JOURNAL OF ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES

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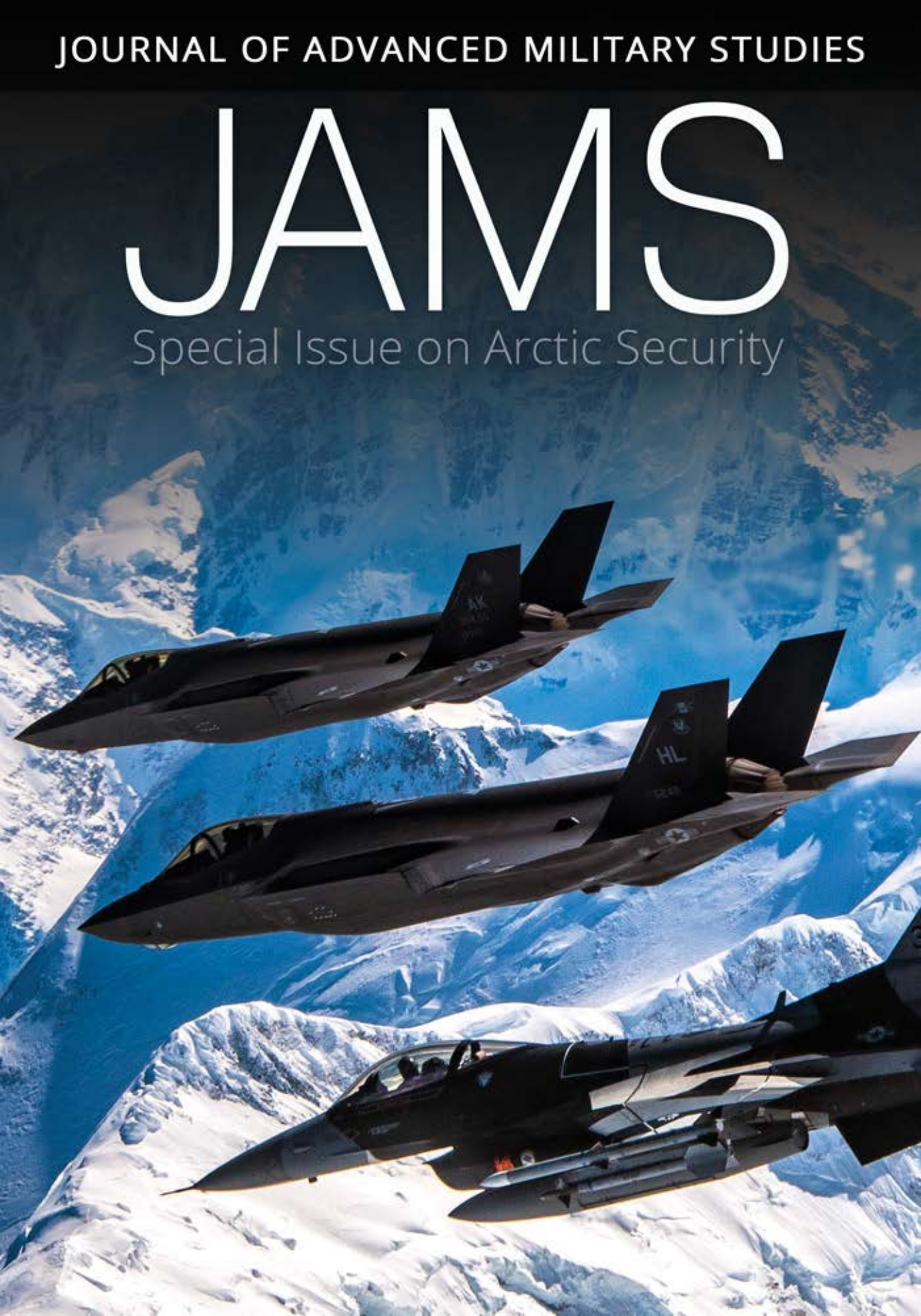
Special Issue on Arctic Security



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MCUP
MARINE CORPS UNIVERSITY PRESS
2044 Broadway Street | Quantico, VA 22134

Journal of Advanced Military Studies
(Print) ISSN 2770-2596
(Online) ISSN 2770-260X

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The Arctic as a Periphery in U.S.-China Competition

Charlotte Hulme, PhD

Abstract: While China's Arctic inroads have attracted growing attention from the United States, this article views Arctic competition as a periphery of global great power competition, or as a sideshow to the main theater of U.S.-China competition—the Indo-Pacific. Examining China's Arctic activity from a peripheral perspective, it ultimately argues that the United States should sustain its current posture of not letting a nonpriority theater become a main event in its competition with China.

Keywords: China, Arctic, great power Arctic, great power competition, Indo-Pacific, U.S.-China, periphery strategy, U.S.-China competition

Throughout the 2010s, a cohort of non-Arctic states, including China, Japan, India, and South Korea, demonstrated a growing appetite for regional involvement, unveiling policies and investments aimed at taking advantage of increasingly accessible natural resources, shipping lanes, and strategic positions.[1] China has attracted the most international attention, as it has campaigned for decades to gain acceptance as a legitimate regional stakeholder, relying on science, economics, international law, and rhetoric bolstering its image as "an active participant, builder, and contributor" to Arctic affairs.[2] Establishing a foothold in the Arctic supports China's economic development and security, including by providing access to shipping routes that mitigate traditional strategic vulnerabilities as well as to natural resources, from oil to

Charlotte Hulme is assistant professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College. Previously, she taught grand strategy at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. The views in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of Defense, Department of the Navy, or Naval War College. The author is grateful to Derick Hulme, Jon Martin, Tom Visel, and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights and helpful comments.

high-protein food sources.[3] But the concept of the periphery reveals another potential aspect of its interests: the Arctic's function as a venue in which China can attempt to shore up vital defense interests and encourage competitors to divert focus from the main theater of competition, the Indo-Pacific.

