



Involvement of 'Outsiders' in the Arctic Region

Aliyeva Incha

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Abstract: Since ancient times people have had access to the Arctic Circle, however, the last few decades have seen recent technological advancements that have allowed the area to be explored more comprehensively. This has created a significantly more complex picture than before as it has been called the new “Great Game.” With the rising interests of eight nations and other non-Arctic countries in the region, overlapping territorial claims have the potential to create new challenges. It is anticipated that increased interest will lead to an increase in the number of vessels transiting the region, despite harsh climate conditions. Meanwhile, the Arctic is experiencing environmental change that is inescapably leading to a new geopolitical reality. Authors, such as Jason Dittmer, have claimed that “The Arctic is evolving from a regional frozen backwater into a global hot issue.”¹ This article discusses the colliding interests and current state of affairs of the three Arctic Council Asian observer countries, China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as those of two observer organizations, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the European Union (EU). Sustainability is one of the major priorities of these countries, which has been reflected in their Arctic policies. The reason for examining China, Japan, and South Korea is that they are growing superpowers and industrialized countries with varying interests in regards to the Arctic region.

¹ Jason Dittmer, Sami Moisiö, Alan Ingram, and Klaus Dodds, “Have You Heard the One About the Disappearing Ice? Recasting Arctic Geopolitics,” *Political Geography* vol. 30, Issue 4, (May 2011): pp. 202-214, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.04.002>.

The changing climate has brought the Arctic region to the attention of the international political community, as disappearing polar ice alters the region's physical map, creating new environmental and international security concerns. According to satellite observations from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA), the map of Arctic sea ice has been shrinking at a rate of 13.3 percent per decade between 1981 and 2010.² This has led to states far beyond the polar circle becoming increasingly engaged and interested in the region for both its role in climate change research, and its new economic opportunities. For example, melting ice has opened up new maritime routes of interest. A number of countries are building up new action plans and allocating considerable funds in order to broaden national research schemes in the Arctic. There are also overlapping interests of the world's major political players in the region. The main allures for non-Arctic players in the Arctic region are resources such as rare earth elements, diamonds, hydrocarbons, fish, timber, and shipping routes. According to the United States Geological Survey (USGS) report conducted in 2008, there are more than 400 hydrocarbon fields in the Arctic Circle, which is equal to approximately 240 billion barrels of oil and natural gas. This accounts for approximately 10 percent of the world's undiscovered fossil fuels.³ However, the lack of technological advancements and existing harsh conditions create challenges for further exploration in the interim.

In the meantime, new shipping routes are opening as the Arctic ice melts, which will substantially reduce the maritime distances between Europe and Asia. This will also provide strategic alternatives to other countries such as Japan. Japan would have an interest in Arctic access owing to its current dependence on shipping through the Strait of Malacca for most of its energy supplies.⁴ It has been suggested that, if navigable, the Northwest Passage would shorten the route between Asia and the East Coast of the United States by 7,000 km as opposed to the current route via the Panama Canal, while the Northern Sea Route would entail a 40 percent distance savings on the transit between Northern Europe and Northeast Asia, as compared with travelling via the Suez or Panama

² NASA, "Arctic Sea Ice Maximum Annual Extent Is Lowest On Record," 2015, <https://www.nasa.gov/content/goddard/2015-arctic-sea-ice-maximum-annual-extent-is-lowest-on-record>.

³ Ronald R. Charpentier and Timothy R. Klett, "Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle," USGS science for a changing world, 2008, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf>.

⁴ Charles K. Ebinger and Evie Zambetakis, "The geopolitics of the Arctic melt," *International Affairs* 6 (85): 1215–1232, 2009.

Canals.⁵ Despite substantially shorter distances, which showcase chances for the developing worldwide freight market, this does not depict the entire picture. It is for this reason that, although sea ice has melted considerably to give greater access to these shipping routes, ice will remain the primary obstacle for transportation. In addition, ice-resilient ships, necessary for Arctic conditions, are more costly to produce and utilize greater fuel than freighters commonly used elsewhere in the world.

The Arctic Council (AC) is the world's primary multilateral forum regarding the Arctic region and focuses on an array of Arctic issues, with the exception of defence and security.⁶ The Arctic Council was established in 1996 under the Ottawa Declaration as outlined by the eight Arctic countries who make up its members.⁷ The Arctic is also regulated by international law under the auspice of the UN.

