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Polar regions for global status: China's great power discourse and status-seeking practice in the Arctic and Antarctic

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Abstract

This article explores how China's polar activities are driven not just by rationalistic interests but also by China's great power identity and a desire to signal status as a riposte to challenges to that status. While previous literature has focused on China's strategic and material interests in the polar regions, this article suggests that China engages in activities such as establishing polar stations, expanding its icebreaker fleet, and showing its flag in Antarctica and the Arctic in order to signal its desire for global status as a great power. These practices may be rationalised in terms of material and strategic interests but are ultimately an outcome of domestic discourse that problematises China's need to keep up with peers' capabilities and maintain its role as a global pivot. In the interaction between Chinese discourse and practice, China's identity as a great power is constructed and renegotiated, laying the foundations for future discourse and practice. Through a document-rich discourse analysis, the article argues that China uses three material practices in the polar regions as a means of aligning its identity with material greatness and solidifying its place among the world's leading powers. China's establishment of research stations in the polar regions is an iterative practice that demonstrates its presence and scientific capabilities. The construction of new icebreakers is a deliberate act of conspicuous consumption intended to demonstrate technological prowess and to keep pace with other major powers. By showing its flag in the polar regions through maritime expeditions, China also asserts its *droit de regard* in regional affairs and demonstrates its capacity for global power projection. The article seeks to complement rationalistic explanations of China's polar policies and to contribute to the literature on how the status game guides state behaviour in international politics.

Keywords

Antarctica, Arctic, China, great power status, icebreakers, material practices, naval exercises, polar expeditions, polar regions, polar stations, showing the flag, status signalling

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Introduction

An ideal typical great power is great in every respect. At a minimum real-world great powers have to keep up with their peers in the areas that matter most. Military power is a universally recognised standard for great powers. But the field of the status game is broader: states conceive of status markers and rank each other across many domains. Entire regions like the Indo-Pacific can become a field for this status game, giving meaning to status signals (Plagemann, 2025; Pu, 2025) that may not be shared by other groups of states (Røren, 2023). Recently, the polar regions, which have traditionally held a minor role in international affairs, have attracted attention due to climate change, resource potential, and growing power rivalry. Did the desire for unalloyed great power status play a role in shaping China's practices in this domain?

The rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to great power status is at the centre of the debate. Some argue that China's great power ambitions are the fundamental drivers of its activities in the polar regions, including research, investments, and governance (Brady, 2017; Kossa, 2023; Sørensen, 2018, 2021). Contrastingly, Tunsjø (2020) argues the Arctic is irrelevant to China's great power status and activities in the Arctic are mainly a spillover of US-China geopolitics. Fravel et al. (2022) believe the Arctic is peripheral to China for now but may become significant in the future. Overwhelmingly, the literature gives a rationalist account of China's polar policies. China's status concerns are discounted as simply 'nationalist narratives' (Wu, 2023). However, other contributions hold that China's polar engagement should be understood in the context of its great power rise (Lanteigne et al., 2020) and its identity discourse (Lamazhapov, 2024).

This article argues that, for China, the polar regions are part of the status game: here, China seeks not only to extract potential material and strategic gains but, more importantly, to signal its great power status. China's material practices, such as constructing polar stations, acquiring icebreakers, and showing the flag, serve symbolic functions that are rooted in the country's discourse on its great power identity. For China, the polar regions offer an unconventional but potent platform to project its identity as a global power.

Indeed, an increasing number of studies have turned to status as an explanation for China's international behaviour (Chen, 2020; Deng, 2008; Gloria, 2021; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Pu, 2019), and to the foreign policies of rising countries more broadly (Paul et al., 2014; Volgy et al., 2011). Status is extremely relevant for China's foreign policy, as China is both very status-sensitive (Deng, 2008; Fung, 2019) and has regarded itself as major power for more than a century (Kaufman, 2014), a self-perception which has become especially important in recent years (Xue, 2023). China has been considered a regional great power and a global great power candidate for a long time (Bull, 2002; Levy, 1983). Furthermore, status provides a convincing explanation for many of China's foreign policy actions: pursuit of global soft power (Edney, 2012), participation in peacekeeping operations (Fung, 2019; Suzuki, 2008), a space programme (Goswami, 2018), the Belt and Road Initiative (Gloria, 2021; Larson, 2015), military posturing in the Indo-Pacific (Pu, 2025), and the acquisition of hydrogen bombs (Haynes, 2020) and aircraft carriers (Pu, 2019).

Status has not been sufficiently explored as a motivation for China's polar engagement. Kossa makes the point that China's Arctic policy 'can be perceived as a pursuit of status' especially in order to solidify the legitimacy of party-rule, but he does not explore status explanation in detail (Kossa, 2023: 97). Brady's (2017) prominent book on China

as a polar great power briefly examines prestige as one of causal mechanisms but ultimately favours material interests like resources and military power in order to explain China's polar engagement. Kopra finds that great power responsibility is not a satisfying explanation for China's Arctic involvement (Kopra, 2020).

Methodologically, the article turns to a document-rich discourse analysis of Chinese-language source materials. In terms of their authoritativeness, these sources can be divided into three levels. The first level comprises sources that reflect the official discourse and includes speeches by China's political leaders and official state and party documents like policies, White Papers, statements, and reports. The second level are sources that reflect direct access to official narratives such as statements from Chinese bureaucrats and newspapers, especially the widely circulated *Renmin Ribao*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP) and *Jiefangjun Bao*, the official newspaper of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The third level includes published interviews, memoirs, TV media, and academic articles of Chinese polar researchers. These sources allow the researcher to take stock of state-directed rhetoric and the individual scholarly interpretations of China's polar ambitions, thus mapping the boundaries of discourse. Despite their diversity, the sources are imperfect as the state-controlled discourse reflects propaganda and the opinions of individuals do not always align with China's official position and should be interpreted with caution.

In the next section, this article will briefly discuss how great power status is constituted through discourses and practices. The second section considers how the polar regions are relevant to China's great power identity. The next three sections give empirical illustrations of China's use of material practices as a way of signalling its great power status, focusing on polar stations, icebreaker construction, and showing the flag on civilian and naval vessels. The sixth section qualifies the outcomes of these material practices on China's status, and examines how these status signals are received by domestic and international audiences. In doing so, this article argues that Beijing's quest for global great power status was an important motivation that has driven China's use of these material practices.

Great power status through discourses and practices

Constructivist international relations theory suggests that identity lies at the core of political action. The international system makes certain subject positions 'available to its holders', which can become internalised as role identities (Wendt, 1999: 257). Role identities are established discursively, and they do not always coincide with the socially defined role a state has within the system (Neumann, 2024). Great power status is one such role identity, but great powers differ from ordinary states not just on the recognition they receive but also because of certain traits and behaviours (DiCicco and Onea, 2023). For example, great powers are exceptional in terms of traits like the 'size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence' (Waltz, 1993: 50) and in terms of the roles they play in the functioning of international society. They have co-responsibility for managing relations between all the great powers in the interests of international order. This is achieved by preserving the balance of power, controlling crises, and limiting wars between great powers (Bull, 2002: 199–220). However, simply possessing positive traits is not enough (Renshon, 2017; Ward, 2017; Wolf, 2019). Because status is a rank position in a hierarchical order and is defined intersubjectively, great power status requires recognition (Murray, 2019; Renshon, 2017), especially from one's peer group (Fung, 2019).

