientific collaboration and research diplomacy to build trust and credibility. Moreover, the energy and infrastructure business sector cooperation (Track Three) and China's promotion of the PSR through forums, publications, and media (Track Nine) is a strategic attempt to normalize its Arctic role and shape global perceptions.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with the library research method as the primary data collection technique. Qualitative research aims to understand the phenomena that occur in the object of study and explore the meaning behind the actions, experiences, and social context that shape reality. This approach emphasizes the importance of the subjective perspectives of participants as well as dynamics that cannot be explained statistically, making it an important tool in exploring the complexity of social phenomena (Khoirunnisa & Mayasari, 2020). The qualitative approach was chosen because it can provide an in-depth understanding of China's diplomatic strategy in the Arctic region, especially in its participation in the Arctic Council and the Polar Silk Road initiative. In qualitative research, researchers seek to understand phenomena based on the perspective of the actor or subject under study and consider the surrounding social, political, and economic context (John W. Cresswell, 2014).

The desk study method collected secondary data from various literature sources, such as scientific journal articles, academic books, official reports of governments and international organizations, and policy documents, such as China's Arctic Policy White Paper 2018. Desk research is relevant because it allows researchers to analyze China's diplomatic narratives, policies, and strategies without direct involvement. It is often tricky in complex regional studies such as the Arctic (Zed, 2004). The data was analyzed by reading the sources, identifying key themes relating to multilateral diplomacy and economic diplomacy by Kishan Rana, and interpreting how these strategies are realized within the framework of China's foreign policy towards the Arctic region. This approach allows the researcher to link China's strategic objectives in the White Paper with its



diplomatic practices in the Arctic Council and their relevance to the Polar Silk Road grand project.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Economic Salesmanship

In the economic salesmanship phase, China not only focuses on marketing the strategic idea of the PSR initiative as a profitable and normatively legitimate project but also actively carries out infrastructure development or economic cooperation in the Arctic region. This strategy is realized through diplomatic channels, including bilateral cooperation, official narratives, and multilateral participation.

In February 2022, ahead of the start of Russia's massive invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin met with President Xi Jinping in Beijing to discuss one of the strategic agendas related to the development of PSR initiatives as part of geopolitical and economic cooperation between Russia and China in the Arctic region (Lamazhapov et al., 2023). In his speech at the Arctic Circle Assembly, President Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of developing the "Polar Silk Road" in the previous year (China Global Television Network, 2021). This initiative aims to connect the Arctic's three central economic centers, American, East Asia, and Western European shipping lanes. Xi is actively promoting this route as a strategic trade route connecting China with Europe and Russia and is offering massive investment in supporting infrastructure in the Arctic region.

This is part of China's economic diplomacy approach that does not directly impose interests but gradually builds scientific legitimacy and economic credibility. China started the development of the PSR initiative by initiating several economic investments in the Arctic in the PSR project master plan, one of which is the construction of shipping and energy projects in the Northern Sea Route, which will become the main corridor of the PSR. Alongside the signing of a joint declaration with Russia in July 2017 to strengthen the strategic partnership, which includes cooperation in the development of the NSR, China explicitly stated its intention to "participate in the construction of the Arctic route" with the Northern Sea Route (NSR) referred to as a key route connecting Asia and Europe for (Liu, 2017).

One manifestation of this strategy is China's massive investment in the Yamal LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) project in Russia, backed by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Silk Road Fund, showing a concrete step in activating the Arctic economic corridor that China calls part of the PSR (Katakey & Ke. This is being promoted as an efficient and time-saving route, offering a potential reduction in voyage time of up to 40% (Hussen, 2016). This could result in significant time savings of around 14 days compared to the Suez Canal (see Table 1).



Table 1. Transport time savings through the Northern Sea Route

Route	Trip From Hamburg to Yokohama		
	Distance (Nm.)	Speed (Knots)	Travel Time (Days)
Suez Canal	11.585	15	32
Northern Sea Route	7.356	14	18

Source: Rahman, Saharuddin and Rasdi, (2014).