One of the success stories of multilateral cooperation in the Arctic is the 'Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean.' The agreement was signed in 2018 and entered into force on June 25, 2021. Signatories included the 10 participants, Canada, the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Denmark (in respect of the Faroe Islands and Greenland), the European Union, Iceland, Japan, the Kingdom of Norway, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, and the United States of America. The main objectives of the Agreement are the prevention of unregulated fishing in the high seas portion of the central Arctic Ocean and the facilitation of joint scientific research and monitoring.⁸

Considering the fact that going forward the Arctic region will have more political, economic, and environmental importance in the world, it is worth highlighting the current state of affairs in the region. This essay will try to focus on state and non-actors, which have interests apart from AC members.

⁵ Clive H. Schofield and Tavis Potts, "Current Legal Developments: The Arctic," *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 1 (23): 151-176, 2008.

⁶ Luke Coffey, "NATO in the Arctic: Challenges and Opportunities," The Heritage Foundation, 2015. <https://www.heritage.org/trade/report/nato-the-arctic-challenges-and-opportunities>.

⁷ Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States.

⁸ US Department of State, "The Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean Enters into Force," Media note, US Department of State, October, June 25, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/the-agreement-to-prevent-unregulated-high-seas-fisheries-in-the-central-arctic-ocean-enters-into-force/>

Arctic Council Observer States

China

In recent years, there has been increased business interest in the hydrocarbon potential of the Arctic even in the face of a complex mosaic of challenges and constraints.⁹ In the last several decades, involvement in Arctic scientific research has become a distinct feature of Asian states' foreign policy,¹⁰ especially after gaining observer status in the AC.

China has been aiming to cultivate a strong position in the Arctic as ice levels continue to deteriorate. China issued its first Arctic Policy strategy in 2018 and the state self-identifies as a "Near Arctic State." China's official engagement with the Arctic began with the signing of the Svalbard Treaty in 1925, albeit under the Republic of China and prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.¹¹ In China's Arctic Policy, it states that it aims to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic, so as to safeguard the common interests of all countries in the Arctic, and promote the sustainable development of the Arctic. Protecting the Arctic environment, addressing climate change, and utilizing resources rationally are the core objectives of the Policy.¹² China's recent strategy to reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2060 and achieve a net zero target can be in line with the sustainability statement outlined in the policy. The interconnections between Arctic climate science and China's own climate were presented as an argument for China's legitimate participation in Arctic governance.¹³ China's achievement of observer status in the AC in 2013 can be interpreted as an unspoken acceptance of Beijing's Arctic expansion, keeping in mind, however, that it was not a popular decision among all states at the time. At the same time, bilateral relationship building with each AC member has enabled China to begin its work solving economic issues in regional policy.¹⁴ China's

⁹ Steffen Weber and Iulian Romanyshyn, "Breaking the ice: The European Union and the Arctic," *International Journal*, Sage Publications 66 (4): 849-860, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070201106600413>.

¹⁰ Svetlana Krivokhizh and Nadezhda Filimonova, "How Asian Countries Are Making Their Way Into the Arctic," *The Diplomat*, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/how-asian-countries-are-making-their-way-into-the-arctic/>.

¹¹ Aki Tonami, *Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹² See note 10.

¹³ Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen and Vincent Gallucci, "The Return of China, Post-Cold War Russia, and the Arctic: Changes on land and at sea," *Marine Policy* (72): 240-245, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.04.034>.

¹⁴ Arthur Guschin, "Understanding China's Arctic," – *The Diplomat* (for *The Diplomat*, 2013), <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/understanding-chinas-arctic-policies/>.

presence has been increasing in the Arctic, although this presence is under the pretence of a concern as a neighbouring country to the region.