Recognition of status contains what Bourdieu calls the 'dialectic of challenge and riposte' (Bourdieu, 1977: 14), where internalised role identities guide states in handling challenges to their preferred status. This is described in status literature as 'status insecurity' (Freedman, 2016), 'status deficits' (Renshon, 2017: 53), 'frustration' (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019: 179), 'fear of misrecognition' (Murray, 2019: 47), or 'status triggers' (Fung, 2019: 43). Much of the literature emphasises the rising powers' need to enhance their status, but the fear of losing status in the face of other states' activities is an equally important motivation. States may riposte through material practices that provide material backing for their status claims by establishing 'facts on the ground' (Götz, 2021; Murray, 2019: 46–52), thus setting status 'in stone' (Pouliot, 2014). These material practices demonstrate the commensurability of a state's self-identification as a great power with material exceptionality in terms of great power traits and behaviours. In doing so, they also change the very traits and behaviours that form the material basis for great power status claims, transforming this status into a brute fact.[1]

While the role identity as a great power is established through discourse, great power discourses are actualised through material practices (Murray, 2019). Material practices are 'socially meaningful patterns of action' that 'reify discourse in and on the material world' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 4), which in turn are constituted and interpreted through discourse. For example, great powers are often defined as states that play pivotal roles in global structures and have *droit de regard*, or a right to be included and having their interests considered even when absent, as well as exerting their influence in unfamiliar settings (Bukovansky et al., 2012: 26–27; Bull, 2002; Clark, 2009; Lebow, 2016; Neumann, 2019: 100). In the discourse, actors first need to establish a state's role identity as a great power, problematise any lack of *droit de regard*, and then argue that this can be rectified through material practices like gaining a 'seat at the table'. However, material outcomes like having 'a seat at a table' are necessary but not sufficient conditions for great power status (Murray, 2019) and further rely on overlapping international and domestic discourses to acquire symbolic meanings, thus starting a new discourse-practice cycle.[2]

Material practices are useful in more ways than merely substantiating a state's role identity as a great power. For instance, the acquisition of certain weapons systems may be driven by defence needs, status aspirations, or both. Furthermore, as practices influence and are influenced by discourses, they may acquire new meanings and lose old ones (Neumann, 2002). As a matter of definition, this study considers that only material practices that have the status-signalling function, that is, are meant to signal the state's preferred status in international society, can ground a state's great power identity (Pu, 2019). Several clues can help identify them.

First, these material practices are foreshadowed by the challenge and riposte described in the discourse. Status literature argues states react strongly to instances of status insecurity, such as when a state is ascribed lower status or denied higher status (Fung, 2019; Larson and Shevchenko, 2019; Murray, 2019). States are under constant pressure to keep up with their peer groups (Fung, 2019: 43–44). In extreme cases, states operate under the Red Queen imperative where they need to perform ever better than their peers just to maintain their status (Neumann, 2016: 1396). Therefore, states often engage in status-seeking behaviour not just to gain status, but in order not to lose it. In the discourse, a prevalent representation of such material practices needs to justify why they would help the state in question to stay on a par with or outcompete its peers.

Second, these material practices are public, intentional, and sometimes costly performances (Pu, 2025). They are public because they address multiple audiences, including

great power peers, and they are intentional because they are meant to signal status. Pu (2025) correctly observes that status signals do not have to be costly, but they do need to actualise the state's trait or role status (Wolf, 2019). Fighting is a costly signal that actualises military power. As unprovoked interstate fighting is illegal and usually shunned, states can send costly status signals through conspicuous consumption, that is, using lavish displays of excess as a means of achieving symbolic goals (Pu, 2019), demonstrating the state's capability to possess sophisticated, exclusive goods that only the most powerful states are capable of possessing (Murray, 2010; Musgrave and Nexon, 2018). A way to distinguish conspicuous consumption from normal consumption is that it is not the most efficient way to meet material challenges (Pu, 2019).

Third, these material practices follow standards for comparison, which are often shared (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019; Lebow, 2016) but ultimately reflect the state's domestic discourse on what matters in world politics (Neumann, 2014). States in the 'world society' are socialised similarly and converge in terms of their practices, especially in matters of worldwide models like education, bureaucracy, and science (Meyer et al., 1997). Standards of comparison are 'defined and contested in and through practice' (Pouliot, 2014: 196), but they also focus on how the concept of great power is articulated in the discourse domestically. This leaves room for states to change standards of comparison, justify their lacklustre performance, or stress the importance of a material practice in which they already excel (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019).

To summarise, great power status is a recognised role identity. States riposte by engaging in material practices that create great power traits and roles as 'facts on the ground' when presented with challenges to their status, like lack of recognition or anxieties due to peers' enhanced status. Without discourses, it is impossible to establish the status-signalling meaning of material practices. These material practices are meant to signal status by maintaining parity or outcompeting the high-status peer group through superior displays like military power or conspicuous consumption, and downplaying the significance of certain practices while stressing achievements in other domains. These discursive representations of practice help justify and solidify a state's claim to great power status. Thus, practices act as a stable foundation for the role identity of a great power, while discourses provide the structured preconditions through which practices are interpreted.

Polar regions in China's great power identity

China has a role identity as a great power. In domestic discourse since the late Qing dynasty, China's sense of itself as a great power has contrasted with its material inadequacies, but the central question in Chinese discourse has not been *whether* China should be a great power, but *how* it should regain its international status (Boon, 2018). Indeed, the very language of Chinese critical inquiry is characterised by 'patriotic worrying' – a preoccupation of Chinese public intellectuals with identifying and finding solutions to problems that prevent China from achieving national perfection (Davies, 2009). For example, since the early 1990s scholars and officials debated whether great power status means that China should shoulder greater responsibilities in the international system, with opponents arguing that the country should instead focus on development that forms the basis of China's great power status claim (Boon, 2018). Thus, the option of China *not seeking* great power status could never be entertained. The question of what was constitutive of great power status, though, was and remains open. The point of contention has thus been what practices China should adopt to achieve or maintain its great power status, and

several representations of the polar regions eventually found their way onto China's official discourse on great power status.

The polar regions have been a part of the global status game since the age of 'European Great Power imperialism' in the late 19th century (Roberts, 2011: 5). Since the earliest days of polar exploration, polar science has been a marker that signalled a nation's place in a global status hierarchy, marking the nation's prowess to operate in remote areas (Yao, 2021). For great powers like Russia, the Arctic has been a stage to demonstrate status and a source of prestige (Grajewski, 2017; Wood-Donnelly, 2020: 107–108). Smaller states like Norway and Denmark have sought to use the Arctic to gain status beyond traditional power structures (Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2016; Wilson Rowe, 2014).

The polar regions became important for China not just because of their potential to elevate its status but also due to anxieties around the polar programmes of China's peer competitors. Who China sees as peers has evolved over time, but status has always been an important dimension of its rivalry with India (Pu, 2018) and Japan (Zhao, 2004). The United States has been China's main significant other as an interlocutor, gatekeeper, and, more recently, a peer competitor (Boon, 2018: 169–170). Demonstrating status as a potential great power was an important consideration behind the Indian polar programme (Joyner, 1990: 58–59; Yao, 2021). Japan, too, considered participation in the governance of polar regions as one of the 'status markers of a great power' (Tonami, 2017: 96). The United States is both an Arctic state and the leading polar operator (Dodds, 2024; Lanteigne, 2025). Ignoring the polar regions would thus be difficult for China if it wished to be a regional, let alone a global, great power.