The success of several commercial voyages through the NSR proves that this arctic shipping route offers significant time and cost efficiencies over traditional routes such as the Suez Canal. For example, the Danish vessel MV Nordic Barents managed to save approximately USD 550,000 on a voyage from Norway to China via the NSR compared to conventional routes (Buixadé, 2014). In addition, the tanker Vladimir Tikhonov completed a 2,200 nautical mile voyage in just 7.5 days, faster than via the Suez Canal (Humpert, 2011). Similarly, LNG carriers from the Yamal project demonstrated that voyages through the NSR are feasible even in winter without icebreaker assistance, reinforcing the line's potential as a key PSR corridor (Wan et al., 2018).

The achievement of efficient shipping through the NSR became part of the practice of economic salesmanship in China's economic diplomacy because the success was used as a strategic promotional tool to attract partners and convince other countries of the added value of the PSR as part of the BRI initiative. In the framework of economic salesmanship described by Kishan S. Rana, the state markets national economic capacities, opportunities, and advantages through diplomatic means, including the presentation of concrete evidence of the effectiveness of the infrastructure or trade routes it supports.

The success of vessels such as the MV Nordic Barents, Vladimir Tikhonov, and Yamal LNG carriers in completing faster and more efficient voyages through the NSR than traditional routes such as the Suez Canal is strong technical evidence. China then utilizes this evidence to build a narrative that its involvement in the Arctic region - through port investment, ice infrastructure development, and energy collaboration - generates global benefits through trade efficiency, time, and logistics costs.

The strategy of economic salesmanship does not only represent formal diplomacy between countries (Track One), as demonstrated by the meeting between President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, the prominent role of companies such as CNPC and the Silk Road Fund in Arctic infrastructure projects, including Yamal LNG and NSR, manifests energy and infrastructure business diplomacy (Track Three).

Networking and Advocacy

This strategy relies not only on formal agreements but also on building long-term relationships through active participation in forums, cross-sectoral cooperation, and creating positive opinions of national agendas in the international sphere. China is



applying this approach to build the Polar Silk Road (PSR) trade route through the Arctic region. Since being admitted as a permanent observer to the Arctic Council in 2013, China has systematically expanded its network with key regional actors, particularly through strengthening bilateral relations with Arctic states such as Russia, Iceland, and Finland.

Table 2. Summary of China's Cooperation with Russia, Iceland and Finland

Partner Country	Types of Collaboration	Strategic Objectives In PSR
Russia	Yamal LNG Project, NSR, port investment	Strengthening PSR infrastructure and main shipping lanes
Iceland	CNARC research collaboration	Scientific diplomacy and normative support for PSR
Finland	Multilateral seminar	Strengthening China's legitimacy as a legitimate actor in the Arctic

Source: The Arctic Institute (2022), CNARC (2021), SWP Berlin (2025)

Cooperation with Russia is a key strategic entry point for China into the Arctic region. In the Yamal LNG project, for example, China China CNPC and the Silk Road Control nearly 30 percent of the project and guarantee massive financing. Moreover, the development of the NSR by shipping company COSCO Shipping shows how China is exercising economic diplomacy based on infrastructure and logistics. Commercial shipping operations through the NSR not only improve China's transport efficiency to Europe but also strengthen the legitimacy of the PSR as an alternative global route. It is important to note that China's networking and advocacy strategy also involves the private sector and non-state actors. Companies such as COSCO and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) actively cooperate with partners from Arctic countries on shipping and energy projects (Katherine, 2019).

On the other hand, China actively participates in Arctic forums such as the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC), which has become an important platform in facilitating policy dialogue and scientific collaboration between China and the Nordic countries. CNARC was established in December 2013 by 10 member institutions, comprising four Chinese and six Nordic institutions, to enhance academic cooperation and understanding of the Arctic and its global impacts (China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, n.d.) One of its important activities was the 7th CNARC Symposium in 2019 in Shanghai with the theme "Arctic Fisheries, Polar Silk Road, and Sustainable Development Practices ."The event was attended by around 120 participants from China, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Russia, including key figures such as former Icelandic President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, who emphasized the importance of cooperation between Arctic countries and non-Arctic partners such as China. The symposium promoted a non-exclusive, shared governance framework to address climate change and support sustainable development. In a discussion session themed "Polar Silk Road: Vision,



Progress and Outlook," Prof. Arild Moe from the Fridtjof Nansen Institute reviewed the importance of building port infrastructure, maritime navigation systems, and climate data across countries such as LNG cooperation and winter shipping as crucial factors in the sustainability of the PSR (China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, 2019).

