

Turning Eyes to the North: A Commentary on Japan's Engagement with the North American Arctic

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Never before has the Arctic attracted such attention.¹ In the distant past, the Arctic was a zone of mystery and intrigue, alternately described as a dangerous and forbidding wasteland, enveloped in cold and ice and inhabited by sea monsters and ferocious tribes or as a pristine resource frontier, filled with untapped potential. But as European explorers struggled, risking and losing many lives in the process, to map and describe the vast northern region, outsiders became progressively less interested in the commercial possibilities of the Arctic and more attracted by the unique Inuit peoples, strange animals, and imposing landscapes of the frozen North.

A portrait of the Arctic as a zone of possibilities has now replaced those early images. The Inuit and the landscape still hold much fascination, and romantic visions of northern peoples sustain a vibrant artistic and cultural industry in the region. A small summer tourism sector draws on southern interest in northern peoples and Arctic landscapes. But it is other forces—the reduction of the icecap and the subsequent opening of the Arctic Ocean for navigation, and the identification of the Far North's immense resource potential—that has sparked renewed international engagement with the region. While some relatively minor questions of territorial boundaries remain unaddressed, to be settled under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the reality is that Arctic sovereignty has largely been settled, although it makes for a contentious debating point in some quarters.

Japan and the Contemplation of the Arctic

Japan has not been a North-facing country. While Hokkaido presents itself as a northern island and has latterly been connected with northern regionalism, the country's interest in northern matters has largely been limited to the long-contentious battle with Russia over the Sakhalin and Kuril islands. Unlike Europe, where Arctic imagery featured prominently in contemplation of northern regions, Japanese artists and writers paid comparatively little attention to the high latitudes. Following the Meiji Restoration (a late nineteenth century time of intense economic, political, and economic transformation in Japan), at a time when North Americans and Europeans were engaged in a scientific and adventuring exploration of the Arctic, Japan stayed on the sidelines. The Arctic was, for Japan and Asia, a distant and largely uninteresting area, devoid of economic opportunities and inhabited by an exotic people who seemed disconnected from the modern industrial age.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Arctic held a tight grip on the Western imagination and only limited interest for the peoples of Asia. Engagement with the Arctic was largely restricted to scientists and ethnographers, with some relatively minor disputes between Canada, Norway, the United States, and Russia over territorial boundaries. Frigid and dangerous weather conditions, vast distances, tiny populations, and extreme difficulties with ocean navigation rendered the Arctic all but uninhabitable to people from temperate zones. The region became a sporting field for Arctic adventurers, who spent long periods exploring, travelling, painting, and writing about an area that held great fascination for thousands of armchair explorers. For much of the world, however, the exoticism of the Arctic was of marginal concern, and certainly not of much interest to the national government.

Antarctic Japan

That Japan was taking minimal interest in exploring Arctic opportunities did not mean that the country was ignoring polar opportunities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the leading industrial nations treated the polar regions as a personal and national testing ground. Dozens of scientific and exploratory expeditions were launched into the forbidding expanses of the Arctic and Antarctic. In the Far North, most of this effort remained connected to Western Europe and North America, with limited engagement by other nations. Antarctica, the frozen tabula rasa in the Far South, was a different matter—vast, unexplored, and open for territorial

claims. Nobu Shirase led the first Japanese Antarctic Expedition, 1910–1912, focusing initially on King Edward VII Land. A small party reached as far at 80° South and the expedition conducted surveys in the Alexandra Range. Japan maintained its interest in Antarctica, renouncing claims to the southern continent after the Second World War, but reintegrating with the scientific and research community in the 1960s.

Jujiro Wada, Japan's Northern Prospector

There was a small Japanese connection to the early mineral development of the Arctic. A tiny number of Japanese and Chinese immigrants followed Klondike stampedeers to the Yukon gold fields in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but they had a shallow-like presence in the mass invasion of the Far North. Wada, born in southern Japan, arrived in North America in 1891. He boarded a whaling ship headed to the Arctic in 1894, discovering an interest in and capacity for living in the Far North. He missed out on the great Klondike strike and played a minor role in the echo boom that broken out in the Fairbanks area in 1902. The persistent prospector continued to search for gold through the far northwest, only to have his efforts run afoul of accusations that he was spying for the Japanese. These false allegations resulted in Wada losing much of his financial backing. He continued to prospect for another twenty years before leaving the North for warmer climates in California. He died in 1937. Wada's story did not get a great deal of coverage during his lifetime, although northerners often spoke of the Japanese prospector at work in Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories.

