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*БРИКС+ как площадка для сотрудничества в Арктике: проблемы,
перспективы и сценарии развития /*

*BRICS+ as a Platform for Cooperation in the Arctic: Challenges, Prospects,
and Development Scenarios*

Набиев Хусравхон Хурshedович

Костадинова Добромира Чавдарова

Руководитель группы:

Стрельникова Ирина Александровна

Кандидат юридических наук, доцент Департамента Зарубежного

Регионоведения, Факультет Мировой Экономики и Мировой Политики

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Since the end of the Cold War, two key narratives about China have coexisted and dominated Western political and academic discourse. First, one of the most common narratives was that China would not be able to sustain its economic growth rates for long and would soon face recession and stagnation. This is often described in the literature as the “China collapse” narrative. Second, economic liberalization was assumed to be followed by political liberalization. China was thus seen as a future element not only of a Western-centric economic system, but also of a Western-centric liberal democratic system. China was rarely perceived as a future hegemon.

The narrative of inevitable liberalization has gained ground in political and academic discourse thanks to the example of other East Asian countries. In countries such as Japan and the Republic of Korea, economic liberalization and early economic successes were followed by a process of political liberalization.

However, the forecasts did not come true. Even the Asian crisis of the late 1990s did not prevent China from improving its economic growth indicators. China's economy grew faster than all others in the world and by the end of the 2000s it had become the second largest economy after the American one. The forecasts regarding internal socio-political changes also did not come true.

At the same time there were alternative scenarios. Some authors considered alternative scenarios for the development of events around China. In particular, the founder of the theory of offensive realism, J. Mearsheimer, warned of the risk of China becoming a “giant Hong Kong.” According to his theory, all states, especially great powers, strive to constantly increase their power. Economic power can easily be converted into military power. There were also authors who predicted a potential conflict between the United States and China.

Tensions in Sino-American relations began long before the Trump presidency, around the late 1990s and early 2000s. Pressure on China, especially information pressure, also grew. US policy documents increasingly noted the growing threat from China. The economic aspect of the “Chinese threat” is based on accusations that China is pursuing “unfair” trade and economic policies.

The political aspect of the “Chinese threat,” which in this case is closely linked to the ideological one, includes narratives that criticize the political regime in China. This includes

accusations of human rights violations as well as “discriminatory” policies towards national minorities in China. In addition, China is often accused of supporting, including materially, non-democratic regimes around the world. Thus, there is an attempt to present China in an extremely negative light for the international community, contrasting its model of political governance with the Western liberal democratic model.

China thus faced a new challenge. On the one hand, China’s economic and military power had grown significantly. At the same time, China’s influence on the international agenda did not match its accumulated power. Some Chinese observers saw the main problem in the West’s continued discursive hegemony. A large amount of information, even information about China itself, was predominantly generated by Western sources.

Since the 1990s, China has placed great emphasis on strengthening its soft power, investing significant effort and resources in this direction. But this has not helped much to destroy the discourse on the Chinese threat. J. Nye's theoretical concept with Chinese characteristics has been an important part of China's foreign policy strategy for a long time.

Chinese scholars have tried to find answers to their questions in the teachings of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who devoted many of his works to the study of discourse. In particular, Foucault perceived discourse not only as a source of knowledge reproduction, but also as an instrument of power. Chinese scholars have significantly reworked Foucault’s teachings, resulting in the concept of discursive power.

First, discursive power is the “right to speak.” “The right to speak” is one of the translations of discursive power in Chinese characters — 话语权. In this case, discursive power is understood as the presence of the right to vote in the international arena. It can manifest itself through more active participation in the work of international institutions and involvement in major international political processes. Second, discursive power is a reflection of the aggregate power of a state in international discourse. According to this version of the definition, the discursive power of a state increases along with the power capabilities of the state. But at the same time, the author

himself makes a remark that the discursive power of a state may not always coincide with the aggregate power of a state. China fits exactly into this category. China's relative power, both primary (military power) and secondary (economic and technological power), has increased significantly in recent decades. But at the same time, in terms of determining the international agenda, China faces the discursive hegemony of the United States and its allies. If the balance of power on the world stage and in the global economy has changed significantly, China feels powerful information pressure in the international discourse.

