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# Japan's role as an Asian observer state within and outside the Arctic Council's framework<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

After the recent publication of Japan's Arctic policy, the world is carefully considering the kind of role Japan will play in the future. As an economic power, Japan will certainly seek to pursue its national interest, particularly in the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and in the offshore drilling of natural resources in the Arctic region. However, as an Asian observer state, Japan will hopefully play a role of a catalyst and watcher in the Arctic Council (AC) and monitor and report the process and conversation of the forum not only for its own benefit but also in the interest of the international community. This aspect should be reflected in the implementation of the new Arctic policy of Japan in near future.

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## 1. Introduction

Japan published its Arctic policy for the first time on 16 October 2015 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015; Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2015a, b). The policy recognizes the need to address some issues of importance and contains Japan's future prospects with respect to fields in which it will take initiative. In May 2013, the Arctic Council (AC) accepted Japan as an observer state (Arctic Council (AC), 2015b, c). It has taken more than two years for Japan to concretize its future plan for making a significant contribution in matters of importance to the AC, whose governance systems are 'flexible and capable of adapting to changing circumstance in a timely manner' (Young, 2009a, 2009b, 426).

In this regard, Japan has taken a great step forward in showing the world its commitment to Arctic affairs. However, at the same time, it is necessary to check whether the policy is a good way for Japan to pursue its national interest in a way that would benefit both the country and the rest of the world. This is mainly because it is maintained that observer states such as China, South Korea, and Japan 'see the role of permanent observers as an opportunity to promote national interests on what is seen as the pre-eminent

arena for international Arctic politics' (Hoel, 2014, 63). Most notably, China has made its Arctic interests known both in a positive and negative way, regardless of its real intention (Jakobson, 2010; Ikeshima, 2013).

Because Japan, through its long-lasting scientific observation, has been a major contributor to Arctic affairs in terms of global interest, it needs the Arctic policy for itself and for others from a wider point of view. In this regard, the policy should be twofold. It should differentiate between what is possible and what is not possible for Japan. At the same time, it should make a distinction between what Japan should and should not do.

The policy has some limitations, mainly because Japan is neither an Arctic coastal state nor a significant stakeholder at this moment. These limitations include the structure and purpose of the AC as a 'high-level forum' for consultation (designated under the 1996 Ottawa Declaration), an observer status within the AC, and the role played by a non-Arctic state and an Asian state in the development of Arctic governance, for which the nature of the demand is, though, shifting (Young, 2009a).

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to consider the role of Japan as a non-Arctic state in the light of the latest policy; and second, to critically fill the gap between the current policy and a desired one.

## 2. Japan's capacity to draft its policy

Japan's capacity to draft its policy is another factor for

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consideration. Its economic/financial capacity, scientific knowledge and experience, and legitimate interest in the Arctic region are among those that require consideration. For example, due to a lack of resources, Japan must consider its future policy as a maritime state in order for Japan to survive mainly through trade. The sea route currently being planned through the Arctic maritime area will ascertain whether Japan will acquire another important sea lane.

Besides these practical considerations, Japan's policy is under restrictions of its pacifist Constitution (Ikeshima, 2015a, b). Particularly in the field of security issues, Japan's choices should be in line with the constitutional framework. Even under the current security legislation, Japan should be prudent enough to live up to the expectations of the other states, particularly of the Arctic states in the context of the Arctic policy, as is discussed below. In addition, being among the original signatory states of the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, Japan is familiar with the significance of the so-called scientific diplomacy in world politics (Ikeshima, 2000).

### 3. Fundamental factors to be taken into consideration

Domestically, Japan has to establish its own policy, strategy, and other related measures in its national interest (Kato, 2013). In this case, Japan's national interest needs to be concretised. Unfortunately, Japan has not concretely identified its national interest in the Arctic affairs besides its proactive contribution in the field of science and observation, so that it will receive enough national support within its country.

Among the non-Arctic states, the triangle relations among Japan, China (Ikeshima, 2013), and South Korea, who will benefit from the Arctic maritime route as their sea lane, may lead to a more important factor for accelerating the development of a possible sea route passing through the Arctic maritime area. It may be also said that, among these three countries, the nation that will benefit most from the route may significantly influence the acceleration of the development of the existent route.