Preparing for Japan: Northwest Defence Projects, The Second World War

The Second World War brought about dramatic changes in Japan's relationship with the North, although not in predictable directions. The attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 exposed America's vulnerabilities on its Pacific flank, while at the same time reducing the nation's defensive capacity in the region. The United States, fearful of a direct Japanese invasion, took dramatic steps to protect the continent. Construction began in February 1942 on a highway connecting Alaska with the North American highway grid. The Americans also built an oil pipeline from Norman Wells, in the Mackenzie River Valley, to Whitehorse, Yukon, where a major refinery was constructed. These projects supported a strip of airfields that linked the American Midwest with major airports in Alaska. The United States used these northern airfields as hand-off points for Lend-Lease airplanes being

delivered to the Russians for use on the Eastern Front. These projects brought tens of thousands of American soldiers and civilian workers into the region, transforming the Northwest through the construction of roads, telephone lines, airfields, and pipelines to service highway communities, and related infrastructure.

The Northwest Defense Projects raised the spectre of Japanese invasion, replete with stereotypic and hostile images of Japan militarism. The Government of the United States was never overly concerned with the prospect of a Japanese invasion, even after the brief and ill-fated Japanese incursions into the Aleutian Islands (which are much closer to Tokyo than they are to Seattle, Washington). Following the defeat of the Japanese fleet at the Battle of Midway, attention shifted to island hopping in the South Pacific and the military initiative in the Far Northwest was immediately scaled back. The Japanese defeat altered North American's view of Japan. By the 1960s, Canada and the United States were welcoming Japanese investments, particularly on resource-related projects. The Arctic fell off Japan's radar, although the region remained fixed in the public imagination. The Arctic's major strategic and military investments from the United States and Russia during the Cold War, expanding on the militarization started during the Second World War, continued the militarization of the Arctic. The defence of the Arctic through a series of radar lines and forward air force and army bases put the Arctic on the frontlines of the Russian-American conflict, drawing additional personnel to the region and advancing scientific research and practical improvements to regional infrastructure. Demilitarized Japan, its focus on economic renewal and global competitiveness, paid little attention to the USSR-US staring contest. The Japanese rediscovery of the Arctic came slowly.

Arctic Tourism

A quaint glimmer of Japanese interest in the Arctic emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, in the form of aurora borealis tourism. The northern lights have long held a considerable fascination for the Japanese, believed to hold special power for couples attempting to conceive a child. Capitalizing on the burst of Japanese overseas travel associated with the bubble economy, Alaska, and later the Canadian North, began to market northern lights tourism to the region. The numbers remained small—counted in the low thousands of visitors per year—due to high costs, remote locations, and extreme cold weather. There was considerable public interest in the northern environment, which combined with the global interest in northern Indigenous peoples, to attract a growing number of Japanese Arctic followers. To the degree that

the Japanese paid attention to the exotic northern locales, of course, the knowledge of quixotic northern settings served to lessen the sense that this was a land of opportunity and resource potential. Education has emerged as another aspect of contemporary Japanese interest in the North, with exchange programs and English as a Second Language courses bringing dozens of students from Japan to the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Alaska each year.

Rediscovering the Arctic

A convergence of circumstances brought the Arctic back into prominence. Beginning in the late 1960s, shipping companies began testing the possibility of running ships through the narrow and treacherous Northwest Passage, an approach that cut thousands of miles and potentially weeks of travel off more conventional routes between Asia and Europe or the Eastern coast of the United States. The controversial voyage of the SS *Manhattan* in 1969, designed by the United States to test the assertion that the Northwest Passage was an international waterway, a position rejected by Canada, demonstrated that it was possible but difficult and dangerous to move vessels through the Arctic waters. A series of failed attempts to unlock the resource potential of the Arctic, including efforts to drill for oil and gas in the Arctic Islands, discouraged all but the most fervent of northern promoters. At the same time, the rise of Indigenous protests and demands for autonomy offered an alternate approach to the management of Arctic affairs. From the early 1970s through to the 1990s, attention focused largely on efforts to recognize and settle Indigenous claims to the land and waters of the Far North, and on Aboriginal initiatives to build political and cultural bridges throughout the Circumpolar World. Both efforts succeeded, resulting in the signing of major modern claims settlements in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Alaska, the establishment of self-rule in Greenland, additional recognition of Sami rights in Scandinavia, the creation of the Inuit-dominated territory of Nunavut in Canada, and even limited acknowledgement of the needs of the Indigenous peoples of Northern Russia. The progress of circumpolar collaboration, dominated by Indigenous organizations and unique international partnerships, held considerable global fascination. Greenland and Nunavut were among the largest Indigenous-dominated political jurisdictions in the world, and their emergence from the shadows of colonialism intrigued many observers. It seemed, as late as the early 1990s, as though the region would focus on internal circumpolar development of cultural, but not economic or political interest, to the rest of the world.