According to the third version of the definition, discursive power is about the power of the media. As Zhao Kejin himself notes, the authorities began to care about the problem of the discursive influence of the Chinese media during the spread of atypical pneumonia in 2003. Since then, Chinese journalists have gained enormous influence on determining the vector of the country's information policy, many of them even began to be hired by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Fourth, discursive power is an evolution of Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power". This definition of discursive power is popular in the academic community. However, Denisov I. in his study concludes that discursive power, on the contrary, refutes J. Nye's soft power. Later, in a joint report, Denisov I. and Zuenko I. argue that discursive power in the Chinese interpretation is increasingly becoming closer to the category of hard power. Since the 1990s, the concept of soft power has begun to gain popularity in Chinese discourse. In 1993, a work by Wang Huning, a significant figure in the Chinese political system, was published. In his article, he called for more active dissemination of Chinese culture, language, and popularization of its thousand-year history. Since the early 2000s, China has begun an active policy of popularizing the Chinese language and culture in order to improve its image. An important element of this policy was the network of Confucius Institutes. They were opened all over the world. However, despite all the investments in this direction, in parallel with the growth of China's influence and power, Sinophobic sentiments were also growing in many countries. In addition, most of the educational centers financed by China in the United States were closed under the pretext of "threat to national security." Denisov I., Zuenko I., and Kashin

V. agree that the main reason for such a failure is the obvious ideological gap between Chinese and non-Chinese audiences. Foreign audiences often find the narratives promoted by China unclear.

Despite the growing differences between the concepts of discursive power and soft power, there are still many aspects where they complement each other. For example, the spread of the Chinese language provides more people with access to sources produced in China itself. This can also contribute to strengthening the discursive power of the state. In addition, despite the transition to using more offensive discursive power, China has not stopped investing in the dissemination and popularization of its culture.

According to the fifth version of the definition, discursive power is an indicator of diplomatic activity and diplomatic successes of the state. This aspect is especially relevant in the early 2010s, when the topic of abandoning the strategy of restraint and moving to a proactive foreign policy was actively discussed in Chinese political and academic discourse.

Discourse power of China also can be divided into 4 main components: political, institutional, technological and moral. This division is conditional and is primarily intended to help better navigate and correctly systematize certain Chinese discursive practices. Some of China's attempts to influence international discourse and promote strategic narratives can be attributed to several areas at once. For example, such a mega-project as the Belt and Road Initiative is directly related to all of the above areas. Even such a conditional division makes it clear that discourse power is far from being only about a special type of information policy and propaganda. Discourse is influenced not only by the prevalence of narratives or the information broadcast, but also by actions. Information, in turn, becomes a tool for interpreting actions.

Let us consider how China seeks to apply its discursive practice using two cases as examples: BRICS and the Arctic policy. BRICS is a comfortable format for China to cooperate with other countries. This platform is representative, does not force participants to take on large obligations and offers a flexible format of interaction. The representativeness of the format allows you to convey your voice to as many subjects as possible. Not only Russia, but also China is interested in the accession of more significant actors in international relations to BRICS. Another significant factor is openness. BRICS is a comfortable format for China to cooperate with other countries. This platform is representative, does not force participants to take on large obligations and offers a flexible format of interaction. BRICS inclusiveness contrasts with Western exclusive institutions.

China's Arctic policy is another example of how Beijing seeks to influence the international agenda using discursive practices. Before receiving observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013, China had been actively involved in Arctic affairs for a long time. China developed scientific, economic, and infrastructural cooperation with Arctic countries and even promoted an environmental agenda. In 2018, China released its first "white paper" on Arctic policy. In it, China designated itself as a "near-Arctic" country. This definition and all activities in the Arctic region were intended to legitimize China's presence in the region. At the same time, China's position on some contentious issues remains ambiguous. China does not comment on the status of the NSR or the NWP, as well as on territorial disputes in the region.

At the same time, China also faces discursive pressure from the West in the Arctic, which has intensified during the US-China standoff. This has led to China's Arctic cooperation with the Nordic countries and Canada declining. The pressure has manifested itself in discrediting China's Arctic policy. For example, the US has actively spread narratives that China will turn the region into the South China Sea (a region with many territorial disputes); destroys the ecology of the region. The US has also categorically rejected China's self-definition as a "near-Arctic" country, stating that there are only Arctic and non-Arctic countries. Canada and the Nordic countries have also tightened their legislation in the field of infrastructure cooperation, which has complicated China's presence in the region.

The further development of China's discursive strategy depends on many factors. China's position on the legal status of the Arctic will remain ambiguous in the medium term. Another key issue is the problem of institutional cooperation. On the one hand, the Arctic Council is an important factor legitimizing China's participation in the region due to its observer status. On the other hand, since 2022, the work of the Arctic Council has been complicated and most of the countries of this institution are negatively disposed towards China's participation in the region's affairs. Taking this into account, China has recently been developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Russia, including within the BRICS framework. China also previously promoted the Polar Silk Road initiative. However, China does not yet consider these platforms as an alternative to the Arctic Council.