Policy Recommendations

- Recognize that Asian states, particularly Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, are mainly interested in the economic aspect of the Arctic, but utilize their willingness to promote scientific cooperation for the sustainable development of the Arctic.

- Encourage intra-Asia cooperation on the Arctic, especially the three East Asian states—China, Japan, and South Korea—to develop ports and necessary infrastructure to make the Northern Sea Route (NSR) a functioning reality.

- Make the Arctic Council a place for Asian states to meet and discuss informally any Arctic cooperation among themselves, setting historical grievances, territorial disputes, and mutual suspicions aside.
Japan

In 1925, Japan became one of the 14 high contracting parties to the Spitsbergen Treaty, which recognizes the sovereignty of Norway over the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard. Japan has been one of the few non-Western states to conduct polar research, doing so since 1957, although mainly focusing on Antarctica. In 1990, Japan formally joined the Arctic research community by becoming a member of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) as a non-Arctic state. In the same year, the Centre for Arctic Research at the National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR) was established in Japan.

According to the Japanese government, Japan’s primary aim of engagement in the Arctic has been and remains understanding and protecting the Arctic environment. As the negative impacts of climate change to the Arctic’s natural environment have become more apparent, policies related to scientific research in the Arctic have been given higher priority. Since May 2011, the nation-wide Arctic research project on climate change has been running, seeking to integrate the various strands of Japan’s scientific research related to the Arctic. In addition, since Japan made the decision to place a higher priority on becoming a permanent observer of the Arctic Council, the Arctic has gained a certain level of political momentum, and the Arctic policies of Japan have started to gather pace and shape. Just before the Arctic Council’s decision to welcome six states, including Japan, as permanent observers (May 2013), an Arctic ambassador was assigned by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (March 2013), and the Arctic was included in the central government’s new Basic Plan on Ocean Policy (April 2013).

This was due to a stronger lobby from the Ocean Policy Research Foundation (OPRF), a think tank and lobbying organization for the Japanese shipping industry and related manufacturing industries. It has conducted several research projects on the Arctic, especially regarding the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Based on the new Basic Plan, a new inter-ministerial committee on the Arctic (Liaison Committee among Ministries and Agencies on Various Issues Related to the Arctic) was set up in July 2013. One of the more proactive, mainstream ministries of Japan, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT), conducted a small project to study the practical legal implications of using the NSR along the Russian coast in view of developing the sea route further. In January 2014, the OPRF started a new project together with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and MLIT to specifically consider the construction of a new icebreaker for Arctic observation.

South Korea

Given its relatively recent entry into Arctic-related activities, South Korea has achieved a lot in its pursuit of further engagement in the Arctic. Similar to Japan, South Korea’s polar activities have primarily centered on Antarctica, beginning in the late 1970s. South Korea’s engagement in the Arctic began with a preliminary scientific study on the Arctic between 1993 and 1995. It was only in 2002 that South Korea became a full member of IASC and opened its first research station in Svalbard. In 2009, the research vessel Araron was launched and former president Lee Myung-Bak visited Greenland and Norway in September 2012. In the policy arena, South Korea identified the Arctic as a priority before the Arctic Council’s decision to grant it observer status. The newly elected president Park Geun-Hye announced 140 national priorities in February 2013, and listed the Arctic as one of the items as a way to realize what she called the “creative economy.” Developing the NSR and the Arctic Ocean was the 13th most important task to be accomplished in the next five years. The following July, the South Korean government announced a plan to draw up an Integrated Arctic policy.

South Korea is not hesitant to express its
interest in exploring new energy sources in the Arctic. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasizes the importance of secure energy sources for South Korea and the potential the Arctic offers to achieve this. The South Korean government’s National Basic Energy Plan set the direction for this. In September 2013, South Korea led a research survey into the Beaufort Sea to look for sub-sea permafrost and methane hydrates, using its icebreaker Araron.

Since it is a maritime nation, South Korea is considering the possibility of using the NSR for shipping. In October 2013, South Korea made its first commercial freight voyage using the NSR. The government sees a possibility to combine these two interests: resource exploration (including oil, gas, coal, iron, etc.) in the Arctic region, and the eventual shipping of these resources via the NSR.

**Singapore**

Singapore has articulated an intention to play a role in Arctic governance through government statements, its submission for observer status at the Arctic Council in late 2011, and by appointing a dedicated special envoy for Arctic affairs to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in early 2012. Singapore has played an important role in global governance regimes and institutions for ocean management and transportation as an island state and a major shipping hub, including as a long-standing member of the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Singapore asserts that freedom of navigation represents an issue of vital interest, that the high seas are the common heritage of mankind, that there must be improved cooperation between littoral and user states, and that ocean governance must be open and inclusive. To reaffirm these points, using the example of melting Arctic sea ice and its direct threat to the city state that is just 163 meters above sea level, an MFA official expressed that Singapore’s agenda with the Arctic was mainly for survival and that Singapore does not have any political agenda.

One of the most common assumptions about Singapore’s Arctic interest is that it is born of the NSR’s potential challenge to Singapore’s role as a global shipping hub. However, questions remain about the near-term potential of large-scale, highly regularized Arctic shipping. On the other hand, Singapore believes there is opportunity in using its expertise in the running of major port facilities and Offshore and Marine Engineering (OME), two industries that are of vital importance for Singapore’s economy. Keppel Corporation, one of Singapore’s most important engineering companies, specializes in building icebreakers, constructing offshore rigs, as well as rigs that are more environmentally friendly. Two major research centers on OME in Singapore have begun new research programs on the marine environment. Recognizing the importance of indigenous people in the Arctic and perhaps their influence in the decision making process regarding the Arctic, Singapore also emphasizes the importance of indigenous communities and their ability to continue their lifestyle and adapt to various changes. Singapore organized a study visit for Arctic indigenous communities to Singapore in June 2012.

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