

Coming into the Cold: Asia's Arctic Interests

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Introduction

This policy brief addresses questions about Arctic governance through a study of the Arctic interests of four Asian states (China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea) and how three Arctic states (USA, Russia and Norway) are meeting this increased interest. While both the more novel and longstanding Arctic interests of Asian states have been sufficiently mapped out elsewhere, the reactions of Arctic states to this rising interest have remained understudied.¹

The research findings presented here come from a project funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defense. 27 persons from policy, scientific and commercial circles in the studied Asian and Arctic states were interviewed. Official documents, scientific articles and media coverage have also been analyzed. A more detailed presentation of this research is available in an academic article published online in *Polar Geography* in July 2013.²

The Current State of the Arctic

In their Arctic strategy documents, the five Arctic coastal states all point to increased shipping traffic

and petroleum/mining activities as promising economic possibilities, and possible security and governance challenges. From a broader governance perspective, the coastal states assert the sufficiency of existing legal regimes as the basis for Arctic governance. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is now recognized by all state and non-state actors interested in Arctic developments as the basis for the Arctic's legal regime and the division of responsibilities between coastal states.

From a security perspective, the Arctic is an area of low tension. Claims and disputes are negotiated between the Arctic coastal states and are not likely to escalate into security issues. For example, Norway and Russia had overlapping claims in the Barents Sea, however an agreement was negotiated and signed in 2010. The defense establishments of the Arctic states promote peacetime confidence building measures. There are regular military exercises in the region involving two or more Arctic states, also between NATO and non-NATO member states. All of the peacetime military cooperative bi-/multilateral arrangements in the Arctic are between states. The NATO organization does not intend to increase its activity in the Arctic in peacetime and encourages cooperation between all the Arctic states. However, NATO's wartime collective defense framework is applicable for all member states, also in the High North.

The two annual multilateral military meetings that have been established to involve all Arctic states – the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable in 2011 and the high-level Northern Chiefs of Defense Meeting in 2012 – mainly discuss the soft security and military support to civilian agencies responsible for safety related matters that have become increasingly important

- 1 The Asian states' interests have been well-mapped elsewhere. Please see: Jakobson, L. and Lee S. 2013. The North East Asian States' Interests in the Arctic and Possible Cooperation with the Kingdom of Denmark. *SIPRI*. April 2013. <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/arctic/arcticpublications/NEAsia-Arctic%20130415%20full.pdf>
- Watters, S. and Tonami, A. 2012. Singapore: An Emerging Arctic Actor. In L. Heininen (Ed.), *Arctic Yearbook 2012* (pp. 105-114). Akureyri, Iceland: Northern Research Forum. http://www.arcticyearbook.com/images/Articles_2012/Tonami_and_Watters_Singapore.pdf
- 2 Solli, P.E., Wilson Rowe, E. and Yennie Lindgren, W. 2013. Coming into the cold: Asia's Arctic Interests. *Polar Geography*. 30 July 2013. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1088937X.2013.825345>

with growing levels of human activity in the Arctic Ocean.³ This emphasis on safety capabilities corresponds with recent efforts under the auspices of the Arctic Council that resulted in a new search and rescue agreement (2011) and an oil spill preparedness and response agreement (2013).⁴

The changing physical environment of the Arctic, the continued development of Arctic governance and regulations, and the prospect of new economic opportunities have contributed to a sharpened interest of non-Arctic states in regional political processes. Asian states have demonstrated an increasing attentiveness to the region, most recently through their successful applications to gain permanent observer status in the preeminent regional forum – the Arctic Council. The rising interest of non-Arctic actors, especially the most recent round of permanent observer applications to the Arctic Council, sparked wide-ranging discussion about regional governance and security, particularly in the national media and policy communities of Arctic states. What are the interests of Asian states in the Arctic and how do they relate to the current state of Arctic governance? Are there any implications for security in the Arctic region?

Arctic Interests of Asian States

China, South Korea and Japan have longstanding polar research traditions, including, for example, research stations on Svalbard, and all four Asian states analyzed have well-developed stakes and participation in development of maritime law and maritime cooperation more broadly. The maritime and polar scientific activities of all four Asian states are integrated into established international scientific and policy communities.