This article views Arctic competition as a periphery of global great power competition. From this perspective, the Arctic is a sideshow to the main theater of competition between the United States and China: the Pacific's first island chain with imperiled Taiwan at its center. The article attempts to explain why China, which lacks a geographic connection to the Arctic, has pursued a regional strategy in the Arctic as an opportunity to take focus off its aggressive ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region. It addresses a gap in the literature concerning the peripheral dimension of great power competition in the high north. Various publications examining China's Arctic activity as it relates to the Indo-Pacific, or how the Arctic involvement of China and other Asian states has "shifted the Arctic's strategic center away from the region itself toward the Indo-Pacific," omit any reference to Taiwan or the first island chain, China's most important focal issue.[4] More broadly, this article highlights the importance of understanding peripheries—both geographic and conceptual—as nonpriority theaters in the overall concept of great power competition.

The first part of the article, which considers China's concept of "peripheral diplomacy," addresses how the article's main argument lies in existing theories of the periphery.[5] The second part assesses China's economic investments in U.S.-allied Arctic states, specifically the Nordic states, from a peripheral perspective. Historically, the Nordics have supported the "One China principle," Beijing's belief that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is the sole legal government of Taiwan and that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the PRC. Yet, they have resisted China's economic inroads to a greater degree than the conventional wisdom suggests and have deepened their trade relationships with China at a considerably slower rate than most European states. This potentially puts the Nordic states in a comparatively stronger position to respond to future Chinese action against Taiwan, if it suited their interests to do so. The third part of the article examines how, from the perspective of peripheral strategy, China has an interest in encouraging the United States to divert resources to the Arctic at the expense of the Indo-Pacific and indeed may be doing so. The United States wisely has not diverted major resources to Arctic competition, perhaps indicative that it recognizes the region as a periphery. Finally, the article concludes by considering lessons for the United States as it considers what to do—or not do—in its approach to competing with China in the Arctic. The article ultimately argues that Washington should sustain its current posture of not letting a peripheral region become a main event in U.S.-China competition.

Theories of the Periphery

The concept of the *periphery*, as this article uses the term, reflects insights generated during the World War I era.[6] Maritime strategy of that period highlights how a peripheral approach avoids decisive battle while embracing indirect methods and unfolds at a distance from the "main event" where most resources are concentrated. For example, naval historian Julian S. Corbett emphasized that maritime Britain, hewing to its strategic tradition, should avoid continental entanglements and instead leverage seapower to defeat Germany. Rather than committing the British Expeditionary Force to the western front, Britain should seek to influence events on land by putting Germany on the horns of a dilemma in the Baltic, on whose trade routes it was dependent for resources like Swedish iron ore. While Corbett did not see the Baltic as peripheral in the sense of being of secondary importance relative to Flanders, his vision included a concept of peripheral action, or action occurring away from the main locus of attention but with the potential to significantly affect events there.[7] In Andrew Lambert's analysis, the Baltic concept, breaking with "the emerging orthodoxy of the Western Front," was "a serious alternative to the continental commitment."[8]

As the early war of movement on the western front settled into a grinding war of attrition, First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, who previously had "looked for a costly, 'decisive' battle," sought to identify "alternatives than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders."[9] His search for a peripheral approach spurred the 1915 Dardanelles campaign, which he anticipated would create conditions for the Ottomans being forced to divert resources to contend with the Allies in Constantinople.[10] During his Hejaz campaign, T. E. Lawrence was more successful than Churchill in executing a peripheral strategy, demonstrating how the problem of strategic stalemate on the western front might be lessened by drawing enemy forces away from the primary theater and forcing them to expend resources on "a side-show of a side-show."[11]

Looking beyond the Great War, maritime strategy inherently is peripheral, enabling a state to advance core interests without committing the entirety of its resources or attempting to directly achieve ultimate objectives. As U.S. Navy Captain John D. Hayes wrote in 1953, "ultimate objectives of all warfare can only be obtained upon the land."[12] He observed, "Peripheral strategy was called 'sea power' by Mahan. Before the air age it could validly be called maritime. But whatever its name, limited aims in warfare can be gained by such a strategy provided that these ends do not include liberating large geographical areas, complete subjugation, or unconditional surrender."[13]

In the contemporary context, Hayes's observation highlights how a peripheral approach can be useful for advancing core interests while keeping conflict limited and under the threshold of nuclear red lines. While the periphery may

not be the place where ultimate objectives are achieved, peripheral activity can affect the main effort with respect to those objectives. Meanwhile, theories of the periphery pioneered during the Great War underscore that peripheral strategy focuses on alleviating pressure on the main theater of conflict or competition. This article argues that these insights shed light on China's activity in the Arctic since the early 2010s, the period coinciding with "periphery diplomacy" becoming an explicit focus of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

As Michael Swaine documents, "China's periphery was first stressed as being of 'primary importance' in China's foreign policy at the 16th Party Congress in 2002."[14] But it was in 2013 that the CCP hosted the first "foreign policy work conference" devoted to periphery diplomacy. Xi Jinping described peripheral regions as "strategically significant to our country in terms of geography, the environment, and relationships."[15] He emphasized the necessity of striving for "an excellent peripheral environment for [China's] development" to achieve the "Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."[16] According to Jianwei Wang and Hoo Tiang Boon, Xi's statements "affirmed the importance of a stable external milieu, in particular [China's] neighboring regions, domestic development, and recognized the centrality of periphery diplomacy."[17]