In 2013, Iceland raised its status in Arctic policy debates by hosting the Arctic Circle Assembly, during which special attention was given to Asia Pacific actors: China, India, South Korea, and Singapore.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Iceland was the first European country to have a free trade agreement with China in 2013. Under the China-Iceland FTA, tariffs on most goods were eliminated. Iceland will exclude some goods from tariff-free trade, for example, dairy and meat products, while China will exclude certain products made of paper. The main objectives of the agreement are to encourage expansion and diversification of trade between the Parties, promote conditions of fair competition in the free trade area, and establish a framework for further bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation to expand and enhance the benefits of this Agreement.¹⁶ It is also worth mentioning that China became an Arctic observer country within the AC one month after the adoption of this trade agreement. The 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) is advancing the practice of the Malacca Strait and Suez Canal linking to Europe and land connection over Central Asia to Europe and the Middle East. China's Polar Silk Road initiative, unveiled in 2018 as a component of the BRI global strategy, aims to develop Arctic shipping routes. Shipping via the Arctic would cut about 6,400 kilometres, equating to saving two weeks of travel between Northern Europe and Shanghai. Seeking to prove the route's viability, in August 2013 Chinese researchers completed their first 30,000-kilometer journey between Iceland and Shanghai.¹⁷ Possible new Arctic sea lanes along the Northern Sea Route (north of Russia, historically known in the West as the Northeast Passage), the Northwest Passage (north of Alaska and Canada), or a Transpolar route are therefore the alternatives that great powers can entertain, for strategic hedging and experimenting.¹⁸

¹⁵ Arthur Guschin, "China, Iceland and the Arctic," – The Diplomat (for The Diplomat, May 20, 2015), <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-iceland-and-the-arctic/>.

¹⁶ Laine Škoba, "China Iceland Free Trade Agreement," Library of the European Parliament, September 12, 2013, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130631/LDM_BRI\(2013\)130631_REV1_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130631/LDM_BRI(2013)130631_REV1_EN.pdf).

¹⁷ Andrew Trotman, "Iceland first European country to sign free trade agreement with China," The Telegraph, April 13, 2013. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/9995525/Iceland-first-European-country-to-sign-free-trade-agreement-with-China.html>

¹⁸ See note 13.

Increasing Chinese interests can also be observed in Greenland. Although the Danish government declined an offer from Chinese mining company General Nice Group to purchase an abandoned marine mine as not to endanger relations with the US, Greenland still has hopes to allure foreign investment from China and other countries to boost its economy.¹⁹ A similar situation occurred in 2019, when the China Communications Construction Company bid to build an airport in Greenland. The growing Chinese presence concerned officials in Copenhagen and Washington, and eventually China had to withdraw the bid.

Arctic ties with Moscow will be another challenge for China, since, to Beijing, all roads to the far north (figuratively and at times literally) run through Russia.²⁰ Beijing has partnership ties with Moscow in numerous projects, especially after the Crimea crisis and China's increased position in the Russian political and economic sphere as a result of imposed Western sanctions on Russia, which narrowed investment routes. One of the recent projects is the Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project. After the imposition of Western sanctions, Russia has been trying to raise financial support for the project. In April 2016, the Export-Import Bank of China and China Development Bank signed two 15-year loans, for 9.34 billion euros (10.7 billion US dollars) and 9.76 billion euros (1.5 billion US dollars), according to regulatory statements from Yamal LNG. For the Kremlin, the \$27 billion Yamal LNG project has become symbolic of Russia's ability to execute large deals in spite of Western sanctions.²¹ However, Sino-Russia relations are not without the absence of tension. The Russian government worries that the short-term assistance China is providing on the Northern Sea Route may open the way for Beijing to dominate that increasingly ice-free passage.²²

China is the largest consumer and importer of energy resources in the world, but its vast geographical distance from the Arctic limits Beijing's opportunity, at least in contrast to Arctic Council members, to set the

¹⁹ Erik Matzen, "Denmark spurned Chinese offer for Greenland base over security – sources," Reuters, April 6, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-denmark-china-greenland-base-idUKKBN1782E2>.

²⁰ Marc Lanteigne, "'Have you entered the storehouses of the snow?' China as a norm entrepreneur in the Arctic," *Polar Record* 53 (2017): 117-130, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/polar-record/article/have-you-entered-the-storehouses-of-the-snow-china-as-a-norm-entrepreneur-in-the-arctic/400E24FB4EB6B68ADC5D72032AD65AFA>.

²¹ Jack Farthy, "Chinese lend \$12bn for gas plant in Russian Arctic," Financial Times, April 30, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/4ca8886e-0e14-11e6-ad80-67655613c2d6>.