China also used academic and business forums as a means of advocacy to convey its strategic narrative regarding PSR in the seminar "China and the Arctic" organized by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) on February 12, 2019, at the Annex Building of the Parliament, Helsinki, Finland (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2019). This seminar shows that China has been recognized by the international community, particularly Arctic countries such as Finland, as an increasingly influential strategic actor in the Arctic region. This recognition is important because it allows China to participate more actively in decision-making and multilateral cooperation in the region. China demonstrates a diplomatic approach that prioritizes common interests such as sustainable development and openness to cooperation, reflecting China's soft power efforts in the region.

The involvement of these non-state actors not only expands China's economic network in the Arctic region but also strengthens Beijing's diplomatic bargaining power in multilateral forums. In the context of Multi-Track Diplomacy theory, China combines diplomacy through energy and infrastructure business (Track Three) and science (Track Five) to build strategic networks in the Arctic region that support PSR.

Image Building

In the context of China's economic diplomacy, the image-building strategy is one of the important instruments in shaping global perceptions of China's presence and legitimacy in various strategic regions, including the Arctic. One of the main narratives developed by China to support its presence in the region is the claim to be a "near-Arctic state." This narrative plays an important role in building an image that China is a legitimate and responsible actor in engaging with Arctic issues despite being geographically excluded from the eight central Arctic states.

China's claim to be a near-Arctic state first appeared in scholarly and diplomatic forums before officially being included in the "China's Arctic Policy White Paper" in 2018. However, long before that, Chinese state actors and academics had begun to popularise the term as part of a global communication strategy. For example, at a joint workshop between the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the China Center for Contemporary World Studies (CCCWS) in Beijing in May 2012, Chinese experts and diplomats used the term "near-Arctic state" for the first time publicly (SIPRI, 2012). They stated that although China is not an Arctic state geographically, the impacts of climate change, shipping opportunities, and access to resources in the Arctic make China a legitimate stakeholder in the region.

This narrative is then reinforced in international forums such as the Arctic Council and other multilateral cooperation. In some of its statements, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also implies the narrative of "geographical proximity" to the Arctic as a strategic justification. For example, China mentions that the northernmost part of its territory is located at latitude 50 degrees north and directly borders Russia, an Arctic country. Thus, climate change, maritime security, and polar infrastructure development directly impact China's national interests (MFA China, 2018).

In addition, analysis from CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) shows that China uses various media, including documentaries and cultural events, to



associate itself with the Arctic region (Parsons, 2022). For example, the documentary film *The Light Whisperer* (Guāng yǔ zhě) depicts the life of a Chinese man in the Arctic, reflecting China's efforts to reinforce the "near-Arctic state" narrative through media. This strategy aims to build emotional affinity and global identity and legitimize its involvement in Arctic governance. In addition, China is also engaged in cultural cooperation projects with the Nordic countries, further reinforcing its image as a responsible actor contributing to Arctic sustainability.

Thus, the near-Arctic state narrative is a crucial component in China's image-building strategy in the Arctic region. It is not only a rhetorical tool in public diplomacy but also a long-term strategy for creating legitimacy for the Polar Silk Road initiative. Through these claims, China seeks to create space for participation in Arctic governance, expand its economic diplomacy, and increase acceptance of its infrastructure investment and presence in a region increasingly at the center of global geopolitical competition.

China's image-building strategy through the narrative as a near-Arctic-state reflects the practice of Multi-Track Diplomacy, which involves the role of diplomats (Track Two) at the SIPRI and CCCWS scientific forums. The narrative is reinforced through media and documentary films such as *The Light Whisperer* (Track Nine).