What constitutes *the periphery*, from Beijing's perspective? In 2014, Swaine noted that while "the public remarks of senior Chinese officials suggest that the main countries on China's periphery, and thus the primary focus of periphery diplomacy at present, include nearby smaller and middle-range states," Chinese sources, including authoritative sources representing the CCP, "do not specifically define the geographical extent of China's periphery."[18] Some suggest that its reach is remarkably expansive. For example, in 2013, Yuan Peng, vice president of the state-linked China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, identified three "rings" of the periphery: an "inside ring" (states sharing a land border with China), a "middle ring" (including maritime states adjacent to the inner ring and extending into the Western Pacific), and an "outer ring," constituting the "great periphery" and including "the circle of Africa, Europe, and America."[19] Similarly, in 2017, Wang and Hoo wrote that while the traditional Chinese periphery includes only countries adjacent to China, the concept has expanded; now, "it goes beyond that to cover the so-called 'greater periphery'."[20] In 2020, however, Jacob Stokes offered a narrower view of the scope of China's periphery, distinguishing between the "small periphery" of "directly adjacent states" and the "large periphery *throughout Asia*."[21]

Given that the Xi era marks the "global expansion" phase of Chinese grand strategy, this article takes a broad view of the scope of China's periphery.[22] Recognizing that the CCP apparently has not excluded any region as irrelevant to periphery diplomacy, and in light of Xi's understanding of the objective of "an

excellent peripheral environment" as supporting China's development in order to realize the great rejuvenation, there is no reason to exclude the Arctic as a nontraditional Chinese periphery.[23] For China, the Arctic is valuable as an arena not only for shoring up core defense interests, including territorial issues at the heart of the great rejuvenation project, but also for encouraging adversaries to divert focus from the main theater of competition—the Indo-Pacific.

Advancing Core Interests in the Arctic Periphery

Since the 1990s, China has amplified scientific research and appeals to international law and multilateralism in its bid to internationalize the Arctic and justify its claim to be a legitimate stakeholder. For example, with the 1993 purchase of the *Xue Long*, an icebreaker that conducted its first polar research expedition in 1994, China highlighted scientific pursuits as a central driver of its Arctic interest and presence.[24] In its first Arctic strategy white paper, published in 2018, China described becoming a member of the International Arctic Science Committee in 1996 as marking "its more active participation in scientific research in the Arctic."[25] In 2004, the Polar Research Institute of China, jointly with institutes in Japan and South Korea, founded the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences, a "platform for polar scientific research exchange and cooperation among countries in Asia."[26] In 2013, a cohort of Chinese and Nordic institutions founded what Beijing described as the first China-driven "multilateral Arctic cooperative research and exchange mechanism."[27]

China's Arctic white paper presents multilateral governance, specifically including non-Arctic states, as natural and inevitable given trends in globalization and regional integration. It states, "The Arctic situation now goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature, having a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region and the interests of the international community as a whole, as well as on the survival, the development, and the shared future for mankind."[28] It acknowledges that although non-Arctic states lack regional territorial sovereignty, "they do have rights in respect of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines in the high seas and other relevant sea areas in the Arctic Ocean, and rights to resource exploration and exploitation . . . pursuant to treaties such as UNCLOS [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea] and general international law."[29] Throughout the paper, China underscores that economic interests, including accessing natural resources and developing shipping routes, are its priority in the Arctic.

While China seeks to exploit economic opportunities in an increasingly accessible Arctic, at first glance the region appears to have little relevance to vital interests in its own region. Yet, as Jerker Hellström noted in 2016, "Chinese officials regard the Nordic region as . . . an arena for the promotion of Chinese

core interests," including issues of "territorial integrity and national sovereignty" involving Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.[30] His observation highlights that even in areas that may not seem directly related, China is focused on promoting its core security interests. In this case, Arctic participation provides China yet another forum to engage with potential stakeholders (the Nordics) and apply pressure to gain support for issues more central to the Indo-Pacific.

Chinese foreign policy often makes economic investments today with the expectation of political payoffs in the future, as demonstrated by numerous infrastructure investments as part of its various "Silk Roads." One of the most important of these expected payoffs is contributing to Taiwan's erasure as an independent entity, including by revoking official and unofficial ties to Taiwan and building an international consensus on the Taiwan question. By doing this, China expects that if it takes decisive action to seize control of Taiwan, it likely will be accepted by the international community with minimal negative consequences to China for the likely brutality of its conquest. For more than a decade, China has used economic inducements to chip away at Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies, which have declined from 23 in 2011 to 12 in 2024.[31] It also has applied economic power to erode unofficial support by states seeking to engage with Taiwan's economy and society while avoiding negative repercussions from the PRC.

Viewing China's Arctic economic investments as part of a peripheral strategy, a key question is whether they have yielded the desired dividends concerning Taiwan. This question has received inadequate attention considering its importance for understanding and deterring a hot conflict between China and the United States. Notably, a 2022 report produced by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) for the Department of Defense (DOD)—*Exploring the Relationship between China's Investment in the Arctic and Its National Strategy*—did not mention Taiwan.[32] This omission illustrates how experts often have not drawn an explicit connection between what China does in the Arctic and its main effort in the Indo-Pacific. A peripheral perspective would insist that they do so.