Therefore, Japan, as a non-Arctic and Asian state, must decide its diplomatic position among these players, as different Arctic states have different state interests. They can be regarded as 'user-states' of the Arctic region in some ways. They have legitimate interests in the exploration and exploitation of Arctic energies and resources as far as they abide by the rules and norms in the Arctic legal regime (Ikeshima, 2014). Japan's relationships with other Asian states can be determined and adjusted when it considers and builds its relationships with the Arctic states.

Moreover, the AC's legitimacy as a governing forum of the Arctic region will be questioned unless it successfully governs Arctic matters both for its own sake and for the rest of the world. Although the Arctic states may seem to be reluctant to accept non-Arctic states as observers, more and more non-Arctic states have recently asserted claims to be legitimate stakeholders with respect to Arctic issues due to the current need of shift in the Arctic region from exclusive regional cooperation to inclusive global cooperation (Young, 2009b, 428; Bartenstein, 2015).

What is common between the Arctic Council and the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting is that 'countries without geographic proximity' increasingly have an interest in what decisions are made and how decision-making occurs (Young, 2012, 165; Jabour, 2015, 104). This trend is nowadays getting more and more inevitable and irreversible in a globalized world.

Due to its global significance particularly in terms of climate change and sustainable use of natural resources in the region, the open and transparent process of governance of the Arctic Ocean will be at issue in the international community. In practice, therefore, outsiders will ask whether the AC is really open to other countries, since this is crucial to good governance and 'legitimate

authority' of the de facto institutionalised forum (Barnett and Sikkink, 2010; Stein, 2010). The AC is also known as a product of compromise and is not necessarily monolithic as the members have conflicted interests (Pedersen, 2012; Nord, 2016).

Furthermore, Japan must also take into account the international community's interest and the interest of humankind in light of climate change, globalization and race for resources in the Arctic region (Ikeshima, 2016). Nowadays, both these interests tend to be a pretext for indirectly interested parties to intervene in the governing process for acquiring a share in the stake particularly in the name of environmental protection and sustainable development.

In this context, against the background of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) movement (Bedjaoui, 1980), supported mainly by developing states, in the mid-1970s, the negotiation process of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) serves as a good example. Group 77 (of the developing states) exerted considerable influence on rule-making related to the sharing of profits from the deep seabed mining mechanism and the facilitation process, including technology transfer from the developed to the developing states. Thus, the North-South divide has been always one of the most globalized concerns in international relations and conference diplomacy (Barnett and Sikkink, 2010).

Accordingly, world conferences on environmental issues as well as sustainable development are, in general, opportunities for discussing public interest and global concerns with special reference to the Third World's interests, among others. The AC's regular meetings will inevitably be seen as among those which attract the world attention and concern public interest. Therefore, the AC will no longer be free from any criticism on its governance as well as its responsibility for the international community.

### 4. Arctic diplomacy of Japan vis-à-vis other states

The factors that should be considered are vis-à-vis the following: Arctic Five (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Russia, and the United States), Arctic Eight (Arctic Five, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden), Asian states comprising Asian Five (Asian Three [China, Japan, and South Korea], India, and Singapore), and European non-Arctic states (Nord, 2016). For the AC to function effectively, its framework needs to guarantee exchange of information, mutual monitoring, and frequent interaction, as is stressed by the advocates of institutionalism (Keohane, 1984; Benvenisti, 2014).

Under the current circumstances, Japan's roles can be classified as followings:

- (1) A leading role as a facilitator in the fields of science (or scientific observation and research), technology, and environment
- (2) A coordinating or accommodating role as a mediator between the coastal and maritime states in terms of the law of the sea, shipping, and resource utilization
- (3) A monitoring role as a monitor state on behalf of the international community, or the rest of the world, in order to check Arctic Five and the AC

These roles are not necessarily exclusive but complementary, and therefore, may overlap with each other. Apparently, these roles may be normally shared by all the observer states. Basically, each observer state has its own interest and mission in accordance with its national policy. In the author's opinion, however, the observer status of Japan should not be buried in the community of the Far North as if its unique contribution would be made only within research and technological innovation.

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