The Chinese official discourse represents the polar regions in three major ways. First, the polar regions are represented as important for scientific research. The idea that if China were to be a great power, it has to overcome the century of humiliation by excelling in science and technology has a long intellectual tradition, dating back to the 'saving the country through science' (*kexue jiuguo*) movement. 'Modernisation of science and technology' was one of the Four Modernisations put forward by Premier Zhou Enlai that would build China into a 'socialist great power' through 'seeking truth from facts, step by step progress, keeping pace, and catching up. . . with the world's advanced level' (*Renmin Ribao*, 1963: 1). Paramount leader Deng Xiaoping emphasised that through technological achievements, 'China must take its place' 'as a great, influential country' (Deng, 1994: 279). Deng's maxim in the technological realm was that China must do 'what others have done' and 'have not yet done' (Haynes, 2020). In the same spirit, Chairman Xi Jinping underscored that 'if science and technology is strong, the country is strong' (Xi, 2024c) and that China is back on the path to 'construct a world science and technology great power' (Xi, 2016). Xi (2023) urged polar scientists to 'always keep in mind "the top priorities of the country"' in order to 'construct a great power in education, science and technology, and talents'. As a global structural hierarchy (Yao, 2021), polar science became important to China as a standard of comparison and a global practice. According to this discursive representation, if China is to be a great scientific power, it needs polar research.

Second, the polar regions are represented in Chinese discourse as areas of strategic and geopolitical importance for great powers. The interest of major powers in the polar regions is due to the poles' influence on global climate, their value to research, reserves of natural resources, sea lanes potential, and status as exclusive venues for regional governance. Polar regions are considered 'important maritime interests' and 'strategic new frontiers' in Chinese discourse (Andersson, 2021). Chinese officials emphasised the polar

regions as part of 'building a modern maritime great power', in accordance with Chairman Jiang Zemin's directives for maritime operations (Jia, 2000). In 2007, Vice-premier Zeng Peiyan emphasised the importance of polar, deep-sea, and ocean exploration for transforming China 'from a major maritime power to a maritime great power' (Yu, 2007). In addition, China sees that the polar regions are important for all major powers. For example, the PLA textbook *Science of Military Strategy* notes that all major powers have a presence in the polar regions (Xiao, 2022). According to this representation, if China is to be a great power, it has to show a presence in strategic regions.

Third, the polar regions are represented as crucial to the common interests of humanity, and thus, if China is to be a responsible great power, it has to play a pivotal role in the polar regions. China considers the polar regions as of interest to humanity as a whole, corroborated by Xi Jinping linking the polar regions to the goal of 'a community of common destiny' (Xi, 2017) and declaring them part of China's comprehensive security in the Article 32 of the National Security Law (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo guojia anquan fa, 2015). In the words of Chinese officials, the polar regions are an area where China 'as a responsible great power' should 'more actively participate in the international governance… and strive to make our country join the ranks of polar great powers as soon as possible' (Liu, 2017a). The polar regions' role in global climate systems has enhanced their importance to China's responsible great power identity (Kopra, 2020). As the Ministry of State Security (2024: 3–5) interprets China's great power responsibility, 'the polar regions have a very special status on the blue planet where humanity lives', and therefore, China should 'achieve leapfrog development . . . from a polar major power to a polar great power'.

The following sections will examine China's scientific, technological, and governance activities as, in addition to their immediate value in terms of material power, practices aimed at obtaining and sustaining recognition of China's status as a global great power.

Stations for status

Antarctic research stations act as international status markers, as Yao (2021) demonstrates. This section takes this argument further by showing that China's establishment of research stations in both Antarctica and the Arctic is part of an ongoing, iterative process designed to continually signal its rising status, thus alleviating the country's status concerns and enabling it to assert influence and compete with peers. China showed little interest in the polar regions until the late 1970s.[3] The issue of Antarctic mineral exploitation gained traction in the early 1980s, spurred by the commencement of formal negotiations over the Antarctic minerals regime in June 1982 and the recent signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in December 1982 (Beck, 2004: 207). In 1977, the PRC State Oceanic Administration (SOA) proposed an ambitious plan to 'survey the Chinese seas, enter the three oceans, and land on Antarctica' (Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China, 2022). China participated in expeditions organised by Chile, Australia, and New Zealand (Zou, 1993) and acceded to the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) as a contracting party on June 8, 1983. However, to obtain consultative status within ATS – which entitles parties to attend, chair, vote and make proposals at ATS consultative meetings – China needed to conduct 'substantial scientific research activity', 'such as establishment of a scientific station' (Argentina et al., 1962: 80).

In domestic discourse, China's lack of presence and consultative party status in Antarctica quickly became represented as a challenge to the country's status. By 1983, 18 countries, including India and Japan, had established scientific research stations in Antarctica. In 1983, China attended the 12th ATS Consultative Meeting as an observer, noting 'the increasing discoveries of rich natural resources' and Antarctica's 'unique geographical location and environment' made China 'pay attention to the inestimable value of scientific surveys in Antarctica' (Department of Foreign Affairs of Australia, 1984). Chinese delegates recalled the deep humiliation and hurt national pride they experienced when asked to leave the venue during consulting party discussions, which prompted their resolve to construct a station in the Antarctic (Jin, 1986: 40–41; Zhu, 2023: 15). Delegate Guo Kun felt that the fact that 'among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council' China was the only ATS non-consultative party was 'totally incompatible with our [China's] status as a country with a population of one billion' (Jin, 1986: 41). China was assigned a lower status than it identified itself with.

It was thus status and not strategic or defence considerations that were decisive for the construction of China's first Antarctic station. 'In recent years, there has been an upsurge of countries competing to build bases in Antarctica', *Renmin Ribao* wrote in 1979, and China was missing out (Jin, 1979). China compared itself with its peer group, which also included regional rivals India and Japan. A Chinese docudrama portrayed China's absence from the Antarctic up until early 1980s as acutely embarrassing. In one scene, the SOA Vice-Director was reprimanded by students over why China had not conducted any expeditions, while 'other imperialist great powers', including Japan and India, 'have made great achievements in Antarctica' (*Changcheng xiang nan yanshen*, 1989).

SOA turned to the PLA Navy (PLAN) for support in organising the station construction (Wu, 2021), appealing precisely to China's lack of say or *droit de regard* in Antarctica. The PLAN Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Liu Huaqing, recalled that China being 'only a contracting party, not a consultative party, and having no voting rights on Antarctic affairs' was 'not commensurate with China's status' (Liu, 2004: 503). He felt that 'as a major maritime power, the Chinese government should have a say in Antarctic affairs' and that the PLAN should 'take the unshirkable responsibility for the first Antarctic expedition' and station construction (Liu, 2004: 502).

Between November 1984 and February 1985, scientists and some 300 PLAN personnel constructed the Great Wall Station on King George Island. Construction of China's first polar station did not itself serve China's economic and military interests. The station's location was chosen purely out of convenience: China sidestepped New Zealand's attempts to compel recognition of their Antarctic claim and constructed the station in the area of Chile's claim because it came without strings attached (Brady, 2017: 51). The project received approval from the highest level in the form of an inscription, from Deng Xiaoping himself, that the station would 'contribute to the peaceful use of Antarctica by humankind' (Wu, 2021). The inscription alluded to the UN Antarctic question discussions and signalled that the use of Antarctic by humankind was only possible with China's participation. China maximised status benefits by inviting the heads of other countries' research stations located on King George Island, including those from Argentina, Chile, the Soviet Union and Poland, to the opening ceremony, (Liu, 2004: 505) and setting up a post office and issuing stamps (Brady, 2017: 53).