Some experts have portrayed Arctic states, especially the Nordics, as recently undergoing a change in their attitudes after previously having accepted China as a "legitimate Arctic stakeholder" and having been "generally welcoming of [its] engagement in the region," as Anne-Marie Brady described Sino-Nordic relations in 2017.[33] In 2022, for example, Andreas Forsby wrote that perceptions of China had "fundamentally changed in the Nordic countries as security-related concerns and sensitive political issues have come to the fore," including Huawei's surveillance for the CCP and China's crackdown on Hong Kong protesters and mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.[34] In its 2022 report, CNA highlighted that Arctic states "including Finland, Denmark, and Canada" had "blocked PRC investment in the Arctic because of security concerns."[35] Such

accounts portray the Nordic states as similar to other states that began to re-evaluate their China policies following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, events spurring policymakers to focus more intensely on the links between economic interdependence and national security. But a look at major Arctic natural resource extraction and infrastructure projects involving China-based entities, which have been a focal point for observers interested in Beijing's efforts to secure a regional foothold, suggests that there has been less of a dramatic change in their stance toward Chinese investments than has been portrayed. These states were often not very involved with Chinese projects to begin with and had a more active pre-2020 record of pushing back on them than is often conveyed.

In its 2022 report for the DOD, CNA evaluated 37 high-profile Arctic natural resource and infrastructure investment projects involving Chinese entities, 13 of which (35 percent) involved Russia, with 24 others (65 percent) divided among 8 host country locations (the 5 Nordics, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom). First, considering natural resource extraction projects, CNA identified 14 that were ongoing as of 2022. Of those, Russia was the host for eight; Canada for three; and Greenland, the United States, and the United Kingdom for one each. Out of 20 total natural resource extraction projects that were stood up from 2008 to 2020, 5 were "blocked by the host country, cancelled, or otherwise stalled."[36] Of those five, one involved Russia (stalled, 2013); one, Iceland (cancelled, 2014); two, Greenland (stalled, 2016 and 2019); and one, Canada (blocked, 2020). Blocking, stalling, or cancelling natural resource projects involving Chinese entities occurred in 25 percent of cases, and in two of the three cases involving Nordic states occurred at least several years prior (in 2014 and 2016) to what has been portrayed as a relatively recent shift in their approach to Chinese investments.

Turning to projects focused on developing "the infrastructure necessary to support resource extraction and commercial shipping in the region," CNA reported that of four that were ongoing as of 2022, Russia was the location for two while Norway and Sweden hosted one each (Finland had one project launched in 2016, which CNA coded as in the "planning" stage).[37] Of 17 total infrastructure projects that were stood up from 2012 to 2022, 6 were "blocked by the host country, cancelled, or abandoned."[38] Of those six, one involved Iceland (blocked, 2012); one, the United States (abandoned, 2017); two, Greenland (blocked, 2016, and abandoned, 2017); and two, Finland (blocked, 2018 and 2019). Blocking, cancelling, or abandoning infrastructure projects involving Chinese entities occurred in 35 percent of cases, and in three of the five cases involving Nordic states this occurred earlier in the 2010s (in 2012, 2016, and 2017) than many conventional accounts of their attitudes toward Chinese investments would suggest.

In sum, CNA data suggests that the Nordic states had limited ties to major Chinese natural resource and infrastructure investment projects, making it easier to loosen ties when they determined it was in their interest to do so. Notably, Greenland and Iceland—which, as the smallest and poorest of the Nordics, theoretically should have been the most vulnerable to PRC economic influence—account for two of the earliest cases of blocking Chinese infrastructure projects, Iceland in 2012 and Greenland in 2016.

The Nordic states' willingness to challenge some of China's efforts to establish a robust economic foothold in the Arctic region currently does not appear to have impacted their long-standing support for the PRC's "One China Principle" and aversion to rocking the boat on the Taiwan question. In 2024, Andreas Forsby noted that not only are the Nordics collectively "not part of the group of so-called 'vanguard countries' that are most supportive of Taiwan in Europe," but that Iceland and Norway "can more aptly be referred to as 'laggards,' having completely isolated themselves from Taiwan with no direct channels of institutionalized bilateral interaction."[39] His interpretation aligns with that of University of Oslo professor Halvor Eifring, who in a 2023 interview noted that, especially given Oslo's campaign to mend the rupture in relations with Beijing following human rights activist Liu Xiaobo receiving the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, "Norway is probably even more China-friendly than other Nordic countries and not openly Taiwan-friendly."[40]

Certain metrics support the idea that the Nordics lag behind the European "vanguard" on the Taiwan issue, or what Taipei has dubbed the "Dumpling Alliance" of the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia.[41] But recent trade patterns suggest that, unexpectedly, it may be the *Nordics* that will be better positioned in the future to respond to Chinese aggression against Taiwan. For example, consider the differential rates of deepening levels of trade between China and the five Nordics, on the one hand, and the four Central and Eastern European (CEE) vanguard states, on the other. For each of the nine states, table 1 compares the value of imports from China in 2017 and 2022, as well as the annualized rate of growth in imports. Table 2 compares the value of exports to China in 2017 and 2022, as well as the annualized rate of growth in exports. Expanding the analysis to consider how the CEEs and Nordics rank among all members of the European Union (EU) plus the United Kingdom and non-EU member Nordic states, in terms of the annualized rate of growth in imports from China, the 4 CEEs rank in the top one-third of 29 states, while the Nordics rank in the middle and bottom one-third.[42] In terms of the annualized rate of growth in exports to China, the CEEs rank in the top 11, while the Nordics rank in the middle and bottom one-third, with one exception—Iceland.[43]

Unexpectedly, since 2017, China has significantly deepened its trade relationship with states recognized as being at the vanguard of pro-Taiwan sentiment

Table 1. A comparison of five Nordic and four Central and Eastern European states' 2017 and 2022 imports from China and the annualized rate of growth in imports from 2017 to 2022, listed from highest to lowest rate

State	2017 imports	2022 imports	Annualized rate of growth
Lithuania	$2.44M	$1.3B	251%
Slovakia	$66M	$3.86B	126%
Czech Republic	$228M	$13.2B	125%
Poland	$548M	$23B	111%
Sweden	$442M	$8.2B	79%
Iceland	$21.8M	$368M	76%
Finland	$344M	$4.37B	66%
Norway	$589M	$6.59B	62%
Denmark	$673M	$6.64B	58%

Source: Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 11 August 2024.