²² Paul Goble, "China Helping Russia on Northern Sea Route Now but Ready to Push Moscow Aside Later," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 18 Issue 73 (May 6, 2021). <https://jamestown.org/program/china-helping-russia-on-northern-sea-route-now-but-ready-to-push-moscow-aside-later/>.

agenda and form a strategy for taking advantage of the new Arctic.²³ China started its scientific initiatives in the Arctic in the early 1900s with the signing of the Svalbard Treaty in 1925. The Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Expedition Committee (CAA) was established in 1981 with the main function being to organize Arctic and Antarctic expeditions and administer the related Arctic and Antarctic affairs.²⁴ The first Chinese research base in the Arctic, the Arctic Yellow River Station, was launched on Svalbard Island, Norway in 2004. It is the only Chinese center in the Arctic. This station is managed by the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC), which is based in Shanghai and overall has four polar research stations operated by the PRIC. Between 1985 and 2012, Beijing initiated five Arctic and 28 Antarctic expeditions.²⁵ One of these initiatives is the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, established by 10 Member institutes – six Nordic and four Chinese – and aims to provide a platform for academic cooperation, to increase awareness, understanding, and knowledge of the Arctic and its global impacts, as well as to promote cooperation for sustainable development of the Nordic Arctic and coherent development of China in a global context. The main interest areas of the center include climate change, economic partnerships, and Arctic policy-making.

In December 2016 the Chinese government announced the construction of its icebreaking ship - Xue Long 2, in Shanghai, which was completed in 2019. Up until now, China has managed to complete construction on two icebreakers and a third is on the way, which is expected to be completed by 2025. These polar icebreakers operate as civilian vessels under the PRIC.²⁶

Militarization of the Arctic, mainly in the form of military exercises, has been increasing under the lead of Arctic states. However, in recent years, China's Arctic aspirations have grown alongside its military presence in the Arctic. China has dispatched naval vessels to the Arctic on two occasions, including to Alaska and later to Denmark, Sweden, and Finland for goodwill visits.²⁷ China also dispatched the Chinese icebreaker Snow Dragon

²³ See note 14.

²⁴ Polar Research Institute of China, <https://www.polar.org.cn/en/index/>.

²⁵ See note 22.

²⁶ Atle Staalesen, "China's new icebreaker completes first Arctic expedition," The Barents Observer, September 29, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2020/09/chinas-new-icebreaker-completes-first-arctic-mission>,

²⁷ Rushi Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang and Gaoqi Zhang, "Northern Expedition: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions," The Brookings Institution, April, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FP_20210412_china_arctic.pdf

2, on a maiden voyage to gather sediment cores in the Arctic Ocean, and Beijing-based Cosco has been sending vessels through the Northern Sea Route each year as part of its Polar Silk Road initiative with Russia. Some in the West suspect that these scientific and commercial pursuits could lead to espionage or military activity.²⁸

China is building two spatially inconsistent but ultimately mutually reinforcing narratives to earn legitimacy as a regional stakeholder with states both inside and outside the Arctic. In the country's more territorial narrative, Chinese officials recognise the continuing salience of territory in the circumpolar north and draw attention to China's relatively northern latitudes, proximity to the Arctic's natural resources, and vulnerability to climate change, which their scientists research through state-funded expeditions. In the more globalist narrative, Chinese officials put forth a vision of the Arctic as a maritime global commons where climate change has environmental implications for the entire planet.²⁹ In both narratives, which support each other, China tries to develop its legality as a stakeholder in the region with the regional actors.

South Korea

Another country with an aspirational Arctic Policy is South Korea. South Korea became an Arctic Council observer country in 2013, and following that launched its first "Arctic Policy Master Plan." In 2018, South Korea adopted its first "2050 Polar Vision Statement" aiming to highlight Polar areas for their vitality, to be part of their national development, and also to showcase South Korea's commitment to addressing challenges within the scope of international cooperation.³⁰ The Arctic states have much to gain from engaging this high technology, research intensive, and innovative nation. South Korea can provide much needed Arctic technology like ice class ships and investments in resource extraction.³¹ In addition, for South Korea, a country dependent on imported energy, the potentially-reduced prices for Arctic oil and gas shipped to East Asia by the Northern Sea Route

²⁸ Alec Luhn, "Freezing Cold War: Militaries Move in as Arctic Ice Retreats – Photo Essay," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/16/arctic-ice-retreats-climate-us-russian-canadian-chinese-military>

²⁹ Mia M. Bennett, "How China Sees the Arctic: Reading Between Extraregional and Intraregional Narratives," *Geopolitics* 20, (2015): 645-668, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1017757>.

