



Nautical chart #80 NGA

Remote Control

Chinese Infrastructure In and Above the Arctic

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for Zoom link.

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China has expanded its presence in the Arctic with polar research stations and two icebreakers. Such “big-ticket” infrastructure has invited scrutiny. Less critique, however, has been made of China’s “vertical” and “virtual” infrastructure in the region, such as satellites, ground stations, and submersibles. This paper explores China’s advances in developing such remote infrastructure in and above the Arctic with respect to the country’s 14th Five-Year Plan and makes three key arguments. First, infrastructure at a distance enables China to expand its presence across the Arctic’s volumetric spaces despite lacking sovereign territory. Second, by generating Arctic big data, Chinese satellites may strengthen the country’s position as a regional knowledge-producer. This newfound status may help the state to participate in regional governance, especially as remote sensing and other forms of large-scale, computationally intensive science become preferred decision-making tools for governments and multilateral organizations. Third, China’s preference for spaceborne and marine observations – effectively, research that can be done in the global commons without sovereign territory – may serve to marginalize local, field-based, and Indigenous knowledge. This has consequences for epistemic norms within Arctic science and, more broadly, the geopolitics of knowledge production.

Thinking Critically About the North:
Emerging Research in the Arctic Social Science and Humanities



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