On 7 October 1985, China became the last member of the UN Security Council to obtain a consultative party status during the 13th ATS Consultative Meeting, with the Chinese delegation stressing that China's status placed it 'under greater obligations to

the peaceful use of Antarctica for the benefit of the whole mankind' (Kingdom of Belgium, 1986: 133). In 1986, China was granted membership of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), which it was also denied earlier (Zhang and Haward, 2022: 192–193). The significance of the station construction as a practice for China was to secure 'voting rights on Antarctic issues' and to win 'glory for the motherland and honour for the army' by demonstrating strategic prowess that could rival that of other countries (Liu, 2004: 505–506). China further utilised the construction of Great Wall station to address audiences in Taiwan and Hong Kong as part of its reunification strategy (Lee, 1990).

However, China's status concerns were not entirely alleviated, since 'the Great Wall Station was built on a small island on the edge of the Antarctic continent, outside the Antarctic Circle, and thus not in the true sense within the South Pole' (Zhu, 2023: 18). China's second Zhongshan Station was constructed in East Antarctic in 1989, which is a strategic location as 'research base and a logistic base' (Chen et al., 2017: 153). At the opening ceremony, Guo Kun described it as a 'victory' and 'a miracle in the hands of Chinese people' in order to 'win glory for the country' (Zhu, 2023: 20). The construction of the station sought to 'show the strength of Chinese people' and that 'the Chinese nation is fully capable of climbing the highest peak of science' (*Changcheng xiang nan yanshen*, 1989).

By the turn of the millennium China had two stations in the Antarctic but none in the Arctic. The fact that China did not have any presence in the Arctic started to become problematised in the discourse – China was lagging behind its peers because 'many countries, including Japan, have also established scientific research stations in the Arctic' (Ren, 1999d). Scientist Gao Dengyi proposed establishing a station, arguing that Chinese scientists 'must think on behalf of the state' (Pan, 2007) and 'should achieve scientific research results commensurate with its [China's] status' (Anon, 2002). Because 'most of the land in the Arctic region already had territorial ownership, and China could not construct a base there', the only option was Norway through the Svalbard Treaty, which gives access for the nationals of signatories and acceding states (State Oceanic Administration, 2003: 524). A privately-funded temporary station was established in 2002 (Pan, 2007), but funds for a permanent station were allocated in the 10th Five-Year Plan[4] (State Oceanic Administration, 2004: 505). In 2003, equipment of the Yellow River station began in Ny-Ålesund, and it opened in 2004 in a former barracks, decorated with guardian lions to remind onlookers of Chinese presence on Svalbard and, by extension, in the Arctic (Pedersen, 2021). The material benefits rationalised the station's construction as a base for polar research including astronomy, earth sciences, environmental science, and biology. But SOA emphasised that 'it ended the history of our country [China] lacking a long-term scientific research base in the Arctic' and 'enhanced our country's [China's] status in participating in international Arctic affairs' (State Oceanic Administration, 2005: 509). Material practices take on new meanings as time goes on, and the station began serving as a BeiDou satellite ground station in 2016 (Shi, 2016), which provided an additional material benefit, widely speculated to have military applications (Falco et al., 2024). This could indeed be in line with the policy of 'civil-military integration' promoted as part of China's military strategy (State Council, 2015: 40). Still, the station was initially meant to assuage China's status concerns by keeping up with peers like Japan and establishing a presence in both polar regions, as well as ensuring its *droit de regard* in the Arctic.

Status was an especially strong motivation behind the choice of the location of the third Antarctic Kunlun station which was constructed in 2009 near the highest dome in

Antarctica, Dome A. Again, China sought to signal status because it compared itself with peers. Chinese scientists argued that 'from the viewpoint of scientific exploration value and polar discourse power, there are four must-contest spots in Antarctica: the South Pole, the coldest point, the magnetic pole and the highest point' (Wu, 2004). Because the US Amundsen-Scott station occupied the South Pole, the Russian Vostok was at the coldest point, and the French Dumont d'Urville Station held the magnetic pole, China aimed to be the first to ascend Antarctica's highest point and build a station there. In the words of Chinese officials, the goal was to demonstrate China's capability to go deep into the interior of Antarctica (Yu and Shen, 2008) and 'greatly enhance . . . [China's] ability to participate in international marine affairs' (Yu and Wang, 2008). Even the name Kunlun reflected 'strong symbolic significance' by connecting one of China's most important mountain chains with the Antarctic (Yu and Shen, 2008). As the head of SOA expressed, the 'realization of these goals enables [China] to expand and maintain the ability of polar rights and interests to a new level, and take a solid step towards the grand goal of building a polar power' (Wang, 2012: 16–17). SOA contended that while China was still behind in terms of 'hard power', the establishment of Kunlun station 'enabled China to move closer towards' its peer group (Government of China, 2009b: 23–24). Kunlun station was not constructed for mineral resource extraction that is prohibited under the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (Madrid Protocol). Chinese scientists were 'not drilling for oil', but for the prestige 'to collect the World's longest ice core' (Harrington, 2017: 48–49). Through the material practice of establishing stations, China sought not only material outcomes like 'valuable firsthand information' but also the status of 'being the first to climb Dome A' and thus enhancing China's 'voice and influence in Antarctic affairs' (Cui, 2019).

Establishing stations is thus truly a practice, an iterative process. Currently, the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC) manages five stations in Antarctica, a station on Svalbard and an observatory in Iceland. After establishment of the fourth Taishan Station in 2014, scientists argued that having five stations in Antarctica would 'greatly enhance . . . [China's] polar scientific research capabilities and levels' by 'radiating from land to the entire Southern Ocean' (Zhang and Yu, 2014). Thus, in order to 'transform from a maritime major country into a maritime great power' and 'to build a strong maritime nation, [China] must vigorously develop marine high-tech' (Yu, 2014). Likewise, the establishment of Qinling Station on Inexpressible Island in Ross Sea in 2024 symbolised that China's polar science had gone 'from weak to strong' (Liu and Hu, 2024; Xi, 2024b). In his 2025 New Year's Address, Xi Jinping highlighted that the fact that 'Antarctic Qinling Station is now in operation on the frozen continent' was an expression of the 'dreams of the Chinese people to explore stars and oceans' (Xi, 2024a), as the footage showed the newly constructed station (Figure 1). In February 2025, China submitted a draft comprehensive environmental evaluation for constructing the sixth Chinese research station at Cox Point in Marie Byrd Land, the only unclaimed region of Antarctica (Polar Research Institute of China and Tongji University, 2025). This indicates that the establishment of polar stations remains an ongoing practice.

An argument has been made that China's stations serve China's economic and military interests. For example, that the locations of China's stations like Zhongshan and Taishan have resource potential (Brady, 2017: 53), and all of China's stations are equipped with satellites that can have dual civil-military use (Brady, 2017: 107–111). But neither of these factors detract from the argument that China seeks to signal its status as a great power through station construction. First, material and resource value is a

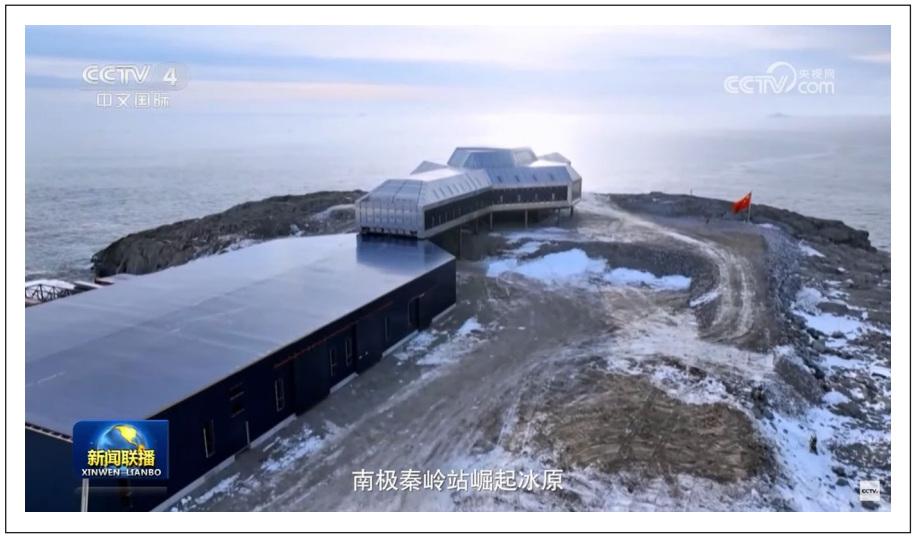

Figure 1. Footage showing China's Qinling Station in Xi Jinping's 2025 New Year address. Photo source: CCTV.