³⁰ "Policy Framework for the Promotion of Arctic Activities of the Republic of Korea 2018-2022," Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries of the Republic of Korea, December, 2019, <http://www.koreapolarportal.or.kr/data/etc/vision2050.pdf>.

³¹ Martin Kossa, "World Policy: South Korea's Positioning in the Arctic," *World Policy*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2015/09/30/south-korea%E2%80%99s-positioning-arctic>.

(NSR) are promising.³² Economic expectations in the Arctic, which have become more viable as a result of climate change, have attracted South Korea, a nation driven by trade and a great seeker of natural resources.³³

The start of South Korea's scientific research on the Arctic can be found in the project Basic Investigation Research for Arctic Research and Development, carried out by the Polar Research department of the Korea Ocean Research and Development Institute, which belonged to the then Ministry of Science and Technology in 1993.³⁴ Later, in 2004, the Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI) became a major player and is a member of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC). In 2021, KOPRI hosted the 26th International Symposium on Polar Sciences (ISPS2021). That same year, the Icebreaker Research Vessel (IBRV) Araon completed its 85-day trip to the North Pole, which has been operational since 2010.³⁵

In 2013 Seoul announced "The Korean Arctic Master Plan," pointing to 31 tasks finished between 2013 and 2017. The tasks covered issues in international cooperation, scientific research, and business fields. Under this Master Plan, more than half of the aimed projects were completed including explorations and research related visits. Following the Plan, the Policy Framework for the Promotion of Arctic Activities of the Republic of Korea 2018-2022 has been launched. In the Policy framework four major strategic directions have been identified, mainly focusing on economic cooperation, contribution to research, and capacity building. Accordingly, South Korea actively participates in the Arctic Council's subsidiary bodies by sending experts to various Working Group and Task Force meetings to observe and keep up to date on Arctic Council developments. This is done through the Korea Arctic Experts Network (KAEN), which was created in 2014 as a mechanism for cooperation and coordination among South Korean Arctic experts.³⁶

³² International Security Advisory Board, "Report on Arctic Policy," United States Department of State, September 21, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/262585.pdf>.

³³ Ha Yeong-Seok and Jung Soo Seo, "The Northern Sea Routes and Korea's Trade with Europe: Implications for Korea's Shipping Industry," *International Journal of e-Navigation and Maritime Economy* 1, (2014): 73-84, . <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enavi.2014.12.007>.

³⁴ Seo Won-sang, Jin Dongmin, and Lee Seokwoo, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," *Ocean and Coastal Law Journal* 22 1, (2017): 85-96, https://digitalcommons.maine.gov/oclj/vol22/iss1/7/?utm_source=digitalcommons.maine.gov%2Foclj%2Fvol22%2Fiss1%2F7&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

³⁵ Minj Choi, "South Korea's icebreaker 'Araon' returns from expedition to North Pole," *Arirang*, October 18, 2021, http://www.arirang.com/News/News_View.asp?nseq=285560.

³⁶ Korea Maritime Institute, "Arctic and International Relations Series," Washington: Canadian Studies Center, Accessed October 29, 2021, http://library.arcticportal.org/1902/1/Arctic_Policy_of_the_Republic_of_Korea.pdf.

Japan

Japan was one of the key figures in developing the Kyoto Protocol, through which the global community reacted to climate change and other environmental issues. The Kyoto Protocol was not as successful as intended, however, it paved a path towards more comprehensive measures, especially after ratifying the Paris Agreement. The Japanese government adopted measures aimed at drastically cutting emissions, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050 within Japan's Plan for Global Warming Countermeasures and the Government Action Plan, adoption of "Innovative Environmental Innovation Strategy" in 2020, achieving carbon neutrality, and initiating the Asia Energy Transition Initiative (AETI). Japan's first involvement in the Arctic started in the 1960s – by conducting observations on the Arctic environment and climate change. Japan's contributions to Arctic Research have been considerable.

