

Edmund Li Sheng, *Arctic opportunities and challenges: China, Russia and the US Cooperation and Competition*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 175 p.p., EUR 49.99 Hardcover

Rapid warming is opening up access to the Arctic. While this situation brings critical changes to regional balance, it also makes the Arctic a new frontier of great power competition. Hence, Edmund Li Sheng's *Arctic Opportunities and Challenges: China, Russia and the US Cooperation* timely examines the participation and interaction of the United States, China and Russia in Arctic affairs from an international relations perspective. Sheng, as a renowned expert on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), takes the Polar Silk Road as a crucial branch of BRI into his analysis to uncover the new geopolitical structure in the Arctic and explains how China's evident presence in the region shifts the bipolar US–Russia competition in the North into a triangular game. In order to discuss the triangle on a solid basis, he prepares the background by classifying all the regional players into four groups, and he shows the big picture devoting a chapter for each which the triangle interacts with: Core players (United States, Russia), direct players (other Arctic Council members), the semi-direct player (European Union) and extra-regional players (China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore). The theoretical framework of the book is the theory of the geopolitics and strategic triangle. While Sheng argues that China, Russia and the United States form a strategic triangle in the Arctic, as a core analytical category, he adopts a historical approach and studies the mutual relations of the great powers in the region from the Cold War period to post-Cold War period by comparing the 1970's Sino-Soviet Union-American triangle to the current interactions between China, Russia and the United States.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the triangular game in the Arctic by summarising the flow of the book: A historical perspective on competition between the great powers in the region and the theoretical framework for Sheng's research followed by his key questions: What has changed with the trend of global warming in recent decades? How is the Arctic becoming an important arena once again for the world's key economies and specifically for the US–China and Russia strategic triangle? What exactly drives China's manoeuvres in the region as an outsider? Chapter 2 is structured around the changes in the geopolitics, the legal status and the major disputes of the Arctic as a precursor to the new strategic triangle's analysis. It emphasises the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Svalbard Treaty as the two main legal instruments in the Arctic. In Chapter 3, Sheng argues that the dynamics of the Arctic can be shown as an example of the forming of a new US–China–Russia strategic triangle and gives a detailed explanation of the change in the balance of power in the Arctic with the interactions of these three powers. As a base for the discussion, the chapter starts with a section revisiting the historical China–Soviet Union–US strategic triangle of the 1970s, followed by a section exploring the trend in relations between China, the United States and Russia after the Cold War and another section discussing the new strategic triangle in the Arctic and emphasising China's game changer role in the region by positioning itself as a “near-Arctic State” and its ambition to build Polar Silk Road as a strategic extension of BRI. Chapter 4 elaborates upon the history and dynamics of the Polar Silk Road initiative and in parallel checks China's Arctic vision, the common ground shared by partners China and Russia in the region and the risks associated with Sino-Russian Arctic cooperation as an outcome of their opposing views and contradictory interests. Chapter 5 of the book gives perspectives on how the strategic significance of the Arctic to the United States is increasing by the effect of its interactions with Russia and China after prioritising the Atlantic and the Pacific within its global strategy for a long time. Chapter 6 explores how the three powers approach the challenges caused by the climate crisis in the Arctic and how this impacts the formation of the new strategic triangle. Sheng defines the Arctic climate issue as a “double-edged sword,” where on the one hand, there are key problems such as permafrost degradation and reduced food resources, but on the other hand, the opening of the Arctic shipping route presents new economic opportunities. Chapter 7 of the book focuses on the roles of China, Japan, South Korea and the European Union as extra-regional players in the Arctic game by analysing their main objectives for intervening in the region's affairs and looking at how their competition and cooperation work on issues relating to the Arctic such as climate change, environmental problems, food and energy sources and new sea routes for logistics. Chapter 8 explains the history of the Polar Silk Road proposal, how the Polar Silk Road tracks the principles of BRI through multilateral cooperation in the Arctic, China's increasing regional

cooperation in non-traditional security and the obstacles that China faces in becoming more involved in Arctic issues.