Table 2. A comparison of five Nordic and four Central and Eastern European states' 2017 and 2022 exports to China and the annualized rate of growth in exports from 2017 to 2022, listed from highest to lowest rate

State	2017 exports	2022 exports	Annualized rate of growth
Lithuania	$1.16M	$251M	193%
Slovakia	$22.3M	$1.48B	131%
Iceland	$2.69M	$99.9M	106%
Poland	$94.4M	$2.37B	91%
Czech Republic	$137M	$2.54B	79%
Denmark	$302M	$4.38B	71%
Norway	$263M	$3B	63%
Sweden	$1.23B	$7B	42%
Finland	$716M	$3.69B	39%

Source: Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 11 August 2024.

in Europe, much more so than with Nordic states that already had accepted its policy toward Taiwan. The members of the Dumpling Alliance are among the leaders in Europe in terms of growing levels of trade with China. Meanwhile, China's trade with the Nordics, some of which have been characterized as Taiwan laggards, also has increased, but at a much slower rate. This points to a potential PRC approach to influencing European policy. States that actively championed Taiwan attracted attention from China as priority candidates for a tighter trade relationship. As poorer states than the Nordics—as is the case for the four CEEs, which rank in the bottom 42 percent of 48 European countries and territories by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita—they likely

also were more receptive to China's economic overtures. But the Nordic states, which have not supported Taiwan's cause, attracted less of China's attention for developing deeper trade bonds. They also may have been less keen to enter into a much tighter economic relationship with China given their relatively higher levels of prosperity, ranking in the top 38 percent of 48 European countries and territories by GDP per capita.[44]

In other words, states that most actively position themselves as pro-Taiwan on the world stage today may be opening themselves up to levels of interdependence with China that in the future may make it particularly costly to support punitive measures against Beijing in the event of an invasion of Taiwan. Meanwhile, the states that appear less willing to rock the boat over the Taiwan question today and that, as in the Nordics' case, are deepening levels of trade with China at a considerably slower rate than others, may be setting themselves up to be in a better position to respond to future Chinese aggression. For the United States, this has obvious implications for engaging with Nordic states to persuade them to oppose China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific and to increase trade with poorer European states to reduce their susceptibility to Beijing's economic initiatives.

U.S. policymakers should be attuned to the potential for a disjuncture between the narrative of Chinese expansion and influence in the Arctic and reality. As two scholars from the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies observed in 2024, "[M]ost of China's attempts at investing in Arctic resources outside Russia have been put on hold or have failed altogether. Even in the Russian Arctic, China's economic footprint is relatively limited beyond its engagement in the Yamal liquified natural gas project."[45] In recent years, Washington has expressed concern about China's Arctic footprint. However, as the next part of this article examines, the United States ultimately has not diverted major resources to the region. On the one hand, viewing the Arctic as a periphery of U.S.-China competition, Washington is wise to avoid strategic distraction from the Indo-Pacific. But on the other, the United States and its NATO allies confront serious risks from Russia's intensifying militarization of the Arctic. The distinct nature of the challenge that China versus Russia poses in the Arctic highlights that while the concept of the periphery may be useful for understanding China's Arctic behavior during the present phase of competition with the United States, it is not an appropriate lens through which to view Russia's Arctic posture in the current stage of its confrontation with the West.

Encouraging Competitors to Divert Focus from the Main Theater of Competition

As the first part of the article discussed, advancing vital defense interests is one aspect of China's Arctic strategy that the periphery concept brings into sharper

focus. The concept also points to China's interest in encouraging the United States to divert focus from the Indo-Pacific to respond to perceived strategic risks elsewhere. In other words, a periphery can serve as an arena for strategic distraction if an actor is able to draw in an adversary and compel a response. Corbett addressed a similar phenomenon in discussing the idea of a "fleet in being." Departing from prevailing Mahanian orthodoxy, which "extolled the importance of achieving dominance at sea through formidable fleets," he "emphasized the constant pressure exerted by a navy's presence, which he termed 'Fleet in Being,' as a means of strategic influence."[46] The idea was that a fleet could exert influence and compel an adversary without ever leaving port, much less engaging in decisive battle. The parallel is that, despite having no territorial claims or a permanent military footprint, simply by its Arctic presence China can seek to compel a U.S. response—specifically, one incommensurate with actual Chinese capabilities or risks to specific U.S. interests—diverting focus from the main theater of competition. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Adam Lajeunesse, and Ryan Dean have addressed this possibility, pointing out that with Beijing's "main preoccupations" being in its own neighborhood and Taiwan representing the "main strategic direction" of the People's Liberation Army, "over-inflated or misplaced fears about China's military threat to and in the Arctic may prove to be a strategic distraction, diverting Arctic states' attention and defense resources from elsewhere."[47]