The first freighter to sail from Europe to Japan via the Arctic Sea Route arrived in 2012. In the same year, a Japanese research organization announced that the extent of sea-ice in the Arctic Ocean was the smallest in recorded history. These alarming signals made states come together in order to conserve and act to protect vulnerable Arctic ecosystems. Japan was also one of the five Asian countries to gain observer status on the AC. Following similar footsteps, as other observer countries, the Japanese government in 2013 adopted the Basic Plan on Ocean Policy. The strategy's focus areas were to pursue research, international cooperation, and inspection of Arctic sea routes. Following that, Japan's first Arctic Policy document was issued in 2015. Japan's Arctic Policy outlined environmental issues, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, ensuring the rule of law, and international cooperation surrounding Arctic sea routes.³⁷ Since the first Policy has been issued, there have not been any policy updates.

In recent years, it has become clear that the climate and weather of Japan are being influenced by changes in the Arctic environment.³⁸ The Japanese government has pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions by more than 25 percent compared to 2005 levels in the next 15 years. Climate change emanating from the Arctic is a major

³⁷ "Japan's Arctic Policy," October 16, 2015, https://www8.cao.go.jp/ocean/english/arctic/pdf/japans_ap_e.pdf.

³⁸ See note above.

issue for Japanese leadership.³⁹ After the Fukushima disaster,⁴⁰ there were vast changes in nuclear power production, with it drastically dropping to six percent of national energy production in a ten year period, due to the inactivity of the majority of reactors. Consequently, Japan now relies heavily on liquid natural gas (LNG) imports. Along with other LNG sources, in 2013, the Government of Greenland awarded Japan Oil, Gas, and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC) the right to develop an oil field off the coast of Greenland. It has since teamed up with Mitsui Oil, Inpex Jx, and GreenPeX to explore two blocks of 5,000 square kilometres of Arctic territory.⁴¹

According to Kazuko Shiraishi, the Japanese Ambassador to the Arctic in 2017, “At present Japan has no existing projects focused on Arctic resources other than on oil and gas and no interests in any specific project involving natural resources in the Arctic. Developing this energy source in the Arctic Circle is an important part of that strategy as well.”⁴² In the meantime, apart from resource minerals, Japan is involved in other economic projects. For instance, a new fiber optic cable connecting Japan with Europe via the Arctic would significantly speed up telecommunications between Europe and Asia.⁴³ Overall, Japan's interests in the Arctic can be classified as preserving the status-quo in the region through cooperation, communication, and sustainable economic engagement.

Role of Non-State Actors

The Arctic Council has 13 intergovernmental observers. Two UN bodies have observer status in the AC: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

⁴⁴ UNEP is a main UN organ in the area of the environment, helping states to approach global, regional, and national environmental issues. It was granted intergovernmental observer status in 1998. The focus of this

³⁹ Andrew Chater, “WHAT IS JAPAN’S ARCTIC INTEREST,” The Polar Connection: Polar Research and Policy Initiative, December 6, 2016, <http://polarconnection.org/japan-arctic-interest/>.

⁴⁰ The Fukushima nuclear disaster happened in 2011, as a result of an earthquake and the subsequent tsunami.

⁴¹ Arctic Institute, “AC Observer: Japan,” The Arctic Institute, n.d. Accessed May 16, 2017 <http://www.thearcticinstitute.org/countries/japan/>

⁴² Joseph Hammond, “Interview with Japan's Arctic Ambassador. Kazuko Shiraishi on Japan’s approach to the Arctic region,” - The Diplomat, March 8, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/interview-with-japans-arctic-ambassador/>.

⁴³ See note 39.