necessary precondition for great power competition: China was initially motivated by the desire to gain a seat at the table and receive *droit de regard* in debates over resources and protection and by the need to keep up with and outcompete peers. China's station construction was not motivated by an immediate desire to extract mineral resources. China has continued to construct stations even after 1998 when it ratified the Madrid Protocol which bans mineral resource extraction until at least 2048. Second, the military usefulness of Antarctic and Svalbard stations is severely constrained by explicit prohibitions in the ATS and Svalbard Treaty. Though stations could provide some dual-use benefits (Brady, 2017: 60–113), their military usefulness is unclear (Press and Bergin, 2022: 351–352). Since military power is a global standard of comparison, this does not contradict status considerations. Finally, the meaning of practices changes as discourses change, so stations may take on more economic and military value in the future. This does not alter the fact that their primary meaning has been to signal status. Establishing research stations helps states demonstrate status by 'achieving the unachievable' and displaying 'logistical and technological capabilities in an extreme environment' (Hingley, 2024: 1002). As a practice, establishing research stations involves both the strategic and practical endeavours of creating spaces for scientific *and* geopolitical activities in the polar regions.

Icebreakers for status

Acquisition of icebreaking vessels is another material practice that has currency for great power recognition. Prestige was a factor behind Soviet and Russian icebreaker construction (Matala, 2019; Moe et al., 2024) and prompted worries in the US of 'lagging behind' (Kikkert, 2021). Building on Pu's (2019) analysis of how China signalled status through the acquisition of aircraft carriers, this section argues that icebreaker construction can

also be considered a type of conspicuous consumption, since building icebreakers is public, intentional and relatively costly. Possession of icebreakers is a practice that has been adopted for operational reasons, but it eventually acquired a status-signalling meaning. While involving material advantages, it also has an important status component because it seeks to change the material reality in order to gain symbolic recognition.

R/V Jidi, purchased from Finland and used between 1985 and 1994, was a retrofitted ice-resistant cargo ship built in 1971. China's first icebreaker *Xue Long 1* was built in 1994 from a Ukrainian icebreaker hull designed for the Soviet Arctic.[5] The icebreaker was needed for China's polar programme, but the acquisition was still described as giving China 'heavy artillery to march into Antarctica' (Zhang, 1994). China still used the icebreaker to signal that it was 'making great strides to keep up with the pace of the world' (Wu and Zheng, 1994). For example, Xue Long's first voyage to the Arctic in 1999 was meant to demonstrate that China was now using 'its own vehicles to load scientific expedition members from' its ports 'and sail directly into the Arctic Circle', thus improving the country's 'research level but also' enhancing the 'Chinese nation's determination and capability to participate in exploring nature and protecting the earth without fear of difficulties and obstacles' (Ren and Ren, 1999).

By early 2009, the dominant discursive representation of Arctic geopolitics was that of a 'scramble' from which China was excluded, creating a status deficit that urgently needed to be addressed (Lamazhapov, 2024: 15). SOA sought to address this lacuna by 'promoting construction of a new polar scientific research icebreaker' (Government of China, 2009a). The SOA argued that 'in the past due to China's weak national strength the country did not invest too much money in polar research' but now China needed to increase its 'hard power' through 'independent construction of a polar icebreaker' (Government of China, 2009a: 11, 14). Polar scientists lamented that, unlike its peer Japan, China had yet to domestically construct an icebreaker, despite already entering 'the ranks of major shipbuilding powers' (Zhang, 2008: 29). SOA compared China to its peer group, arguing that China was lagging behind not only the US, but also the UK, Germany, Australia, Russia, France, Italy, and Japan in terms of 'hard power' in the form of icebreakers (Government of China, 2009b: 23–24).

When the icebreaker design was approved in 2012, the emphasis was that it would be 'made in China' or 'jointly designed' with Finland and 'independently built' (Government of China, 2012). After Xi Jinping's rise to power, the icebreaker construction came to be reimagined as part of 'building a maritime great power' and that 'China can have a right to speak and influence on the international maritime stage' only by expanding China's research fleet (Yu et al., 2015: 12). Tasked with constructing the icebreaker, the 708th Research Institute of China Shipbuilding Corporation argued that 'providing maritime scientific research equipment for the national maritime great power strategy is the sacred mission' that will allow China 'to peacefully utilise and protect polar resources after completion' (Han, 2015: 49).

When *Xue Long 2* was finally built in 2018, Chinese newspapers rejoiced that '*Xue Long 2* is China's first self-built polar scientific research icebreaker and the world's first two-way icebreaking polar scientific research ship' with 'both Chinese characteristics and advanced international level' and celebrated it as 'a great power regalia' (*daguo zhongqi*) fit to 'celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China' (Chi, 2021). In the video reel played at the permanent exhibition at the CCP first Congress Museum in Shanghai (Figure 2), *Xue Long 2* is also used as one of the major achievements marking the 100th anniversary of the CCP during Xi's tenure, along with other

Figure 2. The Xue Long 1 and 2 icebreakers in the CCP centennial video reel at the Shanghai CCP museum.
Photo source: Author.

status markers like Shenzhou 11 and Tiangong 2 space station and the Liaoning aircraft carrier (*Epoch-Making Beginnings*: Founding of the Communist Party of China, 2021). Xi Jinping highlighted Xue Long 2's maiden voyage to the Antarctic as a major achievement of 2019, along with a moon landing by a robotic spacecraft Chang'e 4 and the successful launch of the Y3 mission of the Long March 5 carrier rocket (Xi, 2020). Thus, Xue Long 2 belongs to a class of partly symbolic attributes that demonstrate China's status as a great power – and the legitimacy of CCP rule.

In China, icebreakers are considered a standard for comparison with the peer group. 'Major maritime powers' are often rated by their icebreaking capabilities (Liu et al., 2016). Chinese scholars and officials compare China to its peer group, initially just Asian polar nations like Japan and India, but later also with the US and Russia. China is routinely compared in terms of the number of icebreakers it possesses, buttressed by the argument that China 'needs no fewer ships than the United States and Russia; otherwise, it will never be able to keep pace with the international advanced level' (Liu, 2017b). For example, the media points out that China is 'lagging behind in the field of icebreakers' because 'among all the icebreakers in the operation globally', Xue Long 2 only comes in the middle of the list in terms of installed power, despite China's status 'as a shipbuilding major power holding over half of the global shipbuilding market share' (*Heading to Antarctica: Is it Difficult?* 2024: 6:30–6:40).

