How We Learned to Stop Worrying About China's Arctic Ambitions: Understanding China's Admission to the Arctic Council, 2004-2013
By Matthew Willis and Duncan Depledge, September 22, 2014

Global coverage of Arctic geopolitics since 2007 has fed simplistic narratives about the potential for conflict in the region in ways that the eight Arctic states have struggled to counter. In these narratives, the Arctic is represented as an emerging theatre of conflict, the next 'scramble' (invoking 19th century colonial imaginations of Africa) or the last pristine wilderness of the Earth. More recent recognition of the generally cooperative atmosphere characterising relations between Arctic states has led some analysts to turn their attention to the 'rise of China'. No longer described as a 'slumbering giant', China is portrayed as a resource-hungry goliath, a revisionist power and/or a surreptitious maritime expansionist spreading its tentacles to Africa, Latin America and most recently the Arctic. To us, these narratives convey a degree of what Mark Nuttall and Klaus Dodds have described as an 'emergent polar Orientalism', that is, a 'way of representing, imagining, seeing, exaggerating, distorting and fearing "the East" and its involvements in Arctic affairs' directed at China in particular.

An offer to write about China in the Arctic provided us with an opportunity to test this kind of polar orientalism with a more in-depth investigation of how China's actions are being assessed by the Arctic states. We decided to focus on China's application to the Arctic Council (AC) after hearing that China was actually invited to apply for observer status at the AC a decade ago by the then chairman of the Senior Arctic Officials (SAO). This led us to think about why it took until 2013 for China to become an observer. Although a number of analysts have blamed the geopolitical fears of the Arctic states for the delay in 'letting China in', our research did not support such thinking. What we found was that China's application was caught up in a far more complicated bureaucratic process, rooted in the maturing of the AC's structure as an intergovernmental forum. This article is about that maturation process, how China figured in it, and what its admission can tell us about the perspectives of the different Arctic states.

In 2004, Gunnar Palsson, the Icelandic Chairman of the Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) of the AC, and intergovernmental forum for Arctic states and peoples few in the wider world had then heard of, travelled to Beijing to meet with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Palsson, who had chaired the SAO meetings since 2002, was a vigorous promoter of the global importance of the Arctic, and in particular the work of the AC. The AC's publication of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment in 2004 had confirmed what many scientists had been arguing for the past decade: that climate change was happening and that it was having unprecedented effects on human activities in the Arctic. In New York, Rome, Nairobi and Beijing, Palsson's message was clear: the Arctic mattered and the rest of the world needed to start paying attention to the region.

It was in the context of this wider push to increase global interest in the effects of climate change on the Arctic that Palsson arrived in Beijing. In 2002, China was already the second-highest emitter of CO₂ after the United States. The imperative for engagement with China on a scientific basis was therefore strong. With the full backing of the SAOs, Palsson invited Beijing to consider whether it could derive any advantage from applying for observer status at the AC. It is worth remembering that the AC of the early 2000s was
still very much in its infancy as an organisation (especially when compared to recent developments such as the agreements on search and rescue (2011), oil spill response (2012) and the establishment of the Arctic Economic Council (2014) all of which were negotiated under the auspices of the AC).

From 2004, however, the AC was in full campaign mode as it sought to solicit greater interest from the international community. What was perhaps not anticipated was the level of international interest that would be generated by the privately-led (albeit with political and logistical support from Russian) *Arktika* expedition in 2007. The planting of the Russian flag on the seabed directly beneath the North Pole triggered a frenzy of media coverage that has yet to die down. Although the sudden surge of interest in the Arctic was welcomed by many of the Arctic states (especially among the Nordic countries), it was also unexpected. As Palsson put it to us, ‘some of the Arctic states got more than they bargained for’. His view was echoed by virtually every SAO official we spoke to.

China had in fact submitted its application for permanent observer status to the AC in April 2007, before geopolitical intrigue about the Arctic hit international headlines. By the time of the 2009 Tromsø ministerial, however, it had been joined by the European Union which also wanted a seat. The AC was suddenly in an awkward position as the level of international interest in the Arctic meant that any decision on observers could be deemed precedent-setting. Moreover, the Arctic states were split, with the Nordic countries favourably disposed to admitting any applicant who made a reasonable case (including China and the EU), while Canada and Russia were more resistant to what they saw as the organisation’s unnecessary internationalisation. As an organisation which only reaches decision by consensus, the AC was at an impasse. However, the Nordic countries also recognised that it would be useful to clearly re-state the admission criteria for observer states. The AC member states, together with the permanent participants, therefore decided to hold off on making a decision on admissions until after they had discussed both the admission criteria and the role of ‘permanent’ observers in the Arctic Council in more detail. No applications were rejected; instead the decision was deferred until 2011. In the meantime, China and the EU had to settle for ad-hoc observer status.