Sheng's book makes prominent contributions to polar studies. What makes it unique is the offer of a dedicated Chinese perspective on the US–China–Russia strategic triangle in the Arctic for the first time in one book. At the time of writing, it is also the first published book researching the new Arctic strategic triangle as its main topic. Sheng recommends China to seek a delicate balance through cooperation with Arctic countries, in an atmosphere where the United States sees China as its main competitor and Russia is in doubt about engaging in full cooperation with China. Sheng also portrays the Polar Silk Road as the strongest tool that China wants to expand its influence in Arctic affairs and explains how, from a Chinese perspective, placating the concerns and gaining the trust of Arctic countries about the Polar Silk Road is a must to be able to improve China's policy intervention capacity in the region. According to him, China should coordinate its Arctic relations with the US and Western allies, and despite China's diverging views with Russia, their relations in the region show promise for the future on the way to the successful development of BRI. Sheng compares China's position to those of other extra-regional players such as South Korea and Japan, describing it as "disadvantageous" since these states' international identity and relatively advanced technologies give them more favourable opportunities for participation in Arctic affairs, highlighting how this is another important consideration for China's future strategy in the region.

On the other hand, however, no doubt major powers without geographic proximity to the region will also continue to make an impact on regional decision mechanisms as a part of the globalisation trend. Accordingly, Sheng carries on this discussion drawing upon the concept of "plurilateral diplomacy," which is another contribution helping the readers understand more about the possible future policy of China in the Arctic that is supposed to have a key influence on how the Arctic strategic triangle will evolve. He builds on Corneliu Bjola's (2013) proposal of "Arctic plurilateral cooperation" and considers it a good fit for China's regional stance as an extraterritorial actor. From China's point of view, Sheng argues that plurilateralist initiatives enriched with multiple actors including governments, interest groups and NGOs can bring opportunities for China to be involved in Arctic issues and also present a convenient theoretical framework for the discussion of the Arctic strategic triangle. The International Maritime Organization, the United Nations Development Programme and the Global Environment Facility bodies are given as key examples of the Arctic plurilateralism connections.

Sheng concludes:

The Polar Silk Road is an extension of the BRI into the region around the North Pole, through which it is possible to uncover a new geopolitical structure operating in the Arctic region: With the increasingly strong presence of China in the Arctic, the bipolar competition between Russia and the United States is generally shifting into a triangular game. Just as it did in the 1970s, China is again playing the role of game changer in the bipolar competition between Russia and the United States by adding a third player into the game.

Sheng's book helps us to understand the deeper roots of competition and cooperation between the three great powers China, the United States and Russia, in the Arctic through the lens of the strategic triangle concept in international politics. Though the book, due to its publishing dates, is not able to offer an analysis of the new global balance (or imbalance) and Arctic status that has emerged since the Russian–Ukrainian War sparked in February 2022, it still opens an important window on both the Arctic strategic triangle and Chinese consideration of the Arctic.

Sheng's book is also useful in charting a historical course focusing on the earlier strategic triangle of the 1970s, which works as a strong base from which to answer questions on this era's new global and Arctic triangle. The historical analysis chapter makes a worthwhile contribution to international relations studies in covering the strategic triangle theory. A key noticeable gap is the lack of review of India and its Arctic strategy, which is not found in the book next to the other extra-regional players. It would otherwise be interesting to read at least a few lines on India's influence in the Arctic and its interaction with the new strategic triangle as a potential economic giant of the future. The scholars and students of polar affairs, international relations, international law, climatology and political economy will find much value in the book's interdisciplinary character. In summary, Sheng's study is a significant contributor to polar research as it successfully touches upon the future development of the Arctic, the Arctic strategic triangle and the role of China in the Arctic affairs.

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