It is a prevailing view in Asian business and policy circles that increased commercial activity in the Arctic is likely in the long term, but there are diverging views and assessments about profitability in the short term. In general, commercial companies in Asia do not have ambitious plans in the short term and have a ‘wait-and-see’ attitude for the long-term developments. At

the same time, they want to be well-positioned for possible future opportunities. For example, the Asian states in our study all have longstanding shipping interests. Nonetheless, while our interviewees were interested in the Northern Sea Route as a shorter path between Asia and Europe, they were keenly aware of the higher investment and operating costs for operations in the Arctic. The question of commercial viability is also a factor influencing the rate of growth of other economic activities in the Arctic of potential appeal to Asian states, such as offshore petroleum drilling in the Arctic. China has shown the most concrete interest in Arctic commercial mining opportunities, which corresponds with its broader global pursuit of mineral and energy resources for its industries.

The sovereign rights of the Arctic coastal states under international law and the regional structures for cooperation and coordination seem now to be well-accepted and understood by China, Japan, South-Korea and Singapore. This can likely be attributed to these countries’ own geopolitical interests and histories of involvement in the development of international maritime law, as well as clear signals given by the Arctic states themselves about the prerequisites for participation in Arctic forums. Under the Arctic Council’s ‘Nuuk Criteria’ of 2011, non-Arctic states and other organizations (such as NGOs) have to formally recognize the Arctic states’ sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic in order to be granted permanent observer status. They also have to recognize that an extensive legal framework applies to the Arctic, including UNCLOS. Here it is important to note that UNCLOS also grants important user rights in the Arctic Ocean to non-Arctic states, such as freedom of navigation and the right to innocent passage, among others. In their applications for permanent observer status in the Arctic Council, China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore formally concurred with the Nuuk Criteria.

In terms of security concerns, the Asian states analyzed in our study primarily relate security in the Arctic context to non-traditional security concerns that are likely to have a domestic impact. They associate climate change with food security and agricultural production, and see scientific activities in the Arctic and Antarctica as valid barometers to assess global climate trends. Their domestic energy security concerns relate to market access to petroleum resources in the Arctic and safe transportation of those resources. Some of the studied Asian states expressed concern about threats to their domestic infrastructure from ice melting in the polar areas and the resulting sea-level rise. In the Arctic itself, the Asian states studied are concerned with the development of safety arrangements to serve as frameworks for their ongoing scientific activities and anticipated commercial activities.

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3 The focus areas in these meetings are: how to build a common regional situational picture, communication system challenges, common exercises, best practices in cold weather operations, establishing an overview of regional national military assets that can be employed in safety-related incidents and how to support civilian agencies in peacetime incidents. The military working level meetings enable a direct dialogue and information sharing between the military institutions. The two meetings that have appeared lately may be a temporary measure or evolve into a different format in the future.

4 There are no connections or relations between the military meetings and the Arctic Council or any other regional organization.



While the Asian states have done little to coordinate their Arctic initiatives amongst themselves, their approach to Arctic politics has included largely the same emphases. They are particularly interested in economic opportunities and environmental issues, primarily climate change and other issues that lend themselves to cooperative scientific research. In keeping with the Nuuk Criteria, these countries have outlined areas of Arctic governance where they have a demonstrable interest and capacity to contribute and political/geopolitical rhetoric was consistently absent or toned down in how these countries expressed their interests in Arctic affairs.

Reception of Asian States' Interests by Arctic States

The studied Asian states do not have a radical revisionist agenda when it comes to Arctic governance. Furthermore, permanent observers have a relatively marginal place in the formal workings of the Arctic Council. However, accepting Asian observer applications was hotly contested prior to and during the Council's ministerial meeting in Kiruna in May 2013. The divergences amongst Arctic states on the issue of observers is especially striking, given that there has been increasingly strong convergence in how Arctic states represent and discuss the region in national policy documents. While Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Finland and Sweden were openly welcoming of non-Arctic states' applications to the Arctic Council after the Nuuk ministerial in 2011, Russia and Canada were more clearly skeptical and the U.S. position was not actively communicated until the Kiruna ministerial in 2013.

The reactions of Arctic states to Asian states' Arctic interests have been marked by a number of specificities that could be contributed to specific national interests or foreign policy traditions. Canada's concerns about the 2013 group of observer applications was primarily directed towards the EU's application for observer status (particularly in light of the EU's ban on the import of seal products), as well as worries about the potential inefficiency of and the dilution of Permanent Participants' status and capacity in a broadened Arctic Council. All countries' reactions may have also been colored by broader foreign policy trends relating to how to meet China's continued global economic, political and military rise. Russia's overall foreign policy preference for smaller multilateral formats and exclusive clubs and a cautious approach to China's geopolitical rise were likely contributing factors to a less actively welcoming stance.