After the 2009 ministerial in Tromsø, the number of applications for observer status started to grow. China and the EU were joined by India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea, along with a host of non-governmental organisations. This was paralleled by a surge in the AC’s level of activity as members realised that international interest in the Arctic demanded the AC engage in a broader programme of work to ensure that it remained at the forefront of discussions about science, shipping, resource development and environmental protection. The establishment of task forces to develop agreements on search and rescue and oil spill response reflected this realisation. Years earlier, the decision by Norway, Denmark and Sweden to use their consecutive chairs as a basis for closer cooperation on Arctic issues had led to the establishment of a temporary secretariat in Tromsø. In 2013, it was agreed that the secretariat should be made permanent, an important development in the AC’s structure.

The decision about whether to accept a new tranche of observers into the AC was caught up in these broader institutional growing pains. Following the initial deferral of applications in 2009, the AC members turned inwards to review the role of observers with two objectives in mind: to redefine the role of observers within the AC; and to provide a common basis on which to judge the merits of observer applications. This review was prompted, in part, by the need to develop a mechanism that would reassure the less ‘internationalist’ AC members that the admission of new observers would not lead to a sudden bloating, or ‘UN-ification’, of the organisation. But it was also a response to the concerns of the Council’s Permanent Participants. Even before the external surge in interest, some PPs had sensed a gradual slackening in the observance of procedures and rules that had been designed to ensure their place at the heart of the Council. Sometimes, observers had even been granted greater influence in the working groups at the PPs’ expense. As the prospect of new observers being admitted grew, the Council’s indigenous members demanded their concerns be
addressed. To that end, at the 2011 ministerial in Nuuk it was agreed that the AC would produce an official Observer Manual and Observer Criteria – a new task force to produce these was created. Decisions on the applications of China, the EU and the rest were once again deferred until the next ministerial in 2013.

By 2013, the 'observer question' was beginning to assume its own degree of geopolitical importance. It was not lost on member states that failure to reach a decision would undermine the AC's status as the region's key policy-shaping forum, or that other forums (such as Iceland President Ólafur Ragnar Grimsson’s Arctic Circle initiative) might emerge to fill the leadership void. Continued deadlock or a bungled outcome would also damage the image of openness that the AC was seeking to project. To the extent that strengthening the AC was a key pillar of the foreign policies of several member states, the failure to reach an agreement would also compromise explicit national aims.

The 'observer question' was tabled for discussion over dinner during the Kiruna ministerial. According to diplomats we spoke to, John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, only had one strategic goal for the meeting: to get some kind of outcome. Whether that meant admitting everyone or leaving some out, the key was to reach a consensus. From the diplomats we spoke to, it did not take long for tempers to flare during the debate that followed. No SAO would relate the exact content of what was discussed, but we were told that politics entirely unrelated to the question of observers soon entered the conversation, making it hard to keep focused on the real issue. What the SAOs did tell us was that the most contentious application did not come from China, but from the EU, with Canada vehemently against admitting the EU as a consequence of the EU's 2008 ban on imports of seal products from commercial sealing.

A compromise text put forward by Kerry eventually broke the log-jam. Stating that the 'Arctic Council receives the application of the EU for observer status affirmatively, but defers a final decision on implementation until the Council ministers are agreed…that the concerns of Council members…are resolved', the formulation was classic 'diplomatese' – allowing everyone to claim victory. Interpreted in one way it meant that the EU was, to all intents and purposes, now an observer. Interpreted in another, it meant that the EU would definitely become an observer as soon as the reason for the deferral – the dispute with Canada over sealing – had been addressed.

Over the course of this investigation we were surprised to discover that individual applications for observership, including China's, were never formally discussed within the AC. What was even more surprising was that the 'observer question' ultimately had less to do with observers themselves than with the AC, its character and its evolution. Regarding China, the starting point of our investigation, our findings corroborated the claims of virtually all the SAOs we spoke to that the 'observer question' was never about China per se, but broader issues related to whether the AC could cope with an expansion of observers and what role those observers should play as the organisation matured. If there is a degree of 'polar orientalism' in more journalistic narratives of Arctic geopolitics, we failed to find evidence of it within the AC.

This article summarises the findings of a longer piece of work to be published in the forthcoming "Handbook on the Politics of the Arctic" edited by Leif Christian Jensen and Geir Hønneland (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).