Icebreaker construction is also an iterative material practice for status. A key next step in icebreaking technology for China is construction of a heavy or a nuclear icebreaker, a challenge that Chinese public intellectuals believe the country 'must construct independently', paving the way 'for nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, giving the

PLAN unprecedented range of operations', including potential future nuclear-powered vessels and scientific research expeditions in harsh environments like the Arctic (Li, 2018). With the construction of two more icebreakers – *Ji Di* and a Polar Class 4 deep-sea scientific research vessel *Tan Suo 3 Hao* both launched in 2024 – the emphasis was still on China's technological self-reliance and ability to construct ships for harsh, icy conditions (Ye, 2024; Zhang, 2024). This is in addition to China's own icebreaker testing facilities like a large ice test basin, which is also meant to contribute to the 'strategy of becoming a 'maritime great power'' in 'deep sea, polar, green, intelligent, autonomous and controllable' technologies (Anon, 2023). China continues conspicuous consumption of icebreakers, with construction of yet another icebreaker scheduled to commence for 2025. In the words of the new icebreakers' chief designer, icebreakers reflect a country's 'comprehensive national strength' and 'there is still a big gap between. . . [China] and traditional powers', but the new icebreaker will 'make major breakthroughs. . . and can go to places that were not accessible before' (Guo and Leng, 2024).

As somewhat exclusive goods, icebreakers recently emerged as a new standard of comparison between great powers. China's consumption of research icebreakers was conspicuous enough for the US to worry about its 'near-peer competitors' (Trump, 2020: 1.ii), with China's civilian icebreaking fleet singled out in the newest US Arctic strategies as a reason for expanding the US's own icebreaking fleet (US Department of Defense, 2024: 3; White House, 2022: 6). This is in stark contrast to China's military icebreakers, which are consumed relatively inconspicuously and are procured for tactical 'tasks mainly in the Yellow Sea and Bohai Sea' (Liu et al., 2016). Unlike these, research icebreakers are not designed either for combat or commercial icebreaking – only having potential for dual-use research. China continues to invest in civilian research icebreakers despite the consensus of Chinese scientists that the extent and thickness of sea ice in the Arctic will continue to shrink, possibly allowing ice-free transit by the middle of the century (Shen et al., 2023; Zha et al., 2023). Status thus plays a big role in the continuation of this practice.

Showing the flag for status

Competent performances of great power capabilities through civilian scientific expeditions or military exercises can also be effective status-signalling practices. In naval terms, 'showing the flag' is a practice that is a 'gentle reminder of the existence of the navy concerned' without the 'intention of threatening or using force [and] seldom much expectation of immediate results', which is 'the naval equivalent of the ceremonial and symbolic practices of diplomacy' (Cable, 1989: 71–72). This analysis of military and civilian flag-showing complements existing research on ritualised performances of state authority (Wood-Donnelly, 2020) and military posturing (Pu, 2025). As is well known, established great powers seek to contain rising ones (Mearsheimer, 2001), so showing the flag can signal status by demonstrating their ability to break out of containment. Furthermore, showing the flag is generally less costly but often less effective at signalling status than station or icebreaker construction. This section will look at how China uses civilian research expeditions, and paramilitary and military exercises to show its flag and ensure *droit de regard* in the polar regions. It is especially in the Arctic – where China's repertoire of practices is somewhat limited – that China often shows the flag in order to address its status concerns.

As international scientific cooperation in the Arctic picked up steam in the 1990s after the Cold War, China needed to show its flag in the Arctic. Scientist Wei Menghua argued that China needed to 'enter the Arctic area as soon as possible, gain the right to speak and make decisions in international Arctic affairs, and to safeguard the due rights and interests of the country' (Wei, 1993: 29). *Renmin Ribao* reported that the fact that 'China is still lingering outside the Arctic Circle' is 'inconsistent with our [China's] international status' (Wen, 1994). In 1995, a small expedition led by Wei planted a Chinese flag at the North Pole, and the next year China joined the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC). In the words of expedition participants, 'it is the responsibility of Chinese scientists to subdue the Arctic' because 'China cannot stay outside the gate of the Arctic' and 'must use substantive Arctic expeditions to actively participate' in the IASC, because 'the Arctic has become a hotspot in world politics, economy, military, and scientific research' (Wang, 1995: 26). However, the small grassroots expedition did not assuage China's status concerns. The State Council contended that 'China is a developing coastal major power' (State Council, 1998: 3) and sought to 'narrow the gap' between China and its peers through continuously deepened polar expeditions (State Council, 1998: 35–43).

Xue Long's first Arctic expedition in 1999 was meant to deliver on this promise by showing China's flag. The expedition received meticulous coverage in *Renmin Ribao*, with reporters underscoring that although China was arriving at the Arctic a century late, the expedition was technically challenging since 'most of the Arctic expeditions by European and American countries entered from the Arctic Ocean area adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean' (Ren, 1999e). They also recounted that a Taiwanese scientist on board the Xue Long was moved to tears 'feeling pride at the greatness of the motherland' (Ren, 1999a). By utilising various types of equipment like helicopters, the expedition could 'show our country's [China's] growing scientific strength' (Ren, 1999c). The expedition was meant primarily to show the flag and was only secondarily guided by practical research needs like data collection, as even the data collected was to 'be announced to the world. . . to show the enhancement of China's scientific and technological strength' (Ren and Gao, 1999). By showing its flag, China demonstrated its ability to reach the Earth's 'three poles',[6] which is 'an important symbol of the growing strength of our country's [China's] scientific undertakings and comprehensive national strength' (Ren, 1999b). Indeed, along with the first uncrewed Chinese spacecraft flight, the expedition was declared one of the top ten scientific achievements in China in 1999 (Yang, 2000).

Chinese domestic discourse continued to argue for the use of Arctic expeditions to ensure China's *droit de regard.* Some Chinese public intellectuals feared that China was not doing enough to 'fight for its due rights and interests and international status' (Li, 2009: 99) and argued that 'China has grown into a world-class Antarctic scientific research major great power' but 'only conducted four scientific expeditions in the Arctic Ocean by 2010', which was not commensurate with its status (Lu, 2010: 327). In practical terms, China effectively showed its flag to strengthen its bid for observer status in the Arctic Council (AC), which it had been seeking since 2007 (Ma, 2015). After a 5-year hiatus, China organised its third Arctic expedition in 2008. During the fourth expedition in 2012, the Xue Long travelled from Shanghai to Iceland, becoming the first Chinese vessel to traverse the Northern Sea Route, and then returned via the Trans-Arctic passage, becoming the first vessel to transit through the Central Arctic Ocean (Wang et al., 2014). The voyage was useful as a way of testing the Arctic's shipping routes, but also to signal China's status to the Arctic states.

Iceland's president noted China's 'scientific leadership by bringing the Xue Long across the north-eastern passage and then back through the North Pole' (Grímsson, 2012). Russia's government newspaper interpreted China's first Northern Sea Route expedition as a signal of 'China's claims' to the Arctic (Krivoshapko, 2012: 4) and as 'very decisive steps' in the Arctic at the time when China was seeking 'to strengthen its position' in the AC (Dmitriev, 2013: A6–A7). A Russian counter-admiral interpreted China's 'plans to conduct three major expeditions in the Arctic in 2012–2015', icebreaker construction, and the Yellow River station as signals for China's Arctic claims (Apanasenko, 2012: 1). After being granted AC observer status in 2013, China has continued its practice of organising regular expeditions. Officials argued that even after gaining observer status, China's Arctic research was 'relatively weak', while scholars averred that 'China should not fall behind or lose at the starting line' in the Arctic competition (Zhang and Ni, 2014: 4). Arctic expeditions became yearly events after 2016.