Regulatory Management

Instead of challenging existing laws, China chooses to align its PSR initiatives with international rules and norms, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and environmental protocols in the Arctic. In practice, China also actively participates in working groups under the Arctic Council, such as the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) and the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) (Heljar & Seland, 2019). This involvement shows that China is a passive actor and influences the formation of technical and environmental policies in the Arctic according to its strategic interests.

On the domestic side, China has also established an internal regulatory framework that supports its international engagement in the Arctic. Through agencies such as the State Oceanic Administration and the Polar Research Institute of China, the Chinese government publishes guidelines and regulations for polar shipping, overseas investment, and research projects operating in the polar region (Khanna, 2025). This shows that regulatory management is external and internal, where the state consolidates domestic regulations to align with global standards and facilitate the involvement of public and private actors in PSR projects.

The regulatory management strategy is vital to China's economic diplomacy in supporting the PSR initiative. This approach confirms that China does not only rely on economic power or symbolic diplomacy but actively builds positions through regulatory management that is adaptive, cooperative, and compatible with the international legal order in the Arctic region. This also strengthens China's image as a global actor that not only pursues national interests but also contributes to stable and equitable global governance.

China's involvement in technical bodies under the Arctic Council, such as PAME and SDWG, demonstrates the practice of Track One Multi-Track Diplomacy, where the government contributes to forming environmental and sustainable development policies. This regulatory management strategy confirms that China not only conforms to international laws such as UNCLOS but also actively facilitates the participation of cross-actors within a stable legal framework. Through this Multi-Track approach, China



reinforces its image as a law-abiding, adaptive, and committed to inclusive and cooperative Arctic governance.

CONCLUSION

This research proves that China's economic diplomacy strategy in the Arctic region is a systematic, structured, and multidimensional approach that successfully supports the Polar Silk Road (PSR) initiative as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through an analysis of Kishan S. Rana's four main elements of economic diplomacy—economic salesmanship, networking and advocacy, image building, and regulatory management - this study finds that China is not only able to penetrate the Arctic geopolitical arena as a non-Arctic country, but also negotiate its role legitimately and acceptably in the region's governance structure.

First, in terms of economic salesmanship, China uses diplomatic instruments to promote the economic benefits of the PSR, especially the efficiency of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) shipping line. Massive investment in the Yamal LNG project, cooperation with Russia, and the success of commercial shipping are concrete evidence that the PSR is not just a concept but has been implemented as part of China's global logistics line expansion.

Second, in the networking and advocacy dimension, China has successfully built a diplomatic network involving Arctic countries such as Russia, Iceland, and Finland. It has expanded its influence through academic cooperation (for example, in the CNARC forum) and the business sector. This collaboration shows that China's diplomacy is not only based on interstate relations (Track One) and diplomatic actors (Track Two) but also includes energy and infrastructure business diplomacy (Track Three), scientific cooperation (Track Five), and media engagement (Track Nine) as in the multi-track diplomacy approach.

Third, China uses image-building strategies to shape its image as a near-Arctic state, which is reinforced through official narratives, cultural activities, research cooperation, and public diplomacy campaigns. This strategy succeeded in creating the perception that China is a responsible, legitimate actor committed to the principle of sustainable development in the Arctic - thus reducing resistance from Arctic states that were initially skeptical of Beijing's intentions.

Fourth, regarding regulatory management, the research findings show that China does not choose a confrontational path in negotiating its interests; instead, it adapts PSR initiatives to international legal regimes such as UNCLOS and actively participates in the Arctic Council technical working group. On the domestic side, China is also preparing a national regulatory framework to support the involvement of research institutions, the private sector, and the government in project development in the Arctic region.

Thus, this research confirms that China's diplomatic strategy is not simply a response to climate change and economic opportunities in the Arctic but is part of Beijing's long-term project of building global power based on normative, diplomatic, and geoeconomic influence. Observer status in the Arctic Council is not an obstacle but is utilized as a platform to expand national interests peacefully and legitimately. These findings reinforce the understanding that economic and Multi-track diplomacy are the main instruments in consolidating China's influence in global strategic regions such as the Arctic.



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