⁴⁴ The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) was established by GA res. 2997 (XXVII) (1972) following the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment.

section will be on Arctic related activities of the UNEP. These activities include the Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative (AMBI) 2014, which involves workshops and sides events, focusing on awareness raising initiatives, meetings examining emerging issues, aiming to support conservation of different bird species, and the TEEB-Arctic Scoping Study, with the collaboration of World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) made a first step towards mainstreaming Arctic biodiversity and ecosystem services into policy and decision-making processes. These policy topics include economic development, land use, climate change, and fisheries or wildlife management of the Arctic.⁴⁵

The UNEP Year Book is an annual evaluation of major environmental challenges from throughout the year, which started in 2003. The most recent editions that include Arctic evaluations are the 2013 and 2014 editions. In both editions, dramatic consequences of ice melt, climate change, increase of CO₂ emissions, and increase in sea acidification were all highlighted and compared. Furthermore, the combination of rapid environmental transformation and the rush for resources in a previously remote region raises important geopolitical issues that are likely to have ramifications far beyond the Arctic.⁴⁶

As it states in the Indigenous Peoples Policy Guidance (IPPG) of the UNEP, environmental studies show that some Indigenous Peoples are severely exposed to hazardous environmental contaminants in the Arctic and the Amazon, including persistent organic pollutants and heavy metals as a consequence of the traditional food chains being polluted by Persistent Organic Pollutants or water streams by mercury pollution.⁴⁷ It also says that Indigenous People's traditional practices and knowledge can be a valuable contribution to the mitigation process on an international level. This can be achieved by recognizing Indigenous rights and their ability to hold

⁴⁵ UNEP, "Report of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) submitted to the 14th session of the UN-Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues," 2015, [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/13726/UNEP%20\(1\).pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/13726/UNEP%20(1).pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

⁴⁶ "UNEP Year Book 2013: Emerging issues in our global environment." Nairobi: UNEP. 2013. <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/8222>.

⁴⁷ "UNEP and Indigenous Peoples: A Partnership in Caring for the Environment," Policy Guidance, November 2012, https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/11202/UNEP_Indigenous_Peoples_Policy_Guidance_endorsed_by_SMT_26_1_12.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

decision-making power in institutions, and acknowledging Indigenous Knowledge in resource and land-management practices.⁴⁸

Coping with climate change and security challenges, as well as preserving biodiversity, is an integral part of the strategy of the European Union (EU). In this regard, the EU adopted several policies and strategies in the last decade in order to increase EU engagement in the High North. As it was mentioned in “An Integrated European Union Policy for the Arctic” in 2016, the EU policy in the Arctic region should reflect more closely the Sustainable Development Goals that the EU has committed to achieving by 2030.⁴⁹

The EU has three Arctic Council States among its members (Finland, Sweden, and Denmark/Greenland) and is a major destination and receiver of resources and goods from the Arctic region.⁵⁰ It should be noted, however, that Iceland and Norway are committed to many EU regulations through the European Economic Area Agreement (EEA).⁵¹ In addition to this, seven other EU countries have observer status on the AC. Nonetheless, when it comes to the Arctic Council observer status of the EU, Canada (because of the EU’s position against the seal trade) and Russia have traditionally been opposed to EU membership of any form.⁵² This caused two rejections in 2008 and 2011, however, when tensions dissipated between Canada and the EU, Russia was the primary obstacle because of political challenges between the two, particularly EU sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine crisis and other clashing geopolitical interests. At the Kiruna Ministerial Meeting in 2013, the Arctic Council received the EU’s application for Observer status affirmatively, but deferred a final decision. Albeit, it did grant the EU the right to observe the AC meetings as an “observer in principle.”⁵³ Following the adoption of the “Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean,” where the EU is one of the parties, has also put forward a proposal of banning any tapping of new oil, coal, and gas deposits in the

⁴⁸ Shaughn Coggins and James D. Ford, “Indigenous Peoples and Climate Justice in the Arctic,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, February 23, 2021, <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2021/02/23/indigenous-peoples-and-climate-justice-in-the-arctic/>.

⁴⁹ European Parliament, EU Policy Report, “The Integrated European Union Policy for the Arctic,” 2016.

⁵⁰ Osman B. Askin, “The High North: Emerging Challenges And Opportunities. NATO: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE,” 2015.

⁵¹ Kamrul Hossain, “EU Engagement in the Arctic: Do the Policy Responses from the Arctic States Recognise the EU as a Legitimate Stakeholder?” *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, Nordic Open Access Scholarly Publishing – NOASP 6, 2 (November, 2015): 89-110, <https://doi.org/10.17585/arctic.v6.97>.

⁵² Luke Coffey, “No European Union Membership in the Arctic Council,” *The Heritage Foundation*, No. 3894, April 5, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/europe/report/no-european-union-membership-the-arctic-council>.

⁵³ See note 52.