The circumstances changed due to the conjunction of unique and powerful forces. Global climate change has hit dramatically in the Far North, raising temperatures, depleting the Arctic ice cap and rapidly opening northern waters for commercial navigation. The vulnerability of Indigenous peoples to warmer weather garnered considerable international attention, as did the need for systematic research on changing environmental conditions. Japan, like China and Korea, pushed to participate in the research, with other nations believing that the effort began more in a determination to capitalize on economic opportunities than scientific altruism. Until recently, looming shortages of oil and natural gas drew attention to the impressive discoveries off the coasts of Norway and Russia and widely circulated estimates that the Arctic Ocean held a sizeable percentage, perhaps 25% of the total, of untapped fossil fuel reserves. The prospect of mineral exploitation in Arctic territories, highlighted by the development of diamond mines in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon and an iron ore property on Baffin Island, reinvigorated the international image of the Far North as a land of untapped resource potential.

In addition, the unresolved territorial claims associated with the Arctic continental shelf raised questions about the ownership of vast areas of the region, with Russia pushing its claims enthusiastically and militarily and with Canada speaking with uncharacteristic bellicosity, Denmark asserting its position, and other countries expanding research activity to back their cases. The process, ultimately to be decided under UNCLOS through submissions that are now before the tribunal, ultimately demonstrated the effectiveness of the rule of international law and convention, but raised the political temperatures among affected nations.

Perhaps the most important long-term transition occurred at the international political level. The emergence of new circumpolar institutions, both practical (like the University of the Arctic) and political (the Arctic Council), provided international oversight of the broader region. The Arctic Council had unique elements, including Indigenous participation as full, freestanding members, and seemed to usher in a new age of regional cooperation. Growing international interest led non-Arctic countries to seek the opportunity to participate. Six non-Arctic nations secured permanent observers (France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom). Ad hoc observer status has been sought and received by four other nations (Japan, China, Italy, and South Korea) and the European Union. Indigenous participants have been nervous about the growing international engagement with what was initially seen as a regional institution with influential Indigenous members.

Engaging with the Arctic

Japan, like many other nations, discovered new interest in the Arctic. This interest was expressed in several ways. Planning has proceeded to capitalize on the opening of Arctic navigation, using either the Northeast Passage (over the top of Russia) or the Northwest/Arctic Ocean Passage (over Alaska and Canada). Indeed, Japan, South Korea, India, and China dominate discussion about the commercial use of these still largely untested routes. Enthusiasm for the Arctic routes has abated in recent years as the costs and uncertainty of Arctic navigation have become better known through trial commercial runs in the Far North. It was clear that Japan saw observer status in the Arctic Council as a precursor to great engagement with the Arctic. Formal recognition—if only as observer—provided international recognition that Japan has Arctic interests and was being called on to participate in regional planning.

Japan, like China, has greatly expanded its participation with Arctic science, sponsoring major academic research projects and participating in a growing number of international collaborations. The work is largely coordinated by the National Institute of Polar Research, reorganized in light of growing national investment in Arctic research in 2004, and includes major initiatives with the Ny-Ålesund research station (Spitsbergen Island, Svalbard, Norway) and smaller environmentally-focused projects in Greenland, Canada, Russia, and Iceland. In addition, the country has also been quietly underwriting major commercially oriented Arctic research projects related to methane hydrate extraction. This early stage but promising research has the potential to unleash the energy potential of methane hydrate concentrations, found in many oceans and accessible in the Arctic. Japan funded one of the largest research projects ever undertaken in the Canadian Arctic in this field and is doing experimental commercial extraction with Alaskan partners. Japanese firms are active in mining operations in the Arctic, as they are in many remote regions around the world. For example, Mitsubishi holds a small percentage of the shares in Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation's massive Mary River property on Baffin Island. These investments are part of the country's strategic engagement with resource-rich areas around the world and, while still important, are increasingly dwarfed by the large-scale commitments being made by China, including in the Far North.