In September 2015, five vessels showed the Chinese military flag in the sub-Arctic Bering Sea off the coast of the US state of Alaska for the first time, following a joint military exercise with Russia. This followed a change in China's military doctrine, which emphasised importance of a blue-water navy for 'the Chinese Dream of great national rejuvenation' (State Council, 2015: 1, 27). Chinese military commentators argued that though PLAN was motivated by strategic interests like China gaining operational awareness in far seas, it also wanted to 'prove that we [PLAN] can reach areas near the North Pole' and that 'not only the countries around the Arctic Circle are eligible to participate' in Arctic affairs (*Jinri Guanzhu*, 2015: 23:00–24:10). Some scholars interpreted PLAN's intent as solely to 'demonstrate the demeanour and establish the image of a great power' (Xu, 2018: 37). In the US, the event was interpreted as China was showing an unfriendly flag. A retired US rear admiral described China's exercise as 'clearly a signal' and the way 'mature superpowers operate', suggesting that 'China may be seeking to establish itself as a player in growing commercial activity in the Arctic' (Ryan and Lamothe, 2015).

Showing the flag signals status by allowing China to demonstrate its great power capabilities. In 2017, PLAN docked its LR7 deep-submergence rescue vehicle to a Russian submarine in the Sea of Okhotsk. The exercise provided clear military benefits like accumulating experience for submarine rescue missions, coordination with Russia, and providing operational information on the distant seas. Yet, it was also assigned a status-signalling role in the Chinese discourse by 'demonstrating the Chinese Navy's. . . confidence and ability' to perform complex missions and 'winning new honours for the Chinese Navy' (*Junshi Jishi*, 2017: 22:48).

China also seeks to signal great power status by demonstrating its ability to overcome US containment strategy, especially breaking out of the 'first island chain' which is comprised of islands surrounding China and acts as a geographic barrier to China's Pacific power projection. Although sailing beyond the ring does not actually break the containment, PLAN signals status by showing the flag in US-adjacent Arctic seas. In 2021, PLAN showcased its new flagship *Nanchang* in the Bering Sea in order to 'realise the dream of a blue-water navy' by 'sharpening swords in the ocean' and demonstrating the 'confidence of the Chinese Navy' (Liu et al., 2022: 5). Indeed, the fact that *Nanchang* 'broke through the first island chain, sailed the Bering Sea, and patrolled the Pacific' is often cited as evidence of China's growing military strength (Du and Qian, 2023; Li and Sun, 2022; Song, 2023). China's showing of the flag is often intended as 'a reminder to the other side' of its naval power and a reciprocal response to the US presence in the South China Sea (Haixia xinganxian, 2023: 1:08–1:20).

In China's discourse, the Pacific Arctic emerges as a status-signalling arena due to the possibility of contesting the US under the premise of being a responsible major power. Chinese military commentators argue that 'the navies of China and Russia, as responsible major powers, have to show their major power posture' as well as having to 'use the attitude and capabilities of responsible major powers to demonstrate their disposition' (*Zhongguo yu lunchang*, 2022: 34:00–34:35). When, in October 2024, China Coast Guard vessels became the first Chinese non-civilian ships to reach the Arctic Ocean, commentators argued that 'as a major country, you must provide some services and conveniences to other countries so that they will feel that you are a responsible major country' (*Junqing Shijiandao*, 2024: 19:18–19:40). The Coast Guard was considered a better instrument to show the flag as the use of PLAN vessels could be considered bellicose. China Central Television celebrated this as a demonstration of China's capability 'to sail thousands of nautical miles all the way to the Arctic Ocean after breaking through the island chain' (*24 xiaoshi*, 2024: 45:15–45:40).

Although China's military and Coast Guard exercises create clear military benefits, they always serve non-military purposes like showing the flag. Showing a military flag eventually sparked US concerns that China's 'civilian research presence' might turn into a 'military presence' (Pompeo, 2019). However, the *Science of Military Strategy*, written by PLA strategists, advises that 'the use of polar military forces must be cautious' and 'must strictly obey and serve the country's overall foreign policy', focusing on non-war applications like situational awareness, monitoring, manoeuvrability, and rescue (Xiao, 2022: 166). China's exercises are almost invariably done jointly with Russia, and they have taken on the additional meaning of showing a friendly flag to Russia following the latter's illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In addition, they enhance China's situational awareness, manoeuvrability, and interoperability with Russia. Crucially, though, these exercises serve important status-signalling purposes.

Showing the flag is a status-signalling practice that China has adopted to assert its *droit de regard* in the polar regions, whether the flag is shown on civilian scientific expeditions or military exercises. The status-signalling intent is clearer in the Arctic than in Antarctica, because the Arctic is an ocean where the PRC cannot freely establish stations to signal status as it does in Antarctica and, not least, due to ATS restrictions on the military. Showing the flag is often a result of a status deficit established in the discourse, as was the case with the Arctic, though it has a more drawn-out effect. Military exercises may additionally have military and strategic benefits, but they are almost invariably a signalling tool, if not for signalling status then for signalling other things like support to Russia or reciprocation in the South China Sea.

Alternative explanations and recognition of China's status in the polar regions

The previous sections analysed how China substantiates its great power status by continuously engaging in material practices, including constructing polar stations, building icebreakers, and showing its flag in the polar regions. Material benefits are a less important motive for these practices. When the PRC's stakes or influence is low, it maximises status even at the expense of its material interests. For example, natural resource extraction was never a major consideration behind the decisions to construct stations, icebreakers, or conduct naval expeditions in the polar regions. China did not push for resuming negotiations on Antarctic mining, did not oppose the mining ban and did not opt out of the

Madrid Protocol in 1998 (Harrington, 2017: 46). Most of China's stations in Antarctica were established after the Madrid Protocol, and due to Antarctica's remoteness, mineral resource extraction projects there would be prohibitively expensive even if it were overturned. Neither has China expressed interest in developing resources on Svalbard, where it has a right to do so as a contracting party. China's energy security has certainly been enhanced because of its investment in liquefied natural gas projects in the Russian Arctic but constructing stations or research icebreakers alone do not improve China's access to natural resources. Likewise, China supported the Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean (CAOFA), which restricted fishing in the high seas region of the Arctic Ocean until 2037 (Stokke, 2022). Though the area lacks commercial fishing (Liu, 2020), officials exaggerated that China 'was heavily involved in the negotiation and implementation' of the CAOFA and spun it as an example of China fulfilling its obligations and 'its role as a major country' (State Council, 2024: 8).

In the long-term perspective, icebreaker construction and showing the flag provide China with valuable technologies and experience needed for utilising polar routes, namely the Northeast, Northwest, and Transpolar Passages. The commercial usefulness of transpolar shipping remains largely anticipatory (Bennett et al., 2020), and China's research icebreakers are not suitable for icebreaking guidance. Furthermore, the Polar Code, negotiated under the auspices of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), imposed compulsory rules on polar shipping and was received enthusiastically in China (Kobzeva, 2019) due to the country's status as a 'major global shipping power' and IMO council member (Li and Huang, 2016).

Military considerations are also less important for China's material practices in the polar regions. The PRC security establishment sees its task as protecting its polar capabilities rather than using the polar capabilities for national security (Ministry of State Security, 2024). Still, China's investments in stations, icebreakers, and exercises were not wasteful. Though the Arctic remains a marginal theatre in global geopolitics (Tunsjø, 2020), Chinese military experts anticipate that the polar regions will have greater importance in the future (Xiao, 2022: 162–167). Polar stations can provide instrumental value by supporting global navigation satellite systems and naval exercises can enhance interoperability with Russia. Pu (2019) argues that the crucial distinction between instrumental and symbolic value lies in how status signals project an image of a powerful country and whether they are directed at boosting domestic legitimacy.