Arctic. This might lead to the development of critical moments, as Russia which is currently holding the Arctic Chairmanship, is not in line with this proposal.

Starting in 2008, the EU's policy engagement was active in the Arctic. There were a number of resolutions adopted, such as in 2008 on 'Arctic Governance,' in 2011 on 'A Sustainable EU Policy for the High North,' in 2014 on 'An EU Strategy for the Arctic,' and in 2016 on 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - Integrated European Union policy for the Arctic.' These were mostly providing policy recommendations on climate change mitigation, Indigenous People's rights, sustainable development, and safety of navigation in the Arctic. According to the last Joint Communication (JC) issued in October of 2021, the EU sees climate change as a major threat to Arctic sovereignty. Therefore promoting science, innovation, and research for the benefit of the Arctic is at the heart of the EU policy and actions. Consequently, integrating the Arctic into the EU Green Deal is seen as a necessity. Meanwhile, the JC did not exclude the EU's response from the political, economic, and security challenges in the Arctic. As it is stated in the JC, the EU aims to strengthen sustainable relationships with its partners in the region, stimulate the welfare of Indigenous peoples, as well as support innovative green transition. It also stated that "building on the partial moratoriums on hydrocarbons exploration in the Arctic (in parts of the US, Canada, and Greenland) the EU is committed to ensuring that oil, coal, and gas stay in the ground, including in Arctic regions."⁵⁴ In response, Russian President Vladimir Putin said, "this decision will lead to the rise of the prices, which does not do much harm, eventually we will stop extracting, but we will get, in pricing everything, what we wanted."⁵⁵ Currently, the EU's energy dependence on Russia is considerably high. This dependency will soon be followed by the launch of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, an offshore gas pipeline running under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany, which some critics have said might allow Russia to have more say on European politics.

⁵⁴ European Commission, "Joint Communication to The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee of The Regions," October 13, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2_en_act_part1_v7.pdf.

⁵⁵ "Евросоюз будет добиваться запрета на разведку нефти и газа в Арктике." Golos Ameriki. October 13, 2021. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/eu-to-see-ban-on-oil-and-gas-exploration-in-the-arctics/6269150.html>

Examples of the EU's regional cooperation in the area include the EU's membership of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Northern Dimension policy. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council is a forum for intergovernmental cooperation on sustainable development in the Barents Region, with Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the European Commission as members. The Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region is a parliamentary body comprising delegations appointed by the national parliaments of the Arctic States and the European Parliament.⁵⁶ Interestingly, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council has not formalised its presence in the Arctic Council.⁵⁷ The European Union and the high north share a wide range of linkages and such interdependence could be mutually beneficial.⁵⁸

Conclusion

In order to enhance visibility and expertise in the region, the above-mentioned Asian countries, China, Japan, and South Korea, are developing various educational and research programmes, as well as organizing and hosting different events on Arctic issues. Through soft power incentives stakeholders hope to gauge their economic and security possibilities.

Projections say that the Arctic's ice free summers are imminent; the area may become sea ice-free by 2035.⁵⁹ While similar predictions going forward might put Earth into a vulnerable position, including experiencing extreme weather conditions, floods, and extinction of species, some global leaders foresee an opportunity to secure their economic and political interests in the Arctic.

Taking into account all the clashing interests, it can be assumed that access to the Arctic for these players is not far away, especially with technological advancements. Cooperation and challenges in the Arctic are

⁵⁶ See note 53.

⁵⁷ Vladimir Vasiliev, "The Arctic Council: A Tool for Regional Development and Policy-Shaping," Arctic Yearbook 2016, <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2016/2016-commentaries/190-the-arctic-council-a-tool-for-regional-development-and-policy-shaping>.

⁵⁸ Steffen Weber and Iulian Romanyshyn, "Breaking the ice: The European Union and the Arctic," International Journal. Sage Publications 66, 4, (2011): 849-860, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070201106600413>.

⁵⁹ Alejandra Borunda, "Arctic summer sea ice could disappear as early as 2035," National Geographic, August 13, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/arctic-summer-sea-ice-could-be-gone-by-2035>.

multifaceted and should not be managed single handedly, but rather jointly. In all circumstances, Arctic sovereignty should always be a priority in order to avoid concerns for the future generation.

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