Since the early 2010s, when observers began paying closer attention to China's Arctic activities, there often has been a gap between its actual capabilities and Beijing's characterizations thereof. In 2012, Anne-Marie Brady observed that "for all the attention it receives, China is not putting a lot of money into its Arctic program," which received only $12 million of $60 million total allocated to the polar program (which encompassed the Polar Research Institute of China and the China Arctic and Antarctic Administration). "On the Arctic," she wrote, "Beijing produces a lot of smoke, mirrors and big talk, which disguises their small investment."[48] But two years later, in 2014—a year when the Arctic seemingly was "not especially high on the Chinese agenda"—Xi announced China's aspiration to become a "polar great power."[49] Given that such a status appeared incongruous with China's present capabilities or priorities, what was the added value of this announcement? Whether by design or unintentionally, one effect of Xi's declaration was explicitly incorporating the Arctic into the playing field of great power competition, opening it as a potential periphery in U.S.-China relations.

In 2018, Xi upped the ante as China published its first Arctic strategy document, described its vision for a "Polar Silk Road," and declared itself a "near-Arctic state."[50] Notably, in 2012, Gang Chen wrote that "Chinese strategists will try to avoid drafting any written blueprints that may alarm or provoke

Arctic and other non-Arctic nations."[51] The implication was that releasing a formal strategy would spur a flurry of reaction by the United States and its allies, which Chen portrayed as undesirable for China. Yet, from the perspective of peripheral strategy, such a reaction would not just have been advantageous but may have been a deliberate objective.

These milestones in China's Arctic policy coincided with the region commanding more attention in Washington. In 2015, for example, the year after Xi's "polar Great Power" declaration (and, as will be discussed below, the year after Russia's Crimean invasion spurred the unraveling of its relations with the West, including in the Arctic), the Barack H. Obama administration created an Arctic Executive Steering Committee designed to "better coordinate Arctic efforts throughout the government."[52] Meanwhile, in 2016, Congress highlighted its "sense that the Arctic is a region of growing strategic importance to the national security interest of the United States and that the Department of Defense must better align its posture and capabilities to meet the growing array of challenges in the region."[53]

Washington's focus on the Arctic as an arena of strategic competition intensified toward the end of the decade. For example, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* ignored the region entirely save one reference to keeping "common domains" like the Arctic and cyberspace "open and free."[54] But in 2019, the year after China published its Arctic strategy, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo delivered a watershed speech to the Arctic Council declaring the Arctic "a new arena of global power and competition," while highlighting a "pattern of aggressive Russian behavior" in the Arctic and "China's pattern of aggressive behavior elsewhere" that was indicative of "how it might treat the Arctic."[55] Meanwhile, a section of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 was dedicated to the issue of "Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Countries of the Arctic Region," directing the secretary of defense to "complete an independent study of Chinese foreign direct investment in countries of the Arctic region, with a focus on the effects of such foreign direct investment on United States national security and near-peer competition in the Arctic region." Congress also called for a review of China's 2018 Arctic strategy to determine the "degree to which Arctic littoral states are susceptible to the political and economic risks of unregulated foreign direct investment."[56] Meanwhile, the DOD's 2024 Arctic strategy highlighted that China's Polar Silk Road (the Arctic branch of the One Belt, One Road initiative) "has been used to gain a footing in the Arctic by pursuing investments in infrastructure and natural resources, including in the territory of NATO Allies."[57]

However, a look at some key milestones in the budgetary process from FY 2015 through FY 2025 (including the president's budget request to Congress, the National Defense Authorization Act [NDAA], the Coast Guard Authoriza-

tion Act, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act) illustrates how the United States ultimately has not diverted major resources to what remains a periphery in competition with China.[58] For example, Congress appropriated $150 million for a polar icebreaker in FY 2017 and FY 2018; an unspecified amount for an Arctic ambassador-at-large in FY 2022 and FY 2023; and $125 million for a commercially available icebreaker in FY 2024.[59] In an indication of the distance between Washington's rhetoric about the importance of the Arctic and the resources devoted to it, the president's FY 2024 budget request characterized "establishing American presence in the Arctic" as "a critical security priority" given that U.S. adversaries "are increasing their presence in the Arctic and may seek to disrupt established norms for their own benefit."[60]

One explanation for the limited resources dedicated to the Arctic is that it has lost out to more urgent priorities in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. But it also can be viewed at least partly as the result of an effort to approach the Arctic as a periphery that should not distract from the main theater of U.S.-China competition. For example, in the NDAA for FY 2020 (signed into law in 2019), just after China released its Arctic strategy, Congress asked important questions about the Arctic as a potential Chinese periphery.[61] It called for a comprehensive review of China's Arctic strategy, to determine, among other objectives, "the implications of China's Arctic development and participation model with respect to forecasting China's military, economy, territorial, and political activities" as well as "the degree to which activities of China in the region are an extension of China's strategic competition with the United States."[62] While Washington has remained attuned to the possibility of a "strengthened, future Chinese military presence in the Arctic Ocean," it also has recognized that China's Arctic presence remains "limited," as the DOD characterized it in 2024, 10 years after Xi's "polar Great Power" declaration and six years after China's "near-Arctic state" branding.[63] This reflects an appreciation of the difference between China's actual capabilities and impact and what Rebecca Pincus calls the "myth" that "China is coming for the Arctic."[64]