Constructing stations, building icebreakers, and showing China's flag in polar regions seek to demonstrate China's great power traits, especially technological capabilities and excellence. Facing pressure to 'keep pace and catch up with the world's advanced level' (Renmin Ribao, 1963: 1) in the domestic discourse, China compared its polar capabilities with its peer group. Celebrating the 40th anniversary of China's polar programme, the official discourse emphasises that 'under the leadership of the Party' China's 'polar cause has grown from nothing, from weak to strong' (Ministry of State Security, 2024). For domestic audiences, this discourse ties China's polar capabilities to the CCP's legitimacy by way of two centenary goals, especially 'building a modern socialist great power in all respects' to be achieved by the centennial of the PRC in 2049 (Xi, 2021). Beijing's signalling of its great power status in the polar regions certainly came across to international audiences. The US defined the PRC as 'the only competitor' with the intent and power to reshape the international order and 'become the world's leading power', thus securitising Chinese Arctic activities (White House, 2024: 23, 44). In the Antarctic Region, too, the

US remains 'vigilant against actions by countries that could threaten US national interests' (White House, 2024).

A crucial challenge that China's material practices were intended to address was securing a *droit de regard* in the polar regions, or a recognised position with a seat at the table, the right to speak, and having its rights and interests considered. By 'enhancing . . . [China's] substantive presence in the polar regions', Chinese officials wanted to transform China 'from a major polar expedition power to a polar expedition great power' and thus 'serve the country's political economy, diplomacy, and military affairs' (Wang, 2006: 463). With the help of material practices, China has managed to acquire membership in formal polar clubs, including the ATS consultative club, IASC, and observer status in the AC. These institutions of varying prestige maintain the regional and status-based logic of exclusivity (Stephen and Stephen, 2020), but though all great powers are members, not all members are great powers.

At both poles, China seeks to participate in governance. *China's Antarctic Activities* report claims that 'China's Antarctic cause . . . demonstrates China's image as a responsible major country', and that China will continue 'to actively participate in Antarctic governance and international cooperation' (State Oceanic Administration, 2017). Similarly, *China's Arctic Policy* emphasises China's goal of promoting global and regional governance (State Council, 2018). However, China's actual decision-making power in governance bodies varies between the polar regions and different issues.

In Antarctica, China wields substantial influence, using its veto power where it can, as is expected of a great power. As a member of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, China protected its krill harvesting interests by vetoing the creation of new marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Ross Sea and East Antarctic seas (Liu and Brooks, 2018). Though China relented on the Ross Sea MPA in 2016, it still withholds approval of the East Antarctic MPA over concerns about its krill harvesting (Goldsworthy et al., 2023). China advocates reassessing creating MPAs around Antarctica, doubting their effectiveness and arguing they should not be 'the only' conservation tool (Delegation of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

In the Arctic, China is satisfied with formal club membership as a recognition of its great power status. For example, when Arctic States sharpened the criteria for AC observer admission, requiring candidates to contribute to the council's work and to 'recognise Arctic States' sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic' (Senior Arctic Officials, 2011), China complied with the requirements though it had an option to 'transcend' (*chaoyue*) the AC and exercise its rights solely based on international law like UNCLOS (Guo, 2012; Guo and Sun, 2013: 134). Given that the strings attached to AC observer status could diminish the 'practical benefits' and 'prestige' of joining AC because Arctic countries 'prevent China's status from rising to the level that probably challenges their dominance' (Guo, 2012: 32). China's acceptance of observer status criteria reflects its satisfaction with formal recognition. As China's Vice-Foreign Minister Kong said, Beijing currently wishes to 'neither overstep nor be absent in Arctic affairs', meaning that 'not being absent' from formal governance institutions is an important consideration for a great power like China (Bai et al., 2018).

Contrary to materialist explanations that emphasise the instrumental and strategic implications of status signals, this section argued that China uses material practices to achieve recognition of its status by domestic and international audiences. The recognition China can achieve in terms of great power traits and behaviours varies between the poles and issue areas, with China pragmatically maximising its potential. It has no problem in aligning its interests with international expectations when it serves to maximise

recognition of its great power status, but it also leverages its great power voice for material gains when necessary.

Conclusion

The basic thrust of the article was to demonstrate that status matters in China's polar engagement. China's engagement in the polar regions is a result of the country's identity as a global great power. Due to their global and scientific importance, China believes that the presence in the polar regions is necessary for great powers. In order to signal its status, China uses material practices to achieve symbolic goals. China's push to establish stations, construct icebreakers, and show its flag are all such material practices in the polar regions allowing China to signal its great power status. The establishment of research stations, the acquisition of icebreakers, and flag-showing practices are intentional, public, and often costly signals of China's great power status. As Chinese and international audiences rank great powers by the number and size of polar stations and polar icebreakers – as well as by their capability to conduct expeditions and military exercises – these practices follow the international and domestic standards for comparison, allowing China to assert that it is keeping pace with or outcompeting its peers. China's activities in the Arctic and Antarctic are motivated by more than just territorial, scientific, strategic, or resource-based gains. Though these practices may also serve material interests, such as facilitating dual-use research, first and foremost they serve as intentional and public signals to construct and signal an image of China as a pivotal global actor.

Status is more than just nationalist narratives, propaganda, or ideology. Rather, status is an identity-transforming phenomenon that guides state behaviour and self-conception within the international community. States have an internalised commitment towards the stakes of the status game, viewing these stakes as expressions of the natural order (Pouliot, 2014). This disposition explains why states are inherently driven to engage in status-signalling practices when their status is challenged. China's use of material practices is often motivated as a riposte to status challenges. By systematically and iteratively constructing stations, acquiring icebreakers, and showing its flag in the polar regions, China sends public, costly, and intentional signals that lay the material foundations for its great power role identity. Discourses and practices interact in a cycle of challenges and ripostes, influencing each other and transforming the meaning of China's great power status.

Beyond theoretical and empirical significance, the finding that China's polar status ambitions are, to a large degree, motivated by status considerations carries tangible policy implications. China's symbolic practices aimed at signalling status, such as station building, icebreaker acquisition, and showing its flag, are often interpreted as threatening the security of Arctic states or challenging the polar governance. Policymakers working with Arctic governance or managing great power competition need to consider how symbolic and material dynamics motivate Beijing's behaviour and intent to reshape global hierarchies, prompting reactive policies from Washington.

While this study focuses on China, similar dynamics of status signalling likely influence the behaviours of other ambitious states, such as India or Russia, and even established great powers like the United States. For example, the ability to operate at both poles was an important motivator behind India's Arctic engagement (Østhagen, 2024). Further studies might examine how great powers' discourse and material practices influence global status markers, discourses, and practices, transforming the rules of the status game. Indeed, the status game is *the* social reality – one built on a material reality.

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Notes

1. For example, according to Murray (2019), by acquiring a sphere of influence, a state not only demonstrates its exceptional power and capability to maintain such a sphere but also actively increases its power and influence through the material practice itself. This manifests the state's great power status both by demonstrating and expanding its power.
2. For an empirical example of how Russia problematised its lack of *droit de regard* in Eurasia and sought to rectify it through establishing a sphere of influence, see Kaczmarska (2015).
3. Development of an 'Antarctic exploration and nuclear test ship' under code 640 initiated in 1965 (Guo and Li, 2024) was scrapped in 1967 following Marshal Nie Rongzhen's decision to prioritise sea-based intercontinental missile tests (Liu, 2004: 336).
4. 7,130,000 CNY or about 861,423 USD in 2003.
5. Later, China would use the same modus operandi to acquire its first aircraft carrier (Pu, 2019: 42).
6. South Pole, North Pole, and the Himalayas.

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