At the Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Kiruna in 2013, the U.S. actively supported the applications from all the Asian states to become permanent observers. Well in advance of the Kiruna ministerial,

Norway, like the other Nordic countries, also publicly promoted an inclusive policy towards China and other applicant states from Asia on the condition that they demonstrated an ability to be active contributors to the Council's work. The U.S. and other member states in the Council were also concerned about the risk of being perceived as advocates of western protectionism if the applications were declined. The Asian states put a lot of political prestige into their applications, and the candidacies were an issue of attention in national and international media.

This varied reception of Asian states' applications in the days and years leading up to the unanimous decision to approve these applications in May 2013 also speaks to some broader divergences about how Arctic governance should take shape. Our interviews with Arctic states suggests that there are important junctures ahead relating to how the Arctic Council should develop and how Arctic states place the emphasis between the Arctic's regional and global significance. Not all countries are for the often-discussed idea of the Arctic Council growing from its current 'decision shaping' status to a 'decision making' body. That the U.S. remains committed to the Arctic Council as a 'forum' and against a substantially expanded remit may have made it easier to give a pragmatic 'yes' to further observers. If the Council remains a 'forum' for coordination, the composition of the observer membership has less importance for U.S. Arctic interests. Canada and Russia, on the other hand, were concerned that a greater number of Arctic Council participants, even in the capacity of observers, could make arriving at consensus more difficult and time-consuming, particularly if the desired goal of a strengthened mandate for the Council were to be achieved.

Other interviewees suggested that the Arctic countries' reactions to the observer applications had much to do with how different Arctic states envisioned the Arctic's place in the world. How tied into global process and politics do the key Arctic states prefer to envision the region? To what extent does a more 'global' vision of the Arctic serve to weaken or strengthen the influence of the Arctic states themselves? These questions of how to represent and understand the political significance of the Arctic have direct consequences for the extent to which non-Arctic states belong in the preeminent Arctic body and also point to trends in Arctic governance that merit further study.

Summary

In their applications to become permanent observers to the Arctic Council, China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore all formally recognized the Arctic region's political and legal framework, the sovereign rights of the Arctic coastal states and other elements of governance in the Arctic Council. The Asian states mainly have scientific and commercial interests in the Arctic, and emphasize access, availability and safety. Domestic concerns influence the funding of scientific research about the impact of a changing Arctic environment, as climate change and new weather patterns can affect food production and threaten coastal infrastructure. Future commercial petroleum, shipping and mining opportunities in the Arctic are of interest in some Asian commercial and policy circles. The studied Asian states do not, however, plan on a substantial increase in their commercial activities in the Arctic in the near future, but are open for future expansion of their involvement if it is commercially viable. While China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore do not seek an active role in traditional security matters in the region, they do emphasize safety for their current and anticipated scientific and commercial operations in the Arctic. This dovetails well with an increased emphasis on safety issues in the Arctic Council over the past four years.

- 4 There were divergences among USA, Russia, Norway and other Arctic states on the issue of new permanent observers from Asia to the council. China's application was perhaps the most debated due to the country's emerging status as a major global economic power. The reactions of the eight Arctic states to Asian

states' Arctic interests have been marked by a number of specificities that can be attributed to specific national interests, for example differing approaches to China's global role or aims in other international settings, and to varied foreign policy traditions, such as preferences for small multilateral forums or concerns about efficiency. These varied reactions also speak to broader junctures ahead in terms of how the Arctic Council develops and how its strategic significance is envisioned by member states. Though the member states in the Arctic Council had different views regarding the Permanent Observer applications from Asian states, they ultimately unanimously accepted all non-Arctic state observer applications at the Kiruna Ministerial Meeting in 2013.⁵

- 5 India and Italy was also accepted as Permanent Observers in addition to China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Several organizations also applied, but none of them were accepted at the Kiruna meeting. The EU application for observer status was deferred until Canada's reservations are resolved, and if so the Arctic Council can grant the EU the status of Permanent Observer without a new consideration in the next ministerial meeting.



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