In contrast, for the United States and its allies, Russia, whose militarization of the Arctic has intensified in the context of the deterioration of its relationship with the West in the last decade, represents "the core challenge to Arctic stability."[65] For example, in 2014, Russia "created an Arctic joint strategic command for the primary purpose of providing enhanced protection to existing and planned military installations along the NSR [Northern Sea Route]," which Russia, in contrast to most states, considers an internal waterway.[66] In 2017, Russia published an updated naval strategy "expressing clear Arctic ambitions and signaling the importance of the Northern Fleet," which protects the prized Kola Peninsula, housing such strategic capabilities as 7 of 11 of Russia's ballistic missile submarines and enabling power projection to the key GIUK (Greenland,

Iceland, and the United Kingdom) Gap.[67] In 2017, Russia also announced upgrades to the Northern Fleet, including two additional nuclear-powered submarines, to support what *Sputnik International* described as "phasing NATO out of the Arctic."[68] Russia also has used the Arctic as a testing ground for hypersonic missiles and undersea drone technology.[69] These moves have spurred heightened NATO focus on its northern flank (which has intensified following Finland and Sweden's accession to the alliance in 2023 and 2024, respectively). For example, the second iteration of the Trident Juncture exercise, testing NATO's ability to mount an Article 5 response, was held in Norway in 2018. Meanwhile, in 2021, Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski highlighted key NATO responses to Russia's confrontational posture, including the U.S. deployment of "an expeditionary B1-Lancer squadron with 200 personnel on a temporary basis to Norway" and joint U.S.-UK-Norway exercises "just over 100 miles from the Russia coastline."[70]

The deepening strategic relationship between Russia and China complicates the Arctic as a periphery of U.S.-China competition, though prospects for Moscow and Beijing's long-term cooperation in the Arctic are uncertain given each state's distinct relationship to, and interest in, the region. From this article's perspective, however, the key point is that in the Arctic, Russia and the West are engaged in adversarial confrontation reminiscent of the Cold War era, rather than peripheral competition.[71] The Arctic, comprising seven NATO allies, is not a periphery in the context of this confrontation, particularly given the potential for direct conflict on NATO's northern flank. One implication is that the U.S. choice to dedicate limited resources to the Arctic may be wise in the context of its relationship with China but inadequate to address the risks that Russia poses. Overall, however, given the need to prioritize China as the more formidable threat to U.S. global interests, the choice is a necessary one.

Lessons for the United States

One of the key insights gleaned from evaluating China's Arctic activity through the lens of the periphery is that Beijing has at best a mixed record of achieving desirable second-order effects for its priorities in the Indo-Pacific. In particular, its record of securing an economic foothold, including in U.S.-allied states, has fallen short of its ambitions. Meanwhile, the U.S. response has been largely nonreactive and has not come at the cost of diverting major resources from the main theater of competition. As the lessons below highlight, the United States should continue to approach the Arctic as a periphery of competition with China. But it also should appreciate that Russia's invasion of Ukraine enhances China's ability to leverage the Arctic in a peripheral strategy. Moscow's growing dependence on Beijing sets the stage for the United States to face greater dif-

ficulty, compared to the pre-2022 environment, in reacting to the pull of the Arctic periphery in a manner that is disadvantageous to China.

The first lesson for U.S. policymakers is to recognize that the Arctic remains a periphery of U.S.-China competition. Observing "the more visible overspill of conflicting great power policies" into the Arctic, coupled with "the growing attention paid by non-Arctic states to Arctic affairs," one scholar, writing in 2019, concluded that the Arctic "has increasingly been moving away from the international strategic periphery."[72] Yet, as this article has considered, the fact that the Arctic has become more relevant to U.S.-China competition does not negate that it remains a periphery for both states—a region removed, both geographically and conceptually, from the main theater of competition. The difference in perspective is how to use a periphery rather than turn it into the main effort. The United States can compete more actively or deliberately in the Arctic but ultimately should remain focused on the region's relationship to the Indo-Pacific. To this end, the United States should sustain the position of avoiding prematurely "elevating China to military peer or near-peer competitor status in the Arctic," which "can divert attention from parts of the world where the PRC's capabilities and interests actually warrant such status."[73]

The United States should encourage similar thinking within the NATO alliance, for which the high north has become more relevant given the accession of Sweden and Finland and the fracturing of the post–Cold War status quo following Russia's Ukrainian invasion. In recent years, China not only has commanded greater alliance attention overall, but also has been characterized by the chair of the NATO Military Committee as contributing, with Russia, to a "concerning" heightening of "competition and militarization in the Arctic region."[74] Despite this change in the security environment, however, Washington should encourage NATO allies to remain focused on the main effort—deterring Russia in Europe and along NATO's northern flank—while avoiding getting drawn into China's peripheral Arctic strategy.

The second lesson for U.S. policymakers is to recognize that growing Sino-Russian cooperation complicates the Arctic periphery. China's ability to maintain a circumscribed Arctic military footprint hinges largely on good relations with Russia. As Jeremy Greenwood notes, by seeking occasional access rights to Russian bases or participating in joint exercises with Russia, China can "demonstrate [its] power projection capabilities, but in a limited way."[75] In recent years, a "convergence of economic and political interests" has "led to accelerated Russian and Chinese cooperation in the Arctic," with Moscow needing capital for energy infrastructure, which Beijing can provide, and Beijing needing natural resources and access to trade corridors, which Moscow can facilitate.[76] Prior to 2022, scholars frequently addressed the potential for tensions in the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic, where Russia, unlike China, has

"economic, security, and ideational interests" that are "directly at stake."[77] As David Auerswald observed in 2019, since the early 2000s, Russia has been wary of China's ambition to become "a major power player in an increasingly accessible Arctic," one of the only contexts in which Beijing can be considered a junior partner to Moscow.[78] Meanwhile, Rebecca Pincus highlighted that any potential security partnership "will be vastly complicated by the high priority of the Arctic in Russia's overall grand strategy."[79]