Japan's Arctic Commitments

The Government of Japan has increasingly positioned itself as an active member of the global Arctic community and has repeatedly stated its intention

to remain an engaged and interested party in political and economic issues relating to the Arctic. The government established an office for the Special Representative for the Arctic in 2013. In particular, the Government of Japan has committed itself to several key concepts. Japan supports the principle that all sovereignty and boundary questions must be addressed by the UNCLOS scientific review process. If new legal regimes are required to resolve and manage Arctic disputes, Japan holds that all interested nations, and not just Arctic states, have to be engaged in the processes. Japan is committed to maintaining an active presence in Arctic research through such agencies as the National Institute of Polar Research, the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology, the Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency, and participating universities. A recent initiative, the Japan Consortium for Arctic Environmental Research (JCAR) involves some 300 researchers.

In support of enhanced international engagement, Japan strongly endorses the continued existence of the Arctic Council, with its emphasis on sustainable development and environmental monitoring. Japan also plans to continue participating in international meetings related to the Arctic, including but not limited to the Arctic Council, as part of its ongoing commitment to engagement on Arctic issues.

These commitments were summarized in the Blue Book of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 2011, in a section of the report devoted to "Japan's Foreign Policy in Major Global Issues":

Concerning the Arctic region which is being affected by climate change in recent years, there has been a growing international debate on such issues as environmental problems, opening of shipping routes, and development of natural resources in that region. Recognizing the need to be involved in such debate in an appropriate manner, Japan is strengthening its participation in international discussions regarding the Arctic region, such as submitting its formal application for a permanent observer status in the Arctic Council in July 2009. In September 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the "Arctic Task Force" in order to make cross-sectoral approach [sic] towards the foreign policy on the Arctic, and to take appropriate policy measures.²

These priorities reflect the extent of Japan's interest in Arctic affairs. The Government of Japan followed up by appointing Dr. Asumi Sunami, a highly regarded international affairs specialist and long-time advisor to government, to lead policy development efforts. Japan wishes to be included in international discussions, but does not assert or demand a highly

influential role in the management of Arctic affairs. The Government of Japan, like the business community, sees the Arctic as a land of opportunity, a place of the future more than the present, but worth watching closely due to the potential for regional developments to offer dramatic opportunities for the country.

The Uncertain Trajectory of the Arctic

At root, the current international fascination with the Far North is not particularly new. Bursts of enthusiasm have been commonplace in the past, tied to everything from the zeal for discovery and adventure to the promise of gold and concerns about continental defence. For now, the attraction is the prospect of Arctic shipping, balanced by a concern about running heavily-laden ships through the risky waters of the Arctic. If, as appears likely, the over-the-pole route comes clear (although still for only several months a year), Asian nations, including Japan, will probably be among the first to capitalize on the commercial opportunities. Similarly, the search for oil and natural gas underneath the Arctic waters, although less imminent than in the past, continues to hold the interest of energy-poor countries like China, Japan, and Korea. The challenges and dangers of pumping fossil fuels from under the ocean are very real, the costs high, and the net returns uncertain. It remains to be seen if the current excitement about Arctic resources ends up matching the returns. Suffice it to say that the Far North typically disappoints its greatest promoters.

Japan is an important but not major player in the current debate about and enthusiasm for the Arctic. Indeed, the real story behind Japan's emerging interest and role in the Far North is not really about Japan. Until the 1970s, the Arctic was a global afterthought, dismissed as largely irrelevant for economic purposes and of interest primarily for symbolic purposes and as the tabletop for the Soviet Union–United States Cold War. Strategic and military preoccupations dominated discussions about the North, receding in lock step with the end of the Soviet Union and the thawing of Cold War tensions. The interregnum that followed focused on a truly unique experiment in international affairs, a diplomatic integration of the Circumpolar World led by the region's Indigenous population. It looked, indeed, as though the leadership of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and the establishment of the Arctic Council would lead to extensive regional integration and international co-operation. Building on a foundation of shared Indigenous traditions and experience, supported by national governments determined to improve conditions for northern Indigenous peoples, and celebrated by external observers fascinated with the emergence of pan-Circumpolar

partnerships, participating countries accelerated the empowerment of Aboriginal populations. The creation of the territory of Nunavut in Canada, the extension of self-rule in Greenland, and the recognition of Indigenous rights and circumpolar engagement in Alaska and Scandinavia (and, to a lesser degree, Russia) presaged an impressive level of regional integration.

Very quickly, however, the combination of concern about climate change, the identification of the region's resource potential, a subtle re-emergence of Russian militarism, and global preoccupation with the now-receding prospect of passing the limits of "Peak Oil," transformed the Arctic conversations. Governments and countries, a few years earlier, seemed content to treat the Far North as a political curiosity and Indigenous homeland, controlled through the increasingly extensive networks of circumpolar co-operation. In a few years, the Arctic had been re-internationalized. Countries that had limited their aspirations in the North to scientific advancement now declared a much stronger interest in the region. With the world running out of accessible oil and natural gas, and with the prospect of cheaper and faster navigation across the North of both Russia and Canada/Alaska, countries like Japan, China, Korea, as well as the European Union, rushed to declare the Arctic as an international zone.

Japan, in this context, has been swept along with a wave of rediscovery and optimism. While the current forecasts appear very optimistic—the Arctic remains cold and dangerous, climate change notwithstanding—many nations with no traditional sovereignty or territorial claims on the region have stepped forward. Japan's engagement has been limited to date, but the country has been persistent in declaring an ongoing, permanent interest in the region. The small follow-up steps, particularly through research and active engagement with the Arctic Council, are primarily placeholders. If and when the resources of the Arctic become readily exploitable, and at the point where global market demand makes Arctic developments commercially viable, Japan is determined to have sufficient national experience and knowledge to capitalize on opportunities. Equally, the country wants to be near, if not at, the Arctic Council table that will be shaping key aspects of circumpolar collaboration.

Japan now has a more extensive program of Arctic commitments.³ As a maritime state, Japan is eager to contribute to the Arctic conversation, with a particular interest in issues of navigation and economic development. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) established a Rapid Change of the Arctic Climate System and its Global Influences initiative (2011–2016), climate change, determining assessing the impact of these changes on Japan's marine environment, and Arctic

navigation.⁴ Together with the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability project,⁵ this initiative promotes international co-operation and engagement by Japanese scientists and organizations, and is a flagship element in an extensive Japanese commitment to global information sharing and policy-making. Other emerging initiatives including enhancing the National Institute of Polar Research (established in 1963) and the Arctic Environment Research Centre (1990), and additional Arctic-related organizations including such national agencies as the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC) and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA). As Professor Akiko Okamatsu of Hosei University in Tokyo explained, “Japan has highly advanced technology for research and promotes various projects under the leadership of the Japanese government. The data and scientific knowledge resulting from Japanese research will be shared in international forums and contribution to the protection of the Arctic environment and effective use of the Arctic.”⁶

In the broader scheme of Japanese affairs, the Arctic is a tiny theatre of operations. There is a temptation at present to inflate things Arctic, leaving the public impression that there are major issues of sovereignty, economic development, and international conflict at play in the region. From Japan’s perspective, the country’s engagement with Africa and South America is much greater and more practical, and the close watch of Japanese diplomats and business people over South East and South Asia is many times greater than the comparatively casual interest in the Far North. In the rapid globalized world, marked by shifting geopolitical realities and very real concerns about medium and long-term resource availability, it behooves all nations to keep a watching brief on all areas of potential and opportunity.

In this context, Japan’s still marginal interest in the Far North speaks to several key twenty-first century realities. The world’s wealthiest and resource-short nations understand that sustained prosperity requires access to future supplies of oil, gas, and minerals. This, in turn, necessitates a continuation of global investments and international co-operation. That this vigilance and participation now extends to the largely uninhabited, challenging, and forbidding oceans and islands of the Arctic illustrates the simple truth that the world’s leading nations fear the imminent end of easily accessible resources. The global development of shale gas and the sharp decline in demand for gas and oil that started in 2014 resulted in a diminishment of international interest in Arctic affairs. To date, the Government of Japan has approached the Far North carefully, but with occasionally audacious steps like the methane hydrate research project in the Canadian Arctic. While it is unlikely that the Far North holds the key

to the sustainability of consumptive, energy-intensive economies, Japan and other nations are leaving little to chance. For the foreseeable future, the internationalization of the Arctic will continue, with Japan as an active participant. That Japanese and international engagement with the Arctic is tied closely to imminent economic prospects, it is also possible that the current decline in resource opportunities, if it proves to be of longer duration, could easily result in a collapse in global interest in Arctic affairs. In this regard, Japan's long-term pattern of casual interest and occasional engagement with the Arctic is symptomatic of the global political and economic participation in the Far North.

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Notes

1. This paper is a revision and updating of a paper presented to the European-Japan Advanced Research Network conference.
2. Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diplomatic Blue Book 2011, p. 23.
3. See the Arctic Institute: <http://www.thearcticinstitute.org/search?q=japan>.
4. See the National Institute of Polar Research: <http://nipr.ac.jp/greme/e/index.html>.
5. See the National Institute of Polar Research: <http://www.nipr.ac.jp/aerc/a/about.html>.
6. Akiko Okamatsu, "Non-State Scientific Perspective: Japan," presentation to the 2014 North Pacific Arctic Conference on The Arctic in the Wider World, Honolulu, Hawaii, August 2014.