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine inadvertently strengthened Beijing's hand in the periphery. Russia's growing dependence on China both reduced U.S. opportunities to exploit risks to China in the periphery (including those tied to *its* dependence on *Russia*) and made it more difficult for the United States to resist becoming involved in increasing Arctic security investments. Prior to 2022, the United States had a greater ability to draw out underlying tensions between China and Russia to encourage China to spend more resources in the Arctic than it intended or anticipated, and doing so in a manner limiting U.S. costs and involvement. For example, it potentially could have driven a wedge between China and Russia over the Kuril Islands sovereignty dispute between Japan, which claims the islands as part of its "Northern Territories," and Russia, which recently has doubled down on militarizing the islands by deploying forces, stationing missiles, and constructing new airstrips and barracks.[80] Since Mao Zedong, China had recognized Japanese sovereignty over the strategically positioned islands, which constitute part of the first island chain and offer access to the Arctic via the Northern Pacific.[81] But in 2023, the possibility of the Kuril Islands becoming an Arctic-adjacent friction point between Russia and China diminished, as Xi reversed Mao's position, announcing Chinese neutrality in the dispute, and Russia touted Chinese investors showing interest in executing joint economic development projects on the islands.[82] In short, in the transformed post-2022 security environment, Moscow's growing dependence on Beijing has made it more difficult for the United States to capitalize on potential wedge issues between Russia and China and to exploit risks to China in the Arctic periphery.

The war in Ukraine also has been an unanticipated boon to China's peripheral strategy in the Arctic due to U.S. fears of Sino-Russian collaboration becoming more pronounced. Those fears have strengthened Chinese and Russian incentives to magnify perceptions of their deepening collaboration and alignment. Much as there is a disjuncture between the narrative of China's economic expansion and its actual influence in U.S.-allied Arctic states, equally important is the "narrative-reality gap" concerning China's investment in Russia. As CNA highlighted in a 2017 report on Chinese investment in Arctic energy and minerals projects, "During the investigation of many of these transactions, announcements of the expense, scope, and anticipated value of

various investments were clearly distorted, particularly in Russian and Chinese media." In Russian media, CNA "noted instances of 'creative accounting' (inflating the value of deals) to attract much needed capital into Russian projects and the economy in general."[83] Post-2022, Russia's incentives to engage in "creative accounting" have only increased as it searches for non-Western sources of capital. Meanwhile, China has greater incentives than before to inflate figures surrounding its investment in Russia in order to stoke and exploit Western fears of Sino-Russian collaboration.

In the post-2022 environment, the Arctic will have a stronger pull on the West's attention as one of the main arenas in which the China-Russia partnership is playing out.[84] This appears particularly likely in the U.S. context, given President Donald J. Trump's interest in acquiring Greenland in response to its waterways having "Chinese and Russian ships all over the place."[85] During a March 2025 visit to Greenland, Vice President J. D. Vance explained the administration's position: "We cannot ignore . . . the Russian and Chinese encroachment into Greenland. We have to do more." He stated, "We know the Chinese are very interested in this island. We have seen some of the economic pressures they have tried to place on Greenland. We know they are increasingly engaging in military training and military interests. . . . . We have seen very strong evidence that both the Chinese and Russians are interested in Greenland."[86]

It likely also will become more difficult for the United States to resist increasing investments in Arctic security tools that are not necessarily those best suited to addressing the challenges that China and Russia pose. For example, policymakers have focused on closing the "icebreaker gap" as a cornerstone of the U.S. response to China (which has 3 polar icebreakers) and Russia (which has 41).[87] In 2024, the United States, Canada, and Finland announced plans to launch the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort, a consortium to "collaborate on the production of polar icebreakers and other capabilities," addressing what U.S. officials describe as an allied need of "between 70 and 90 icebreakers" to respond to the Russian and Chinese Arctic presence.[88] During his visit to Greenland, Vance highlighted the need for "investing more resources, investing in additional military icebreakers, investing in additional naval ships that will have a greater presence in Greenland." We "know that is necessary," he stated. "We know there has been an expansion of the security footprint and security interest of Russia and China."[89] Yet, as Paul Avey noted in 2019, "many of the specific military challenges that China or Russia might pose in the Arctic are independent of icebreakers and best dealt with in other ways." Reflecting a peripheral understanding of the Arctic's significance relative to the main theaters of great power competition and potential conflict, he contended that the "best way to deal with China and Russia in the Arctic is to address disputes in their

own backyards," given that most "of the pathways to a great-power crisis that could end up affecting the Arctic stem from crises outside the region."[90]

U.S. adversaries will continue to attempt to draw it deeper into the Arctic periphery. For example, in July 2024, days after the DOD's updated Arctic strategy noted that China and Russia's "growing alignment in the region is of concern," the pair conducted their first joint bomber flight near the United States, which was intercepted in Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone.[91] However, this article argued that in such a security environment, the United States should focus on the Indo-Pacific and its centrality to great power competition with China, remembering that the Arctic is a peripheral theater to that competition. Such recognition should facilitate not only keeping the main theater of competition in focus but also recognizing diversions. The challenge and opportunity for U.S. policy going forward, especially related to the Arctic, is to keep the periphery peripheral.

Endnotes

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43. The CEE rankings are Lithuania (1), Slovakia (6), Poland (10), and Czech Republic (11). The Nordics in the middle one-third are Denmark (13) and Norway (18), and in the bottom one-third, Sweden (25) and Finland (27). Iceland ranks 8 of 29. Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity.
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